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Mobile Landscapes, Immobile Identities, and the Persistence of Land Use Conflicts in Sogamoso, Colombia

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Abstract

This paper uncovers and explains the local dynamics of land use conflict in and around the city of Sogamoso (Colombia). Recent scholarship on land grab has called for more nuanced analyses of (i) the roles of a multiplicity of not only international, but also local actors, (ii) non unilinear dynamics of land use transitions, and (iii) land grab in middle size cities, where rural-urban ties and processes of ‘worlding’ differ from those observed in large cities. Furthermore, theories of the persistence of agriculture in and around cities have had difficulties in grappling the hybrid nature of peri-urban spaces, which are economically multifunctional, socially diverse, and ecologically complex, and therefore difficult to govern.

We explore these issues through the case study of Sogamoso, where we conducted 28 semi-structured key-informants interviews. Data were coded through the analytical lens of (im)mobility of human (people, identities) and non-human (natural resources, pollutants, ecosystems) elements of the peri-urban landscape.

We find that inconsistent, and at times openly contradictory national environmental and development policies trickle down at urban level by creating new, or amplifying already existing land use conflicts. In their turn, these conflicts exacerbate long standing barriers to governance of peri-urban spaces, including social fragmentation and lack of trust among actors. We also find that some actors deal with conflicts by employing strategies that aim to influence key decision makers, while others employ ‘exit’ strategies of autonomy. This results in an uneven landscape of winners and losers, which appears to make the prospect of conflict resolution yet less likely.

This paper helps advancing the urban land debate by highlighting the importance of the intersection and contingent articulation of global and national drivers of land grabbing, and local socio-ecological and political path dependencies.

Keywords: Colombia, development, peri-urban space, urban agriculture, urban land grab