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Viewpoint, Policy Forum or Opinion

Towards a political economy of the COVID-19 crisis: Reflections on an agenda for research and action

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A B S T R A C T

The spread of COVID-19 has raised difficult questions that interrogate the pandemic as a public health emergency, an economic crisis and a disruptor of consolidated governance forms. While addressing the public health emergency must be the main priority, we also need to track the ways in which the crisis is reconfiguring economic and political ordering and diverse actors are renegotiating relations in the exceptional circumstances the pandemic has created. These dimensions can have far-reaching implications in wide-ranging policy areas, both as the crisis unfolds and in the longer term. Based on a review of developments concerning land governance, this Viewpoint discusses continuities with longstanding patterns as well as ruptures and distinctive features that outline the initial contours of an agenda for research and action.

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As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across virtually every country in the world, it unleashed a tragic wave of human suffering, prompted unprecedented policy responses and unsettled major aspects of social organization – from work patterns and commercial supply chains, to the modes of interaction in personal and family life. While the pandemic’s future evolutions remain uncertain, its outbreak in the first half of 2020 raised questions that interrogate the crisis as a public health emergency, an economic recession and a disruptor of consolidated governance forms.

The pandemic’s potential to disrupt governance arrangements is partly linked to its having highlighted the fragility of a global economic system that, until now, seemed the only one possible; its having exposed, and compounded, structural inequalities at local to global levels; and its having prompted extensive state intervention to tackle the health emergency and the resulting economic fallout, potentially reshaping public discourses about the role of state and market for years to come (Cotula & Schwartz, 2020; IEL Collective, 2020).

More generally, throughout history major crises have provided turning points in social and political organization, altering economic fundamentals, reshuffling alliances, shifting narratives and reconfiguring public authorities. And over the past few years, there has been much debate about the place of crises, and crisis narratives, in restructuring public policies (Klein et al., 2008). From a legal standpoint, legislation to confront the pandemic in countries as diverse as Colombia1, India2, South Africa3 and the United Kingdom4 has challenged cornerstones of contemporary governance, including personal liberties and the operation of businesses, markets and cross-border trade.

While addressing the public health emergency must be the main priority, these considerations call for also exploring ruptures and continuities in economic and political ordering. They call for a “political economy of the crisis” (Tsoukalis, 2012) that can illuminate how diverse public and private actors are repositioning themselves and renegotiating relations in the exceptional circumstances the pandemic has created, through discursive practices and concrete actions, with potentially far-reaching implications in a wide range of policy areas, both as the crisis unfolds and in the longer term.

1. The case of land governance

Consider the governance of land. In many societies, the land question is an important part of the “social contract”. Land sustains economic activities, social identity and the collective sense of justice, and underpins power relations and political organization. At the same time, claims to land are often disputed, particularly as local-to-global transformations exacerbate competition for...

1 Decree No. 457 of 2020.
2 Order No. 40–3 of 2020 and subsequent regulations.
3 Regulations under the Disaster Management Act of 2002.
4 Coronavirus Act of 2020.
valuable lands. From the mid-2000s, a global surge in transnational agribusiness plantation deals fostered heated debates about “land grabbing”, within wider contestation over alternative visions of rural development (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Borras et al., 2016; Dell’Angelo et al., 2017). Meanwhile, diverse factors have long promoted structural reconfigurations in local land relations. Contexts vary but there are recurring trends.

For example, research from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa points to growing pressures on land and increasing land commercialisation, often linked to deep-seated socio-economic change (Amaro & Ubink, 2008; Chimhowu, 2019; Toulin, 2020); concomitant trends towards growing land concentration and fragmentation, depending on the context (Jayne, Chamberlin & Headey, 2014); urban expansion and the involvement of urban elites in rural land transactions (Mathieu, Zongo & Paré, 2002); and the renegotiation of relations between women and men (Manji, 2018; Griffiths, 2019), youths and elders (Richards, 2005), tenants and landlords (Colin, 2013), and mobile and sedentary groups (Touré, 2018). These complex transitions often intersect with the changes induced by large-scale land-based investments, underpinning socially differentiated processes and outcomes (Sulie and Dancer, 2020).

In such challenging policy terrains, ill-suited design and skewed implementation often undermine the effectiveness of public interventions. Contingent problems such as lack of resources are a recurring issue. But land issues are drenched in politics (Boone, 2014), and deeper-level factors are typically at play. In many countries, colonial legacies and post-independence legal transplants, including those associated with integration into global commodity chains, underpin arrangements that may suit elite interests but are at odds with local ways of accessing, using and managing rural land (Cotula, 2020).

In addition, formal governance systems often embody ill-articulated tensions between potentially conflicting policy objectives (such as protecting local rights and promoting commercial investments), and their operation may be undermined by a de facto policy thrust that responds to vested interests more than official legislation (Guevara Gil and Cabanillas Linares, 2020). As pressures on natural resources intensify, land disputes provide arenas where different visions of development can come directly into contest – including the modernizing ambitions advanced by the national elites that control the juridical and institutional apparatus of the state, and the ways of life and social imaginary of people who hold a strong connection to the land.

These circumstances have long made land a particularly difficult issue. The disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic intervene on this substratum of historical trajectories and socio-political complexities. There is as yet little systematic evidence on the land-related reverberations of the crisis. But media reports, blogs and webinars (for example, Land Portal, 2020; International Land Coalition, 2020) provide cues for designing research and action that can anticipate and respond to developments as they unfold.

2. Land governance in the shadow of the pandemic

While it is too early to map the effects of the pandemic in the land governance sphere, early signs point to developments that would warrant further investigation. These include reported disruptions in land administration services and their impacts on efforts to secure land claims (Wakesho, 2020). But they also outline more encompassing issues, affecting relations within families and communities, social processes that cut across rural and urban worlds, and interactions among citizens, businesses and states. A few examples can illustrate the parameters of this broader canvas.

One recurring theme was that lockdown measures made it more difficult for small-scale farmers to sell their produce, undermining rural livelihoods and raising concerns that families might be forced into distress land transactions. In South Africa, the closure of street trading, later reversed, was reported to have primarily affected small-scale farmers, who largely rely on informal markets (Wegerif, 2020; PLAS, 2020); while reports from Nepal indicated that farmers were having to sell produce at lower prices set by the traders (Deuja, 2020). Meanwhile, urban-to-rural migration by unemployed urban workers in search for new livelihoods in rural areas was expected to increase pressures on agricultural land, potentially displacing tenant farmers and sharecroppers (Choudhury, Ghosh & Sindhi, 2020, on India; Deuja, 2020, on Nepal).

In addition, reports suggested that well-connected individuals were using the reduced space for oversight and accountability as an opportunity to seize lands (see for example Chandran 2020, citing developments in several Southeast Asian countries). There have also been reports of forced evictions during the pandemic, often to the detriment of farm tenants or customary landholders (NRC, 2020), leading some governments to enact moratoria, such as in Uganda (Uganda Media Centre, 2020).

The overall impacts were reported to be unevenly distributed, exacerbating pre-existing differentiation based on wealth, income, status, gender, age and other factors. Anecdotal evidence from Kenya suggested that, as household livelihoods were coming under greater pressure, widows were being forced to abandon their homes and relinquish the family land they accessed through their deceased husbands – or to consolidate their bond to the in-laws by marrying other family members (Harrisberg, 2020).

Reported developments also occurred at the interface between land governance and global commodity production and trade, illuminating the role of the state, and the law, in opening up natural resources to commercial activities. Some governments and companies were reportedly seeking to press on with, fast-track or skip local consultations aimed at securing approval for large-scale investment projects (Szoke-Burke, 2020; Salomão, 2020; Firelight, 2020), or push on with project implementation (Nguyen, 2020; Cecco, 2020), at a time when the crisis made it more difficult for affected people to meaningfully engage. Further, some governments appeared to be using the reduced public scrutiny to fast-track legislative reforms aimed at facilitating agribusiness or mining investments (Jong, 2020; Spring, 2020; Ferrando and Vecchione-Goñalves, 2020).

While activists have long mobilized to defend land tenure, including in the context of large-scale investments (Hall et al., 2015), restrictions on travel and gatherings created new challenges for this work, constraining commonly resort-to strategies for fact finding, collective action and alliance building. Nonetheless, there were documented instances of online advocacy by civil society, Indigenous organizations and citizen groups (Bangkok Post, 2020; Ojeda and del Arco, 2020; Gasy et al., 2020). Activists highlighted the difficulties of holding public consultations during the pandemic, and the unsuitability of online platforms due to their limited accessibility, particularly in rural areas, and to their inconsistency with Indigenous decision-making practices (European Network on Indigenous Peoples et al., 2020).

Lack of comprehensive evidence makes it impossible to assess the breadth and depth of these developments. However, several alarm bells suggest that the developments could amount to more than isolated incidents. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples expressed serious concerns about the way COVID-related states of emergency were further marginalizing Indigenous communities and militarizing their territories, while governments and companies were forcing through agribusiness, mining and infrastructure megaprojects on ancestral
lands (OHCHR, 2020a). In addition, Global Witness (2020) reported that threats and attacks against land rights defenders accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis, citing evidence from Colombia, Niger, Indonesia and the Philippines. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called for halting approvals of extractive projects and related law reforms during the pandemic (IACHR, 2020).

3. Continuities, ruptures and an agenda for research and action

These developments present continuities with longer-term processes. The pursuit of development models premised on natural resource extraction, and on encroachment on Indigenous lands, is a longstanding issue – as are distress land sales and the dispossession of widows in times of crisis, the marginalization of local land claims and the ability of national elites to mobilize their entries into the machinery of government to strengthen their control over public lands. In addition, space for dissent has been shrinking, and repression of land rights defenders increasing, for several years already (Global Witness, 2016). In these respects, the pandemic merely constitutes a new chapter in the unfolding of familiar land struggles.

However, the context of the pandemic also presents distinctive dimensions that can exacerbate or depart from some of the longer-term trends. The need to confront a difficult public health emergency has justified unprecedented public action. But emergency measures and situations also create extra-ordinary circumstances that can warp the space-time of policy action and restrict room for public oversight and accountability, potentially altering policy priorities, reshaping the boundaries of the possible and facilitating covert (or even overt) opportunistic strategies. In many countries, legislation suspending basic rights and granting wide-ranging powers to the executive raised concerns about possible abuses (OHCHR, 2020b), and prompted debates as to whether normalized “states of exception” might sustain lasting transitions towards more authoritarian forms of government (Foucault et al., 2020).

In these overarching contexts, the pace and modalities of governance shifts, whether concerning land or other policy issues, the interplay of interests, alliances and narratives underpinning those shifts, and available strategies for countervailing power might differ from longstanding patterns, in ways that are yet to be systematically explored. Further, there are questions about how pre-crisis patterns might influence developments as the crisis unfolds; about the processes whereby certain temporary disruptions might translate into durable reconfigurations; and about whether, in the longer term, the fallout from the crisis could destabilize consolidated political settlements. While initial analyses on land and COVID-19 have primarily interrogated evolutions within national polities, there is also a need to examine developments in global economic and political ordering, including those that affect the terms for the integration of resource-dependent countries into the global economy.

Contradictory forces are at play. The need for governments to generate public revenues and find ways out of a debilitating economic crisis could increase pressures for pro-business reforms to attract commercial land-based investments, rolling back or hollowing out hard-fought social and environmental safeguards and exacerbating backlashes against rights advocates. At the same time, by exposing and compounding structural problems, the crisis strengthened the case for enhancing local rights and reimagining governance systems that were already under strain before the pandemic.

Tracking evolutions can generate insights about the changing contours of contemporary governance. Political, legal and institutional configurations vary considerably. Responses to the pandemic evolve over time, and several countries have since eased lockdown measures or transitioned to variable patchworks of legal restrictions. But the global nature of the crisis and the severity of its impacts mean that these issues will have enduring relevance for initiatives to generate evidence and promote accountability. A rich agenda lies ahead, for both research and action, to interrogate these dimensions during the crisis and in the longer term. Taking on the challenge requires local-to-global alliances between researchers and practitioners, and effective avenues for those whose rights are most directly at stake to advance their priorities.

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