

Culture of secrecy around global land deals must be broken to protect people and environment.

A new report today reveals how opening up the process around large-scale land deals in developing countries would benefit local communities, governments and business, and provides direction on how this can be achieved.

The report, *Dealing with Disclosure*, published by Global Witness, the International Land Coalition and the Oakland Institute, looks at why it is vital to transform the secretive culture behind large scale land deals, and for the first time shows how it might be done. At present decisions are being made in secret, with basic information unavailable even to those affected. The report argues that all contractual information must be made publicly available unless investors or governments can prove that this would harm commercial competitiveness or public interest – a principle it calls “if in doubt, disclose”.

The rush for land in developing countries has rapidly intensified since 2008, but the sector remains largely unregulated. Concerns are growing over the impact of big, secretive deals between governments and investors on communities and the environment. As more and more land is taken away from local communities, growing numbers of people are losing access to the resources they have relied on for generations, and ecosystems are being destroyed.

Decisions and negotiations around land deals are frequently conducted in secret, without the knowledge, let alone consent, of affected communities. Without access to basic information such as contract terms or pre-project impact assessment studies, local communities and other parties cannot make informed decisions about the suitability of proposed investments.

This lack of information hampers efforts to hold governments or investors to account, making human rights and environmental abuses more likely. It also undermines governance and democratic processes and fosters high-level corruption, discouraging companies willing to operate responsibly.

Megan MacInnes, Senior Land Campaigner at Global Witness said “Far too many people are being kept in the dark about massive land deals that could destroy their homes and livelihoods. That this needs to change is well understood, but how to change it is not. For the first time, this report sets out in detail what tools governments, companies and citizens can harness to remove the shroud of secrecy that surrounds land acquisition. It takes lessons from efforts to improve transparency in other sectors and looks at what is likely to work for land. Companies should have to prove they are doing no harm, rather than communities with little information or power having to prove that a land deal is negatively affecting them.”

But it's not only communities who would benefit from the changes the report proposes, as Frederic Mousseau Policy Director at the Oakland Institute explains. “Evidence increasingly points to the significant benefits for governments and business from improved transparency and ongoing public consultation. Whilst investors would benefit from a level playing field as well as reduced risks of corruption and expensive and damaging conflicts with communities, greater transparency would enable governments to make more informed decisions and negotiate better deals when allocating commercial rights to land.”

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Notes to editors:

- Global Witness investigates and campaigns to prevent natural resource-related conflict and corruption and associated environmental and human rights abuses (<http://www.globalwitness.org/>)
- The International Land Coalition is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organisations working together to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building (<http://www.landcoalition.org/>)
- Oakland Institute is an independent policy think tank, bringing fresh ideas and bold action to the most pressing social, economic, and environmental issues of our time (<http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/>)