
Land Grabbing in the Shadow of COVID-19 and Lockdowns

Submitted 15/04/23, 1st revision 22/05/23, 2nd revision 21/06/23, accepted 30/06/23

Izabela Bludnik¹

Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to discuss the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on land grabbing in the Global South countries. This process is dramatic for the humanity around the globe and in particular for local populations whose property and human rights are violated. The most severe consequences include delay in meeting sustainable development and climate neutrality goals.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Critical analysis of the literature, the analysis of secondary data available in reports and publications, case studies, synthesis and logical reasoning.

Findings: The pandemic and lockdowns accelerated the process of land-grabbing. It has negative impact on indigenous peoples but consequences of land grabbing and deforestation are much wider. The deterioration of the natural environment hit all countries and their citizens. Moreover, the recovery from the pandemic crisis involved much public spending that boosted the indebtedness of many economies. This can undermine the implementation of sustainable development and climate neutrality goals.

Practical Implications: COVID-19 epidemic has many positive and negative consequences that are widely discussed and well-known. However, the public is practically unaware of the process that takes place at the backstage of the pandemic and lockdowns, namely intensive land grabbing and deforestation, in particular in the Global South countries. Studies of this kind may increase social awareness of the environmental degradation as well as persuade the decision-makers to prioritize long-term climate goals over short-term monetary gains.

Originality/Value: This research significantly expands the discussion about the consequences of the pandemic and lockdowns. It shows a problem that has not been sufficiently underlined, namely that bans on travelling, restricted mobility and gathering, and the reduced operation of the public administration have far reaching effects not only locally but also globally, thus contributing to the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Land grabbing, pandemic, lockdown, Global South.

JEL codes: Q56, Q58.

Paper type: Research article.

Acknowledgment: The project is financed within the framework of the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name "Regional Excellence Initiative" in the years 2019-2022; project number 001/RID/2018/19; the amount of financing PLN 10,684,000.00.

¹Institute of Spatial Management and Socio-Economic Geography, University of Szczecin, Poland, izabela.bludnik@usz.edu.pl;

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic reached its global scale in March 2020. To counteract its further spread countries introduced various measures, such as the obligation to wear facial masks, keep social distance, and sanitise hands. A number of governments decided to go much further and implemented unprecedented drastic measures by imposing the total lockdowns, restrictions on mobility in public space and within countries, ban on public gatherings, closing or restricting the operation of shopping centres, public administration, schools and universities, as well as cultural and entertainment institutions (Khan *et al.*, 2020). In some instances, it also applied to manufacturing plants which operation was actually brought to a halt overnight.

All this had its impact on the natural environment. On the one hand, we observed positive feedback of reduced emissions from industrial production and transport, improved water quality, as well as lower noise, and water and energy consumption.

On the other hand, the production and use of plastic packaging and personal protection equipment rapidly increased (facial masks, gloves, and disinfectants in plastic bottles). Moreover, a lot of food was wasted as people made stocks, and the consumption of energy by household appliances increased as mandatory lockdowns kept people at their homes. All these issues have been frequently discussed and thus are well-known to the general public.

However, the spike in land grabbing has been discussed rarely as it takes place at the backstage of the pandemic and lockdowns (Grima *et al.*, 2020). The public is practically unaware of the process that has dramatic social and environmental repercussions, in particular in countries of the Global South.

Of course, the phenomenon as such is not new, as it had taken place long before the outburst of the pandemic and the introduction of lockdowns. For a long time, governments of several countries prioritised the development of their energy industry, infrastructure, mining, as well as deforestation and the development of industrial scale agricultural production.

However, bans on travelling, restricted mobility and gathering, and the reduced operation of the public administration, including courts and the land management authorities, expedited land grabbing and illegal deforestation of territories which for generations had belonged to indigenous peoples (Rolling back..., n.d.). All this has had far reaching consequences not only locally but also globally, thus contributing to the ecological crisis.

The article's goal is to discuss the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on land grabbing in the Global South countries. Therefore, the second part of the article includes a concise review of pandemic impacts on the status of the natural

environment. The third part provides specific examples of land grabbing during lockdowns and Covid restrictions. The article ends with a summary.

2. The Impact of the Pandemic and Lockdowns on the Natural Environment – Short Review

Undoubtedly, the pandemic and lockdowns have had a negative impact on economic outcomes and health of societies (both physical and mental). At the same time, shortly after the economic shutdown and the introduction of severe restrictions, news started flowing about positive effects of the slowdown in the economy.

These included primarily lower air pollution due to reduced industrial production and road transport, aviation, and international shipping. The quality of water improved, with Venice being a striking example. Noise levels dropped and the same was noted regarding energy and water consumption by the manufacturing industry.

Optimistic news about the improved environmental status started coming from China, a country which was first to close their borders, impose production downtime, and restrict street traffic. According to Lauri Myllyvirta (2020), an analyst from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, in the early 2020, the CO₂ emission in China dropped by at least one fourth, which is 6% of the total global emission, in comparison to the corresponding period of 2019.

Since the demand for energy was lower, the operation of coal-fired plants, coking plants, and oil refineries was reduced as well, respectively by 36%, 23%, and 34%. This had a direct impact on the quality of air, as confirmed by the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment. The number of good air days in the Hubei Province alone, the epicentre of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, increased by 21.5% in February 2020 in comparison to a corresponding period of the previous year.

Similar positive feedback started coming from other countries as well after they decided to implement severe restrictions and lockdowns. In their report, the European Environment Agency (2020) confirmed that in spring 2020 the shutdown of European economies resulted in a significant reduction of noise and other emissions, chiefly from road transport, aviation, and international shipping. The report points to April 2020 major reduction of NO₂ concentration in all weather conditions.

Although reductions varied from country to country and from city to city, in many locations statistics were really imposing. For example, in Spain the NO₂ concentration dropped by 61%, in France by 52%, and in Italy by 48%. In April 2020, the PM₁₀ concentration was also lower in all European countries (independent from weather). Although in the case of the particulate matter the effect was not so spectacular as for NO₂, according to the EEA, the PM₁₀ reduction reached as much as 30% in some countries.

In their report, the European Environment Agency (2020) highlighted that reduced emissions to air play an important role for the status of the environment. High emission and concentration of pollutants affect vegetation, animals, quality of water and soil, and lead to irreversible damage to ecosystems.

Major environmental damage can be caused by ozone, ammonia, and nitrogen oxides present in the air. Ground-level ozone can damage crops, forests and other vegetation by impairing their growth and affecting biodiversity. The deposition of nitrogen compounds causes eutrophication which can affect terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and lead to changes in species diversity and invasions by new species.

Not all analyses, however, have confirmed these optimistic news regarding the reduction of pollution as a result of lockdowns and Covid restrictions. For example, measurement results publicised by the airly.org portal (Czy koronawirus..., n.d.) showed that the concentration of particulate matter did not differ much if we compared March 2019 and March 2020.

This applied to London, Warsaw, Bucharest and Lombardy. Moreover, in 2020, PM10 was much higher on a number of days than in 2019. According to experts from airly.org, such pollution levels suggest that transport and industry, so much affected by the pandemic and lockdowns, do not have such a profound impact on the air quality (in all countries). The main contributors to air pollution are local sources and weather also has a major impact, especially temperature.

Researchers and experts have agreed on one issue – although the pandemic and lockdowns really had their positive influence on the natural environment, the effect is going to be temporary. In fact, reopening of economies and boosting of industrial production to make up for the delay not only counterbalanced the environmental benefits, but also led to a major excess pollution if compared to levels recorded before the pandemic.

The above-mentioned trends have been aggravated by other negative phenomena, such as the increased use of facial masks, disposable gloves, and disinfectants (most often sold in plastic packaging), larger generation of medical waste from personal protection equipment used by medical personnel and patients to protect oneself against infection in hospitals and clinics, as well the use of disposable food packaging to protect consumers against the virus.

Additionally, demand and supply side changes boosted the production of plastics. Since the pandemic contributed to the drop of oil prices, production of plastics from fossil fuels became cheaper and more profitable than the reuse of materials and recycling (Lockdown w Europie..., n.d.).

During the spring lockdown, growing food waste generation became a serious issue. The need to stay at home and reduced mobility in public space, as well as the risk of

basic foodstuffs shortages, pushed people to make surplus food stocks. Some of such foodstuffs perished and had to be disposed. Great Britain, for instance, observed a growth in the volume of bio-waste by one third (Napierała, 2020).

From the point of view of the future environmental status, it is particularly important that the pandemic and lockdowns brought giant economic losses. Consequently, GDP has shrunk due to the shutdown of economies and the pandemic disrupted supply chains. The process was accompanied by much larger public support to sectors which were forced to discontinue or reduce their operation.

Thus, the combating of pandemic aftermaths has led to major budget deficit and public debt. While struggling to mitigate negative impacts, governments may decide on shifting funding from environmental investment to cover most urgent current needs (Koronawirus a..., n.d.). In the longer perspective, it may force governments to abandon climate neutrality and sustainable development goals.

3. Land Grabbing During Lockdowns and Covid Restrictions – Examples

The above-mentioned negative repercussions of the pandemic, lockdowns, and restrictions, or at least the majority of them, have been broadly commented by the media, researchers, experts, and politicians. As a consequence, the society is now well aware of them and their significance for the natural environment in the nearest and more distant future.

One of the most dramatic consequences of the pandemic, which surprisingly is very narrowly or not at all discussed (except for local groups of environmentalists and human rights activists), is the spike of land grabbing by big private corporations which is an example of the financialisation.

The new pandemic situation resulted in the loss of land and its natural resources. This is particularly true in the case of less wealthy populations which lost their land to large financial players. The struggle against the big capital has not chance to succeed, since due to the shortage of money and education people end up displaced and can hardly try to regain their property. It is particularly important, since land grabbing and deforestation often takes place in countries of high corruption levels where independent courts effectively do not exist.

During the pandemic also courts had to restrict their operation. Consequences have been far reaching and translated into the loss of income (for many people farming is the only source of income), worsened inequality and poverty, lack of food security, breakdown of local communities and the loss of their cultural heritage, as well as growing social conflicts, often accompanied by bloodshed.

For instance, in Indonesia, from March to April 2020, two local activists were killed and four other arrested in relation to protests against land grabbing in Sumatra and

Borneo. One of clashes took place in the District of Lahat, South Sumatra Province, where a palm oil producer – PT Artha Prigel – operates. It is a branch of Sawit Mas Group that supplies Procter & Gamble with palm oil chemicals. For quite some time, the local population accused the company of land grabbing.

In September 2018, local farmers retaliated and seized 1/10 of the 2000-hectar plantation owned by the company. The farmers started to grow their own crops. The conflict deteriorated in March 2020 when the security company requested farmers to leave the property. Two farmers were stabbed during the clashes. According to local activists, the pandemic only worsened the conflict. The company took advantage of the situation to continue land grabbing as protests were banned and the society had to focus more on combating the virus (Cotula, 2020).

A similar situation took place in the North Sumatra Province where the local community provided sustainable farming on a 442-hectar strip of mangrove forest under a permit by the Ministry of Environment. However, in the middle of the site, a 64-hectar plot was occupied by PT Karatia, a company producing palm oil. Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, both parties were able to coexist without violating each other's rights.

At the beginning of the pandemic, an independent monitoring of the site discontinued, and PT Karatia started burning a part of forest used by local farmers (Jong, 2020).

During the pandemic, more frequent instances of land grabbing, deforestation, and violence in Argentina Paraguay, Columbia, and Brazil were reported by Greenpeace, Global Landscape Analysis and Discovery (GLAD), and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Between January and June 2020, the Argentinian part of Gran Chaco recorded deforestation of additional 2.500 ha in comparison to a corresponding period of 2019.

In particular, from March to May 2020, during the total lockdown, the deforestation rate was 80% higher than in the same period of the previous year. Usually, deforestation follows the same scenario, namely armed forces enter a site on behalf of capital owners to take over land and resources attached to it and illegally displace local peoples. Then, new land is cleared of any trees by either burning or cutting. A local community resists and tries to defend their property.

People are mercilessly beaten or murdered. Activists and observers have emphasised that already before the pandemic illegal deforestation and land grabbing were very common in Argentina, and during the lockdown – according to new regulations – any such activity has been illegal. The issue, however, is that these regulations are not enforced (Roy, 2020).

From March to September 2020, in the Colombian part of the Amazon, the SINCHI Institute noted three times more heat points than in the corresponding period of 2019. Heat points indicate locations of forest fires, one of the most popular forms of deforestation that accompanies land grabbing. British researchers who studied the phenomena concluded that apart from drought the reason was a reduced control by the government during the lockdown and the mobilisation of militant groups hired by corporations that invest in exploitation of natural resources (and drug cartels).

According to statistics provided by Somos Defensores, a Colombian NGO, from January to September 2020, Colombia recorded at least 95 murders of human rights activists. This translates into an increase of 61% in comparison to 2019 (Roy, 2020).

The pandemic and lockdown also had their impact on the status of the environment in Brazil. In the Brazilian part of the Amazon, massive land grabbing and deforestation have continued for quite some time and these have rapidly increased since 2019 when Jair Bolsonaro became the Brazilian president. The Amazon, often referred to as the “green lungs of our planet”, produces about 20% of oxygen for the earth atmosphere and absorbs huge volumes of CO₂. Experts warn that the shrinking of the Amazon forest will cause global warming.

Despite the fact, the investigation by Reuters, the information agency, has shown that since 2019 Bolsonaro has kept sending his army to the Amazon forest to supervise deforestation and land grabbing. The Brazilian law introduced by President Bolsonaro commonly known as the “land grabbers decree” legitimises deforestation, forest burning and consolidation of land in the Amazon.

During the pandemic, the devastation of the Amazon Forest exceeded its previous scale and pace. During the first four months of 2020, the deforestation rates increased by 55% comparing to the corresponding period of the previous year (Phillips, 2020; Roy, 2020; Rybski, 2021).

Unfortunately, there are many such examples and some of them are reported by the Rainforest Movement portal (Exploiting the pandemic..., n.d.). During the government imposed lockdown, a Guinea-based joint venture, owned by the mining giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto, which enjoy a generous support of the World Bank, displaced over a hundred families to continue the extension of their bauxite mine. People were moved to an area of a former mine deprived of any residential infrastructure, including access to water and sewage systems.

Moreover, the area of arable land there was insufficient to support so many people. Another example reported by Rainforest is the Wampis, indigenous peoples of Peru, who filed a lawsuit against oil and gas company GeoPark. They claimed that the health of the Wampis was threatened by uncontrolled entry of company employees to their autonomous territories. In Uganda, although evictions were banned during

the government-imposed lockdown, agro-industrial businesses, supported by the police and the military, expropriated dozens of farmers from their small farms.

In Cambodia, also during the lockdown, a Vietnamese rubber business giant, Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL), destroyed forests which belonged to the Kreung and Kachok peoples. Moreover, the company damaged two sacred mountains with wetland and old forest traditionally used as hunting areas and burial grounds. In Panama, a leader of the indigenous Guna peoples condemned land grabbing, mining, as well as illegal deforestation and hunting during the lockdown in territories occupied by indigenous populations.

In the context of the above mentioned examples, the situation in South Africa, in particular at the outskirts of Cape Town, seems paradoxical. The March 2020 lockdown resulted in the loss of many jobs and left people without income. Since people were no longer able to pay rent for their already sub-standard flats, many of them had to move to the outskirts and established illegal primitive camps. They provide a substitute of shelter made of various materials, typically waste steel sheets.

These shelters do not have access to electricity, water or sewage networks. People move there out of despair as they have no other choice but the government refers to them as “invaders” and accuses them of illegal land grabbing. The government started sending the Anti-Land Invasion Unit and designated officers to demolish camps and chase people out. When crowds protest, people are treated with rubber bullets (Reinders, 2020).

In many instances, the big capital (mostly international) is free to seize land from hard-working owners, destroy the natural environment, and violate human rights to maximise their profit. Not only are corporations not treated as invaders, but considered to be guarantors of economic prosperity in a given area. In other instances, citizens who try to survive the pandemic and lockdowns are accused of illegal land grabbing and treated as a threat, are some of them are removed by force.

4. Conclusions

Land grabbing in the Global South is not new. However, it has rapidly increased after the food crisis that accompanied the abrupt economic slowdown of 2007–2009. The pandemic and lockdowns accelerated the process and it grew to an unprecedented scale in many countries. In the shadow of the ban on travelling, gatherings, and restricted mobility, the illegal land grabbing and deforestation through burning or cutting trees have rapidly progressed.

It is much easier to destroy the environment and violate ownership and human rights when it escapes the attention of observers, as local populations do not have access to telephone or the Internet to alarm the public, and the operation of state administration and its control and management functions are limited. As people are

forced to stay at home during lockdown, activists have become an easy target for those who try to eliminate citizens causing troubles for large corporations.

In a number of countries, the already fragile safety of activists further deteriorated during the pandemic and consecutive lockdowns (Löw, 2020).

Governments often decided to exclude “essential services” from covid-related restrictions. The exemption has applied to companies involved in mining, fossil fuels, palm oil, and timber production. During lockdowns, these “exemptions”, however, had little to do with the provision of “essential services”, and the decisions were designed to secure profits for corporations.

There is a clear tendency to favour inward investors and prioritise their interests at the expense of the general public, as governments are afraid to be snowed under lawsuits filed by these corporations claiming compensation for profit lost due to restrictions (Exploiting the pandemic..., n.d.).

Undoubtedly, land grabbing has negative impact on indigenous peoples. It includes violation of human rights, illegal seizure of property (property that otherwise could help people to survive lockdown and restrictions), diminished food security, increased poverty, deteriorated trust to public institutions and market players, higher prices of land and food, etc.

However, consequences of land grabbing and deforestation are much wider. The deterioration of the natural environment and fluctuation of global food prices hit all countries and their citizens. Moreover, the end of lockdowns does not mean the end of troubles. Recovery from the pandemic crisis involves much public spending that boosts the indebtedness of many economies.

As a result, governments and public administrations may fail to maintain their prudent approach to investors who buy land for business purposes only. For those governments, rapid revenue from contracts could be far more important than long-term social and environmental repercussions (Löw, 2020). This undermines the implementation of sustainable development and climate neutrality goals and this will have devastating consequences for future generations all over the globe.

References:

- Cotula, L. 2020. Stopping land and policy grabs in the shadow of COVID-19. Available online: <https://www.iied.org/stopping-land-policy-grabs-shadow-covid-19>.
- Czy koronawirus wpłynął na zanieczyszczenia powietrza w Europie?. N.d. Available online: <https://airly.org/pl/czy-koronawirus-wplynal-na-zanieczyszczenia-powietrza-w-europie-nasza-analiza/>.
- European Environment Agency. 2020. Air quality in Europe – 2020 report. EEA Report 09. Available online: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2020-report>.

- Exploiting the pandemic: Corporate and elite profiteering. N.d. Available online: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/viewpoint/exploiting-the-pandemic-corporate-and-elite-profiteering/>.
- Grima, S., Thalassinos, I.E., Dalli Gonzi, R. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Malta and its Economy and Sustainable Strategies. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3644833> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3644833>.
- Jong, H.N. 2020. Land conflicts escalate with spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Available online: <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/04/land-conflicts-escalate-with-spread-of-covid-19-in-indonesia/>.
- Khan, S., Thalassinos, I.E., Rabbani, R.M., Atif, M. 2020. Pandemic Paving Ways to Next Generation of Learning and Teaching: Futuristic Cloud Based Educational Model Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3669832>.
- Koronawirus a zmiany klimatu. Jak pandemia wpłynęła na środowisko?. N.d. Available online: <https://www.nn.pl/blog/posts/2020/zmiany-klimatu-i-srodowisko-a-epidemia-koronawirusa.html>.
- Lockdown w Europie. Zmniejszyło się zanieczyszczenie powietrza, wzrosło zużycie plastiku. N.d. Available online: <https://swiatoze.pl/lockdown-w-europie-zmniejszylo-sie-zanieczyszczenie-powietrza-wzroslo-zuzycie-plastiku/?sidebarb>.
- Löw, C. 2020. Under cover of the pandemic, stealth land grabs are ongoing in India. Available online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/under-cover-pandemic-stealth-land-grabs-are-ongoing-india/>.
- Myllyvirta, L. 2020. Analysis: Coronavirus temporarily reduced China's CO2 emissions by a quarter. Carbon Brief. Available online: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-has-temporarily-reduced-chinas-co2-emissions-by-a-quarter>.
- Napierała, I. 2020. Wpływ epidemii koronawirusa na środowisko. Available online: <https://www.gdziepolek.pl/blog/wplyw-epidemii-koronawirusa-na-srodowisko>.
- Phillips, D. 2020. Brazil using coronavirus to cover up assaults on Amazon, warn activists. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/06/brazil-using-coronavirus-to-cover-up-assaults-on-amazon-warn-activists>.
- Reinders, S. 2020. Photos: Why South Africans Built An Illegal Settlement Called Covid. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/11/15/934003088/photos-why-south-africans-built-an-illegal-settlement-called-covid?t=1641975843209>.
- Rolling back social and environmental safeguards in the time of COVID-19. The dangers for indigenous peoples and for tropical forests. N.d. Available online: <https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/default/files/documents/Rolling%20Back%20Social%20and%20Environmental%20Safeguards%20-%20Global%20Report%20ENGLISH%20FINAL.pdf>.
- Roy, I. 2020. Deforestation and land-grabs bring Covid-19 threats to Amazon and Gran Chaco residents. Available online: <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2020/09/17/deforestation-covid-coronavirus-amazon-gran-chaco-indigenous/>.
- Rybski, J. 2021. Trwa największa wycinka drzew w brazylijskiej Amazonii. Available online: <https://www.national-geographic.pl/artukul/trwa-najwieksza-wycinka-drzew-lasow-amazonskich-w-brazylia>.