



ICARRD+20: LINKING NATIONAL AND GLOBAL LAND POLICY DEBATES TO ADVANCE LAND JUSTICE AND REFORM

By Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau
and Jordan Treakle

THE GLOBAL LAND GRAB AND ICARRD+20

While the struggle of rural communities to access land has continued for centuries, global land grabbing increased substantially following the 2007-2008 food price crisis and the concurrent 2008 financial crisis. Corporations from the Global North like agribusiness firms and hedge funds, known for their aggressive and exploitative tactics, began to buy up land in the Global South to chase high commodity prices and the increasing price of land.

Significantly, these developments took place almost immediately after the first **International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) in 2006** (as well as the parallel event organized by social movements, the “Land, Territory, and Dignity” Forum). ICARRD was a historic conference, held in Brazil and hosted by the United Nations, that created new political space for social movements to advocate for land policy issues at the global policy level.

Today, rural peoples face unprecedented new threats and challenges to land tenure and democratic control over territories and lands. These threats include financial speculation and

corporate land ownership; ecological destruction, extreme weather, and the climate crisis; inequality; and deepening hunger and poverty. Land grabbing, in particular, has grown bigger, more widespread, and more sophisticated. Instead of land grabbing being a local, regional, or national process, it is now global, and instead of being led by local or national elites, some of the biggest financial companies in the world like pension and retirement funds - which, with total global assets estimated to be almost \$60 trillion, are the most powerful actors in the financial sector - are moving to acquire global farmland as a new financial asset class.

Moreover, **global land grabbing is no longer characterized by aggressive corporate actors from the Global North preying on the Global South; now even the lands of the Global North are being grabbed**, and financial funds and businesses from the Global South are being recruited into these new international land deals.

This is a critical moment for the Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (or ICARRD+20 for short) scheduled to take place in Cartagena, Colombia from February 24 to 26, 2026. Taking place 20 years after the original ICARRD, global social movements of rural peoples and food

producers “expect ICARRD+20 to go further: to confront land concentration, secure collective and customary rights, advance redistributive agrarian reform, ensure gender and generational justice, and defend territories as spaces of resistance, hope, and transformation.”¹

Democratic land access and governance is one of the National Family Farm Coalition’s (NFFC) priority areas of work. NFFC’s participation in ICAARD+20 and partnering with similar organizations from around the world is also part of NFFC’s strategy. The outcomes of ICARRD+20 will also help to advance policy advocacy at the national level in the United States.



NFFC’S WORK ON LAND

Founded in 1986, NFFC represents 30 organizations from over 40 states in the U.S. NFFC’s member organizations represent diverse backgrounds, struggles, and experiences, including over 100,000 farmers, ranchers, and fisherfolk from across the country. NFFC fights for justice for food producers, especially for fair prices and wages, and for a food system based on food sovereignty and the human right to food.

As a member-led coalition, NFFC members have identified land concentration as a major issue. New

and beginning farmers, especially, identify access to land as their biggest challenge.² [NFFC is working to advance policies](#) that would improve how the federal government can help new and beginning farmers, particularly from historically underserved communities, to access and control land for community-based farming and food production. Additionally, NFFC is defending access to and governance over land, as agribusiness corporations and their partners in the financial sector increase their large-scale farmland acquisitions around the world and in the United States. NFFC is supporting public policy that would bar large corporations from buying additional farmland in the U.S., which is driving up the price of farmland beyond what family farmers can afford.

THE LAND CRISIS

Neoliberal globalization and free trade in the 1990s increased agribusiness control over global food production, with farms consolidating and corporations concentrating their power. According to Nury Martinez of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC),

“Land inequality has increased since the 1980s, driven by factors such as the expansion of large-scale industrial agriculture and economic and trade policies that prioritize global commodity production. As a result, a staggering 70% of the world’s arable land (land suitable for growing crops) is now controlled by only 1% of the largest farms (mostly monoculture) producing a few commodity crops. Meanwhile, farms of less than two hectares make up 84% of all farms but cultivate only 12% of the arable land.”³

Since the 2008 financial crisis, financial corporations have turned to farmland as a speculative asset class. Hedge funds, wealthy individuals, endowments, and pension funds have bought tens of millions of acres of prime farmland around the world. These large-scale

land acquisitions squeeze local communities, drive up farmland prices and farmland rents, and intensify environmentally destructive agribusiness practices. In some cases, financial companies buy farmland that has been illegally taken from communities through fraud and threats of violence, in clear violations of law and human rights. According to Global Witness, more than 2,200 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared from 2012 to 2024.⁴

In the United States, large financial companies outbid farmers and buy up land to increase their agribusiness fiefdoms, control more of our food supply, and take more of the “food dollar.”⁵ Mirroring the price of housing, the price of land keeps going up. For farmers looking to purchase land, increasing prices make it all but impossible to do so. Even for farmers that already own land, the rising price of farmland may not be a benefit, particularly as the farm crisis deepens. US farmers dealing with low commodity prices and rising debt are pressured to sell their land in order to pay off debts and secure a retirement. Black farmers, Indigenous communities, and other communities of color that own land are particularly targeted by and susceptible to predatory companies using high pressure tactics.⁶

This 21st century corporate land rush follows a long history of land theft and violence in the U.S., going back to the country's founding, where

European corporations (e.g. the Virginia Company and the Massachusetts Bay Company) were formed to locate and extract wealth and resources from the Americas. Colonial settlers continued to fight and steal land from Indigenous Peoples who lost not only their land but their culture and livelihoods in what is now recognized as a genocide.⁸ Kidnapped and enslaved Africans were also brought to the U.S. to work on plantations, and even after emancipation, the land that Black farmers were able to acquire was systematically stolen through corruption and racism in the 20th century.⁹ Finally, free trade policies in the 1990s like North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), destroyed rural economies in Mexico while the traditional *ejido* land reform system of governance that dated back to the Mexican revolution was weakened and privatized.¹⁰

US FARMLAND IS MORE EXPENSIVE THAN EVER – ONE ACRE OF LAND WAS VALUED AT \$4,350 IN 2025.⁷

With such an intense history of land theft and land injustice, the increasing role of financial corporations buying up farmland exacerbates the challenges of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color to access and control farmland in the U.S.



The lack of land governance policy change at the national level in the U.S. further worsens this current problem, harming food producers and rural communities and benefiting land speculators. While around nine states have passed laws to restrict corporate farmland ownership, and 21 states have passed laws restricting the foreign ownership of farmland, national policies governing land ownership and protecting access to land are outdated. National policy to address these issues is urgently needed to protect family farming.



Background on ICARRD and the Significance of ICARRD+20

Land reform - the process of governments re-distributing and re-organizing land governance to benefit rural communities and small-scale food producers - and **agrarian reform** - which also includes increased government support for small-scale farming, ecological practices, and local and regional markets - **enable equitable access to land and ensure sustainable and dignified rural livelihoods**. Where implemented, land and agrarian reforms can strengthen food systems and rural livelihoods. There are critical lessons to be learned from agrarian reform efforts that can be relevant to North America.

The original International Conference on Agrarian

Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) was held in Brazil in 2006, following the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 1979. It was a multilateral conference (meaning that governments sent official delegations to debate and negotiate on the final text) hosted and organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), focused on land and territorial development and agrarian reform. The final report from ICARRD proposed that rural development policies, including agrarian reform, should:¹¹

- focus on the poor and their organizations
- be participatory, respectful of gender identity, and be socially-driven (e.g. bottom up, NOT top-down)
- be socially and environmentally sustainable
- contribute to food security and poverty eradication
- be based on human rights, including the rights to employment, especially for landless workers
- strengthen local and national markets and income generation through small- and medium-sized enterprises
- foster social inclusion and conservation of environmental and cultural assets of the rural areas and the empowerment of vulnerable rural stakeholder groups
- be implemented in context that fully respects rights and aspirations of all rural people, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups, within national legal frameworks and through effective dialogue

The resulting report and debate at ICARRD, along with the food and financial crises of 2007-2008 that followed, created strong political momentum at the UN that led to the development of three significant pieces of global policy - the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP), the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants](#) (UNDROP), and the [UN Voluntary Guidelines on the](#)

[Governance of Land Tenure](#) (VGGTs). It also spurred significant political reforms to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) which made it the most inclusive and democratic policy space in the world, allowing social movements and their allies in “civil society” to debate and negotiate for food sovereignty and the human right to food.¹²

Unfortunately, because the U.S. government has resisted efforts to endorse and implement human rights frameworks at the UN - and has refused to sign or endorse UNDROP - rural communities in the U.S. do not experience the full impact of these global policies and reforms, which significantly shape land rights around the world. **It is therefore critical that the U.S. government recognizes the political outcomes of ICARRD+20.**

Key UN Policies:

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): Adopted in 2007. Formally recognized Indigenous Peoples’ rights, including the rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent.

UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP): Adopted in 2018. Recognizes the unique rights of rural peoples to land and livelihoods, over and above the interests of agribusiness.

Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Land Tenure (VGGTs): Adopted in 2012. Recognizes that “customary” and “informal” rights to land are also legitimate, and not only “legal” rights to land.

ICARRD+20 is coming at a crucial time, and social movements for food sovereignty are fully supporting it. According to Nury Martinez of the IPC,

“...ICARRD+20 offers a much-needed multilateral space to assess progress in the responsible

governance of land, fisheries, and forests, and to agree upon and coordinate effective public policies to address critical issues related to land and commons.”¹³

Putting land on the market has led to extreme concentration and acceleration of the agribusiness model, to the detriment of people and the planet. At ICARRD+20, officials from around the world will again debate these issues, and civil society and social movements will be there to hold them accountable and show them the vision and energy of rural peoples to build a better and fairer world. However, unlike in the previous conference, where civil society had to organize a separate event since they were not allowed in the official meeting, this time civil society will have a seat at the table.

ICARRD+20 provides an opportunity to re-center and prioritize land governance issues, which need to be at the forefront of multilateral policy debates at the international level. Additionally, human rights law must be the foundation of land policy at the national level in the U.S., where it is urgently needed. Finally, farmers, workers, and food producers from social movements and civil society organizations need an autonomous seat at all policy-making tables where land governance is created in order to ensure equity, fairness, and democratic processes that can ensure the public good.

This brief was written by Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau and Jordan Treakle, and designed by Samantha Cave.

Visit www.nffc.net for more information about the coalition and its policy work.

For more information about ICARRD+20, please contact Jordan Treakle, jordan@nffc.net.

REFERENCES:

¹"Nyeleni Newsletter: Rooted in resistance: territories for climate justice." Box 1. Newsletter no 61. 21 October 2025. <https://nyeleni.org/en/category/newsletters-nyeleni-in-english/newsletter-no-61-rooted-in-resistance-territories-for-climate-justice-coming-soon/>

²"Building a Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey." The National Young Farmer Coalition. 2022: <https://youngfarmers.org/publication/nationalsurveyreport2022/>.

³"It's official! Cartagena to host the Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD+20)." La Via Campesina. May 5, 2025: <https://viacampesina.org/en/2025/05/its-official-cartagena-to-host-the-second-international-conference-on-agrarian-reform-and-rural-development-icarrd20/>.

⁴"Roots of Resistance." Global Witness. <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/roots-of-resistance/>.

⁵"Corporate Control of Agriculture." Farm Aid. <https://www.farmaid.org/issues/corporate-power/corporate-power-in-ag/>

⁶Fairbairn, Madeleine; Elsa Calderon; and Jordan Treakle. "Selling out the Delta: Farmland Investment and Small Farmer Land Access in Mississippi." The National Family Farm Coalition. February 2023: https://nffc.net/wp-content/uploads/SellingOuttheDelta_FINAL.pdf.

⁷"Land Use, Land Value & Tenure - Farmland Value" USDA NASS. 2025. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/land-use-land-value-tenure/farmland-value>

⁸Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), p. 6.

⁹Newkirk II, Vann R. "The Great Land Robbery." *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2019: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/.

¹⁰"NAFTA's Legacy for Mexico: Economic Displacement, Lower Wages for Most, Increased Migration." Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch. September 1, 2019: https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/NAFTA-Factsheet_Mexico-Legacy_Oct-2019.pdf.

¹¹"Outcome of and FAO Follow-up to the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD)." 2006: <https://www.fao.org/4/j8160e/j8160e.pdf>.

¹²"Nyeleni Newsletter: Rooted in resistance: territories for climate justice." Box 1. Newsletter no 61. 21 October 2025: <https://nyeleni.org/en/category/newsletters-nyeleni-in-english/newsletter-no-61-rooted-in-resistance-territories-for-climate-justice-coming-soon/>

¹³La Via Campesina. May 5, 2025.

ADDITIONAL READING:

Pahnke, A., & Treakle, J. "From creating to confronting racial hierarchies: The evolving role of the US state in land policy." *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 23(4), 687–705. 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12559>.

UN Human Rights Council. "Land and the right to food: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri." UN Doc A/HRC/61/51. January 7, 2026: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/61/51>.

Seufert, Philip; Monsalve, Sofia; Rolón, Luciana; & Shalmali Guttal. "Lords of the Land: Transnational Landowners, Inequality and the Case for Redistribution." *Fian International and Focus on the Global South*. June 2025: https://www.fian.org/files/is/htdocs/wp11102127_GNIAANVR7U/www/files/Lords_Land_Fian_20250602_fin.pdf