

GOVERNMENT'S SECRET LAND GRAB AGENDA

'Our Land. Their Profits. Our Enslavement'

The government has a secret agenda to take ownership and control of customary land away from rural people and hand it to multi-national companies, commercial banks and other foreign interests.

The National Land Summit, held in May 2019 was just another move by the government to try and weaken communities' hold on their customary land and spark a new foreign-driven land grab.

The government has been pursuing this agenda for more than two-decades, particularly through the Department of Lands, PNG Forest Authority, Mineral Resource Authority and the Department of Agriculture.

The government has been heavily influenced by foreign donors, multi-lateral organisations, foreign businessmen and academics, the media and other outside actors.

With their support and encouragement, the government has been undertaking a dedicated program to reduce the amount of customary land across the country.

Secret Agenda

The government's secret land grab agenda can be seen in many different places if you look carefully.

Incorporated Land Groups were originally introduced to allow communities to take back control of plantations taken away in colonial times. But through legislation and poor practices, government has allowed ILGs to be abused as a *de facto* system to obtain consent for large-scale resource extraction like logging and mining and enable 'benefit sharing'. This has led to many abuses and the loss of customary land.

It was the misuse of ILGs, together with changes to the Land Laws introduced in 2007, that led to the huge SABL land grab. By 2012, around 5.5 million hectares of customary land, or 12% of our total land area, passed into the hands of corporations through illegally issued leases.



Figure 1: The map shows 50 of the 75 Special Agriculture Business Lease (SABL) areas in Papua New Guinea. All the SABLs together cover an estimated 5.5 million hectares of customary land. (GIS Data: J. Kimagl)

Successive governments have published dense and lengthy long and medium term development plans that if read carefully, expose their land agenda. Vision 2050, for example sets a target of reducing customary land by at least 15%

The 2019 National Budget talks about encouraging further 'land reforms', 'private sector growth' and 'the registration of customary land for commercial use.'

To this agenda we can add the outcomes from the May 2019 Land Summit. These include moves to make customary land titles 'bankable' as security for loans, encouraging greater private investment to commodify land, and reopening the debate on existing SABL leases, which were supposed to have been cancelled, and the ban on further new leases.

False Arguments

The government always tries to justify its land grab agenda by using the false argument that customary land is unutilized and a barrier to development.

Exactly the opposite is true: customary land is the only resource on which rural people can build a secure future.

Customary land already provides employment for 3 million farmers and supports an economy worth K40 billion a year.

Customary land also supports the production of fresh, healthy locally grown food and sustains people in times of natural disasters and helps them manage the impacts of global warming.

Government cannot be Trusted

History shows that the government simply cannot be trusted with the administration of customary land.

It has shown numerous times, that it lacks the capacity to handle complex land issues and cannot be trusted to ensure people's rights and interests and the environment are protected.

The Department of Lands and whole land administration system is riddled with corruption and mismanagement and is underfunded, especially at the provincial level. It will take considerable time, political will and substantial resources to make meaningful improvements but the government is showing no signs it is willing to make this investment.

The government has still not reversed the huge SABL land grab which was an attempt to 'mobilize' customary land on behalf of the logging and oil palm industries, and it has still not resolved the complex land issues around the LNG project.

The government cannot even manage its own state land properly and clearly cannot be trusted with what is our nation's most valuable asset, customary land.

People are the key to growth

Rather than trying to 'mobilize' customary land by taking it away from the people, the government should be mobilizing rural people and empowering them to develop their existing and new agriculture and horticulture businesses and other small and medium industries.

This is exactly the development path laid out in our Constitution and is the only way to ensure we achieve a 'smart, wise, fair, healthy and happy society' by 2050.

The government should be defending customary land ownership and helping local businesses to boost production and to access national and international markets.

This means providing extension services to nurture new enterprises and help increase productivity, providing better transport and storage infrastructure, supporting processing and value adding and protecting local producers from unfair foreign competition.

Products like vanilla, cocoa, honey, coconut oil, spices, fruits and vegetables, poultry, beef and fish can all be very successfully produced on customary land and have great potential for import substitution and boosting export earnings.

Our continued population growth, only makes maintaining local control over customary land even more vital.

Conclusion

Land mobilization is a phrase that we are always hearing from government, multilateral organisations and foreign aid providers.

It is just a euphemism for land grabbing by foreign companies.

Land mobilization is a cover for promoting the interests of a global elite and further increasing their wealth rather than doing what is best for customary landowners and Papua New Guinea as a proud and independent nation.

Rather than 'mobilizing' customary land the government should focus on mobilizing and empowering rural people.