Land-hungers? The clash over rights to forestland and acacia plantation livelihood in the Upland Central Vietnam

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Land grabbing has always been among the most several issues which test the governments’ ability to govern in many countries and in Vietnam. When most of the studies focus on large-scale land grabs and highlighted the impacts on local villagers and their exclusion to get access to natural resources, there is much little attention to small-scale land grabs. Using ethnographic approach and the case study in one intensive acacia plantation commune of Upland Central Vietnam, the paper examines why and how did the farm households get access and maintain the control over forest land before unpacking the dynamics of land grabs by them. The primary data, including 90 in-depth interviews, collected from the on-going fieldwork, January – June 2019 is mainly used for this paper. The observation and participatory forest change mapping, secondary data, Google Earth Images, and academic papers are also used to strengthen the analysis. The findings indicate a dramatical transformation of the landscape from post-war destroyed forests and mainly natural forests to a landscape dominated by farm-based acacia during two decades. In this picture, the villagers are enrolled in highly market-oriented production of commodities. They are hungry for land and have applied various mechanisms to grab control rights to land for acacia expansion. By bringing the issue of land grab by the poor in the context of acacia expansion into debate, we highlight that: (i) Land grabs always happen, not only at large-scale but also small-scale by the poor. The smallholders, in this case, are not victims as usual but the land grabbers; (ii) Land grabs do not do justice. It reflects the intensified competition among villagers themselves as well as their resistance process with the state to encroach into the state-forest owners nearby; (iii) The acacia is seen positively for both greening and opportunity for the poor, but they still have typical characteristics of a boom crop, that change the values and social relations around land. Through the paper, we expect to contribute to the comprehensive picture of land grab and point to dynamics which are emerging on the ground but have not yet received sufficient attention.