

Rapid intensification of global struggle for land

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The earth's limited surface is expected to stretch to everything: food for soon to be nine billion people, feed for our beef cattle and fowl, fuel for our cars, forests for our paper, cotton for our clothes. What is more, the earth's forests are preferably to be left untouched to stabilise the climate. Human ecologist and economist Kenneth Hermele will shortly be defending a thesis at Lund University, Sweden, in which he demonstrates that the struggle for land is intensifying rapidly.

Kenneth Hermele has conducted field studies in Brazil, where sugar cane has been cultivated for [biofuel](#) for 40 years.

"Even in a huge country like Brazil, there is not enough land to grow biofuels, food and cattle fodder without negatively impacting on the climate and biodiversity", says Kenneth Hermele.

It is true that biofuels are not grown in the rainforest, but sugar cane cultivation replaces other crops, like [soya](#), which in turn expands onto [grazing land](#). New areas for grazing are needed, and they can be found in the [Amazon](#).

"In Brazil, cattle ranchers are often singled out as the villains of the piece because it is they who burn down the rainforest to provide grazing for their cattle. In actual fact, their actions are merely a consequence of the increase in cultivation of [sugar cane](#) and soya on land that was previously used for cattle farming", explains Hermele.

Competition for arable land has intensified greatly in recent years. Rich countries take control of land in poor countries through trade and unequal exchange of ecological resources, outsourcing of polluting industries and dumping of environmentally hazardous waste.

"One result of this struggle for land is the re-emergence of the phenomenon of 'land grabbing'", says Kenneth Hermele. "Land-hungry actors – spanning the whole spectrum from countries to companies to pension funds to pure speculators – invest in land in developing countries. The pattern is reminiscent of the colonial division of labour."

Kenneth Hermele argues that Thomas Robert Malthus (1766) might be proved right in the end. Malthus believed that the population of Britain would increase much faster than the rate of food production and that this would inevitably lead to famine. The theory was much debated in the early 1800s, but was soon seen as obsolete with the arrival of new technology, fossil fuels and colonial expansion. Today, in the view of Hermele, we are back at the frontiers that Malthus foresaw.

More information: www.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=12588&postid=2969351

Provided by Lund University

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