

**Trapped in the corporate agri-food system:
resources grabbing and political economic constraints in Thailand**

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Abstract:

Studies on the global corporate agri-food system have extensively discussed the system's environmental and social unsustainability, as well as how global food security and the periodic hikes in food prices in recent years are linked to the energy and global economic crisis. The current conjunction of food, energy and global economic crisis has prompted international capital markets to engage in speculative ventures in land, food and bio-fuels, as investment in agriculture appears to present one solution to the profitability crisis of capital.¹ Excess speculation by non-commodity traders are seen as contributing to volatile, rising food prices.² In addition, to keep the prices of circulating capital or raw materials down, capital strives to plunder uncaptialised nature by geographically expanding the frontiers of appropriation such as through different channels of accumulation by dispossession.³ Agricultural resources grabbing, particularly in developing countries, increases the domination of large capital and finance over the agri-food system. Scholars and international civil society movements such as Via Campesina have discussed ways to reform and transform the current agri-food system towards a more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable system. There are merits to such spirits of global solidarity, but local and nation-based struggles to reform the agri-food system, taking into account specific social, political, economic contexts, are also important.

As a case study, the paper will discuss how agricultural resources grabbing in Thailand threatens the country's food security, and discuss the challenges facing Alternative Agriculture movement in Thailand. Based on a field research in Thailand between October 2012-February 2013, it will focus on issues such as land, genetic resources grabbing and

¹ Philip McMichael, "The Food Regime in the Land Grab : Articulating ' Global Ecology ' and the 'Political Economy'," Paper presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing 6-8 April (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex 1, 2011), 3 and 7-8.

² Jennifer Clapp, "Food Price Volatility and Vulnerability in the Global South: considering the global economic context," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 6 (September 2009): 1186.

³ Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the metabolic rift: a theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology," *Journal of Peasant Studies*. Vol. 28, No. 1, Jan. 2011, 21-23.

increased control of agri-businesses over the agri-food system, enabled by continuing attempts to increase the levels of free trade and free flow of finance, such as through the signing of FTAs. The paper will also discuss how, despite the growing visible threats, resistance to resources grabbing and capitalist agriculture has not been able to make significant changes to the status quo. Alternative Agriculture movement in Thailand has made some respectable progress, and linkages with international civil society movements have helped them to analyse the problems and refine their ideas and strategies. However, the movement's expansion is partly limited by political-economic constraints in the country. The paper will focus on how their efforts are hindered by hegemonic ideological belief in large agri-businesses and capitalist agriculture, which is aided by an almost complete mutualistic symbiosis between large capital and the centralised Thai state. Co-opting pro-poor and leftist rhetoric, crowding out other progressive alternatives, political-economic elites have implemented agricultural and rural populist policies which re-inforce patron-client relations, keeping the masses dependent. Attempts to challenge the power of large agri-businesses or to empower the poor, such as through progressive land reforms, are ignored or suppressed. The political-economic elites have also benefited from existing political bi-polarisation which divides the people's movement. In sum, the majority of the population are mentally trapped by the belief in capitalist agri-food system, populist patron-client policies and political bi-polarisation, and are too distracted by such narrow analytical frameworks to think about progressive reforms in the agri-food system, let alone the economy as a whole.