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**Covering the great land rush: The role of frontline journalism, and broader coverage strategies, for reporting on large land and natural resource deals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Sunderland for the degree of PhD by Existing Published or Creative Works**

**March 2024**



## **Acknowledgements**

In submitting this PhD, I acknowledge the role of the University of Sunderland in supporting my research.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. John Price, Mr. Neil Macfarlane, and the broader team at the University of Sunderland's Journalism Department. This thesis, and the previously published work accompanying it, is the product of more than a decade of frontline reporting involving dozens of editors, collaborators and colleagues spread across South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Canada. I would like to thank the sources who made the time to speak with me, including many people facing displacement, environmental violence, and other difficult circumstances. Some went on the record at significant personal risk and this work wouldn't have been possible without their bravery and commitment to a larger sense of justice.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Krista, and son, Logan, who put up with me during the process of writing this thesis and producing the attached work. Spending time around a stressed reporter on constant deadlines is never easy and they handled it with grace and care.

## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses best practices for investigative journalistic coverage of large land and natural resource deals. It situates the contributions and original insights brought to light over a decade of field reporting into the broader journalism literature on best practices for environmental coverage. It traces the historical evolution of large land deals, highlighting examples of effective coverage of the phenomenon. It offers an original methodology for approaching coverage of the issue, by melding ground-truth interviews and official records to identify previously unknown information on the causes, drivers and impacts of large-scale land and natural resource deals. It analyzes the utility of specific reporting tactics including: satellite mapping, social media, land registry records, stock price movements, investor disclosures and contracting documents to determine their utility in bringing new information to light on land grabs. And it offers two new approaches to the broader study of journalism, one theoretical and the other practical. The theoretical contribution reframes transparency into an active praxis of engaged reporting leveraged to wring previously unpublished information from powerful institutions. The practical contribution reimagines international best practices for reporter-fixer collaborations on coverage of large land and natural resource deals.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In providing counsel to his son, the television gangster Tony Soprano once advised, “Buy land, ‘cause God ain’t making anymore of it” (Readers Digest, 2021). While the fictional mob boss was hardly the first to make such a proclamation, the issue of large farmland acquisitions by wealthy investors, particularly in the Global South, has taken on new urgency since spikes in food and fuel prices in 2007 caused a rapid increase in the phenomenon known as land grabbing (Edelman et. al 2013; Hirsch 2022; Vermeulen & Cotula 2010; Von Braun & Meinzen-Dick, 2009). By 2022, the 21<sup>st</sup> century deals – more than 2,500 agreements - covered an estimated 96 million hectares of land, an area larger than Mexico (Land Matrix 2022). Millions of people and huge amounts of food, water and capital are directly impacted by these deals (Liberti 2013; Messerli et al., 2014; Oliveira, McKay and Liu 2022). There is a large volume of literature on the subject, including: many case-specific studies, probes into the role of large land deals (or the lack thereof) in poverty alleviation and food security, and analyses on how colonialism, global power imbalances, and capital accumulation shape the agreements (Mihalik 2012; Oliveira, McKay and Liu 2021; Ross 2014).

This thesis, however, is concerned with how journalists should best cover the deals, a subject which has received minimal attention. How reporters effectively uncover, report on, contextualize and follow-up on these deals in the era of climate change is fundamental for audiences and affected communities (Liberti 2013; Hines 2019; Radebe and Chiumbu 2022). This thesis, based on the production of hundreds of articles and ten years of field reporting from the frontlines of the global land rush, offers a methodology for best practices in journalistic coverage of the deals and case-specific examinations on challenges, strategies, and opportunities for breaking original stories. This methodology is based on melding “ground truth” from field reporting with primary records to add new quantitative and qualitative information into the public domain. The thesis contributes a new theoretical approach to journalism studies: re-framing transparency into an active praxis to wrench new information from powerful actors. It also adds a practical approach for international land and natural resource reporting practice: re-imagining journalist-fixer relationships in international coverage to prioritize non-journalists with specific skills and contacts as reporting collaborators.

### **1.1 A road map for thesis structure**

This thesis will commence with a brief introduction to historical reporting on large land deals, basic context on where journalistic scholarship on the issue stands, and definitions for key terms. The second chapter explains the methodology used for this research, examining how land rights journalism can be most effectively conducted in the current media environment. It also poses the research questions to be examined and offers the selection process for why certain pieces of reporting were included in the attached portfolio of previously published work and why others

were excluded, underscoring the unique contributions to knowledge from a decade of frontline journalism. It also offers some critiques of the core methodology.

Chapter 3 addresses key debates within newsrooms, and the scholarly literature, on best practices for international reporting in general, and coverage of large land deals specifically (Giles 2010; McLeary 2007; Price 2019). It will analyze some of the economic challenges media organizations face when attempting to embark on investigative international environmental coverage (Hines 2019; Comfort, Tandoc & Gruszczynski 2019; Schäfer & Painter 2021) and then probe new developments for financing journalism on large land deals through the emerging media ecosystem of foundation-supported reporting (Wright, Scott and Bunce 2019; Nisbet, Wihbey, Kristiansen and Bajak 2018; Benson 2018). This chapter also analyzes the practical utility of different reporting and sourcing techniques, such as leveraging big data, approaches for NGO sources, and social media research, in the development, iteration, and production of investigative coverage on large land and resource deals. Chapter 4 analyzes the value of different reporting strategies, in the context of specific pieces of journalism from the attached portfolio of original work. It will show how this journalism brought new information into the public sphere and leveraged the core methodology behind this thesis (Arsenault 2015c; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2017g; Kaufman 2014; Burgis, Clark & Peel 2016; Liberti 2013; Lozada 2022).

The final chapters address two specific contributions from this thesis, one practical and the other theoretical. Chapter 5 offers a theoretical reinterpretation of how journalists should approach transparency in the context of investigative reporting on land and natural resource deals. It reimagines transparency as an active praxis of engaged reporting leveraged to wring previously unpublished information from powerful institutions, rather than a steady state, or desirable characteristic. This theoretical contribution, and some criticisms of it, are addressed in the context of the broader reporting methodology outlined in this thesis. Chapter 6 offers a practical contribution to journalism practice; a reappraisal of relationships between international correspondents and fixers as a possible blueprint for other working journalists, particularly those covering large land and natural resource deals. This chapter discusses some of the emerging literature on best practices for collaborations and offers a new approach in the context of the original coverage and methodology outlined in previous chapters. Chapter 7 offers a final conclusion which summarizes the key contributions of this thesis and notes where more research is needed.

## **1.2 Definitions**

Frontline journalism typically acts as the first draft of history (Williams 2012). In the context of this thesis, “journalism” is defined as “a professional practice that gathers, evaluates, selects and presents news and information [and] generates original content” (Schäfer & Painter 2021, p. 2). Journalists follow editorial principles and distribute content to a “wide range of general and



specialist audiences” (Schäfer & Painter 2021, p. 2). The original journalism forming the backbone of this thesis, like most traditional reporting, was produced for a generalist audience. Journalists typically view themselves as one or some combination of the following: neutral curators who manage news flows based on the relative importance of an issue, watchdogs who monitor elites, or advocates of a particular cause (Schäfer & Painter 2021; Zelizer 2017). These perceptions influence their work (Bruggemann 2017). The original reporting on land deals cited in this thesis typically aims to follow the second watchdog self-identification, as part of a broader praxis to pry information from powerful actors, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5 (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2017g; Arsenault 2021a). This transparency journalism stands aside from the advocacy content creation common for non-government organizations and campaigners who publish blogs, opinion pieces, analysis and other generalist and specialist content on the great land rush (Shoemaker and Reese 2014).

In the western press, the term “land grab” gained popular media currency in the U.S. in the late 1800s during the era of monopolies and pushes by white settlers to take control over Indigenous territories (Coatsworth 2004; Zoomers et al. 2016). The “great land robbery” was frequently how commentators described the expansion of American railroads and the concentration of capital among a small group of oligarchs (Zoomers et al. 2016, p. 151). In 1883, for instance, the New York Times ran a story about the behaviour of Texas railroad concerns headlined: “A Great Land Grab” (NYT 1883). The term gained renewed attention in North America during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, as indebted farmers hit by drought were forced to move en masse, as popularized in John Steinback’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (Holleman 2017). In short, large land deals are not intrinsically new and have been well covered in scholarship, the press, and the popular imagination for more than 150 years (Basu 2007).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century iteration, there is near universal agreement that today’s great land rush kicked off with global spikes in food and commodity prices in 2007-2008 (Zoomers et al. 2016; Ross 2014). Since 2006, more than 20,000 articles have been published including the phrase “land grabs,” according to a review on Google Scholar (Google Scholar 2023). In addition to “large-scale land deals” the terms “land deal” or the more direct “land grab” will be used on occasion for ease of syntax without implying a different political or economic configuration of the concession in question. For the purposes of this thesis, the term “large-scale land deal” refers to concessions bigger than 200 hectares involving investors primarily concerned with returns on capital, rather than local employment, community food security in the growing region or other social goods (Messerli et al. 2014). These investors could be nationals of the country where the concession is located or based internationally, but their concessions represent a “disarticulation from their host society” (Henderson 2021, p. 262). Large-scale land deals can also refer to a form of neo-mercantilism, popularized by financiers from the Gulf states and northeast Asia, involving the wholesale export of crops out of a concession area and into the investing nation to meet its food security needs (Henderson 2021). Lands where residents lack formal tenure security, including

territories occupied by traditional Indigenous communities, or so-called frontier areas where climate shifts and increased demand from population growth elsewhere have elicited new interest from investors, are often particularly at risk from these deals (Arsenault 2014c; Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016a; Arsenault 2016b; Henderson 2021).

## **Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Context**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins with a critical discussion of some of the existing scholarship, or the lack thereof, on best practices for journalistic coverage of large land deals, providing a justification on the need for this research. It explains the core reporting methodology guiding my approach to investigative journalism on land and resource deals by melding “ground truth” interviews with original primary records. And it poses the research questions to be answered in this thesis. It also addresses some critiques and shortcomings of this methodology. Finally, this chapter details the selection process for why certain pieces of original journalism produced using this investigative reporting methodology were included in the portfolio of attached work and why others were excluded.

### **2.2 Research context and justification**

Despite the importance of large-scale deals for livelihoods, food security and basic human rights, and the interest in them from reporters and academics, there is minimal scholarship on best practices for journalistic coverage of the great land rush. No published academic monographs are specifically devoted to the issue and “large-scale land deals” or “land grabs” mostly receive only tangential mention within broader studies of investigative journalism, best practices for the inclusion of marginalized voices in reporting, and environmental or resource journalism (Lester 2017; Radebe and Chiumbu 2022; Schwartzstein 2020; Burrett 2021; Hines 2019). There is, however, a significant and growing body of scholarship on best practices for, and the general importance of, journalists reporting on climate change, environmental issues, and transparency around natural resources (Freedman 2020; Schiffrin and Powell 2019; Sachsman and Valenti 2020). There is also a plethora of frontline journalism examining the rush for land (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault 2016h; Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2017g; Bourne 2013; Burgis, Clark & Peel 2016; MacFarquhar 2010). This frontline reporting, coupled with the aforementioned academic branches of journalism research, will form important components of the secondary literature for this thesis. Scholarship from fields including geography, international political economy, development studies and history will also be leveraged for more case-specific context on the land deals themselves (Liberti 2013; Oliveira, McKay and Liu 2021; Tsai et al 2020).

### **2.3 Base methodology and research questions**

The methodology behind this thesis, and the original contributions to knowledge and approaches to journalism contained within, is drawn from a variety of sources. It includes primary research

material from a decade of frontline reporting on the land rush based on hundreds of interviews on five continents with: government officials, lawyers, corporate executives, activists, scientists, politicians, policy experts, and residents facing displacement. These interviews are part of a journalistic methodology known as “ground truth” defined as “literally witnessing events” or talking to sources with direct insights on the issue in question to report the facts (Rohde and Roy 2016, p. 116). In this land rights reporting methodology, ground truth from the field, literally in this case, is backed by primary records such as contracting documents, court filings, government data, official correspondence released via access to information requests and corporate disclosures (Chavkin 2021; Lozada 2022; Zoomers, Gekker & Schäfer 2016).

The synthesis of ground truth and previously unreported official records form the backbone of the methodology for this journalistic contribution to knowledge. Figure 1 on page 40 provides a visual representation of what this methodology looks like in practice, including how source materials denoted as either ground truth or primary records can be selected, reported, and melded together to form a cohesive piece of investigative reporting. In this thesis, original journalistic contributions based on primary source material obtained through investigations will be situated in the broader literature on frontline journalism best practices, transparency reporting for natural resource issues and strategies for international journalism collaborations. Melding original investigations into the secondary literature will underscore unique contributions to knowledge from this journalism on the global scramble for land and resources. In doing so, this thesis will address the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the most effective journalistic approaches for investigative coverage of large-scale land deals in creating broader public understandings of the phenomenon?
- 2) What insights do this original research, and the practical and theoretical approaches behind it, including the methodology of melding “ground truth” and primary records, offer to other journalists and scholars?

## **2.4 Limits and critiques of the methodology**

While the methodology of melding “ground truth” with primary records offers perhaps the most holistic approach to covering the great land rush, it still faces several theoretical, epistemological and practical shortcomings. The first theoretical problem relates to the concept of ground truth itself. Insights from direct witnesses or participants in the same event are not universal. Two individuals can view the same proceedings and study the same primary records to draw radically different conclusions about key causes, historical drivers, and potential solutions. In environmental reporting, the writer William Cronon captured this dynamic in his essay *A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative* (Cronon 1992). Cronon analyzed two competing works on the drought that struck much of the central United States in the 1930s. The authors, both respected

scholars, had access to the same primary records on the Dust Bowl and agreed upon the basic facts around precipitation levels, migration, and food insecurity (Cronon 1992; Arsenault 2014a). One argued the Dust Bowl was mainly a natural disaster due to a simple lack of rain and it showcased the strength of American farmers who stayed on the land; their sacrifice during a period of drought improved the nation's food security in the long run (Bonnifield 1978). The other called the period "one of the three worst ecological blunders in history" and said its toll showed the perils of industrial agriculture and the country's structural system of food production and class relations (Worster 2004, p. 4; Cronon 1992). The ground truth reporting methodology does not address competing interpretations of the same event, nor does it attempt to. While the methodology seeks balance, fairness, and accuracy, it does not present its findings as "objective," a term increasingly questioned by media scholars, journalists, and members of the public (Lugo-Ocando 2020; Mattar 2020; McNair 2017). A closer examination of debates about objectivity as an ideological pillar of journalism, and its utility for the coverage of land deals in the context of a reimagined praxis of transparency, will be addressed in Chapter 5.

In addition to allowing for different framing, analysis and conclusions from the synergy of ground truth through interviews and primary records, this methodology does not account for growing distrust among audiences of the accuracy and context of news reporting in much of the western world (Strömbäck et al 2020; Gallup 2022). In the U.S., for example, 38 per cent of respondents to a Gallup poll had no trust whatsoever in media reporting in 2022 (Gallup 2022). The reasons for this drop in trust are hotly debated among journalists, scholars, and average citizens (Farid 2023; Markov & Min 2023; Newman et. al 2023). Some argue that journalists need to take more pugilistic stances on social issues to build credibility, especially among marginalized communities (Mattar 2020). Others say the opposite is true, arguing that creating trust with audiences requires giving equal space to contrasting perspectives on an issue (Newman et. al 2023). Some scholars blame fake news and misinformation online for a decline in trust; others say leading politicians have been increasingly levelling harsh critiques at journalists, further eroding confidence in their reporting (Burrett 2021; Fontes & Marques 2022; Newman et. al 2023). These debates are crucial to the future of news and have been the subject of multiple studies and other research. Addressing declining trust in the news media in the western world in a fulsome fashion would require its own separate book-length study; analyzing that complex problem and providing solutions is outside of the scope of a thesis aiming to offer original insights on covering land and resource deals. It is clear, however, that practiced to near perfection, the reporting methodology outlined in this thesis will not impact audiences who do not trust reporters in the first place.

Along with high-minded debates about interpretations for different events and rising distrust in the press, this reporting methodology can be hampered by more practical problems. A lack of newsroom resources for international coverage and investigations, a problem that will be addressed in depth shortly, makes ground truth nearly impossible for many working journalists to access.

Obtaining primary records such as corporate filings and contract documents can be logistically difficult or impossible in certain regions (Schwartzstein 2020). In some authoritarian states which are also key backers of land investments, such as the UAE, China, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia, employing this methodology to investigate land grabs often is not feasible due to visa prohibitions, a lack of public access to contracting records, and fears of potential sources of reprisals by state security (Liberiti 2013; Henderson 2021; Bebawi and Bossio 2014; Schwartzstein 2020; Pearce 2012). In Saudi Arabia, for example, on-the-record interviews with local tribesmen who will be displaced by NEOM, a proposed future city on the Red Sea spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman, cannot happen effectively (Michaelson 2020; Hope & Scheck 2020). Three residents who spoke out against the project were, for example, sentenced to death in October 2022; it's nearly impossible for foreign reporters to operate freely in the region to conduct on-the-record interviews with residents facing displacement or other government critics (Rothwell 2022; Hope & Scheck 2020).

In short, there are many regions where this methodology cannot be strategically employed due to safety, financial or logistical constraints. In these cases, other reporting strategies are more effective for garnering accurate information, such as interviews with diaspora communities who don't have a "ground truth" perspective and social media monitoring and verification (Bebawi and Bossio 2014; Cooper and Owen 2014). Those problems aside, in large swaths of the world this journalistic methodology can provide the most transparent, fair, and complete picture of the impacts of the great land rush (Arsenault 2015a; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault & Le Billon 2022a; Burgis, Clark & Peel 2016; Lozada 2022).

## **2.5 Selection process for the portfolio of previously published work**

Over more than a decade of reporting on land rights, climate change and natural resources, the research for this thesis, and the contribution to knowledge contained within, included the production of more than 700 published stories (Arsenault 2011c; Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2014c; Arsenault 2015a; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016e; Arsenault 2016i; Arsenault 2017d; Arsenault 2017g; Arsenault 2018a; Arsenault 2021a). This previously published work includes complex investigations conducted over the course of months and simple 400-word news articles written in the space of a few hours (Arsenault 2015f; Arsenault 2016b; Arsenault 2016c; Arsenault 2016d; Arsenault 2017c; Arsenault 2017g; Arsenault 2022a). This workload is part of an industry-wide trend: it's not uncommon for staff reporters to report and write three stories daily, if not more (Brey, 2018; Pew Center, 2011). The average non-profit newsroom, the kind of organization for which most of these pieces were created, fared slightly better for workload and time, with reporters producing an average of more than two stories per week (Holcomb et. al 2022). For this thesis, it would be logistically impossible to expect reviewers to read more than 700 individual pieces of journalism. Moreover, not all these stories – including deeply researched investigative contributions – explicitly relate to the topic at hand. Stories with headlines including: “Awe and

fear: Politicised gangs of Venezuela”, "Dirty money thrives despite Mexico drug war" and "Funding deals gave Coca-Cola power to quash health research, study says" were excluded from the portfolio of previously published work for a lack of direct relevance to the topic under consideration (Arsenault 2013; Arsenault 2012 and Arsenault 2019b).

Many stories related to land rights and climate change were also excluded if they did not employ the methodology of combining ground truth and primary documents, or they otherwise lacked deep original reporting or insight. Articles with headlines such as “Gunmen storm Amazon hospital, murder Brazil land activist”, “Goat plague hits poor farmers in Africa, Asia, wider vaccination needed: FAO” and “Canada welcomes China’s plan to build a 'Polar Silk Road' in the Arctic” fit into this exclusion (Arsenault 2017f; Arsenault 2015b; Arsenault 2018a). Pieces produced under the auspices of what journalists call “feeding the beast,” often commissioned by editors demanding more content to fill space, were also excluded from this portfolio (Benson 2018, p. 1061; Blom 2004; Zelizer 2005; Arsenault 2016d).

The previously published work which underpins this thesis and the original contribution to knowledge contained within has been set out in a full portfolio attached to this thesis as Appendix 1. The portfolio includes 70 stories for roughly 70,000 words of original content. It is divided into four sections showcasing original journalism focused on: large-scale land deals, resource governance, food security, and the climate crisis. Content in these sections is further subdivided into the various regions where the journalism was produced, including: Brazil, Cambodia, Mali, the United Nations food agencies in Rome and stories with a global frame of reference. In several cases, stories from this portfolio produced measurable policy impact or awards (Arsenault 2015c; UNCA 2015; RTDNA 2022; Arsenault and Le Billon 2022b; IMarEST 2023). The previously published works included in the portfolio were chosen based on:

- Leveraging the core methodology of this thesis.
- Originality in bringing new information, or unique interpretations of existing information, into the public sphere.
- Audience responses as measured through online traffic, engagement, and awards.
- Broader investigative utility and impact.

Put simply, content included in the portfolio added original knowledge on large-scale land deals into the broader discourse and was reported under the aforementioned methodology of melding ground truth and primary records (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016i; Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2017g; Arsenault 2021a). In the bibliography for this thesis, original published works which were not included in portfolio because of space constraints, or because they didn’t fit the methodology, will still be cited if they add value, sourcing or insights to the broader arguments and analysis.

## **2.6 Summary**

So far, this thesis has introduced the research topic, defined key terms and provided a research justification on the need for more information about strategies for journalists covering the great land rush. It has also noted the core methodology for this research and explained the selection process for previously published work in the attached portfolio, showcasing an original contribution to knowledge. The upcoming chapter provides context on best practices for sourcing stories about large-scale land deals and addresses some of the practical difficulties reporters can encounter when covering the issue with the aforementioned methodology.

## **Chapter 3: Best practices for reporting strategies, addressing challenges and opportunities**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter will outline some of the professional challenges reporters face when attempting to produce investigative journalism on large land and resource deals, in the form of declining newsroom budgets and audience engagement. It also highlights some positive responses from journalists and media organizations to these difficulties. It will then assess the effectiveness of several strategies and sourcing techniques for bringing new information to light on the deals when leveraging the methodology explained in Chapter 2. It will assess the benefits and drawbacks of NGO sourcing, the utility of social media for transparency reporting on large land and resource deals, best practices for leveraging big data, and strategies for gathering ground truth voices from the field. These best practice debates inform the original contributions to knowledge on large land and resource deals discussed in Chapter 4, and the theoretical and practical contributions to journalism addressed in Chapters 5 and 6.

### **3.2 Challenges of international investigative coverage**

It doesn't take an investigative journalist to recognize that the business model of traditional media outlets is under profound strain (Rohde and Roy 2016). Advertising dollars, the economic lifeblood of most news outlets, have declined as marketers migrate their spending to social media giants and search engines like Google (Canadian Heritage Dept 2022). With some recent notable exceptions, such as the New York Times, paid newspaper subscriptions and cable TV audiences have been on a downward trajectory in the western world since the rise of the internet some 20 years ago (Nielsen 2015). These economic pressures are impacting the ability of journalists to conduct in-depth investigations or even keep their jobs. In the U.S., echoing similar trends in other western nations, some 30,000 newsroom jobs disappeared between 2008 and 2020, a loss of 26 per cent (Pew Center 2021). This decline has been especially sharp for foreign reporting, "one of the most



expensive journalistic undertakings and one of the least rewarding in terms of audience interest” (Hamilton 2009, p. 466). As revenues fell, major western news outlets began shuttering expensive overseas bureaus, relying instead on syndication services, including Reuters, the Associated Press and Bloomberg (Sambrook 2011). According to one study, the overall number of foreign correspondents working for American newspapers fell from 188 in 2002 to 141 in 2006 (McLeary 2007). Another study found that the number of foreign correspondents employed by the 10 largest U.S. newspapers dropped by nearly 25% to 234 in 2011 from 307 in 2003 (Willnat & Martin 2020). Without providing firm numbers, a later study estimated the number of foreign correspondents employed by midsized U.S. newspapers has fallen by 30% since 2000 (Willnat & Martin 2020). These declines come against the backdrop of a broader industrywide business crisis. The journalism publication Poynter reported that "2023 was the worst year for the news business since the pandemic" citing more than 20,000 media job losses, including at outfits which still employ foreign correspondents, such as ABC News, Bloomberg, NBC News and the Washington Post (Fu 2023). In short, there is no debate that the number of traditional staff foreign correspondents has been declining.

The decrease in correspondents in the field, coupled with increasing pressures on the journalists who are still employed to deliver constant content across media platforms, has led to more “superficial” reporting of international news, and fewer resources for ambitious, nuanced coverage (Rohde and Roy 2016, p. 118). Investigative reporting, particularly on large land deals, is generally an expensive undertaking, often involving travel to remote areas, costs associated with obtaining original records and costs related to security and logistics (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015f; Arsenault 2016h; Arsenault 2017a; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021b). Audience engagement with these stories, as measured by online traffic or new subscriptions, typically does not meet the cost-benefit analysis editors are forced to make on how to deploy limited news gathering budgets (Giles 2010).

This decline in professional foreign correspondent roles and budgets for foreign newsgathering from mainstream outlets has helped lead to a rise in freelance reporters, bloggers and citizen journalists producing news content on international stories (Willnat & Martin 2020). This trend impacts coverage of large land and resource deals, which typically happen in remote locations, exacerbating budget pressures for traditional outlets, and sometimes leading to audience concerns about the balance and fact-checking of content produced by non-staff journalists (Lester 2017; Manninen 2020; Willnat & Martin 2020). Aside from the largest media outlets including The New York Times, The Guardian, Financial Times, BBC, CNN, Reuters or Al Jazeera, few traditional news organizations have the resources or wherewithal to engage in such complex international reporting on a regular basis (Carvajal, García-Avilés & González 2012; Freedman 2020).

### **3.3 Emerging hope in foundation-supported journalism**

Despite the financial strains on international investigative journalism at traditional outlets, there have been some positive developments for land rights reporting in recent years: specifically, the rise of non-profit foundation support for ambitious foreign or investigative reporting projects (Benson 2018; Konieczna 2022). While non-profit publications and journalism projects have existed since the mid-1800s, if not earlier, the current growth in the importance of foundation-supported reporting began in the mid-2000s, in tandem with a decline in newsroom budgets (Nisbet, Wihbey Kristiansen & Bajak 2018). Between 2010 and 2015, more than 6,500 foundations in the U.S. distributed \$1.8 billion for journalism initiatives; the annual funding from foundations has almost certainly increased since then (Nisbet et al. 2018, p. 5; Konieczna 2022). Of this money, more than \$30 million was directly spent financing international reporting, with another \$83.6 million spent on U.S. domestic investigative and public affairs news (Nisbet et. al 2018, p. 64, p. 5). By 2023, non-profit news outlets in the U.S. were receiving an estimated \$150 million annually, according to the Boston Consulting Group, which also estimated the news industry required \$1.75 billion (Bauder 2023). In other words, non-profit journalism has seen an “substantial” infusion of cash, but that money is not enough to cover the needs of the industry, particular for expensive international reporting (Bauder 2023; Benson 2018). The methodology for creating the journalism underpinning this thesis, and much of the top global reporting on land rights, required access to foundation money to finance investigations (Arsenault 2015; Arsenault 2015a; Arsenault 2015f; Arsenault 2015g; Arsenault 2016e; Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault & Mendes 2017b; Arsenault & Mendes 2017c; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021c; Burgis, Clark & Peel 2016). The original contributions of this journalism on land rights are part of the growing trend of international non-profit investigative reporting (Gearing, A., & Berglez 2019; Leigh 2019; Brainard 2015).

Most key pieces included in the portfolio underpinning this thesis were produced for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of the world’s largest news agency, or the publicly funded outlets Al Jazeera and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Arsenault 2011a; Arsenault 2011c Arsenault 2014f; Arsenault 2015c; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021b; Arsenault 2022b). Many of the most ambitious investigative contributions were in turn financed by outside non-profit groups, such as the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, the Earth Journalism Network, the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Global Reporting Centre, who in turn receive foundation funding (Arsenault 2015a; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault & Mendes 2017a; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault & LeBillon 2022b; Chavkin 2021; Scott & Bunce 2018). Some scholars have criticized this foundation dependence as “philantropiccapitalism” allowing billionaires like e-Bay founder Pierre Omidyar or stock speculator George Soros to fund journalism that does not fundamentally challenge the capitalist status quo, conflates “private and public interests” and lacks transparency (Wright Scott & Bunce 2019, p. 676). While these structural critiques certainly have some merit, the simple fact is that in the current media economy, these investigative reports on large-scale land deals would not have happened without foundation support (Arsenault 2015a; Arsenault 2015e; Arsenault 2016j; Arsenault and Mendes 2017; Arsenault and LeBillon 2022b). Likewise, much of the best reporting on large-scale land deals has been funded by the Pulitzer Center. As one long-

time foreign correspondent observed: “The Pulitzer Center is an example of how in-depth journalism is still possible” as its goal is “the public good; it’s not profit, it’s not ratings” (Rohde and Roy 2016, p. 119).

Some of the strongest coverage of the large-scale land deals came from a 2016 partnership between investigative reporters at the Financial Times and the Pulitzer Center titled *The Great Land Rush* (Burgis, Clark & Peel 2016; Pulitzer Center 2016). With frontline reports from Myanmar, Indonesia and Ethiopia, the series drew heavily on ground truth reporting through interviews with key players involved in the deals, along with corporate records and market information (Burgis et al. 2016). This sort of award-winning, rigorous journalism with full graphics and field interviews is a testament to the power of collaboration and foundation-backed foreign reporting in elucidating this complex global issue. Harper’s magazine analyzed the same Ethiopian deal in 2014 in a more conversational and pugilistic tone than the FT under the headline: “The man who stole the Nile” (Kaufman 2014). National Geographic Magazine’s stand-back look at large-scale land deals across Africa, another foundation-funded piece, featured rich reporting from Mozambique and other countries (Bourne 2013). Accompanied by National Geographic’s characteristically engaging photography, it was sourced to a variety of food security experts and local farmers. The piece provides an excellent overview of the issue in the context of food security and climate change; it examines some of the largest investors in African farmland including Malaya’s Simon Darby in palm oil, a host of Chinese companies and the Brazilian and Japanese-backed ProSavana project in Mozambique. Like other narrative-style pieces on the issue, feature journalism where the reporter uses the term “I”, the story did not break new ground or uncover new information. It was solely based on traditional reporting techniques, rather than a melding of ground truth and original primary records (Bourne 2013).

### **3.4 Best practices for sourcing in the search for ‘ground truth’**

Investigative environmental journalism, centred both on the lived experiences of sources on the frontlines of the land rush and empirical evidence from state or corporate-created primary sources such as contract documents, is not new unto itself (Feldstein 2006; Heidenblad 2020). It’s not a product of the most recent waves of economic globalization, the digitization of newsrooms or climate change pressure cooking inequalities and the scramble for resources (Friedman 2004). It has, however, evolved due to these economic, environmental, and technological forces (Zoomers et al. 2016). Technological shifts have made vast amounts of data easier for journalists to access. Corporate disclosures required by financial regulators in London or New York, company press releases lauding the latest agreement, or satellite maps geolocating how land and water resource concessions overlap with local settlements, are useful additions to a journalist’s toolbox (Leigh 2019; Lester 2017; Lugo-Ocando 2020; Lozada 2022). But without context, confirmation and insights sourced directly from people affected by the deals, they are not enough to produce accurate, engaging content for audiences.

With newsroom cutbacks hampering frontline reporting, journalists covering environmental issues have been criticized for relying on establishment sources – the politician’s spokesperson, corporate PR officer or ex-government official in a think tank office – rather than prioritizing marginalized voices (Comfort, Tandoc & Gruszczynski 2019). This problem has been intensified by 24-hour news cycles and the frenzy to be first, particularly on social media (ibid 2019). Staying in the newsroom and picking up the phone for a quick quote from a company spokesperson about a firm’s latest land deal is the path of least resistance when working on deadline, especially if the alternative is travelling long distances to speak to people directly impacted by the concession. Privileging easy-to-access elite sources has been cited by journalists as a major impediment to balanced, contextualized coverage (Plasser 2005). An attempt at “balance” when reporting on deadline on large-scale land deals is traditionally sought via NGOs, academics, trade unions or other such groups – but the essential problem of privileging voices who are typically urban, college educated and easily reachable by phone or email persists (Shoemaker & Reese 2014). Hard data on how the problem of elite sourcing impacts coverage of land deals is not readily available. However, studies on media coverage of climate change, often produced by a similar cohort of reporters as those who cover land deals, underscores the bias towards official, office-based sources (McKinley 2013; Comfort et al. 2019). Based on climate coverage from 19 countries, one study found politicians made up 50 per cent of print sources; NGOs and other civil society actors comprised 28 per cent and scientists 14 per cent (Edie & Kunelius 2010). While corporate officials and local government functionaries would certainly comprise a larger share of sourcing when it comes to land deals, the prevalence of official sources in much of the daily news coverage would likely remain similar.

While there is minimal literature directly addressing the practice of journalism related to large-scale land deals, studies analyzing climate change reporting show that more than half of all publications globally on the practice of climate change journalism examined the U.S. Large developing countries, including Brazil and India where significant numbers of land grabs have taken place, appear in less than two percent of studies. (Schafer & Painter 2020; Comfort & Park 2018). There is broad consensus that climate change related communication in developing countries, the very places most vulnerable to global warming and land deals, is generally under researched; the same is true for journalistic methodologies on land deals (Nguyen, Tran and Da 2020; Schafer & Painter 2020).

### **3.5 NGO sourcing in pursuit of ground truth: The benefits and drawbacks**

In seeking to bring information into the public sphere on land deals and their impacts, journalists often liaise with campaign groups and researchers to identify and connect with possible sources (Powers 2016; Looi 2013; Sachsman and Valenti 2020; Vidal 2010). These organizations often work with activists in impacted countries who can serve as sources for reporters (Hines 2019; Looi 2013). In some cases, original journalism produced through ground truth reporting can become the

foundation or inspiration for an in-depth NGO report or academic study or visa versa (Arsenault 2014e; Callison & Young 2019; Grain et. al. 2015; Oxfam 2011; Hirsch 2022).

This interplay between journalists and advocacy groups on sourcing was especially pronounced in early reporting on land deals, with articles and videos providing analysis of the land grabbing phenomenon, including a 2010 piece from The Guardian's John Vidal datelined from Juba, Sudan and a broader story on land grabbing in Africa from National Geographic, among many others. These were well written and reported but lacked the combination of original records and ground truth (Vidal 2010; Bourne 2013). The Washington Post's look at land grabbing in Myanmar by Chinese companies and their partners in the country's military follows a similar trajectory and reporting style (Motlagh 2013). Leveraging a hidden-camera investigation by the advocacy group Global Witness, Al Jazeera produced an engaging television and online package on land grabs in Malaysia's rainforest. An investigator with the NGO posed as a businessman looking to purchase land for a palm oil plantation from companies close to a powerful local politician. "In each instance, the land in question was occupied by Indigenous communities, who have valid claims to ownership rights under Malaysian law," Al Jazeera reported (Looi 2013). This relationship between journalists and advocacy groups is not unique to coverage of land grabs, but the remoteness of many of the sites involved with land deals and logistical problems in gaining access to concession sites on a regular basis, means the interplay between the groups for sourcing, data analysis and contract records is particularly important, especially on tight deadlines or when newsroom resource constraints impair more robust ground truth coverage (Liberti 2013; Hines 2019; Pearce 2013; Powers 2016).

For instance, ahead of a World Bank conference on land governance in 2016, accessing Brazil's northeastern agricultural frontier wasn't possible, as I was still waiting on a journalistic work visa for the country. NGOs had partnered with residents' advocacy groups in the region who feared displacement from their traditional harvesting territories as industrial soy plantations expanded (Arsenault 2016b; Calmon 2022; Russo, Bastos & Dos Reis 2021; Powers 2016). A few of these local campaigners from the MATOPIBA region covering roughly 73 million hectares, or an area the size of France, travelled to Washington, D.C., to lobby lenders and government officials regarding the dangers of land grabbing from industrial agriculture investors (Arsenault 2016b; Borrás et al. 2021; Calmon 2022; Polizel et. al. 2021). NGOs helped arrange interviews during the conference, making a story with firsthand sourcing and ground truth elements possible despite the visa constraints. "Losing our land is the most violent attack we can face," Maria de Jesus Bringelo, 68, said in a phone interview (Arsenault 2016b). She previously had her house burned down for spearheading a letter writing campaign opposing displacement by cattle ranching interests (Arsenault 2016b). While this mediated sourcing is less effective for ground truth journalism than field reporting, insights from these frontline sources, coupled with World Bank records, still provided valuable insights into the region's land rush and the bank's policies (Arsenault 2016; Calmon 2022; Polizel et. al. 2021).

NGO sources, of course, have their own practical and sometimes structural problems (Broersma, Den Herder & Schohaus 2013; Fenton 2010; Van Leuven & Joye 2014). Reports and the sources underpinning them are generally politicized, tied to the NGO's broader goals and positions on land governance and in many cases, to fundraising (Fenton 2010; Van Leuven & Joye 2014). Like the first wave of stenographic media reports on land deals, NGOs working in the space often miss key data, contrasting information or context (Edelman 2013; Gilfoy 2015; Hofman & Ho 2012; Powers 2016). Sometimes this leads to incorrect data about deals and their impacts entering the public sphere (Brautigam 2015; Cancela, Gerber & Dubied 2021; Gilfoy 2015). Local residents whose views on a concession contradict the outlook of a particular NGO aren't typically offered to journalists as potential sources; and follow-up reporting on whether a signed deal resulted in changes on the ground isn't typically the stuff of a fundraising campaign, particularly when an agreement languishes (Arsenault 2015d; Brautigam 2015; Fenton 2010; Gilfoy 2015; Hofman & Ho 2012; McKeon 2013).

Moral or epistemological debates about the importance of including the unmediated voices of impacted communities aside, these frontline community sources with no ties to outside groups are crucial for obtaining basic facts about an investment, especially for follow-up reporting, as evidenced by the case study of a large land deal in Mali, which will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 4 (Arsenault 2015d; Brautigam 2015; Cancela, Gerber & Dubied 2021; Rohde and Roy 2016). One study of Chinese land deals in Africa, for instance, found that public announcements of large leases of African farmland totalled some six million hectares (Brautigam 2015). After field visits to the sites in question and interviews with local residents, Deborah Brautigam found that only 240,000 hectares had actually been transferred between 1987 and 2014 (Brautigam 2015). After visiting the sites of 60 announced large-scale deals and conducting interviews, her study found that only 38 acquisitions led to some land being transferred (Arsenault 2015j; Brautigam 2015). Ground truth through local interviews and verification, coupled with a deeper investigation of investment data, was crucial for establishing what was happening in the field around China's land deals in Africa. This issue almost certainly would not have been uncovered through sources mediated by NGOs (Brautigam 2015; Hofman & Ho 2012). While interviews with impacted communities are key for this reporting, they are not always enough to create a thorough report. People facing displacement typically do not have access to the relevant primary records or context that can be provided by persons who participated in the decision making around a concession (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016a; Liberiti 2013; Romero 2015).

### **3.6 Techniques for social media inclusion: marginal potential for land coverage**

For many 21<sup>st</sup> century international news events, such as the Arab Spring or wars in Syria and Ukraine, the role of the foreign correspondent has shifted (Cooper and Owen 2014). "Bearing witness" doesn't necessarily mean being on the ground; a plethora of YouTube videos, Facebook

posts, tweets and other social media content uploaded from protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square or Syrian rooftops as shells hit neighbourhoods, offer primary-source material for journalists in faraway newsrooms (Cooper and Owen 2014). This citizen journalism, coupled with verification and contextualization, has offered new avenues, information streams and source material for covering the world from the ground up (Ibid 2014). Journalists covering developments in Homs, Syria from London, Tehran or Doha face their own challenges for balance, context, cultural nuance, and accuracy. But there is consensus among journalism scholars that these new information streams have changed the role of the foreign correspondent and empowered digitally connected communities, advocacy groups, individuals, and citizen reporters, particularly in the Global South (Hermida 2012; Hujanen 2018; Zayani 2021).

Social media linked foreign reporting was utilized in a few stories produced as part of this thesis, including an award-winning look into ISIS stealing, and rebranding, UN food aid to redistribute to its supporters, which will be discussed in the next chapter (Arsenault 2015c; UNCA 2015). The importance of social media in this case was, however, an exception for most investigative land, food, and climate reporting (Arsenault 2015c; Arsenault 2016c; Arsenault 2016i; Arsenault 2017d). Utilization of social media is seldom central to covering what is often a slow burn of the great land rush (Arsenault 2015d). In rural areas where land deals normally take place, including: Brazil's Amazon rainforest, Mali's Malaka region, and palm oil plantations in the central Democratic Republic of Congo, internet connectivity is often poor. More importantly, key local sources, such as residents of Boco do Acre, Brazil, facing displacement from powerful local cattle interests, or plantation workers in the DRC earning \$1 per day, typically are not tweeting about their experiences on the frontlines of the global land rush, unlike Cairo's digitally savvy youth or Syrian aid workers (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault & Mendes 2017c; Bebawi & Bossio 2014). This connectivity divide between urban areas, where most news coverage is centred, and remote regions where most large land deals take place, coupled with the growing importance of data journalism on the issue, means the old-style role of the outsider foreign correspondent still has a place in covering large land deals; social media sourcing is less relevant for this branch of reporting (Mitra and Paterson 2021; Beban, Schoenberger and Lamb 2019).

### **3.7 Techniques for leveraging 'big data'**

The growth of data journalism and easy-to-navigate mapping software has played an important role in land-rights reporting as the rush for empirical evidence on global land grabs has coincided with broader cross-disciplinary discussions about "big data" (Graham and Shelton, 2013; Goodchild, 2013). A trending term in academia and journalism, "big data" suggests that the availability of datasets of increasing volume, velocity and variety can help to better understand reality (Zoomers, Gekker, & Schäfer 2016). Like social media, datasets alone are normally not enough unto themselves for creating a story. But they can play a role in helping reporters find the needle in the haystack for specific deals worth further investigation (Graham & Shelton 2013).

They can also help clarify connections between investors and different concessions while offering a broader, global look at the phenomenon. For instance, interactive maps curated by academic researchers at the project Land Matrix, and informed by big data, have been key tools for journalists around the world covering land deals (Graham & Shelton 2013). Raw data for land rights and natural resources reporting used as part of this thesis's original journalism has included: comparisons of commodity import and export statistics from different jurisdictions, interactive timelines charting interlinked news developments in connected locations, and comparing land deal contract negotiation timelines with political trends (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2017g; Arsenault 2021a). Stock price data for corporations involved in land deals compared with raw commodity prices, data on state subsidies and changing corporate ownership structures, and maps from different stakeholders and land registries showing competing information about concession ownership and custody chains have also been important inputs for investigative reporting (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2016a; Arsenault 2017c; Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2021a).

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter has examined the value of different reporting tools and sourcing strategies for bringing new information into the public sphere regarding large land and resource deals, while probing some of the economic challenges and emerging opportunities for journalists pursuing this specialized coverage. Examining these sourcing strategies is crucial, as the methodology of melding ground truth and original records requires reporters to leverage a variety of techniques for gathering unique information. The core methodology, in other words, is merely rhetorical if the practical utility of different sourcing strategies for leveraging it, and the broader economic pressures facing this kind of coverage, are not understood. The interplay between the core methodology and these individual sourcing approaches is visualized in on page 46. This graphic shows how strategies discussed in this chapter buttress the broader methodology, and the theoretical conceptualization of the transparency journalism praxis addressed in Chapter 5, to guide coverage. The practical output produced under these strategies will be explained in the next chapter, showcasing how their effective utilization shapes original investigative reporting on large-scale land and resource deals. Moreover, the sourcing approaches and responses to economic pressures addressed above provide the operational scaffolding for how reporting can be conducted on the ground to support the theoretical and practical contributions to journalism studies addressed in Chapters 5 and 6.



## **Chapter 4: Reflections on investigative coverage and original journalism case studies**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter analyzes the role frontline journalism contained in the attached portfolio has played in creating broader understandings of the impacts of large-scale land and resource deals. It will examine how reporting utilizing ground truth interviews and primary records, based on the sourcing strategies discussed in Chapter 3, has brought new information about individual deals, and the phenomenon in general, to audiences in the context of evolving journalistic coverage of the issue. Showing how specific stories uncovered new information is crucial for understanding the practical and theoretical contributions to journalism studies on reframing transparency into an active reporting praxis and reappraising correspondent-fixer relationships which will be addressed in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

### **4.2 The historical evolution of land grab reporting**

Early information on the initial wave of the 21<sup>st</sup> century land rush, beginning around 2007, largely came to light through announcements of new deals reported in local media by investors or officials in nations hosting the concessions (Grain 2008; Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021). These media reports, typically from countries with low scores on global press freedom indexes such as Kuwait, China, Pakistan, the UAE, Ethiopia, Laos, Sudan or Mozambique, often mirrored official stenography from ribbon cutting ceremonies, official press releases or business roundtables, rather than rigorous journalism based on ground truth (RSF 2021; Grain 2016; Ward 2018). In 2008, a publication analyzing the phenomenon based on this kind of sourcing from the campaign group Grain “was perhaps the first to declare a global trend in land grabbing,” according to one study (Borras & Franco 2012, p 37). Grain’s initial publication, according to a follow-up from the authors published eight years later, was sourced to reports “buried in the business sections of newspapers like the Vientiane Times and the Sudan Tribune” (Grain 2016, p. 1). “Little did we know,” the authors wrote, “that by merely pulling the news clips and analysis together ... would trigger a tsunami of global media attention, social activism and political struggle” (Ibid 2016, p. 1).

These stenographic media reports, which were not based on the journalistic methodology of melding ground truth and primary records contained in this thesis, nonetheless became raw research materials for a host of academic studies and campaign-group materials in the “first wave of scholarship” consolidating critiques of global land grabs (Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021, p. 322; Cotula et al. 2009; Oxfam 2011). This first wave of activism and scholarship helped spur multilateral organizations, such as the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank, to address the deals, with the former hosting a conference on the issue and issuing a set of

guidelines for responsible land investments and the latter producing a full length monograph, hosting conferences and attempting to rebut critiques from campaigners that the bank itself financed land grabs (CFS 2014; Karlsson 2014; Hall and Osorio 2014; Deininger and Byerlee 2011; Bramely 2014). In short, the first wave of journalism and scholarship brought discussion of these deals into the broader public sphere (Brondo 2013; Looi 2013; Mihalik 2012; Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021; Vidal 2010).

Sparked by these initial reports and the ensuing public and scholarly interest, more serious journalism outside of what had been largely stenography ramped up following 2008, including general overviews of the practice cited to UN reports and academic studies, and field reports from impacted communities and countries (Smith 2009; MacFarquhar 2010; Buckley 2010; Butler 2010; Pearce 2012). As more rigorous journalism on specific deals utilizing the ground truth methodology was published, a more complicated, nuanced picture of many of the concessions emerged, in a media trend roughly coinciding with shifts in academic scholarship (Brondo 2013; Liberti 2013; Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021; Zoomers & Kaag 2014). Further reporting started to probe: the role of water (rather than just land) in drawing investor interest, the role of local elites in fostering deals, “fortress conservation” where NGOs promote something akin to land grabs under the auspices of environmental protection, and investigations into “zombie land grabs,” or deals which were announced but never actually materialized (Arsenault 2011c; Brown 2011; Bräutigam & Zhang 2013; Gardner 2012; Liberti 2013; Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021; Warren and Baker 2019; Zoomers & Kaag 2014). In short, much of the initial information on large land deals came to light because of something akin to journalism – but based on official announcements rather than rigorous reporting (Grain 2008; Oliveira, McKay, & Liu 2021). This first wave of information stoked interest for deeper ground truth journalism and more demand for publishing contract documents and other primary records related to the agreements, which continues today (Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Vidal 2010; Warren and Baker 2019; Woertz 2013). The original contributions noted below came as part of the second wave of reporting on the issues, and brought new information about specific deals, and the phenomenon in general, to audiences.

## **4.3 Examples of original coverage**

### **4.3.1 Mali: Following up on Libya’s farmland grab**

The role of frontline journalism in creating broader understandings of the deals and their impacts was on display in a series of 2015 reports from Mali regarding 100,000-hectare concession the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi had signed in 2008 for some of Mali’s most fertile farmland (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015e; Arsenault 2015f; Arsenault 2015g; Arsenault 2015h). Prior to my arrival in the Segou region, no reporters had visited the site of the concession to follow-up on what was happening there following Gaddafi’s ouster from power in 2011, nor had the contract for the deal been previously made public (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015h). Based on interviews

with local residents, government administrators, UN officials and senior political advisors in the capital, Bamako, I was able to determine that much of the concession territory had been left fallow, despite Mali facing a hunger crisis (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015h; Bleck & Michelitch 2015). Many local people living on and around the concession didn't know whether anyone from Libya would return to force them off the land, leaving them with particularly precarious tenure security (Arsenault 2015d).

I also obtained a copy of the original concession contract following extensive trust building with a law professor in the capital under whom much of the country's political elite had studied (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015h). Much of the access I was able to attain in Mali was facilitated by a local former security contractor with ties across the country's political class, the skills to build trust with diverse sources, and a sharp sense of the evolving safety situation on the ground. The role of fixers like this, who desire to work with international correspondents anonymously to preserve their contacts, will be addressed in Chapter 6 in a contribution on best practices for reporting collaborations on large land and resource deals. A graphic illustrating workflow best practices for these collaborations, prioritizing working with non-journalists when credit and workload with local reporters can't be shared equally, is visualized as figure 2 in the final chapter. By melding ground truth and contracting documents, wrenching transparency from powerful actors and choosing the right collaborator, the investigative reports from Mali brought new, original information into the public sphere. The New York Times also covered Gaddafi's Mali concession, interviewing local residents and economists in 2010, and using the transaction as part of a broader look at large land deals in Africa (MacFarquhar 2010). But the report did not bring anything new into the public domain regarding the concession or land deals more broadly through contracts or other previously unreported primary source evidence (MacFarquhar 2010).

In addition to breaking the story on the status of the Malibya concession post Gaddafi, and uncovering the contract for the deal, my broader ground truth reporting from Mali probed the factors underlying the country's susceptibility to land grabs, including: weak governance and political corruption, climate change exacerbating existing ethnic and resource-related conflicts and intensifying water scarcity and worsening food insecurity amid rapid population growth (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2015e; Arsenault 2015f; Arsenault 2015g; Schilling, Scheffran & Link 2010). Part of the reason why Gaddafi chose the location in the Segou Region northeast of the capital for the concession site stems from the availability of water from a canal system built during the French colonial period. As desertification increases due to climate change, this struggle for water resources largely underpins the scramble for arable land in a country with some of the world's worst food insecurity (Schilling, Scheffran & Link 2010; Hegazi, Krampe & Smith 2021). In turn, the broader hunger crisis fuels desperation in a vicious circle of political violence, as evidenced by a series of interlinked insurgencies and the growing power of criminal gangs (Arsenault 2015e; Bleck & Michelitch 2015; Hegazi, Krampe & Smith 2021).

Government authorities in the capital who are responsible for addressing these interlocking crises openly acknowledged the links between the country's broader conflicts, land rights, hunger and climate change in perspectives which have not been widely reported from official sources. "In the north there is such poverty, the environment is so tough, that when the jihadists come they find it easy to get followers," Paul Coulibaly, a senior adviser to Mali's government told me during an interview in the central government's main administrative compound in Bamako. Underscoring the links between Libyan land grabs and Mali's weak state, the compound itself, the seat of government authority and bureaucracy, was built with Libyan funds provided by Gaddafi's government in 2010 (Bunting 2010; Arsenault 2015e). "Even if they [fighters] don't bring money—just food—they will find allies if they can feed people," Coulibaly said (Arsenault 2015e). In this regard, ground truth reporting based on frontline sources exposed some of the broader political and environmental implications of land grabs like the Malibya concession.

#### **4.3.2 Syria: Exposing ISIS's food theft in the context of aid transparency**

Original reporting coupled with primary records to break stories on land and security issues was also leveraged during an investigation into ISIS stealing and then rebranding UN food aid in Syria (Arsenault 2015c). Images of the crude attempt to plaster the so-called Islamic State's logo over the World Food Program's insignia had been circulating on Twitter and some small online publications from within territory the group controlled in Syria. But my reporting was the first to get official confirmation from WFP officials about what happened with the theft; it started with a raid on a warehouse in Aleppo, Syria in September 2014 (Arsenault 2015c). My reporting found that many donors had not been informed the aid, enough to feed 8,000 people for a month, had been looted by ISIS (Arsenault 2015c). Typically, a "no comment" is the last thing journalists want from our sources. But in this case, the refusal by aid groups, who normally expend substantial resources trying to garner media attention, was instructive. "We do know about this issue," a spokesman for Oxfam told me echoing the approach taken by other charities, but "given the sensitivities we have to decline your interview" (Arsenault 2015c). The investigation brought new information to audiences through original sourcing and was part of a package of stories on land and natural resources awarded the Gold Prize at the United Nations Correspondents' Awards in New York in 2015, presented by the UN Secretary General. The accolade showcased the broader impact and interest in the coverage, underscoring that NGO sources should be held to the same level of scrutiny as other actors, including governments and businesses (UNCA 2015; Arsenault 2015c; Lugo-Ocando 2020).

#### **4.3.3 Untangling a taxpayer-funded land deal in the DRC**

The methodology of coupling ground truth interviews and primary records to create broader understandings of large land deals was employed during an original investigation into how a hedge fund based in the Cayman Islands acquired the biggest palm oil plantation in the Democratic

Republic of Congo (Arsenault 2014e). My story used stock price data and ownership records to track how this fund managed to lose money on the deal (ibid 2014e). Owners of the Feronia plantation later received a substantial injection of capital from U.K. taxpayers via the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC), the private sector lending arm of Britain's international development department, which has subsequently been rebranded as British International Investment (Arsenault 2014e). Unlike many other stories related to large land deals and corporate abuses, executives behind this investment, and their government backers in the U.K., were willing to give extensive interviews and access, perhaps because any interest from a business-orientated outlet like Reuters was seen as a net positive, given the firm's stock price falling 95 per cent in less than three years (Arsenault 2014e). Company officials provided on-the-record interviews, detailed data on tax payments and funding, and other requested files and statements, which I cross referenced with other primary records, such as mandated disclosures to investors and stock price movements (Ibid 2014).

Establishing ground truth with workers and local residents in the DRC, however, was more challenging due to the aforementioned logistical problems of budgets, visas and security that journalists can face in covering rural land conflicts (Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2014f; Cheyns & Thévenot 2019; Hirsch 2022). To access witnesses with ground truth knowledge of the situation, my reporting involved source building with advocacy groups who had close ties in the surrounding communities. One campaigner who had rallied residents against the deal before being forced into exile by security concerns, Jean Francois Mombia, told me how plantation staff received less than Congo's minimum salary, while living in crumbling housing without functioning schools for their kids (Arsenault 2014e). When Mombia's points were put to Feronia's CEO, venture capitalist Ravi Sood, he confirmed on record that salaries paid by his company were indeed "too low" (ibid 2014). My investigation leveraging ground truth interviews and primary records broke a previously unreported story and led to impact on the ground in the DRC, including promises by the company to improve housing for workers (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2014f). Subsequent follow-up reporting, however, showed these pledges were not met, with the company contending that continued financial turmoil made implementing these improvements impossible (Arsenault 2017e).

The initial 2014 investigation into Feronia's DRC plantation acquisitions, and the company's bailout with taxpayer funds, opened the door for a coalition of advocacy groups to launch broader reports on the deal in the context of land grabs, human rights and African food security, underscoring how frontline journalism can help create broader understandings of land and resource deals (Arsenault 2014e; RIAO-RDC and Grain 2015; Vidal 2015; Arsenault 2017e; HRW 2019). Other journalists picked up the story following the publication of a report into Feronia by a coalition of campaign groups in 2015. Most covered the deal as a news story sourced to the campaigners' report, with reaction quotes from named parties, including Feronia and the U.K.'s Commonwealth Development Corporation, which was subsequently rebranded as British

International Investment (Grain et. al 2015; Kenber & Mostrous 2016; Vidal 2015). In this regard, information which came to light via my frontline journalism was “force multiplied” by campaign groups to create public knowledge about the deal and its impacts (Arsenault 2014e; Arsenault 2017e; Kenber & Mostrous 2016; Langan 2020; HRW 2019; Huggins 2021; Vidal 2015). In 2019, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published its own 95-page report on exploitation around the Feronia concession, following similar framing as my previous two original articles on the concession, looking at the ensuing abuses and the role of European development banks in financing the deal (HRW 2019). Academic studies looking deeper into those angles followed the HRW report, underscoring the broader role of my original ground truth journalism in increasing public understandings of the investments (Langan 2020; Huggins 2021).

#### **4.3.4 Covering Brazil’s high stakes land scams**

With one of the world’s largest agricultural industries, and powerful lobbies representing soy and cattle interests, Brazil consistently ranks among the world’s most dangerous countries for land and environmental activists (Global Witness 2022; Rodrigues & Campos 2022; Mollett 2022). Its success as an exporter to global consumers, coupled with the importance of the Amazon as the world’s largest rainforest, means stories about land rights struggles in South America’s largest country can garner more audience interest compared to deals in smaller nations (Casado & Londoño 2019; Fontes & Marques 2022; Sampaio 2023). Brazil’s agricultural importance and the industry’s ensuing political power is directly linked to violence against land rights activists (Arsenault 2016m; Arsenault 2017g; Global Witness 2022; Rodrigues & Campos 2022; McCoy 2022). Between 2012 and 2021, 342 land and environmental campaigners were killed in Brazil, one of the highest rates on earth (Greenfield 2022; Global Witness 2022).

Through follow-up reporting, primary records and interviews with residents directly impacted by these killings, my ground truth journalism was able to advance and deepen understandings of the country’s land rights struggles. For example, by interviewing Elson Gomes a year after the killing of his friend, Indigenous land rights campaigner Clodiode Aquileu Rodrigues, I brought new information about the case to light, in the context of broader impunity for powerful agribusiness interests (Arsenault 2017g; Rodrigues & Campus 2022; Mollett 2022). Prosecutors had originally arrested five men from an armed group of soy farmers in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil’s farming heartland, following the murder (Arsenault 2017g). They were subsequently released, the reporting found, and no other arrests had been made for the murder (Arsenault 2017g). In an interview, the local prosecutor tasked with investigating the killing said “organized militias” of farmers had been attacking Indigenous rights campaigners in the area (Arsenault 2017g). “Land conflicts in Mato Grosso do Sul and the murder of Indigenous leaders are realities that go hand in hand,” the prosecutor told me (Arsenault 2017g). The reporting brought new information to audiences, including consumers of soy grown in the area, about how ongoing impunity in the region contributes to the violence (Bledsoe 2020; Ferrante, & Fearnside 2019; Xu, Zeng & Zhang 2023).

When it comes to coverage based on ground truth and primary records, court filings backed by original interviews can provide unique insights. One of the most common land grab tactics in Brazil, known locally as *grilagem*, involves investors illicitly registering state property or land used by small farmers as their own (Fearnside 2008; Silva et. al. 2023; Spadotto et. al. 2021). The tactic can involve bureaucratic scams at local land registry offices, which are privately owned in Brazil and known as *cartorios* (Campbell 2015; Fearnside 2008). The problem is exacerbated by the lack of a central land registry demarcating ownership in any sort of systematic fashion and by the broader impunity which reigns in some rural areas (Mollett 2022; Spadotto et. al. 2021). Often, *grilagem* involves violence, as powerful local agribusiness interests, who are sometimes suppliers to larger international companies, forcibly evict or harass smaller farmers or Indigenous communities from land they seek to register as their own (Arsenault 2016a; Arsenault 2017h; Arsenault and Mendes 2017c; Bledsoe 2020; Fearnside 2008; Sampaio 2023; Mendonça & Pitta 2022).

The problem is well known in Brazil, but naming individuals or companies involved in criminality, tracing how specific pieces of land are usurped, and following the supply chains to determine how beef or minerals from territory taken through *grilagem* reaches global markets, is not easy (Arsenault & Mendes 2017c; Campbell 2015; Pahnke 201; Reydon et. al. 2015; Spadotto et. al 2021). Primary interviews with members of impacted communities are important, but farmers who have been attacked or displaced typically have little insight into changes in ownership records for specific pieces of land and the legal tactics employed by agribusiness to take control over territory (Arsenault 2017h; Arsenault & Mendes 2017c; Reydon et. al. 2015; Mollett 2022; Spadotto et. al 2021). In this regard, court documents, ownership certificates and other primary records provide crucial primary evidence I have used to uncover the inner workings of land grab operations (Campbell 2015; Arsenault 2016a; Arsenault and Mendes 2017c; Spadotto et. al 2021).

In Piauí state, part of Brazil's MATOPIBA agricultural frontier, one key *grilagem* case I probed through court records involved a plan to usurp 124,000 hectares of farmland by registering property in the name of a dead man, among other illicit techniques (Arsenault 2016a; Polizel et. al 2021). "The *grilleros* don't produce food," said the state prosecutor leading the investigation into the scam (Arsenault 2016a). "They're speculators ... the land is rich but the people face poverty," he told me, adding that the problem is getting worse (Arsenault 2016a). Bringing new insights about how these scams work on the ground, in the context of broader problems in Brazil's land governance regime, has value for audiences, along with regulators, reform campaigners and government officials who are trying to combat the problem (Campbell 2015; Fearnside 2008; Mendonça & Pitta 2022). The interplay between original ground truth interviews and primary records has also been used by other reporters breaking stories about land grabs and environmental crimes in Brazil, including the New York Times, The Washington Post, Mongabay and The Intercept (Cowie 2019; Romero 2015; Wenzel 2023; McCoy 2022).

### 4.3.5 Probing suspect oil contracts in Guyana

Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America, is experiencing an unprecedented resource boom (Arsenault 2021b; Arsenault & Le Billion 2022a). Guyana's economy grew by 62 per cent in 2022, one of the world's fastest rates, and it's expected to expand by 25 per cent annually for the next three years because of new offshore oil fields (Marks and Parraga 2023). Despite a revenue windfall, transparency campaigners say the country could be another victim of the resource curse due to weak institutions, climate change threats and a history of ethnic and political polarization (Arsenault & Le Billion 2022a). Opposition lawmakers also worry Guyana is signing over large concessions to inexperienced but politically connected firms who don't have the skills or technical expertise to extract oil to deliver royalties for the population, as the climate crisis undermines the long-term outlook for fossil fuels (Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021b; Arsenault 2021c). "We have had oil contracts signed off to god-knows-who for god-knows-what," Deputy National Assembly Speaker Lenox Shuman, who leads Guyana's third-place political party, told me (Arsenault 2021a). Lawmakers say they're determined not to make the same mistakes on resource governance as other oil-rich countries such as neighbouring Venezuela or Nigeria (Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021b). They have taken steps to publish most oil concession contracts as part of a bid to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (Arsenault 2021a). But a deeper records search into the players behind one important contract, and the timing of the deal, revealed significant red flags with how the government allocated the Canje concession (Arsenault 2021a).

The contract to exploit the offshore field was signed by then-President Donald Ramotar in May 2015, one week before he was voted out of office, and with no competitive bidding process or open tender among firms, my original reporting showed (Arsenault 2021a). The investigation, based on ground truth interviews and primary records, involved cross referencing the publicly available contract for the Canje deal with previously unpublished corporate registry files from Guyana and Canada which needed to be obtained in hardcopy at considerable expense. These primary records were supported by interviews with all the key players involved in the deal, including the former president, the ousted former head of the anti-corruption agency, current foreign secretary, and businessmen behind the agreement, along with local residents, environmentalists and consultants. This cross-referencing of primary records from two continents coupled with original ground truth interviews allowed the audience to learn new information about contracting irregularities for a major deal (Arsenault & Le Billion 2022a).

One of the companies awarded part of the Canje concession was a Canada-based firm called JHI Associates. When it received rights to exploit the field, JHI was registered to a suburban home in Barrie, Ontario, a cottage country town outside of Toronto. It had no assets or address in Guyana, according to the registry documents I obtained (Arsenault 2021a). Amazingly, these original records collected during the investigation didn't just come as news to general audiences or



transparency experts; they provided new insights to the former head of state who signed the deal. “I didn’t know that,” former President Ramotar told me during an interview in a five-star hotel when asked why he signed a concession for a multi-million-dollar oil bloc to a home-based business with no assets, equipment, local staff or infrastructure (Arsenault 2021a). He maintained there were no improprieties with how the contract was signed, although he conceded the timing didn’t look ideal in retrospect (Arsenault 2021a).

The importance of melding ground-truth journalism and original contracting documents to shed new light on a resource deal was exemplified during my interview with Ramotar at the Marriot Hotel in Georgetown. JHI’s Guyanese partner on the contract was the firm Mid-Atlantic Oil and Gas run by a politically connected businessman, Edris Kamal Dookie (Arsenault 2021a). I had tried for weeks to secure an interview with Dookie to get his side of the story on how Mid-Atlantic and JHI secured the contract but received no response. By coincidence, he was sitting in the hotel bar during my interview with Ramotar. The former president waved him over for an interview, prefacing the invitation by telling the businessman that he “deserves a national award” for this service. Dookie called Ramotar a “visionary” in backslapping which underscored the close relationship between the head of a company with no capital or infrastructure who secured an oil concession and the politician who approved it (Arsenault 2021a). After attempting to probe the relationship between the two men in the context of the Canje contract, the head of Guyana’s anti-corruption watchdog, the State Assets Recovery Agency, was sacked and the organization was disbanded, the former director told me, in his first foreign press interview since his ouster (Arsenault 2021a).

My 3,500-word investigation into the Canje contract for CBC News broke new ground in Canada and Guyana, disclosing previously unreported details, such as JHI’s lack of a Guyanese address and staff, and the fact that it was registered to a suburban Canadian home. The depth of ground truth sourcing, combined with the breadth of primary records examined for the piece made it perhaps the most thorough reporting of contracting irregularities in Guyana’s oil industry published to date. Direct impact followed soon after. *Kaieteur News*, a wide circulation tabloid-style newspaper based in Guyana’s capital, ran the piece in full (without prior authorization or permission) under the misleading headline “How ex-President Ramotar & Robert Persaud ‘enriched friends’ with Guyana’s Canje Oil Block” (Arsenault 2022a). Transparency advocates in Guyana and beyond renewed calls for a new investigation into the deal following the publication, as environmentalists doubled down on criticism that investing billions in fossil fuel infrastructure isn’t the way forward for a developing nation with a capital city threatened by rising sea levels (Oil and Gas Governance Network, 2022).

Following publication, Guyana’s ambassador to the U.S., Samuel Hinds, jumped into the fray, posting an open letter responding to the story which was widely circulated in Guyana’s pro-government media (Hinds 2022). Hinds acknowledged “the body of the report is somewhat

tempered in presenting some balance” and could point to no errors in the journalism (Hinds 2022). He, rightfully in my view, slammed Kaitour’s “strident, sensational, attention-grabbing headline” which “negatively colours all that is in the report” (ibid 2022). He conceded that, “Yes, ex-President Ramotar, shortly before Guyana’s elections of May 2015, did grant a Petroleum Exploration Licence to a Joint-Venture of Mid Atlantic Oil & Gas (Dookie) and JHI (Cullen) for off-shore acreage” and said the companies “were recently registered and unknown and with no other assets.” He didn’t mention why the government shutdown the anti-corruption investigation probing the contract (Hinds 2022). He defended the individual businessmen behind the companies as experienced operators, but didn’t mention the lack of an open tender or transparent bidding process for the contract. Most significantly, Hinds said future exploration bloc contracts would be offered at advertised and scheduled “bidding rounds” (Hinds 2022). In other words, public outcry following investigative reporting on resource contracts led to tangible impact in changing government policy to improve transparency. The ambassador ended his response to my piece by arguing Guyana has been “conscious of climate change” and “that even as we begin to learn to live with oil, we must prepare with the rest of the world to live without oil” (Hinds 2022). The investigation into the Canje contract and Guyana’s natural resource deals went on to win Best National Feature from the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), one of Canada’s top journalism awards (RTDNA 2022).

#### **4.3.6 Cambodia: Ground truth, court records and trade data interrogation**

Cambodia has been a hot bed of some of the most aggressive land grabs in Asia and my ground truth interviews with displaced communities, coupled with official land records, government documents, legal filings and secondary reports, brought new information to audiences (Arsenault 2016e; Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault 2016g; Arsenault 2016h; Arsenault 2016i; Arsenault 2016j; Embree 2021; Joshi 2022). Records submitted to the International Criminal Court in The Hague allege 770,000 people, or roughly six per cent of Cambodia’s population, have been displaced by land grabs with the complicity or active involvement of senior government officials (Arsenault 2014d; Embree 2021). I was the first international journalist to report on the filing of the litigation against Cambodia’s government at the ICC, breaking new ground through primary court records and interviews, while including fair responses from Cambodian authorities (Arsenault 2014). This initial news story brought the issue into the public domain but didn’t include the voices of displaced Cambodians who would be impacted by the litigation due to deadline and logistics pressures.

Follow-up reporting from across rural Cambodia, including from makeshift dwellings for displaced residents on the edges of new concessions, urban slums in the capital, coastal fishing communities and inside one large land concession, brought these ground truth perspectives to the fore, showcasing local reactions to international land grab litigation (Arsenault 2016e; Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault 2016g; Arsenault 2016h). “We have nothing after they took our land,” one displaced farmer in the Sre Ambel district west of the capital told me, noting how his family had

survived the Khmer Rouge genocide, but could not afford to eat after their land was taken for a sugar plantation (Arsenault 2016f). This settlement had not been previously visited by reporters, and other journalists did not weave together ground truth voices from displaced people with the legal maneuvering at The Hague, to find out how impacted residents were reacting to the litigation. “We have tried to file complaints (with local authorities) but it hasn’t worked,” the farmer said. “Maybe if there is a trial (at the ICC) the people would get justice. It would stop other leaders from plundering the property of people” (Arsenault 2016h).

To foster public understanding of the broader impacts of land grabs, I wanted to address the emotional, cultural and gendered tolls of displacement. The impacts of land grabs on domestic violence have been studied by academics and human rights groups, but minimal international journalism has focused on these linkages (Lamb et. al 2017; Park 2019; Joshi 2022). “I beat up my wife after we lost our land,” said one farmer who had been displaced from his five-hectare rice paddy by a large concession. Having lost the ability to send his kids to school or buy food following the eviction, he said he snapped and became violent for the first time, despite knowing it was wrong (Arsenault 2016g). Ground truth interviews with men and women on the frontlines of the country’s displacement crisis were buttressed by secondary reports from human rights groups and local researchers, who tracked an increase in domestic violence among families displaced by land grabs (Arsenault 2016g). This reporting helped bring the human costs of these deals to broader audiences, breaking new ground on the subject.

Despite the documented human and environmental costs of land grabs, I wanted to provide a contrasting narrative as part of my broader Cambodia coverage as part of a growing body of work on solutions journalism (Arsenault 2016j; Lough & McIntyre 2021; McIntyre 2019). This story focused on a natural resources company attempting to take a different approach to displacement for a large land concession (Arsenault 2016j). I was able to provide insights on these attempts through ground truth reporting from inside the Grandis Timber plantation, part of what Cambodia’s government touts as its “leopard skin” plan, designed to improve agriculture and create jobs, while allowing existing residents to continue living inside large concessions (Dwyer, Polack & So 2015; Oldenburg & Neef 2014). This reporting, to probe how the leopard skin initiative functions in practice, was the product of weeks of negotiation with company officials to gain unimpeded access to 9,000 hectares of guarded, fenced-off land. It was the first international journalism to conduct ground truth interviews with residents living inside a major concession (Dwyer, Polack & So 2015; Neff 2016).

Inside the plantation, residents who had lived on the land prior to the timber investment said they could largely carry on their daily activities unencumbered (Arsenault 2016j). Most were ambivalent about the leopard skin plan, with some seeing it as minor a nuisance, and others keen to secure employment with the timber company. “My daughter works for the company earning about \$4 per day,” said one local resident, living in a dilapidated house with no water or power

inside the concession (Arsenault 2016j). He said his material conditions hadn't been improved or worsened by the land deal. "We would be happy if the company hired all of us" (Arsenault 2016j). Grandis Timber also worked with about 400 local residents to secure formal land titles to their plots, which many residents supported to stop other small farmers from trying to move onto their land. "The company measured the land and made a title certificate for me," said one farmer who grows rice and corn on a seven-hectare plot inside the concession. (Arsenault 2016j) Other long-time residents had set up small businesses selling snacks to timber employees, in an example of how a land concession can be managed without displacing existing communities (Arsenault 2016j). While worth showcasing with ground truth reporting and official records, the Grandis Timber case is an exception to how most concessions and resource deals are managed in the country (Neef 2016; Oldenburg & Neef 2014).

When it comes to leveraging data for land and natural resources investigations, official trade statistics cross referenced with other sources can often show when authorities are hiding information (Arsenault 2016g; Oya 2013; Schroeder 2014). Government or corporate spokespeople can lie, obfuscate or simply refuse interviews; access to information requests from government agencies are often redacted (Hewitt, Larsen and Walby 2012). But official trade data is normally untouched. Government functionaries, even in undemocratic states, typically don't know what to censor, and basic statistical accuracy is key for functioning markets and official policy (Arsenault 2016e; Morley, Myers, Plancherel & Brito-Parada 2022; Suykens, Katz-Lavigne & Pandey 2022).

I employed the strategy of comparing big data sets, coupled with ground truth established through field interviews, in my original reporting on illegal sand mining in rural Cambodia. Fishermen in Koh Sralau in the country's east had been complaining about industrial dredgers literally stealing the ground beneath their feet and the sand below their boats, decimating fish stocks and the broader environment (Arsenault 2016e; Morley, Myers, Plancherel & Brito-Parada 2022; Suykens, Katz-Lavigne & Pandey 2022). Until data journalism was employed, Cambodia's government had maintained that its sand dredging industry was small, showing less than 3 million tonnes of sand exports (Da & Le Billon 2022; Morley, Myers, Plancherel & Brito-Parada 2022). Researchers compared this data with official import records contained in U.N. figures from neighbouring Singapore, which showed the wealthy entrepot imported 72 million tonnes of sand from Cambodia between 2007 and 2016 (Arsenault 2016e). This data journalism, coupled with field interviews from coastal communities, and site visits showing dozens of large dredgers working openly in coastal estuaries, proved conclusively that the scale of the problem was huge and Cambodian officials were enabling it; a policy local residents blamed on corruption. "Seven beaches have already disappeared because of the mining," said one local fisherman. "They're just gone and the people can't enjoy them anymore." (Arsenault 2016e) After the data was published, Cambodian officials pledged to address the problem, underscoring the potential impact of merging interviews and primary trade records for land rights coverage (Arsenault 2016e).

## **4.4 Summary**

This chapter has showcased examples of how combining ground truth reporting with the examination of primary records can bring new information to light about large-scale land and resource deals. Using this methodology, I have broken stories on: taxpayer-funded bailouts of ineffective plantations in the DRC; contracting irregularities in Guyana’s oil industry; the long-term impacts of land-related violence in Brazil; and illicit sand mining in Cambodia. In addition to frontline interviews with direct witnesses of events, it has addressed the value of different strategies in obtaining primary records, including resource contracts, corporate registry files, international import-export data comparisons, stock price movement charts, investor disclosures and court documents in the context of this original reporting and the broader methodology underpinning it. The next chapter addresses a new theoretical contribution to journalism studies; how this reporting was guided by a reimagined approach to transparency.

# **Chapter 5: The transparency praxis, a theoretical contribution to journalism studies**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers a new theoretical approach to journalism studies. The broader theory driving the original journalism underpinning this thesis, and the deeper rationale for melding ground truth interviews and original primary records, is to re-define how journalists understand transparency. This theoretical approach posits transparency as more than an idea or good policy, but as something journalists covering natural resource deals must wring out of powerful institutions through an ongoing praxis of engaged research and reporting. In essence, transparency is the product of active engagement from journalists; a continual process akin to political struggle but without partisan frameworks or predetermined conclusions. Rather than the ends justifying the means, the means themselves and the process of investigation based on journalistic rigour, constitute a reframing of the idea of transparency in investigative reporting, and the praxis underpinning how journalists can and should approach stories on land and natural resources. This chapter will evaluate different theoretical conceptions of transparency as the idea applies to journalism studies, showing how this praxis-based reinterpretation adds to, and conflicts with, other approaches to the idea. It will show how this reimagining of transparency guides the reporting methodology and broader coverage described in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 including with a visual representation of the interplay in figure 1. It will explain how this approach centres transparency as a North Star guiding investigative journalism, in contrast to the notion of objectivity, along with how this new conceptualization of transparency is tied to discussions about journalistic impact. Finally, it offers some critiques of this theoretical approach to praxis-based transparency in the context of reporting on large-scale land and resource deals.

## **5.2 Re-framing transparency into an active journalistic praxis**

There is widespread consensus among journalists and journalism scholars that transparency is positive, desirable and an idea worthy of support (Black 1997; Birkinshaw 2009; Kurambayev & Freedman 2020; Rodríguez-Martínez et. al 2017; Meijer 2009; Moene & Søreide 2019; Radon et. al 2019). How transparency is defined, however, should impact how journalists conduct investigative land and resource reporting and the approaches we use for covering individual stories and generating impact (Karlsson 2021; Chadha & Koliska 2015; Moene & Søreide 2019). In the typical characterization shared by many reporters, the anti-corruption group Transparency International describes the concept as “the characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions” (Transparency International 2024). Among journalism and transparency scholars, the definition, and its impacts on coverage, is slightly more nuanced (Alemán 2012;

Karlsson 2021; Kurambayev & Freedman 2020; Manninen 2020; Salgado & Strömbäck 2020; Powers 2022; Krøvel & Thowsen 2019).

Birkinshaw echoes Transparency International's approach, defining the concept as "the conduct of public affairs in the open or otherwise subject to public scrutiny" (Birkinshaw 2006, p. 189-191). This stands in contrast to what Black calls "opaque policy measures" where it's difficult to determine who is making decisions and why, and who benefits (Black 1997, p. 476). As a concept, transparency is often defined as greater openness and accountability in terms of an institution's goals and relationships (Mopsik 2012; Vos & Craft 2017). These are notions with which "journalism has been viewed as having a special relationship" (Chadha & Koliska 2015, p. 216). The watchdog journalism interpretation of transparency, at its core, involves making an organization's data public when it previously was not (Mitchell 1998). Some definitions are normative, constructing transparency as a principle; others are descriptive, viewing transparency as a characteristic of institutional relationships (Meijer 2009). Others position transparency as a dualism between the public's right to know and privacy concerns (Oliver 2004). In the context of journalism on land and resources, many consider transparency a goal for which "open data is one important requisite" to foster accountability, participation and "eventually good governance and anti-corruption" (Jaitner, Schilling & Matthaiei 2020, p. 1).

The Society for Professional Journalists' code of ethics extrapolates Transparency International's base definition to the practice of reporting, calling transparency a key "ethical principle" for journalists and how they relate to their audiences (SPJ 2014). The SPJ's guidance urges journalists to conduct themselves with openness, explaining processes, source-gathering methods and editorial decisions (SPJ 2014). This interpretation of transparency related to the work journalists produce is part of a broad scholarly debate involving best practices for communicating with audiences, how much (or whether) increased communication about editorial choices leads to improved trust in the press, and how journalists can most effectively strive for transparency in their relationships (Chadha & Koliska 2015; Karlsson 2021; Kurambayev & Freedman 2020; Manninen 2020; Vos & Craft 2017). My contribution is related to, but separate from, this body of scholarship. I am most concerned with how journalists view themselves and their praxis of attaining data, and how they can most effectively hold the powerful to account by prying loose new information. My approach re-frames transparency from a desirable trait, sensible approach to institutional policy formation, or a strategy for audience trust building, to a praxis of engaged journalism and research. My approach to improving transparency is focused on the means of reporting, rather than an elusive end goal or final steady state where openness has been attained (Arsenault & Le Billon 2022a).

My approach borrows from a concept pioneered by abolitionist scholar and journalist Frederick Douglass, and his perspective that there is "no progress without struggle" (Douglass 1857). My approach to transparency repositions Douglass' praxis to strategies for journalists in extracting

information and insights from powerful actors, aiming to shed light on the goals, motivations and impacts of large land and resource deals (Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2017e; Arsenault 2014f). Rather than just viewing transparency for concession contracts, and disclosure of the motivations behind specific deals and community impacts from the agreements as something companies or governments should publish based on commitments to openness and scrutiny – which often do not happen (McDevitt 2017) – this approach views the struggle of attaining that information, and the ground truth perspectives of impacted residents, as a fundamental journalistic commitment and a theoretical approach anchoring coverage. In essence, transparency is the product of active engagement from journalists. This praxis of transparency underpins how reporters can and should approach stories on land and natural resources. The next section will situate this original interpretation into the evolving literature on transparency and reporting, noting where it bridges other approaches to journalistic tradecraft and where it conflicts with other reporting methodologies.

### **5.3 Bridging modernist and post-modernist approaches to transparency**

Albert Meijer traces the evolution of understandings of transparency from pre-modern, to modern and post-modern perspectives (Meijer 2009). All three perceptions, in his view, highlight debates about the “ambivalent relation between trust and openness” a dualism at the “heart of debates about the new transparency” (Meijer 2009, p. 255). Modernists contend that transparency mediated through digital technologies, such as better access to diverse forms of data, gives audiences more information, contributing to social rationalization. This modernist approach has been expressed through the media, the internet and other systems of digital data transmission which “play a key role in mediating government transparency in our times” (Meijer 2009, p. 259). Pre-modernists, in contrast, reject this idea of transparency as “decontextualized” arguing it will result in reduced social trust (Meijer 2009, p. 262). Postmodernists focus on the esthetics of transparency, arguing in favour of diverse forms and manifestations of the concept (Meijer 2009). My praxis-based approach rejects the pre-modernist view and leans heavily on the modernist interpretation, borrowing elements related to story framing, source diversity, and skepticism of objectivity as a fundamental journalistic value from the post-modern perspective. It utilizes the modernist interpretation, backing the view that presenting more information to audiences can help pry information out of powerful actors and lead to policy changes. But it refocuses both modern and post-modern conceptualizations, centering the process of obtaining information as an act of engaged struggle from the reporter.

While hewing closest to modernist values and interpretations, the post-modern framework offers a few valuable insights for my approach to advancing transparency through journalism, even if the underlying nihilism or lack of fundamental meaning and rationality in the discourse is flawed (Alemán 2012; Peterson-Salahuddin 2021; Syzdykova, Akinina, Shilova & Gromatikopolo 2020). Skepticism over journalistic objectivity as a framework or key value for coverage is one area where



this transparency praxis draws from the post-modern approach. As Peterson-Salahuddin notes in defence of the post-modern transparency ethos, despite claims of objectivity or the “view from nowhere”, journalism cannot be “divorced from the subjective values in which news is constructed” (Peterson-Salahuddin 2021, p. 392; Nagel 1986). My approach to transparency does not assume there is a single, objective framework under which an event can be interpreted; as noted in the introductory section of this thesis, there is still a place for stories (Peterson-Salahuddin 2021; Cronon 1992). My approach to subjective interpretations in story framing, source selection or topic consideration, however, utilizes the modernist style of journalism: offering fair comment to all sides of an issue – a concept rejected by many postmodernists as “bothsidesism”, careful fact checking and fairness in pursuit of rational, structured analysis of the information uncovered through struggle (Ben-Shai 2023, p. 8; Vos & Craft 2017). To reimagine an old cliché, in the context of this approach to transparency and sourcing, journalists are entitled to their own stories, not their own facts.

#### **5.4 Emphasizing the process for extracting transparency in adversarial journalism**

This original approach to transparency focuses on the active element of how journalists obtain, contextualize, and publish information about the activities of institutions, mainly governments and companies. It largely falls within the framework of “adversarial journalism” as a means of holding powerful actors to account (Noveck 2017, p. 2; Willnat, Weaver & Wilhoit 2019). For journalistic tradecraft, and how transparency can be pried out in the reporting process, Noveck draws a distinction between adversarial freedom of information requests and the more “collaborative” open-data movement (Noveck 2017, p. 5). My approach relies on both adversarial and collaborative processes in gaining primary information and records. However, it prioritizes “involuntary” transparency projects where information is wrung from powerful institutions (Heemsbergen 2013, p. 47) while maintaining an optimistic perspective on what will be published, and what the original data and ground truth reporting will elucidate. For instance, stories from Cambodia leveraged the transparency praxis to find generally positive results from powerful actors on the Grandis Timber concession, while also uncovering outright deception from the government and companies related to sand mining (Arsenault 2016j; Arsenault 2016i). In both cases, the praxis of wringing information out of powerful actors remained the same, but it led to different conclusions depending on the results of the reporting.

The involuntary approach to transparency in this praxis can involve strategies such as obtaining information via freedom of information legislation, along with leaks, such as accessing the contract for the Malibya concession from a highly placed individual or Wikileaks disclosures (Arsenault 2015; Arsenault 2011d). It can also include using open-source data reframed with additional context and ground truth reporting, such as the use of social media posts on food aid being stolen by ISIS in Syria to obtain corroboration of thefts from UN agencies, or accessing corporate registry records in Guyana to show the nature of the companies receiving oil concessions (Hammond 2001;

Heemsbergen 2013; Noveck 2017; Arsenault 2015c; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault and Le Billion 2022a). Across these newsgathering tactics under the transparency praxis, reporters publish information from a “position outside the organizations it was making transparent” (Heemsbergen 2013, p. 47). Under this approach, the struggle to obtain information from powerful bodies is also “forever unfinished” (Heemsbergen 2013, p. 50). As such, much of the importance of this reinterpretation of transparency for journalistic tradecraft relates to the process itself.

### **5.5 Transparency praxis as a rebuttal to journalistic objectivity**

My praxis-based approach to transparency acts as an alternative pole for framing journalistic ethics in contrast to objectivity, a modernist pillar of reporting (Vos & Craft 2017; Meijer 2009). The objectivity discourse has been increasingly criticized by scholars, the general public and frontline reporters as an ineffective framework for covering the world, and for privileging establishment voices and maintaining the status quo (Vos & Craft 2017; Weinberger 2009; Hearn-Branaman 2016; Mattar 2020; Peterson-Salahuddin 2021). Some consider transparency, as an approach to journalism, the “new objectivity” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; as content is widely discussed and “subject to dispute and revision,” though these arguments are made in the context of journalists’ relationships with audiences (Koliska & Chadha 2016, p. 53; Weinberger 2009). Transparency, as an epistemological tool for producing content, explaining newsroom decisions, fostering trust with audiences, and something to be desired from institutions, has gained new prominence in journalism studies (Maras 2013). In practice, this means journalists should be “open about relationships and goals” (Vos & Craft 2017, p. 1511; Herrmann 2011), “open to criticism” (Vos & Craft 2017, p. 1511; Mopsik 2012), and allow audiences “inside the news gathering, production and decision-making process” (Vos & Craft 2017, p. 1511; CBS 2005). This privileging of transparency over objectivity places the former alongside core journalistic values such as honesty and fairness (Plaisance & Deppa 2009; Vos & Craft 2017). My approach takes transparency beyond “the new objectivity” as a North Star for journalistic tradecraft, though it accepts this interpretation, both in how reporters explain their decisions to the public and how we frame our stories. As an act of political struggle, transparency is wrestled from powerful actors to demand openness in motivations, causes and impacts of decisions related to large land and resource deals. Combined with ground-truth voices, this transparency praxis can lead to tangible impacts for people affected by large land and resource deals (McDevitt 2017).

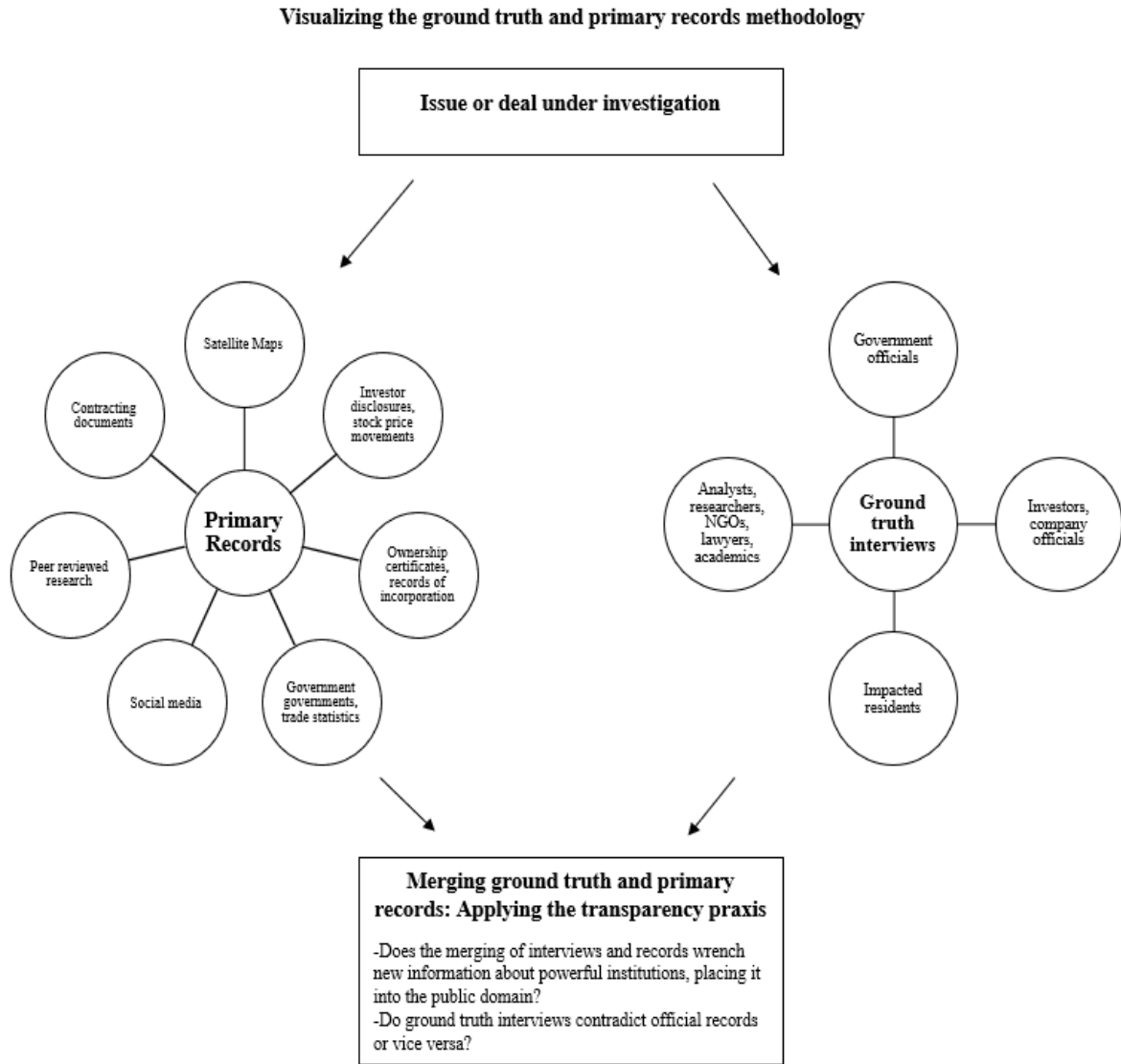
### **5.6 Transparency praxis in the context of debates about journalistic impact**

There is a widespread belief that improved transparency for extractive industries, particularly around contracting, can mitigate some of the worst elements of the resource curse; a body of literature indicating that countries and regions don’t face poverty, corruption, and environmental violence despite their natural resource endowments, but *because* of them (Auty 2002; Arsenault & Le Billion 2022a; Coll 2012; Schiffrin and Rodrigues 2014). There is some debate, however,

on the impact increased transparency from journalistic investigations or open access to contracting records has on improving governance, economic or environmental outcomes (Karlsson 2021; Schiffrin and Rodrigues 2014). Measuring direct causation between a piece of investigative reporting and policy changes on the ground is difficult (McDevitt 2017). Investigative journalism is like other types of research in that only a fraction turns out to be impactful. The total sum of investigative journalistic activity is therefore important even if a given inquiry fails to produce useful evidence and thus may appear to be wasted effort (Moene & Søreide 2019). Difficulties in measuring the impact of an individual piece of reporting notwithstanding, several studies, including examinations of displacement related to large land and resource projects in Mozambique and Vietnam, have found correlations between journalistic investigations and policy reforms including compensation for displaced people and other material improvements for impacted residents (McDevitt 2017; Schiffrin and Rodrigues 2014; Jaitner, Schilling & Matthaei 2020). “The opening up of contracts,” notes one study on investigative journalism and natural resource investments, “has already led national governments to negotiate far better deals” (McDevitt 2017, p. 12). “By seeing what kinds of environmental protections countries are negotiating, other governments learn what to ask for and are getting better at renegotiating opportunities” (McDevitt 2017, p. 12).

This improvement in negotiating outcomes underscores the value of praxis-based transparency; engaged research from reporters can arm decision makers in affected countries with clear, accurate information to advance improved social and governance outcomes and make them wary of engaging in corrupt practices. This approach to advancing transparency for land and resource deals can take coverage beyond naming specific bad actors such as politicians or companies involved in corruption or deals which fail to live up to their promised outcomes; though these elements are important and fall well within the framework. More broadly, it can lead journalists to highlight institutional failures or structural inequities in how capital moves, how deals are negotiated, and who benefits (Embree 2022; Liberti 2013; Jaitner, Schilling & Matthaei 2020). Coverage of complicated deals in the natural resources sector requires “the exposure of structural challenges that allow power abuse and threaten democratic institutions” (Moene & Søreide 2019, p. 113). In other words, the struggle to wrest information from institutions is fundamental to better outcomes, even if the impact of an individual piece of reporting is unclear. Spotlighting structural problems which allow for abuses, and improving information access on specific deals for governments and communities, are core benefits of approaching investigative natural resource journalism with the transparency praxis. This reimagined approach to transparency, practiced in tandem with the methodology outlined in Chapter 2, is represented visually below.

**Figure 1: Visualizing the ground truth and primary records methodology**



## 5.7 Critiques of the transparency praxis

Theoretical concepts and assumptions about information flows and the impact of reporting under the transparency praxis, as noted above, are rooted in modernist interpretations of openness and rationalization. These interpretations, and how they fit within the broader structural goal of this reporting: to hold powerful actors to account, have been criticized as having the opposite effect. Michel Foucault argues that transparency, likely including iterations of the praxis-based approach to journalism, can actually assist “the administration of power” (Meijer 2009, p. 262; Foucault 2012). His contemporaries have expanded that concept to issues around natural resources, contending that modernist transparency, which reduces “asymmetries of information” can foster

“market discipline” and efficiency in profit seeking (Heemsbergen 2013, p. 49). Applied to natural resource governance, transparency – including this praxis of journalism – means “power creates knowledge and knowledge produces power” but “many mechanisms governing power/knowledge are not visible immediately to those involved” (Van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & Gruezmacher 2017, p. 310).

Put another way, by publishing complex information about land and resource deals, even with the journalistic necessity of simplifying it for audiences, reporters utilizing this praxis can end up reinforcing the same unequal power dynamics. Communities most affected by negative elements of the deals, particularly rural residents with low education levels and minimal command of English, will garner minimal or no benefits from publications leveraging the transparency praxis. Corporate competitors, other investors, members of the administrative elite in impacted countries or office-based NGOs will, however, benefit from information journalists pry from powerful actors “in the Machiavellian strategic, conscious and utilitarian sense” (Van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & Gruezmacher 2017, p. 310). Thus, journalists using this approach can reinforce the same unequal information flows they seek to undermine, if the people most impacted from the deals can’t benefit from the new knowledge unlocked through investigations and the power that comes with it.

This theoretical critique dovetails with a more practical issue in how reporting under the transparency praxis, and the aforementioned methodology of ground truth interviews and primary records, is financed and executed. As noted in Chapter 3, the tools for this reporting often involve: data journalism, financial support from foundations, and network structures of reporters and expert sources, such as advocacy groups, to buttress sourcing to advance the transparency praxis. Stefan Candea argues this combination of “data journalism, network structures, non-profit and commercial models” forces investigative reporting into the realm of “data feudalism” (Candea 2020, p. 32). In essence, Candea contends that the mix of sophisticated technological approaches to investigative journalism, such as scraping large data sets or satellite map analysis, coupled with the reliance on philanthropy financing, means the process for some 21<sup>st</sup> century investigative international reporting gives too much leverage to a few financial donors and platform owners “without any accountability” (Candea 2020, p. i). In other words, he argues that the processes many journalists use in their international investigative reporting are anything but transparent, reinforcing elite capture of the public sphere. This undermines the praxis identified above of how journalists should envision their struggle to wrench information from powerful institutions. Some of the international investigations discussed in Chapter 4 and supplied in this thesis’s attached original portfolio would certainly be criticized by Candea under this framework.

The theoretical and related practical implications of these critiques have some merit. But the reasonable concerns noted by contrasting scholars do not offer better methods for journalists to conduct what most agree is necessary investigative reporting. That additional knowledge about

deals and their impacts obtained under the transparency praxis approach may not benefit rural communities affected by the deals is not a dilemma that journalists, or journalism studies, has the capacity to address. Reporters can identify problems and potential solutions in their reporting but resolving multifaceted global power imbalances is beyond the scope of our profession. Critics of foundation funding and its impact on investigative journalism produced under the transparency praxis don't offer practical, viable alternatives to this necessary funding (Candea 2020; Wright, Scott and Bunce 2019). Non-profit or subscriber-based models are sometimes mentioned to fill this financial void, but these have rarely been successful outside the largest media outlets, and many news non-profits are also dependent on foundation support (Holcomb et al. 2011; Lugo-Ocando 2020; Nisbet, Wihbey, Kristiansen and Bajak 2018; McLeary 2007). International investigative journalism is an expensive undertaking. These critiques may diminish the strength of the transparency praxis. But without a viable alternative to finance investigative reporting, the criticisms don't fundamentally undermine the theory behind this best practice strategy. Put simply, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, this approach to investigative international journalism and the funding underpinning it, are the best options currently available currently to many reporters (Rohde and Roy 2016).

## **5.8 Summary**

This chapter has shown how the reimagination of transparency into an active praxis for journalists can guide coverage on large land and natural resource deals. It has situated this reinterpretation within broader discussions about transparency, bridging modern and post-modern approaches, and showing how the transparency praxis shapes adversarial journalism and functions as a theoretical counterweight to the idea of journalistic objectivity. It has also addressed some critiques of this praxis-based approach to investigative reporting. In doing so, this chapter has offered a new concept for journalism studies, which serves as a guiding theoretical framework for the original reporting contained in the attached portfolio, and for the discourse of journalism studies more broadly. This reimagination of transparency is the theoretical foundation upon which the methodology of this thesis was built, and it guides the sourcing best practices noted in Chapter 3, and the specific work product summarized in Chapter 4. In addition to the theoretical contribution offered above, Chapter 6 analyses relationships between international correspondents and fixers and provides an original practical contribution for improving them.

## **Chapter 6: Practical contribution to international reporting collaborations**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers a practical contribution to investigative reporting: a reimagination of relationships between international correspondents and their local collaborators or fixers, who are frequently hired for coverage in the Global South. My contribution to journalism practice prioritizes engaging non-journalists as reporting partners, when equally shared story credits between foreign and local correspondents aren't viable. This approach broadens sourcing options, insights and background context beyond collaborators who have journalism skills, and draws instead upon translation, policy and subject matter experts who have minimal previous experience in traditional reporting. This chapter will show how this practical reappraisal of the relationships, visualized in figure 2, has impacted original reporting contained in this thesis. It will also outline some of the debates about best practices for correspondent collaborations in the Global South, noting some of the criticism of this original approach. Finally, it will provide a full conclusion for this thesis' practical, theoretical, and methodological contributions to investigative journalism on large-scale land and natural resource deals and identify where further research is needed.

### **6.2 Re-imagining relationships between international correspondents and 'fixers'**

The role of fixers, often local reporters working for international correspondents on short contracts, has seen increased interest and scrutiny in journalism studies in recent years (Borpujari, 2019; Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Palmer 2018; Palmer 2019; Plaut & Klein 2019; Santos 2022). Valued for their language skills, contacts, local cultural knowledge and problem-solving abilities, fixers play a key role facilitating and translating for many investigative international journalists covering land and resource issues (Palmer 2019; Plaut & Klein 2019). Fixers were instrumental for reporting many of the stories contained in the portfolio of original work accompanying this thesis, as noted in Chapter 4 (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016f). The fixer helps organize and translate interviews outside of a correspondent's home country while navigating local cultural realities and coordinating logistics. The role of fixers has been an understudied mainstay of international journalism through the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Palmer 2019). Though most audience members likely remain unaware of the responsibilities of fixers, the role was introduced into western popular culture during the Vietnam War era, as captured in the film *The Killing Fields*. Investigative reporting on U.S. military coverups by a New York Times correspondent was only made possible by his Cambodian fixer, Dith Pan, who ended up in a vicious prison camp for his troubles in the service of journalism (Plaut & Klein 2019). From wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to land grabs in Mali and shady oil deals in Guyana, fixers have been a mainstay of modern foreign correspondence (Palmer 2019; Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault 2021a).

Despite the importance of the role, or perhaps because of it, the very term “fixer” has been criticized. Media scholars and local journalists who collaborate with “big foot” foreign correspondents known for flying into high-profile stories as inaccurate, condescending, and borderline neocolonial (Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Stein & Baines 2021). Capturing this unease around current definitions and approaches, one long-time foreign correspondent rejects the term “fixer” arguing that such media workers are “really journalists” (Witchel 2004). Some fixers, and many media scholars, prefer terms such as “collaborator”, “producer” or “reporting partner” to describe the activities of local media workers hired by foreign correspondents (Plaut & Klein 2019; Santos 2022; Witchel 2004). A significant portion of people who work as fixers are journalists themselves (Plaut & Klein 2019). Their complaints include a lack of bylines or other reporting credits for the work they do in organizing interviews and conducting research, and a generally extractive relationship with their better funded foreign (normally western) counterparts (Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Plaut & Klein 2019). In this relationship, an outside journalist can mine the sources and insights a local reporter has developed for years, pay a cash fee for several days of work with no benefits, and then receive the bylines and related accolades (Palmer 2019; Witchel 2004). In some cases, local reporters working as fixers say their outside paymasters miss crucial nuance in their coverage due to a lack of local knowledge, or worse burn bridges with sources cultivated by the local journalist, potentially putting the local reporter at greater professional or security risk (Plaut & Klein 2019).

Changes in the global media business, noted in Chapter 3, including declining budgets for foreign news coverage and more reliance on freelance contributors, have increased responsibilities for many local fixers (Witchel 2004). “What we’re seeing now are fixers as surrogates,” notes the dean of Berkeley’s School of Journalism (Witchel 2004). Particularly in insecure regions, including parts of the Middle East, fixers “are the Seeing Eye Dogs, or rangers, for the men and women who can’t safely go out and do the reporting themselves” (Witchel 2004). The small but growing body of scholarship on the relationship between journalists and fixers has focused on best practices for international collaborations between comparatively well-funded reporters in the Global North and their colleagues in the Global South, and strategies for reimagining the relationship (Plaut & Klein 2019; Santos 2022). Underscoring increased attention on the issue in recent years, events discussing the role of fixers were held at the National Press Club in Washington, and a special conference linking journalists and collaborators at the Global Reporting Centre in Vancouver (National Press Club 2020; Global Reporting Centre 2023). These workshops typically stressed collaborative relationships between local and international journalists in pursuit of a story, rather than the tradition of information, contacts and logistical support flowing one way, and money flowing the other.

My approach to the relationship between fixers and journalists backs this general principle of cross-border collaborations with equal credit on bylines, where appropriate. My approach, however, stresses something simpler, and perhaps uncomfortable for some local and international



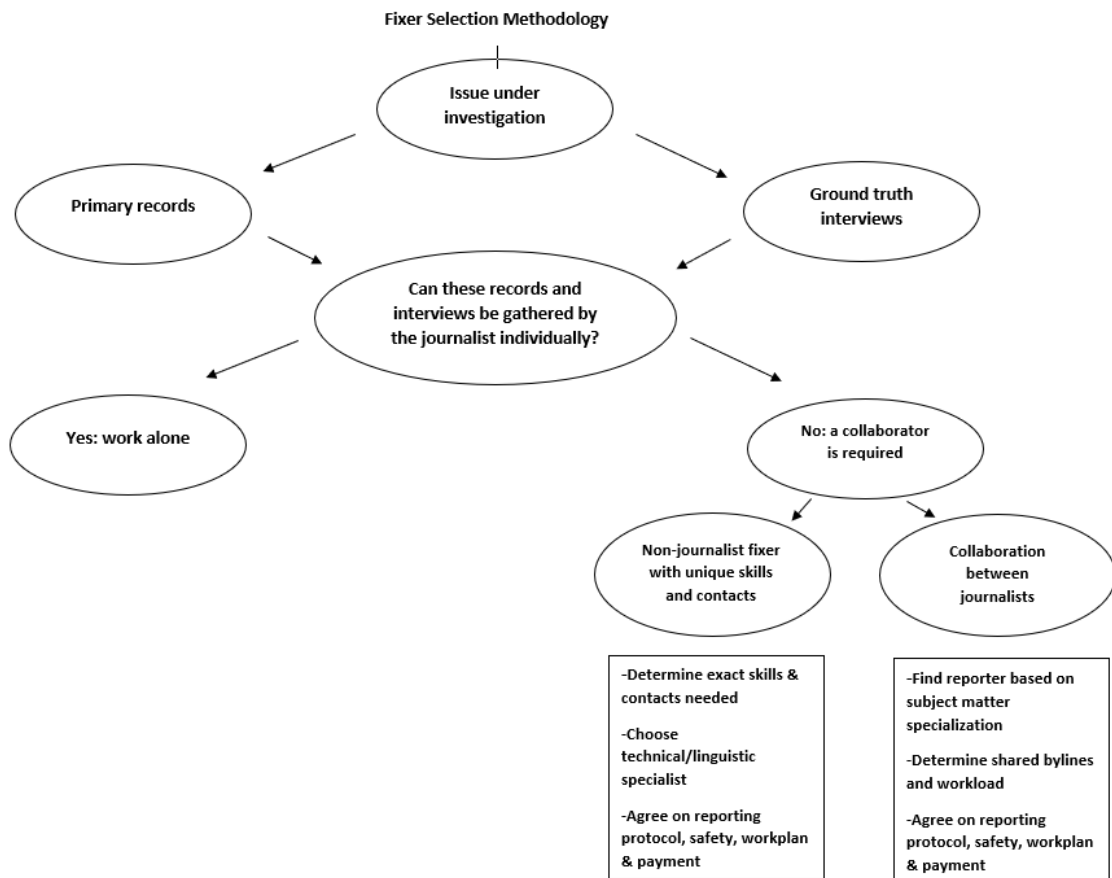
reporters given the current media and political climate: partnering with individuals in the Global South who have no journalism experience, or interest in journalism and the related bylines, but offer other unique skills, sources and experiences related to the reporting process. Local reporters, trainee journalists or newsroom assistants have traditionally filled the role of fixer or collaborator because they have a basic understanding of what foreign correspondents want, how to set up interviews and how to do the job – along with contacts in many cases. Put simply, if you work on a plumbing or electrical project in another country, it makes sense to hire a skilled tradesperson there; journalism is similar. But my approach is different. Legitimate critiques about extractive or neocolonial relationships between foreign correspondents and local journalism partners aside; such relationships pose a larger, practical question for reporters operating in the post-COVID, zoom-era: why bother spending thousands of dollars and contributing to climate change via international air travel to deploy a journalist to another country, when a local reporter could do the required interviews, gather the primary documents and complete the rest of the field reporting? The two journalists can produce the piece together virtually if the foreign correspondent's skills in story framing or production are needed to convey the information to their audience. In cases where I have collaborated with a local journalist, I have used this approach, meaning equal credits on bylines and workload distribution (Arsenault & Heshmatpour 2012; Arsenault & Migiro 2015; Arsenault & Moloney 2015).

Most stories included in the portfolio of original work on land and resource deals accompanying this thesis, however, rely on collaborators with no previous relationship to journalism. In Mali, as noted in Chapter 4, I worked with a former security contractor who understood the country's internal dynamics, geography, and political context; in Venezuela, a simultaneous translator who had long standing professional ties to government and business elites (Arsenault 2015d; Arsenault 2013). Neither of these workers had any interest in sharing bylines in the final pieces of journalism; in fact, they were adamant in remaining anonymous to preserve future business relationships. They both had excellent sources who hadn't been previously tapped by foreign reporters, a strong understanding of local political realities and unique suggestions for story framing. I collaborated in similar fashion in Cambodia and Cuba; Guyana and Mexico – working with academic researchers and local photographers, respectively. Both demographics added unique sources, insights, and deliverables to the final reports (Arsenault 2016f; Arsenault 2018b; Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2011b). In all cases, the interests and personal goals of the collaborators were met, such as image credits for the photographers (Arsenault 2021a; Arsenault 2021b).

This approach to reporting collaborations offers insights for other journalists and the broader practice of reporting. First, working with people who have no previous journalism experience makes it easier for correspondents to find original sources who haven't previously been in the press; journalists have a habit of recommending sources who they know or have dealt with before as the path of least resistance (Koikkalainen 2008; Hope 2019). My approach to non-journalism collaborations is arguably better at reaching ground truth voices than the standard style of working

with local journalists in countries where the visiting correspondent doesn't speak the language. Second, under my approach, both the journalist and the collaborator are getting what they want and have agreed to out of the relationship, despite the latter's disinterest in journalistic credit or bylines. As the Online News Association notes in its ethical guidelines on best practices for relationships between journalists and fixers, one of the few guides from a professional media association, "The most important thing is to make clear to short-term and long-term contract workers exactly how we see our obligations to them" (ONA). This approach to collaboration utilizes the skills, sources, and insights of different parties without duplication or taking advantage of local reporters. When using this approach to collaboration, it is imperative the journalist does not allow biases or pre-conceptions from the fixer to impact source selection or story framing; it's not uncommon for non-journalists to have strong opinions about what makes a worthwhile story and who should be consulted. Ideas, suggestions or insights, unto themselves, aren't negative. But relying on a fixer with no journalism experience places additional onus on the correspondent to have well-vetted story frames and source ideas so a fixer's outside business connections or personal political views do not affect the final output. This broader approach to collaboration is also fluid enough to include local reporting partners on equal footing with bylines and credit when the situation presents itself, meaning travel can be reduced without compromising output quality, or the core methodology of melding ground truth and primary records, reported under the transparency praxis. A flowchart showing how a journalist can choose most effectively between these two poles when embarking on investigative coverage of land and resource deals using the methodology of this thesis is visualized below.

**Figure 2: Fixer Selection Methodology**



### 6.3 Critiques of this approach to non-journalist collaborations

The most obvious critique of this approach is that it’s an oblique way of reinforcing unequal power dynamics in fixer-correspondent relationships; a defence of a status quo most scholars and many journalists consider unacceptable (Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Santos 2022). Is this approach not just an underhanded method for foreign correspondents to duck accountability, hiring people without formal journalism experience who arguably have less negotiating power in securing their legitimate economic and professional interests? In short, this depends on the specific individual involved and what they want from the relationship. Even scholarship critical of current relationships recognizes that the “fixer operates within uneven power dynamics, but is not without agency” (Plaut & Klein 2019, p. 1700). Prioritizing workers whose agency and outside professional experience makes them disinterested in reporting credits to preserve their access works well within this concept of professional agency. Roughly 75 per cent of fixers reported having another profession, stating that fixing contributes just a moderate source of income (Plaut & Klein 2019). This leaves the individuals involved who are uninterested in reporting credits with

“multiple professional identities, and thus access to multiple worlds” – in other words the ideal outsiders to provide new insights for visiting journalists (Plaut & Klein 2019, p. 1705). Moreover, the goal of any coverage, foreign, domestic, or geographically hybrid, should centre on adding value for the audience. Having reporting collaborators with sources, understandings and insights which have not been previously published can provide audiences with unique ground truth perspectives. With a strong local reporter who can source background material and has geographic proximity to the land or resource deal being covered, outside correspondents should work with these journalists as equals, sharing bylines and efforts, and reducing unnecessary travel whenever possible.

A second critique might contend that the idea of reporters working with non-journalists in the field is hardly revolutionary. Taxi drivers, teachers, NGO staff, local hustlers and others with a knack for navigating the streets, have often been tapped by foreign correspondents to work as fixers in a pinch (Brewster 2011; Oputu 2014). My approach, however, is original in seeking to codify and defend this counterintuitive practice of actively seeking collaborators without journalism experience or interest, defying most of the existing scholarship on journalist-fixer relationships (Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Santos 2022; Stein & Baines 2012). This approach does not purport to address historical power imbalances between north and south, east and west. But by actively seeking collaborators with unique insights and sources outside of journalism, when joint bylines on stories with local reporters aren't feasible, it does offer the most insightful strategy for wrenching transparency from powerful institutions in pursuit of ground truth on large land and resource deals.

## **6.4 Summary**

This chapter has outlined a new approach for international collaborators on coverage of large land and resource deals in the context of intensifying debates about relationships between journalists and fixers. It has shown how this novel proposition – either sharing equal credit and bylines with reporters in the Global South or relying on collaborators with no previous journalism experience – can improve coverage and lead to more equitable partnerships. It has also examined how this practical approach to collaboration has impacted the original reporting contained in the portfolio of previously published work. It has outlined how this contribution to journalism practice on collaborations impacts the use of the broader ground truth methodology and can provide new insights and source material to audiences. Finally, it visualizes in figure 2 how this approach can be utilized by working journalists when embarking on international investigative reporting projects, while noting some critiques of this approach to journalism collaborations. Chapter 7 offers a final conclusion for this thesis and spells out where additional research is required.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis, and the theoretical frameworks underpinning the stories in the attached portfolio, add three original contributions to the study and practice of investigative journalism on large land and natural resource deals. First is the methodology for approaching stories. Other scholars have highlighted the importance of ground truth interviews for investigative coverage (Rohde and Roy 2016; Friedman 2004). Striving to obtain primary records is also a well-documented tactic for investigative journalism (Hines 2019). But merging these two approaches to create robust coverage in the context of large land and natural resources deals, is unique. With minimal existing journalism scholarship on best practices for this niche coverage area, this methodological contribution is part of expanding the research literature, primarily within journalism studies. The practical results of this approach uncovered new information about land deals and their impacts. A decade of coverage impacted broader scholarship on natural resources governance, global development, and environmental policy. This original methodology offers a practical, transferable guide and strategy for other journalists covering the great land rush. It also provides a framework for journalism studies on best practices. As the academic journalism literature on best practices for this coverage area is miniscule, more research is needed to assess, critique and expand this reporting methodology as it's arguably the first scholarly attempt to lay out a best practice guide for coverage of large land and resource deals.

The theory underpinning this methodology is a reimagined approach to transparency itself. This transparency praxis is a new contribution to journalism studies and it offers a theoretical approach underpinning how and why investigative land and natural resource coverage is executed. Other journalism scholars and frontline reporters have written about the importance of transparency, framing the concept as something desirable for institutional behavior and as a guiding ideology for how journalists conduct their relations with sources and audiences (Allen 2008; Anseeuw, Bourgoin & Harding 2022; Vos & Craft 2017). For land and resource coverage, however, journalists should view transparency as something to be forced from powerful institutions through a process of engaged reporting and research. This conception of how reporters approach their stories is useful as both a North Star for coverage priorities, and as a measure of effectiveness for investigations: Does a story pry new information from powerful actors by combining ground truth interviews and primary records? This is a theoretical framework for frontline reporters, and media scholars, to evaluate and conceptualize coverage, and the study of journalism itself.

Finally, this thesis offers a novel practical approach for reimagining relationships between journalists and outside collaborators, or fixers. The existing scholarship on journalist-fixer relations is small but growing (Borpujari, 2019; Kotišová, & Deuze 2022; Palmer 2019; Plaut & Klein 2019). There is a widespread view that the traditional dichotomy where a comparatively well-resourced reporter from the Global North hires a local journalist from the Global South to act as a fixer, using their sources and cultural knowledge on a short-term contract without providing

bylines or other reporting credits is flawed (Kotiřová & Deuze 2022; Palmer 2019; Santos 2022). But when it comes to solutions to the problems identified in previous research, few offer tangible specifics which can be practiced in the field (Plaut & Klein 2019; Santos 2022). Previous scholarship and professional best practice guides note that a one-size fits all model does not work for these relationships (Plaut & Klein 2019; ONA). Collaboration protocols must shift based on the individuals involved, the story in question, newsroom resources and other factors (ONA; Plaut & Klein 2019) Building on problems identified by other scholars, my original approach to journalism practice presents two divergent options. When outsider correspondents want to collaborate with a local reporter, workload, research and credits should be shared equally in a mutually beneficial relationship utilizing the different skill sets of both journalists. This approach was used in several cross-border collaborations on large land and resource deals. Alternatively, the outsider correspondent can collaborate with a local partner with minimal journalism experience, or interest in bylines or related credit, to access unique ground truth sources unnoticed by other media organizations. Of the three original contributions to journalism studies and practice, this approach to fixer-reporter relations is likely the most controversial. More conversations, debates, and exchanges, along with deeper research, is needed to continue the discussion, particularly for these collaborations in the context of large land and resource deals.

Most of the stories contained in the attached portfolio of original work were reported before the COVID-19 pandemic and the dislocation it unleashed. In the pandemic's aftermath, prices for food, energy and other natural resources spiked, leading some analysts to anticipate another wave of global land grabs. Economic forces underpinning the 2007-08 land rush seemed to be re-emerging (German 2022; Suwandi & Foster 2022). While there have been new significant land grabs in the post-pandemic environment, amid high commodity prices and Russia's invasion of Ukraine destabilizing food and fuel markets, there has not been a spike in new land deals comparable to 2008 (Anseeuw, Bourgoïn & Harding 2022; Grain 2023). Perhaps long-term problems emerging from the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first land grab wave – deals which don't lead to actual crop production, inexperience from some speculators in executing long-term agriculture projects, and increased journalistic scrutiny and community resistance, have spooked investors looking for market-beating returns or governments in politically unstable regions keen on boosting GDP. More research is needed to determine why there hasn't been a spike in deals given current realities in commodity markets. To this end, reporting on this issue, and the contributions to knowledge contained therein, will continue. The broader methodology behind this reporting, and its theoretical and practical contributions, provide new insights and strategies for correspondents covering the phenomenon. The little-studied issue of journalism strategies for coverage of large land and natural resource deals requires more research, especially related to emerging methods such as the inclusion of artificial intelligence for analyzing deals, best practices for satellite mapping, and other open-source big data gathering techniques. Hopefully, contributions from this thesis will encourage more debate, critique, and research on the phenomenon of land grabbing, and the broader role of journalists in covering it effectively.

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## **Appendix 1: Selected portfolio of previously published work**

### **Large-scale land deals**

**Summary:** This series of articles brought new, original information into the public discourse around large-scale land deals. For example, I was the first journalist to publish the contract between Muammar Gaddafi’s government in Libya, and Mali, one of the poorest nations on Earth, for 100,000 hectares of irrigated land. I was also the only one to report on the situation on the ground at the concession site, and fears from local residents, following Gaddafi’s ouster and Libya’s descent into civil war.

### **Mali**

Arsenault, Chris, [“Mali’s Land Deal With the Devil”](https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/malis-land-deal-devil-letter-markala) *Foreign Affairs*, May 12, 2015. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/malis-land-deal-devil-letter-markala>

Chris Arsenault, "Drought, expanding deserts and 'food for jihad' drive Mali's conflict." Reuters, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climatechange-mali-conflict-idUSKBN0NI16M20150427>

Chris Arsenault, "Guerrilla Gardening' Takes Root in Hunger-Hit Mali" Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting/Reuters, April 30, 2015.

Arsenault, C. (2014). "'Population growth far outpaces food supply' in conflict-ravaged Sahel." The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/oct/22/population-growth-outpaces-food-sahel-study>

## **DR Congo**

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, I was the first journalist to connect the dots between a Canadian hedge fund, the country's largest palm oil plantation and the U.K.'s Commonwealth Development Corporation. The Canadians purchased the Feronia plantation at the height of the commodities boom; the bankers had no idea how to run such an operation. They got paid while other investors lost millions when the company's stock tanked. After I broke this story, NGOs and campaigners continued to monitor developments with Feronia, releasing reports and attempting to secure better treatment for the local workers.

Chris Arsenault, "Bailing out a foreign food company in DRC" Al Jazeera, November 14, 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/11/14/bailing-out-a-foreign-food-company-in-drc>

Chris Arsenault, "Congo plantation firm financed by UK aid accused of breaking promise to help workers" Reuters, February 28, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/africa-aid-landrights-idINL5N1FR00P>

## **Cambodia**

A series of original, investigative reports filed from across the country compared the situation on the ground in communities where the contracts for large-scale land deals are publicly available versus places where they are not. The reporting found that deals with contract transparency yielded somewhat better outcomes for impacted residents, particularly related to compensation for lost land. The reporting project also tested whether firms with a stated commitment to corporate social responsibility related to land governance achieved better outcomes for residents living within their concessions. Analysing a local land tenure system known as the "Leopard skin" the research found that some impacted communities did experience slightly better outcomes for income and food security following the creation of one forestry deal in rural Cambodia. These reports added substantial new information to our collective knowledge on land deals, and they were well cited in academic and legal studies.

Chris Arsenault, "Cambodians push for transparency over large land deals" Jakarta Globe/Reuters, December 24, 2016. <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/cambodians-push-transparency-large-land-deals/>

Chris Arsenault, "'Leopard skin' plan helps Cambodia farmers stay on large land concessions" The Star/Reuters, November 29, 2016. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2016/11/29/leopard-skin-plan-helps-cambodia-farmers-stay-on-large-land-concessions>

Chris Arsenault, "Landless Cambodian farmers look to International Criminal Court for justice" Reuters, November 22, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-icc-cambodia-landrights/landless-cambodian-farmers-look-to-international-criminal-court-for-justice-idUSKBN13H1J9>

Chris Arsenault, "Domestic violence rife amid Cambodia land conflicts - rights group" Reuters, November 10, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/women-landrights-politics-idINL8N1D50CR>

Chris Arsenault, "Cambodia digs into sand mining industry as beaches and crabs vanish" Reuters, November 3, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-landrights-environment-idUSKBN12Y224>

Chris Arsenault, "Cambodian land grabs are 'crime against humanity', lawyers tell ICC" Thomson Reuters Foundation, October 7, 2014. <https://news.trust.org/item/20141007172351-q2k3o/>

## **Brazil**

A series of original investigative reports from Brazil, including a look at land conflicts filed from deep in the Amazon rainforest, added insights to the growing literature on Brazil's backsliding on land rights and environmental protection. The output helped humanize scientific scholarship on how land formally titled to Indigenous communities provides some of the best protections against climate change and deforestation.

Chris Arsenault, "Politics of Death: Land conflict and murder go "hand in hand" in Brazil" Daily Mail/Reuters, June 26, 2017. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-4641796/Politics-Death-Land-conflict-murder-hand-hand-Brazil.html>

Chris Arsenault, "In Brazil's 'Wild West' a young prosecutor takes on corrupt land deals" Reuters, August 16, 2016. <https://news.trust.org/item/20160816175113-pti37/>

Chris Arsenault, "Insight: Inside Brazil's battle to save the Amazon with satellites and strike forces" Reuters, September 28, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-environment-landrights-insight/insight-inside-brazils-battle-to-save-the-amazon-with-satellites-and-strike-forces-idUSKCN11Y1NI>

Chris Arsenault, "Brazil Supreme Court backs indigenous land demarcation in long: running case" Reuters, August 17, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-landrights-court/brazil-supreme-court-backs-indigenous-land-demarcation-in-long-running-case-idUSKCN1AX0ZJ>

Chris Arsenault, "Losing our land like losing our lives', Brazil activist tells World Bank" Reuters, March 16, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-landrights-brazil-agriculture-idUSKCN0WI2QY>

Chris Arsenault, "In World's Largest Urban Rainforest, It's Conservation vs Housing Rights" Jakarta Globe/Reuters, May 25, 2017. <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/worlds-largest-urban-rainforest-conservation-vs-housing-rights/>

Chris Arsenault, "Brazil sacks head of indigenous agency amid land conflicts" Reuters May 5, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/brazil-politics-landrights-idUKL8N1I74Q5>

Chris Arsenault, "Brazil urged to expand land rental market but small farmers aren't convinced" Reuters, September 8, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-landrights-agriculture-idUSKCN11E1DS>

Chris Arsenault, "Environmentalists urge Brazil's president not to rollback Amazon protection" Reuters, May 31, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-landrights-climatechange/environmentalists-urge-brazils-president-not-to-rollback-amazon-protection-idUSKBN18R1MO>

## **Global**

Chris Arsenault, "Foreign 'land grabs' redraw global map of farmland ownership" Reuters, November 28, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/farming-landgrabs-idUSL6N0TH2LK20141128>

Chris Arsenault, "Who owns Mars? Mining puts spotlight on out of this world property claims" Reuters/DNA India. August 22, 2017. <https://www.dnaindia.com/science/report-analysis-who-owns-mars-mining-puts-spotlight-on-out-of-this-world-property-claims-2537240>

Chris Arsenault, "Property rights for world's poor could unlock trillions in 'dead capital': economist" Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-landrights-desoto-idUSKCN10C1C1>

Chris Arsenault, "Paying poor landowners not to cut trees a cheap way to save forests" CBC News/Thomson Reuters, July 20, 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/forest-payments-1.4214557>

Arsenault, Chris. "Large food firms back voluntary plan to stop land grabbing" Reuters (2015). <https://www.reuters.com/article/food-farming-rights/large-food-firms-back-voluntary-plan-to-stop-land-grabbing-idINL5N10S2Z620150817>

## **Resource governance**

**Summary:** Tied to land grabs are issues related to other natural resource extraction, including mining, oil, water, fish and even genetic codes. Based on beat reporting, I was the first to report



for a mainstream news outlet on a major, unannounced shift by the International Criminal Court to start prosecuting environmental crimes. Getting that news promptly and effectively into the public sphere was crucial for scholars writing on shifts in international law.

Hailed as a major victory for cooperation on resource allocation, a deal to share South America's key Guarani aquifer among Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay has been considered a gold standard by governance researchers. My follow-up reporting on that deal, however, found that the reality on the ground in terms of enforcing and ratifying the agreement's key provisions was far different than what was originally announced. This follow-up, the first in English media with original interviews with government officials responsible for managing the deal, upended the previous consensus, adding new information to the literature on conflicts over transboundary resources in the climate change era.

In Canada, my research into a series of bombings targeting sour gas infrastructure in a remote northern region of British Columbia was published by Palgrave-McMillan. The conflict was the source of the largest bounty in Canadian history – and charges were never laid by police. The research, based on interviews with corporate officials at global energy companies, local farmers and municipal officials, added to a growing body of scholarship applying the discourse on land conflicts, often reserved for the developing world, to the global north.

Chris Arsenault, "Crude bargain: How an unknown Canadian firm with no drilling tools scored a major oil deal in Guyana" CBC News. December 23, 2021.

<https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/features/guyana-oil-canadian-deal>

Chris Arsenault, "Canada not walking the talk on its miners' abuses abroad, campaigners say" Mongabay: Land Rights and Extractives Special. July 24, 2020.

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/07/canada-not-walking-the-talk-on-its-miners-abuses-abroad-campaigners-say/>

Chris Arsenault, "In fight against illegal fishing, Canada's sea spies struggle with sloppy intel, bias: Internal files" CBC News, March 12, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/dfo-fishing-canada-atip-racism-spies-illegal-fishing-un-flag-it-1.5943655>

Chris Arsenault, "Canadian firm's proposed gold mine in Amazon rainforest a step closer to reality, CEO says" Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, March 28, 2021.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/belo-sun-brazil-gold-bolsonaro-amazon-indigenous-environment-rainforest-business-1.5963002>

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## **Food security**

**Summary:** How the global community will feed nine billion people by 2050 with accelerating climate change is one of the fundamental questions of our age. Through a series of original stories filed from Rome, home to the U.N.'s food agencies, this reporting broke ground on the food security beat. For example, at the U.N., through online investigations and deep sourcing in the bureaucracy, I was able to break a story on ISIS stealing aid from the World Food Program in Syria and rebranding it as coming from the militant group. This original reporting was part of a Gold prize winning entry at the U.N. correspondents' award, linking aid transparency, displacement, and violence.

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## **Climate crisis**

**Summary:** Climate change is fundamentally altering how global food systems work. From original reports on what an emerging oil producer like Guyana can do to maintain net zero emissions, to interviews with Canadian oil workers looking to transition into green energy jobs, and access to information requests probing how governments are responding to changes, these stories offer original insights from the frontlines of communities looking to build resilience in the face of drastic shifts.

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