

## 4.10. Land Rush and local livelihoods in Central Africa

<b>Project</b>	Land Rush and local livelihoods in Central Africa: From a simulation game about land conflicts to community theatre action research
<b>Organisation</b>	Université Catholique de Louvain
<b>Research location</b>	Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
<b>Cooperation partners</b>	ARES (Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur), FNRS Mandat d'Impulsion Scientifique, Institut Supérieur du Développement Rural – Bukavu, civil society partners: Louvain Coopération and Action pour la Paix et la Concorde
<b>Team</b>	One senior researcher and five Ph.D researchers, one postdoc, one independent graphic specialist and one NGO employee
<b>Funding sources</b>	Université Catholique de Louvain Fonds Wernaers FNRS Freedom to research Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur
<b>Websites</b>	<a href="http://www.uclouvain.be">www.uclouvain.be</a> a <a href="#">MOOC</a> on natural resources and development and the <a href="#">Land Rush Game</a>

### ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND ●●●

Landrush is an interdisciplinary action-research project about natural resources in central Africa, coordinated by An Ansoms, a senior researcher from Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. The project is in collaboration with five Ph.D students (four at Louvain, one at Antwerp), one postdoctoral researcher, one freelance illustrator and consultant on cultural heritage conservation and a specialist in development education at Louvain Cooperation (NGO) are also involved. The project is embedded in the Centre for Development Studies of Université Catholique de Louvain, where the senior researcher is one of the co-directors. The Landrush project aims to identify and analyse actors' strategies and discourses in central African land conflicts, in order to detect the deeper dynamics underlying such conflicts and formulate policy recommendations for more efficient land conflict management policies. The project focuses on eastern DRC (South Kivu) in particular, where the team is collaborating with academic and civil society partners to adopt an innovative methodological approach in which a simulation game (Land Rush) is transformed into community theatre for action-research. However, the project also includes cases from Rwanda and Burundi which are – in interaction with the research in eastern DRC – analysed from a comparative perspective.

## FUNDING ●●●

The Université Catholique de Louvain and Fonds Wernaers have funded the elaboration and professionalisation of the [Land Rush Game](#) and is currently supported by the FNRS Mandat d'Impulsion Scientifique (2015-2018). Further funding is from ARES (Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur), the South Kivu (DRC) and the Université Catholique de Louvain.

## PROBLEM BEING ADDRESSED ●●●

This project aims to provide a better understanding of how the rush for land is affecting the fabric of society, and ultimately the chances for peace and stability in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi. The project analyses how intensified competition for land affects actors' livelihoods; and which strategies and discourses these actors develop to deal with those challenges. It builds a strong partnership between academics in the North and South – in interaction with civil society organisations. The project adopts an innovative methodological approach in which a simulation game (Land Rush) is transformed into a community theatre action-research in order to access actors' hidden discourses. This project aims to inform and reflect alongside policymakers and donors through innovative advocacy tools, with the ultimate aim of improving the chances for peace and stability in Central Africa.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND SOLUTION ●●●

The game Land Rush, developed originally for teaching purposes at Université Catholique de Louvain, simulates the complex competition for natural resources in developing countries. It models real-life dynamics in the land arena and is based on years of research on the livelihoods of farmers in the Great Lakes region of Africa. In this project, the game was transformed into a research tool. Since participants may find resource competition and agrarian change to be sensitive topics to discuss and as board games are a typically western phenomenon, the game was transformed into a theatre production. In two steps:

1. the researchers linked up with local NGOs working on micro-level community building and conflict resolution. With an academic team from the South and the North, a training course for animators working for the NGO partners in the field was designed. The animators served as brokers between the researchers and the research participants. At the beginning of the course the animators are invited to play the LandRush game. They then reflect on the key dynamics of the game and the animators engage in a discussion on the relevance of these key dynamics for the setting in which they work. Finally they brainstorm on ways to translate the messages from the games into a theatre sketch that appeals to the local population.
2. In a second step the animators perform their sketch (20-40 min) in front of the community where the research is to be carried out. After the sketch a researcher asks the public to reflect on the links between the sketch and peoples' real lives.

The method is now transformed into an instrument for action research. The team investigates – in collaboration with civil society partners – how it can be better inserted in the partners' activities and reflections.

## GRAND CHALLENGE BEING ADDRESSED ●●●

Competition over natural resources is a worldwide societal challenge. This is all the more so in a region such as the African Great Lakes Region, characterised by overpopulation, huge land scarcity, and a history of violent conflict. Land conflicts have often played a role in the escalation of tensions into violence; and the scars of that violence continue to influence post-war negotiations over land. Tensions often remain ‘under the radar’ for a very long time, invisible to outsiders. As a result, it is difficult for policy makers and development practitioners to develop successful conflict management approaches.

The research methodology developed in this project allows researchers to access people’s hidden transcripts. By removing the controversy from the real context and placing it in a fictional one (theatre sketch), participants can discuss real-life conflicts and feel secure enough to reveal part of their hidden transcripts. This allows researchers and civil society partners to detect the deeper dynamics in land conflicts. Moreover, the creation of the sketches with local youth theatre groups inserts a positive dynamic in the civil society partners’ community building projects.

## RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION ●●●

The researchers are collaborating with Congolese academic and civil society partners. Communication with these partners is very intense. Both academic and civil society partners collaborated over the course of several months on elaboration of the ARES project. The two Congolese researchers in the team (one in the final stage of his Ph.D, one who has just completed it) play a crucial role in this partnership. They have co-developed the methodology and are constantly linking the dynamics in the research team to the realities of the local partners. They have gained the legitimacy to set up a university research expertise centre in Bukavu on land conflict management (end stage of this project). The team see this research centre as an important step towards being more permanently present on the ground, with ownership in the region.

APC, the civil society partner, helped the researchers to embed the method in a broad land conflict analysis. This partnership will be further deepened in the ARES project.

The researchers are targeting different audiences. First, the researchers have made a significant effort to make their research results available to a broad public by publishing – alongside specialised academic journals – in freely accessible journals targeting academics, policymakers, opinion formers and civil society actors in the Great Lakes Region. The senior researcher has recently become a co-editor of one of those journals (*Conjonctures Congolaises*). Second, they aim to target policymakers more directly (future stage) through active advocacy. The ARES project aims to target provincial authorities (South Kivu), customary authorities, and international donors. Conferences with this core group were organised in Bukavu in May 2014 and in September 2016. The team is also working on collaboration with the local media. The local communities involved in the research will benefit from the setting up of a youth theatre group that receives long-term coaching from the civil society partner (foreseen in ARES project).

The discussions launched through the Land Rush Theatre method invite people to reflect on possible solutions to land conflicts. Through such dynamics, the project aims to contribute to local community building. The researchers have transformed some of the research results into a [MOOC on natural resources and development](#) (Louv4x, EdX), reaching out to students worldwide. There are also scholarships allowing African students to participate in the MSc program at Louvain. One of this year’s Congolese Master’s students will receive a Ph.D scholarship through the ARES project.

Throughout the project, communication with target groups has taken place through the presence of the researchers in the field during pilot test phases. Both the theatre groups and populations involved, as well as the civil society partners, have nevertheless expressed the need for a longer-term commitment. For this reason, the researchers elaborated a project (ARES) to engage in more structural collaboration with local academic and civil society partners.

The senior researcher has created an atmosphere – and set up some structures – that continuously stimulate the team to debate on ethical reflections. There are no taboo topics and no hierarchies in these structures, and the senior researcher makes use of the team for her own ethical reflections. This will help to gain confidence and trust in a context characterised by violence and deeply rooted conflicts.



## EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION ●●●

The research is carried out by a relative small group of mainly young academics from both North and South involving partners from Université Catholique de Louvain, UCB, and ISDR. The methodology developed is unique and can be replicated in other countries facing a rush for land. A better understanding of the hidden dynamics of land conflict – before they burst out into violence – is useful in the elaboration of better land conflict management policies. The team lists ten papers in peer-reviewed ISI journals, twenty-five in other peer-reviewed journals, eighteen in in peer-reviewed books and four general books.