

Land grabbing, residential tourism and their consequences for ‘local’ development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua



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Introduction

Empirical evidence suggests that the liberalization of land markets and increasing opportunities to buy land through the market place have resulted in an upward trend in the ownership of land by foreign buyers in Central America. Tourism is one of the activities that have a large share in this new privatization and “foreignization” of space, and particularly residential tourism causes profound spatial and social change. Even though Central America has been connected to the outside world for centuries, current processes of land acquisition, tourism and migration, accelerated by modern transportation and communication technologies, play crucial roles in establishing new connections and deepening globalization and capitalist relations. On the Internet, large numbers of international real estate companies are offering ‘paradise’ to private investors. Both Costa Rica and Nicaragua have become main destination countries for this type of investment.



Aim of research

To arrive at a better understanding of residential tourism and the related migration and land-grabbing processes in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, as well as the implications of these processes in terms of sustainable development.

Research Questions

1. What are the *characteristics* of the current surge of residential tourism development and land grabbing in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and who are the actors involved?
2. What are the roles of *institutions and governance* (on local, regional, national and international levels) in land grabbing, migration and the development of residential tourism?
3. To what extent are *new population movements* surging as a result of land grabbing and residential tourism (tourism migration, labour migration, displacement of local population), and what do they mean for social relationships and development in the tourism regions?
4. In what ways are land grabbing and residential tourism sources of *social conflict*?
5. How can residential tourism and land grabbing help people in marginalized regions to *escape from poverty* or constrain them from doing this?

Methodology

- Existing sources: national household surveys, media sources , public documents
- Questionnaires: economic effects of residential tourism
- Semi-structured interviews: socio-cultural changes, land-environmental conflicts
- Participant observation (limited: attendance events etc)
- Multi-sited research methodology: development chains

Phase of research

6 months fieldwork finished: Data analysis & Article writing

Main differences between Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Costa Rica (Guanacaste)	Nicaragua (Rivas, Tola)
Characteristics of (residential) tourism	
• Residential tourism <i>and</i> large international hotel chains thriving (until recently); built upon a diversity of tourism (small scale national tourism, ecotourism, luxury tourism, sun & beach tourism, etc.)	• Residential tourism (small and large scale appearing besides existing small-scale “backpacker” tourism
• Tourism business more established: diversified base of hotels and other services	• Few tourism services established e.g. lack of mid-range hotels
• Current residential tourism activities: land transfer, lot subdivision and sale, construction, use of properties by residential tourists, out-renting	• Current residential tourism activities: land transfer, lot subdivision, some construction; low number of residential tourists yet
Main problems related to residential tourism	
Environmental problems, life quality	Land conflicts
• water scarcity	• disordered land registers
• sewage water and solid waste treatment	• insecure titles
• mass construction, uncontrolled growth	• political “games” with land
• deforestation, erosion	• affecting not only tourism investors, but also local inhabitants e.g. indigenous populations

Some preliminary results

- Displacement of original inhabitants: mainly during former decades; now specific cases (indigenous groups, land conflicts) and displacement of traditional economic activities and lifestyles
- Rather than out-migration and displacement, diverse population movements caused by residential tourism (see diagram)
- Economic employment- and linkage effects of residential tourism (sporadic evidence, more research needed): probably lower than conventional tourism’s effects, but long-term effects should be taken into account
- Societal conflicts emerging on land, environmental and life quality issues; some indications of (much needed) strengthening civil society
- Governance: residential tourism “boom” taking place in a context of weak regulation and control in both countries. Local and national institutions largely incapable of arranging effective territorial planning, environmental control and social investment



Local development: whose development? Diversity of population in tourism areas:

