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Introducing the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS)

The Rise of the BRICS

The economic and political rise of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) has far-reaching implications for global agrarian transformation as key sites of production, circulation and consumption of agricultural commodities. They are hosts to abundant cheap labour and natural resources, and to growing numbers of affluent consumers at the same time. The five BRICS countries are working both separately, and increasingly together, to shape international development agendas, both as partners in and potential alternatives to the development paradigms promoted by the established hubs of global capital in the North Atlantic and by international financial institutions.

In each of the BRICS countries, profound changes are underway in rural society and agrarian economies. These vary from concentration in landholdings, changes in rural-urban links, migration, promotion of smallholder farming alongside the rise of corporate agribusiness, class differentiation of smallholders and family farmers, new forms of agri-business upstream and downstream of farming, vertical integration in value chains, supermarketization – and different combinations of these. Such agrarian transformations in turn interact with changes in rural society and agrarian economies in neighbouring countries, with the BRICS expanding their presence in their respective regions, partly by promoting both state and private sector-led partnerships and investment deals. These transformations do not represent simply the extension of BRICS countries into their respective regions; rather, their roles interact with dynamic changes already underway within these regions partly marked by the rise of another set of powerful actors: middle income countries (MICs) like Argentina and Chile in Southern America; Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam in Southeast Asia; Nigeria and Kenya in Africa, among others.

The rise of BRICS countries alongside some powerful MICs, and the emerging alliances within and between them, has sparked debate about whether they herald a new era for international economy and politics as an alternative to the conventional North Atlantic-anchored neoliberal prescription for development – or whether their models of development are problematic, perhaps in new ways. More profoundly, the BRICS countries challenge existing conceptions of a North-South divide as the most significant dimension of global inequality in power and wealth, but without challenging capitalism as a system, or seeking to fundamentally transform the underlying social relations of capitalist agricultural production. What seems to be an evolving polycentric world order presents new challenges to and opportunities for scholars, activists, policy makers, development practitioners and others – and we need to respond with new and innovative initiatives in knowledge production such as that proposed.



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The BICAS Initiative

BICAS is a collective of largely BRICS-based or connected academic researchers concerned with understanding the BRICS countries and their implications for global agrarian transformations. Critical theoretical and empirical questions about the origins, character and significance of complex changes underway need to be investigated more systematically.

In taking forward this research agenda, we are building on and intending to extend the focus of existing knowledge about the BRICS. The rise of BRICS countries has been accompanied by the rise of interest and academic research initiatives in recent years. Most of these initiatives are Africa-centric, tracking the impact of several BRICS countries on Africa. In building our network, our research focus and analytical frameworks differ from other research on the BRICS in at least four ways:

1. We are *not* primarily concerned with the BRICS as an organisation, but with the constituent countries themselves and the changes underway within their national territories, around them regionally (intra-regional), and their activities in other regions (inter-regional). Our aim is to ground our analysis at the national level in a critical understanding of agrarian, environmental, and agro-investment policies, and to linking this through macro-level analysis and specific case studies to changes elsewhere in their regions and other regions.
2. We are pursuing research and analysis framed primarily within agrarian political economy; unlike most BRICS research partnerships, we are not conducting strategic studies nor focused on international relations (IR) explanations.
3. We are scholars rooted in the contexts of the BRICS countries and their neighbours. These are considered the world's new centres of capital accumulation, but they also need to become hubs for knowledge production, and BICAS is founded on a desire to shape the process and politics of knowledge production about the BRICS, from within them.
4. We do not focus exclusively on the BRICS countries; rather, we want to examine them in relation to both the older conventional hubs of global capital in the North Atlantic, and the rising MICs.



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The BICAS Research Agenda

BICAS is an ‘engaged research’ initiative founded on a commitment to generating solid evidence and detailed, field-based research that can deepen analysis and inform policy and practice. In BICAS we will aim to connect disciplines across political economy, political ecology and political sociology in a multi-layered analytical framework, to explore agrarian transformations unfolding at national, regional and global levels and the relationships between these levels.

BICAS promotes critical and collaborative research to deepen understanding and to inform responses at local, national, regional and global levels. Our concerns are threefold:

1. to promote world-class cutting edge research, expanding the frontier of knowledge on contemporary agrarian change, grounding this within our respective countries and regions, and building on our and others’ knowledge of agrarian change nested at these national and regional levels, in order to generate new insights, critiques and conversations about emerging global agrarian transformations, its drivers and its implications;
2. to facilitate graduate student exchanges, comparative analysis and research collaboration among the BRICS and MICs countries, thereby improving scholarship and strengthening the next generation of intellectuals concerned with agrarian change and with the politics and economics of land, food and agriculture;
3. to respond to the challenges faced by civil society organisations of how to respond to a more polycentric world, to address questions of CSOs and global governance, and to inform strategic thinking within these movements.

BICAS is founded on a vision for broader, more inclusive and critical knowledge production and knowledge exchange. We are building a joint research agenda based principally on our capacities and expertise in our respective countries and regions, and informed by the needs of our graduate students and faculty, but aiming to scale up in partnership and in dialogue with others. Our initial focus will be on Brazil, China and South Africa.

While we will build on a core coordinating network to facilitate exchange we aim to provide an inclusive space, a platform, a community, hence we invite participation.



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Our Research Questions

BICAS sets out four clusters of research questions around which we are organising our research and our engagements with one another, and on which we will promote further research and dialogue.

Changes in the BRICS countries: what are the key similarities/differences of the agrarian structure in Brazil, China, and South Africa? What are the historical processes which have shaped these countries' current situation, with special attention to key convergences and divergences? What is the role of family farmers and smallholders in the agrarian system, what challenges and pressures are they confronted with, what patterns of social differentiation are emerging among them? What changes are taking place in agrarian labour regimes, and how does this influence what forms of collective action by them are evident and possible? What changes are under way in land tenure regimes? What are the current processes and actors involved driving change, and how are local and national processes of agrarian transformation shaped by global and trans-national processes of investment, trade and inter-state relations, (and vice versa)? What new forms of agri-business (such as agriculture-focused investment funds) are emerging and with what are their effects? What are the changing dynamics within these BRICS countries as sites of production, circulation and consumption of agri-commodities?

BRICS and MICs in their regions: what agrarian transformations are underway in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Southern Africa? What are the dominant directions of change but also any countervailing directions? What endogenous and exogenous forces are driving change in agrarian structures? How are state policies implicated? How do they affect the behaviour of private sector actors? In turn, how are private sector forces shaping state policies? What are the outcomes for changes in demographics, settlement and migration; inputs and investments in agriculture and other rural productive sectors; agricultural production and the rise of boom crops; agroprocessing and the rise of manufactured foods; and formal and informal markets? What is the character of investment and trade relations between the BRICS countries and MICs located within their regions? What food systems are emerging at the regional level? How is this manifested spatially? Are there winners and losers, and, if so, who are they?

Dynamics in the agro-food system: what are the changing dynamics in the patterns of production, circulation and consumption of food, at national, regional and global levels? What factors – including political, demographic, economic, environmental and climatic – are driving these changes? In what ways are agricultural and food value chains being restructured, and who is benefiting most from such restructuring? What are the interests shaping the retail sector's expansion and what are the scope, significance and politics of its promotion of alternative food production and restructured value chains (organic, buying local, preferential procurement, etc)? Where and how is concentration of ownership and control in these value chains taking place? Have power relations shifted between family farmers, smallholders, farm workers and agribusiness sectors, and within them? If so, how and why? With what effects for investment, production, labour regimes and accumulation?



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BRICS and MICs in relation to the old hubs of global capital: What is the role of BRICS countries in the emerging financialization of agriculture? How are the BRICS countries' roles in global trade in food and agricultural commodities changing? What are their histories of trade and trading partners, what historical processes constituted the current world agro-food system and how is the system changing at present? Through what economic, political, legal and other processes are current changes unfolding? How is membership of the BRICS group influencing and enabling these changes? How are other actors responding, and to what effect? What new sites of contestation around food production, circulation, consumption, and forms of accumulation are opening up with possibilities for alternatives to emerge?

Possible initiatives/projects aside from in-house collaborative research among coordinating members:

- (i) International conference, seminars and workshops around the themes discussed above
- (ii) Small research grant competition, especially aimed at PhD researchers doing field research
- (iii) Various forms of affiliations by researchers: as interns, as 'post-docs', as fellows
- (iv) BICAS Working Paper Series

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Who we are

The convening institutions and key contact researchers of BICAS are as follows.

Brazil: Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), with Sergio Schneider

UFRGS is a century-old educational institution which is recognised nationally and internationally as one of Brazil's top 10 universities. Located in Porto Alegre, its Graduate Programme in Rural Development (PGDR) offers Masters and PhD degrees linked to the School of Economic Sciences. Its goals are to train professionals to perform in the fields of teaching, academic research and social intervention, as well as to implement projects and carry out planning activities in the field of rural development. Nowadays PGDR have 30 staff members and 120 Masters and PhD students. <http://www.ufrgs.br/english/home> **Sergio Schneider** is Professor of Rural Sociology and Development Studies at UFRGS in Porto Alegre. He has a degree in Social Sciences, and a Masters and PhD in Sociology. His main interests are the sociology of food, agrarian and rural development, family farming and rural policies. He is the current president of the Brazilian Society of Rural Economy, Sociology and Management (SOBER).

http://www.ufrgs.br/pgdr/Postgraduate_Programme_in_Rural_Development.php?menu=9&codMenu=66

Brazil: University of Brasilia (UnB), Planaltina Campus (FUP), with Sergio Sauer

University of Brasilia (UnB), Planaltina Campus (FUP) was established on April 21, 1962. UnB is the utopia of Brazilian anthropologist and educator Darcy Ribeiro and since its inception has been committed to producing state of the art knowledge for the transformation of Brazil, giving it a national reputation for excellence in research, teaching, and extension. Currently, UnB has 2,308 teachers, 2,692 dedicated staff, 30,727 undergraduates and 8,913 graduate students. It houses 26 faculties and schools and has 18 centers dedicated to specialized research on four campuses. Planaltina Campus (FUP) has a Masters Program for Environment and Rural Development (MADER) and field research on related topics. **Sérgio Sauer** has a PhD in Sociology and is a professor at UnB in the Master Program for Environment and Rural Development, National Rapporteur to the Human Right to Land, Territory and Food of DhESCA Brazil Network. His latest books published on agrarian issues are: *Land and territory in the Amazon: demands, challenges and perspectives* (2011) and *Land and modernity: the reinvention of Brazilian countryside* (2010).

China: College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at the China Agricultural University, Beijing, with Ye Jingzhong and a group of faculty at the college, and adjunct professors Henry Bernstein, Saturnino ('Jun') M. Borrás Jr., Jennifer Franco and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

COHD has 200 plus faculty and 1500 students (BA, MSc/MA and PhD) and consists of seven departments: Development Studies, International Development, Sociology and Anthropology, Law, Management Science, Media and Communication and Foreign Languages. COHD is the leading institute in the field of critical agrarian and development studies in China, active in debates on rural-urban migration, food and agriculture, land conflicts, rural development and China's aid in Africa. COHD promotes wide academic collaboration with domestic and international institutes and scholars. COHD operates a world class Critical Issues in Agrarian and Development Studies seminar series, featuring about 40 internationally known scholars since its inception in 2011. <http://cohd.cau.edu.cn/main/html/shizililiang/fazhanguanlixi/2009/0207/8.html>

Ye Jingzhong is a Professor of Development Studies and Deputy Dean at COHD. He holds a PhD degree in Social Sciences from Wageningen University. He was a development practitioner from 1988 to 1998, and since then has conducted academic research in the areas of: development intervention and rural transformations, agrarian sociology, rural/land politics, rural social problems, rural left-behind population, rural education. **Henry Bernstein** is Emeritus Professor of Development Studies in the University of London at the School of Oriental and African Studies. He was editor, with Terence J Byres, of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, for fifteen years (1985-2000), and founding editor, again with Terence J Byres, of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2001), of which he became Emeritus Editor in 2008. His book, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change* (2010) has been translated to various languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Bahasa, French, Turkish, and Japanese. He is Adjunct Professor at COHD, China Agricultural University, Beijing. **Saturnino M ('Jun') Borrás** is Associate Professor at ISS, Adjunct Professor at China Agricultural University, Fellow of the Transnational Institute and Food First, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*. He coordinates the Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) and Land Deal Politics Initiatives (LDPI). Research interests include: land grabbing, biofuels, food politics/movement and food sovereignty, forest policy, (inter)national state-society relations around rural development, and (trans)national agrarian movements. **Jennifer Franco** is co-coordinator of TNI's Agrarian Justice work. She is a researcher working on land



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and rural politics issues. After receiving a PhD in politics in 1997 in the US, she began working with the Philippine solidarity group in the Netherlands, and with local peasant organizations in the Philippines. Her current research work include the politics of land and water grabbing and agrarian movements in international context. She is Adjunct Professor at COHD, China Agricultural University Beijing. **Jan Douwe van der Ploeg** is Professor of Transition Studies at Wageningen University in the Netherlands and Adjunct Professor in Rural Sociology at China Agricultural University in Beijing, China. He has a broad range of work experience in the agricultural sectors in Latin America, Africa and Europe. Processes of commoditization and the associated differentiation of agriculture into contrasting farming styles have been a major focus of his work. His key publications include *The New Peasantries, struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of empire and globalization* (2008). This book has been translated and published in Spanish, Portuguese and Italian and a Chinese translation is forthcoming.

South Africa: Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, with Ben Cousins, Andries Du Toit and Ruth Hall

PLAAS was founded in 1995 at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Cape Town, with the purpose of undertaking policy-oriented research to support the newly elected government in implementing its land reform policies. Since then, PLAAS has developed a proven track record of undertaking high-quality research, as well as policy engagement, teaching and training, about the dynamics of chronic poverty and structural inequality in Southern Africa, with a particular emphasis on the key role of restructuring and contesting land holding and agro-food systems in the subcontinent and beyond. www.plaas.org.za **Ben Cousins** holds a DST/NRF Research Chair at the University of the Western Cape, at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS). His main research interests are small-scale agriculture, trajectories of agrarian change, and the politics of land and agrarian reform. He co-edited (with Aninka Claassens) *Land, power and custom: Controversies generated by South Africa's Communal Land Rights Act*. **Andries du Toit** is Director of PLAAS. He has a PhD in Comparative Studies from the University of Essex and has done extensive research on the political economy of structural poverty and racialised inequality in South Africa. At present, his work focuses on developing a critical understanding of the politics of knowledge production in the government of poverty and marginal livelihoods. **Ruth Hall** is an Associate Professor at PLAAS, and holds a DPhil in Politics and MPhil in Development Studies from the University of Oxford. She works on land and agrarian reform in South and Southern Africa. She is a co-founder and co-convenor of the Land Deal Politics Initiative and regional coordinator of the Future Agricultures Consortium.

In collaboration with:

The Transnational Institute (TNI) was founded in 1974 as the international programme of the Washington DC-based Institute for Policy Studies. For more than 30 years, TNI's history has been entwined with the history of global social movements and their struggle for economic, social and environmental justice. TNI throughout its history has taken on: (i) Frequently identified crucial issues on the horizon – third world debt, World Trade Organisation, corporate power, carbon trading - and played a key role in putting them on the agenda for social movements; (ii) Been bold in tackling structures of power, even though this led to the assassination of its first director, Orlando Letelier by the Chilean secret service; (iii) Had a deep mutually respectful relationship with grassroots movements, from national liberation movements in 1970s and 1980s to those comprising the global justice movement more recently; (iv) Brought together and catalysed networks, from the foundation in 1977 of one of the first global organisations studying transnational corporations, Transnational Information Exchange, to the formation of the Linking Alternatives Network in 2006; (v) Dedicated itself to putting forward alternative proposals to reflect the just world that TNI, its Fellows, staff, and networks are committed to turning into reality. At TNI, the *Agrarian Justice Program* anchors the coordination work with BICAS. www.tni.org

Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC) is an Africa-based alliance of universities and other research organisations seeking to provide high-quality and independent information and advice to improve agricultural policy and practice in Africa. Based in four hubs, in Southern, East and West Africa and with a secretariat at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, FAC's research focuses on the political economy of agricultural policy processes in Africa. Since 2005, researchers have conducted comparative, multi-country research in 15 countries and 10 themes: growth and social protection; policy processes; science, technology and innovation; pastoralism; commercialisations; land; young people and the agri-food system; gender and social difference; climate change; and Brazil and China in Africa. www.future-agricultures.org



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International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Agrarian, Food & Environmental Studies (AFES) research sub-cluster is part of the Research Program: Political Economy of Research, Environment and Population Studies (PER). Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies (AFES) at ISS is an intellectually vibrant international hub of cutting edge research and world-class graduate teaching in the field of critical agrarian studies and critical environmental studies, within the tradition of `engaged scholarship`: academic work that has social relevance. We therefore privilege approaches and initiatives that aim to contribute to constructing bridges between the academic world, the development policy community, as well as NGO and social movement activist circles. Critical scholarship is at the heart of AES. www.iss.nl

Oane Visser is Senior Lecturer /Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, of Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses on land deals, financialisation, rural development, labour and social movements in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet countries and in particular Russia – the role of Russia in the region. He is principal investigator of an ERC project on land acquisitions in Russia and Ukraine and an editor of *Focaal- Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*.

Max Spoor is Professor of Development Studies (in particular regarding economies in transition) at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Visiting Professor at the Barcelona Institute of International Studies, and Guest Professor at the Nanjing Agricultural University in China. His research is focused on Asian transition economies such as Vietnam, China, and the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia, particularly regarding rural and environmental issues, poverty, social exclusion and inequality. His current research on global land deals focuses on former Soviet Eurasia.

Research associates

Liu Juan is a post-doctoral fellow at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the Hague within the Research Programme, Political Economy of Resources, Environment and Populations Studies and at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at China Agricultural University, Beijing. She is currently based in the Hague. She is doing a follow up research and writing work from her recently completed dissertation on the politics of land expropriation in rural China, and will start a research work on the rise of BRICS countries and its implications for global agrarian transformations. She also helps in the secretariat work of BICAS.

Lee Mackey is a PhD candidate in the School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles, a Fulbright Fellow in Brazil, Bolivia and El Salvador and a visiting researcher at the University of Brasilia, the Getulio Vargas Foundation and the TIERRA Foundation in Bolivia. Mackey holds a Master of Public Policy and a BA from University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Mckay, Ben is a PhD candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the Hague, and is part of the Research Programme, Political Economy of Resources, Environment and Populations Studies. He is currently researching on the rise of BRICS countries and its implications for global agrarian transformation, with specific focus on the rise of the Brazilian state and capital and their influence on agrarian transformation in southern America, specifically Bolivia. He also helps in the secretariat work of BICAS.

Gustavo de L. T. Oliveira was born in Brazil, has an MA from the University of Colorado at Boulder and is a PhD candidate in Geography at the University of California at Berkeley. He researches social and ecological transformations in the Cerrado region of Brazil, particularly the soy complex and its role in global agroindustrial restructuring. He is affiliated with the University of Brasilia.

Technical Coordinating Secretariat:

Jun Borrás (junborras5@gmail.com)
Ruth Hall (rhall@plaas.org.za)
Sergio Sauer (sauer.sergio@gmail.com)
Liu Juan (juanlcau@gmail.com)
Ben McKay (mckay@iss.nl)

For general email communication, please use: bricsagrarianstudies@gmail.com



bricsagrarianstudies@gmail.com

