

Report  
 LANDac PhD Network Event:  
**Ethics in land governance research**  
*Utrecht, the Netherlands*  
*6<sup>th</sup> October 2017*



On 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017, LANDac organized a PhD networking event on “Ethics in land governance research” at Utrecht University. 25 PhD students from different universities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Erasmus Rotterdam, Leiden, Twente, Utrecht and Wageningen) participated to share experiences on methodological challenges in conducting empirical research on land governance and learn from other researchers at the beginning of their academic career how to manoeuvre in the complex and sensitive research field of land governance.

The event started with a welcome and introduction on behalf of LANDac by Dr. Griet Steel, the research coordinator of LANDac. She explained that LANDac started a PhD network at the annual conference last year in order to exchange knowledge and support PhD research in the Netherlands of more than 60 PhD students working on land related issues.

This introduction was followed by a keynote speech “ethical challenges in land-related research in authoritarian Rwanda” of **Dr. Margot Leegwater** (Africa Studies Centre Leiden and Catholique University of Louvain la Neuve, Belgium) who has done research on land issues in Rwanda, where the sensitivity of land issues is very much politicised. Margot discretely shared how she struggled with getting initial trust in interviews, where most of her respondents were used to reproducing “public discourse” by giving socially acceptable answers.

Margot also gave a personal reflection on how doing research on land and ethnicity in Rwanda has an impact on the emotional well-being of the researcher. At least in her case, the constant sense of being watched and listened to accumulated stress, changed expectations about trust and resulted in a form of functional dissociation. She ended her talk with posing two provocative questions to the audience:

- Can being (too) ethical mean you cannot (fully) do your research?
- To whom do we as researchers have to be ethical: for example, to authoritarian governments or to respondents – and what if the government *are* your respondents (as is the case in the research of one of the participants)?

These questions and others were further discussed in three break-out sessions.

**(1) Ethical challenges in research on land related issues with social movements and local communities**

*Chair: Dr. Mayke Kaag, African Studies Centre Leiden*

In this session, the discussion centered on the positioning of the researcher, especially if vulnerable groups are involved and in conflict with landowners. In terms of ethics it was decided that it is important to not let the interests as researchers overwrite respondents' interests.

**(2) Ethical challenges in research on land related issues in conflict contexts and authoritarian regimes**

*Chair: Dr. Gemma van der Haar, Wageningen University*

This session discussed surveillance and control of information by governments and where governments give instructions to people on how to answer. What strategies do researchers have to circumvent in these instances? The participants also discussed issues of manipulation and transparency. Questions were raised about who is manipulating whom, because the "local community" can also manipulate researcher and strategize through the research.

**(3) Ethical challenges around qualitative and quantitative data and data management in research on land related issues**

*Chairs: Dr. Griet Steel, Utrecht University & LANDac and Dr. Christine Richter, ITC Twente*

In this session ethical and methodological concerns of data access, quality and sharing were discussed. These discussions were related to the bigger questions related to the power of data and the power dynamics involved in decisions about what data to make visible or not.

The event closed with a plenary discussion chaired by Gemma van der Haar (Wageningen University) in which the outcomes of the workshop were presented and a planning for next LANDac PhD network activities was made. Suggestions were made to include ethical discussions in curriculum development in research masters as well as PhD research. We also talked about the importance of looking at data sharing policies of universities and differences by different disciplines – because apparently in medical sciences ethical review processes are much more binding than in social sciences.

Finally, as a follow-up to this event we proposed to organize the next LANDac PhD networking activity in April, during which PhD students can share their work in progress and get feedback from senior researchers. PhDs are also asked to introduce their work on LANDac's website to get an overview of what is being done on land governance research in the Netherlands at the moment. All PhD students are also invited to write blogs or discussions papers for the LANDac website to discuss both results and research process and experiences.

*If you would like to join the PhD network, please contact Griet Steel at [g.steel@uu.nl](mailto:g.steel@uu.nl) or enquire at [landac.geo@uu.nl](mailto:landac.geo@uu.nl).*

LANDac – the Netherlands Academy on Land Governance for Equitable and Sustainable Development – brings together researchers, policy makers, development practitioners and business professionals in the field of land governance and development. With a focus on new pressures and competing claims on land and natural resources, the LANDac network conducts research, disseminates information, and organizes courses and training, while strengthening linkages between actors who might not usually meet. Our guiding question is how to optimize the link between land governance, sustainable development, and poverty alleviation.

LANDac is a partnership led by, and based at, the International Development Studies (IDS) Group of Utrecht University. Other partners include: the African Studies Centre Leiden, Agriterra, the Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) of the University of Twente, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Land Portal, Oxfam Novib, Royal HaskoningDHV, VNG International and Wageningen University and Research.



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