Tip sheet for stories about land grabbing

1. The human angle:
   a) It may be obvious but it bears repeating: the people must be at the centre of your story. Try to find a human angle: there is often one. Get eyewitnesses testimonies from people and documentary evidence about their claim on contested land. In stories about land, journalists can get so bogged down in the legal minutiae and land records that the human suffering becomes secondary and the end result doesn't grab the readers. Great injustices have been inflicted through depriving people of their land and property – how you present your story can strengthen resistance movements/spark public outrage and bring about change, and even force accountability of law-breakers.
   b) Those under pressure from the land mafia and their collaborators in government are often extremely afraid to talk to journalists. Go through local community leaders or community-based organisations, and work to win the people's trust. Meet them at a place where they feel safe, tell them that it is their wish whether they want to share their names with you, and that you won't quote them by name (unless they want you to).

2. The legal aspect:
   I looked at a number of Pakistani laws such as the Colonisation of Government Lands Act, 1912, the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 etc for my stories on land grabbing and illegal land use. You would need to refer to similar legislation applicable to your country. In particular, focus on what the law says about:
   - the conditions under which the government can cancel short term temporary leases for agriculture/poultry farming
   - the conditions under which the government can acquire private land for public purposes and according to what formula it must ensure fair compensation to the owners
   - the procedure for the government to dispose of public land through auction on market rates (not hand it over to favoured parties)
   - double allotment of land with ulterior motives

   These are often the areas where the state exploits citizens who do not have enough of a political voice and joins hands with private developers in profit-making ventures.

3. More story ideas:
   a) Areas where construction is illegal such as forest land and river embankments are particularly attractive for fraudulent land schemes. Irregular practices by state authorities can also include the conversion of amenity plots into commercial/industrial plots and involve manipulation/tampering in the government's record of rights.

   Note: In instances where land records are digitised, it's naïve to assume the state will be compelled to operate transparently. In my story 'The shaky foundations of ASF Arabian Vista' https://www.dawn.com/news/1461688 , the computerised land record was taken down for months by the provincial government in order to prevent access to it after I sent my questions to the officials concerned. Fortunately, I had

pictures of the online record taken earlier. These were uploaded on our newspaper website to back my claims in the story. Therefore, try to collect evidence before government authorities can be tipped off.

b) Build connections with non-governmental organisations working with indigenous communities, and with human rights lawyers who handle cases of illegal deprivation of land.

4. Presentation: Include documentary evidence provided by the people of raids on their property, documents of ownership etc (in a way that their identity remains protected unless they consent otherwise). You could include audio clips from interviews of those affected, with permission and with distortion if necessary. Add maps, time lapse satellite imagery, evidence of tampering in record of rights, etc. Again, the aim is to achieve a presentation which has a mix of the human angle and documentary evidence.

5. Security:
   Err on the side of caution. There is a high level of risk associated with investigating stories on land grabs, because state authorities are almost always involved. Approach the story through local community members who have the lay of the land and can advise you on how to stay under the radar. Make sure you have a plausible cover story in case you are stopped and questioned. If possible, ask questions of the protagonists after you have collected all the evidence.

   Useful articles/publications:
   https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/why-you-should-care-about-land-grabs

   https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_eng.pdf

   https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263728018_Land_Grabbing_and_Global_Governance_Critical_Perspectives

   https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/10/3/324