The politics of peri-urban land grabbing for commercial use (PERIGRAB)

How municipal governance and commercial development and infrastructure expansion is causing the conversion of land and loss of nature

UiO Energy summer research project for 2026

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Background and aim

In recent years, there has been increasing attention towards the loss of nature as a result of urban growth, regional enlargement and infrastructure development. Loss of nature is not a new phenomenon, but its scope and speed seem to be increasing. Efforts are being made to get a better overview of nature loss caused by land extraction, or land grabbing, but there is limited research within the social sciences that examines how and why nature is lost in the areas around today's cities. Research has concentrated on green urbanism and the ongoing densification of cities and towns, while the huge conversions of nature and agricultural land outside cities, caused by the development of shopping centres, logistics centres, warehouses and data centres, have received far less attention.

This summer project will contribute to a larger research project investigating the relationships between municipal planning, business and corporate development, and nature loss, primarily related to the land grabbing and conversion of green areas in peri-urban areas and along large highways close to cities. Attracting commercial actors and companies is an important task for many municipalities, to create in jobs and income, and the development of land in the form of plots for private and public companies, is considered to be an important part of municipal planning. We will focus on establishments that require large areas and high end infrastructure connections in areas outside cities where property prices are lower than in the city itself. The project will identify various forms of land grabbing and conversion of nature and agricultural land, that prior to development were less affected by intense human activity. This implies that they were areas for agriculture, nature and outdoor recreation (LNF areas, according to the Planning and Building Act), before converted into commercial areas and built-up spaces.
The project will select a small number of cases (in a couple of municipalities), where relatively large areas are converted from natural, agricultural and recreational land to commercial spaces

and infrastructures. We will map and study cases in different stages, from early planning to fully developed commercial areas. The choice of cases will depend on access to information about and from the key actors or stakeholders. These include municipalities, county councils, county governors, private and public land owners, real estate developers, buyers of the plots, end users and other actors. In addition, we will use available geographical information, from the Norwegian Mapping Authority and municipal planning agencies, to get an overview of the distribution and development over time of such conversions.

The theoretical framework may be characterised as geographical political economy and political ecology. The aim is to understand the political, economic and planning mechanisms and processes that are central to the transformation from nature to land-intensive peri-urban commercial areas. Public regulations based on the Planning and Building Act and the Pollution Control Act constitute an important framework that must be included in the study. Emphasis will be placed on understanding how political considerations and economic incentives affect the outcome of regulatory processes and actual land use changes.

Methods and tasks

The students and supervisors will work together in selecting a number of cases in different phases of transformation towards commercial areas. Depending on the development stage of these cases, the following tasks are relevant for the students:

- Identify developed areas on maps, via e.g. the Norwegian Mapping Authority and Google Earth, and map their composition and calculate their size
- Search for municipal documents in the form of applications from developers, municipal letters, zoning plans and other documents
- Search for statements, objections, decisions and other information from county authorities and the County Governor
- Map property ownership, real-estate developer(s) and other actors with economic interests in the areas, and if possible, obtain their views
- Map neighbours and civil society actors (e.g. neighbourhood organisations and nature conservation associations) and their views and possible actions in relation to the development

The project should be finalized before September 1st 2026, resulting in a written report (in the Include report series). The applicants should be attending a master's programme in a social science discipline, preferably Human Geography, Sociology, Political Science or Anthropology.