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Climate change policies, land grabbing and conflict: perspectives from Southeast Asia

Esteve Corbera^a, Carol Hunsberger^b and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti^c

^aInstitute of Environmental Science and Technology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain;

^bDepartment of Geography, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada; ^cRegional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development and Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Introduction to the special issue

Since the late 1990s, and particularly over the past decade, we have witnessed a proliferation of land-related initiatives being globally promoted in response to the climate change “problem”. Some of these have been specifically designed and implemented to respond to decisions adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), specifically its Kyoto Protocol. These include mitigation efforts aimed at increasing forest carbon stocks through reforestation programmes and through mitigation projects under the Joint Implementation and the Clean Development Mechanism (Wittman, Powell, and Corbera 2015). More recently, there have been efforts to promote forest conservation and management under the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) framework of the UNFCCC (Duchelle et al. 2014), and to mainstream “climate smart” agriculture (Chandra, McNamara, and Dargusch 2017).

In parallel, we have witnessed the increasing cultivation of “flex crops”¹ like oil palm, corn, soy or sugarcane around the world, while renewable energy technologies with direct impact on land use, such as hydro and wind power, have also been up-scaled. These trends respond to growing demand in the global food regime and global energy markets (IPCC 2011; McMichael 2010), but they have also often been framed as a means to mitigate climate change and address a broader environmental crisis. In fact, many renewable energy programmes and projects have been incentivised by climate change policy mechanisms, such as carbon offsetting or targeted national subsidies, thereby contributing to reducing carbon emission, nationally and internationally.

These land-related developments have sparked numerous controversies, even more so when deployed in the Global South or in countries with weak land governance frameworks and democratic deficits (Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2011). On the one hand, for example, there is evidence that actions promoted or funded by the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol often have led to unintentional and undesirable impacts. It has been shown that CDM forestry and REDD+ projects² can have detrimental impacts on local resource users and ecosystems, including: an increased labour burden on local populations; a disruption of local institutions, particularly land tenure, in ways detrimental

to poor and disadvantaged social groups; limited income gains and elite capture; and the promotion of fast-growth tree species or exclusionary conservation activities (Aggarwal 2014; Bayrak and Marafa 2016).

On the other hand, large-scale flex crops cultivation has often been preceded by seizing, expanding or transforming areas seen as “under-utilised empty lands” into more productive, and market-appealing, uses (White et al. 2012; Wolford et al. 2013). Through concerted efforts by state and corporate initiatives, facilitated by international financial institutions, land has been taken away from the customary or legal control of local communities and farmers and put at the service of global commodity networks (Dell’Angelo et al. 2017). Displaced people and affected communities inserted into the labour regimes of large-scale farms can suffer from poor working conditions while a suite of other social and gendered implications occur at community level (Cochet 2017; Creutzig et al. 2013; Mingorría et al. 2014; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017). The local farming environment is in turn radically transformed to give way to monocultures, while the broader hydrological cycle can also change (Mehta, Veldwisch, and Franco 2012).

Large-scale renewable energy deployment has also resulted in problematic outcomes: wind farms, for example, have changed property regimes and deepened inequalities in access to land and off-farm income, in addition to creating disturbances that are potentially harmful to animal and human populations (Huesca-Pérez, Sheinbaum-Pardo, and Köppel 2016). Hydropower development has caused severe impacts on river ecosystems by affecting water flows and sediment transport, as well as social dislocation at times, triggering population re-settlement and loss of livelihoods (Kelly-Richards et al. 2017).

When these land-related processes have involved the purchase or long-term lease of large tracts of land, media, non-governmental organisations and academics have referred to them as examples of the “global land grab” phenomenon (Borras et al. 2011). They have been labelled as “green grabs” when pursued in response to climate change and other environmental policies (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). The (green) “grabs” documented in this special issue may or may not involve land-use and tenure change, but they do involve changes in control of land – or of related resources, such as trees, minerals or water flows – at the expense of the interests and rights of local communities.

The “rush for land” has been riddled with conflict, involving land-related grievances across all involved parties and more or less institutionalised forms of local resistance (Costantino 2016). Conflict has occasionally involved physical evictions or armed violence; the latter particularly when such violence was already present before the land grab (Gómez, Sánchez-Ayala, and Vargas 2015; Rudi et al. 2014). Political reactions “from below” by affected social groups have not automatically emerged everywhere and every time. In some countries, the state apparatus may suppress or heavily control such mobilisations. Pre-existing forms of institutional injustice and cultural repression often reinforce disregard for the interests and land claims of the most disenfranchised and politically disorganised communities and social groups. Furthermore, where political reactions do occur in some form, they do not always manifest as opposition to the “grabbers”; some are mobilisations to become inserted into the emerging agrarian-environmental enterprise enclaves (Borras and Franco 2013). States selectively deploy national and international governance instruments and principles to advance three possible, contradictory agendas: to facilitate, to mitigate negative impacts and maximise opportunities or to stop and roll back land grabs resulting from these intersections (Borras, Franco, and Wang 2013).

In addition to the analyses of environmental and social impacts highlighted above, scholars of land and green grabs are exploring the financialisation of agriculture and conservation (Dempsey 2013; Fairbairn 2015), and the consequences of land/green grabs on rural labour (Li 2011; Neimark 2012; Osborne 2011). What remains under-explored are the effects of renewable energy investments on national political economies and local political ecologies (McCarthy and Thatcher, *forthcoming*), as well as the cumulative and interactive effects of multiple “grabs” undertaken for environmental and other purposes (Hunsberger et al. 2017). In our view, grabs driven by environmental or agricultural development agendas may run parallel to each other, but they may also overlap, intersect and interconnect: their promoters may be competing for the same block of lands; the “grabbed” lands may be adjacent to one another; the institutional bases for their parallel land control-oriented initiatives may be overlapping in contradictory or complementary ways; and so on. There may be spillover effects in terms of political economy and ecological and demographic processes as a result.

The contributions in this special issue aim to shed light on the interconnections between environmental and agrarian processes, and social conflict, in the specific context of land interventions driven by climate change or economic development policies, with case studies as the main method of enquiry. One article is global in scope while the rest provide rich empirical evidence from a number of Southeast Asian countries.

Special issue preview

Hunsberger et al. (2017) open the collection by proposing a research agenda to explore the interconnections between climate change policies, land grabbing and conflict. According to the authors, these interconnections, which manifest, for instance, through social processes like human displacement or through ecological impacts on resource flows, can only be meaningfully understood if one transcends the territorial boundaries of land grabs themselves. The authors argue that expanding the scale to the landscape level can reveal patterns and cumulative impacts that would go unnoticed with a smaller geographical focus. Additionally, they consider that researchers and non-scientists should generate knowledge about these interconnections together. The former can collect data that are perceived as important by the latter, and in doing so they can carry out socially meaningful and transformative research. To be effective, however, such knowledge co-production needs to be mobilised to intervene in the cross-scale policy processes that might be supporting climate change policies and land grabs, or that could potentially minimise their impacts. The authors offer a number of leverage points through which such “action for change” could be pursued.

One of these leverage points for change is the international arena, in which the intersections of environmental and agrarian conflicts can and should be brought to the fore. Claeys and Delgado Pugley’s contribution (2017) offers a neat account of how two key transnational social movements – the agrarian movement *La Via Campesina* (LVC) and the International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) – have developed distinctive climate justice framings to advance rights-based considerations under the UNFCCC. Based on extensive fieldwork during UNFCCC meetings in 2007–2015, analysis of UNFCCC decisions and interviews with members of these two organisations worldwide, the authors describe how LVC has gradually mainstreamed into the

UNFCCC a development paradigm grounded in food sovereignty and agro-ecology, while IIPFCC has sought to increase indigenous participation in climate schemes to regain control over indigenous territories. In mobilising a human rights framework, both LVC and IIPFCC portray peasants and indigenous peoples as stewards of nature and climate change “solvers”, rather than land-use or climate change culprits. The success of these two movements in influencing UNFCCC decisions demonstrates the key role that social movements can play in designing more socially transformative policy, as well as the importance of treating land-use rights and climate change justice issues as inseparable domains in policy and practice.

The contribution by Franco, Park, and Herre (2017) sheds light onto the often problematic translation of well-intended policy into practice. The authors consider an array of international regulatory instruments, including state- and corporate-led, that are available to respond to conflicts arising from agrarian transformations driven by agricultural development and climate change policies. The mobilisation of these instruments by international development workers, activists or company officials in charge of corporate social responsibility to deal with social conflict related to land grabbing or climate change interventions in Cambodia and Myanmar has been ineffective due to a combination of factors that are rarely envisioned when such regulatory instruments are crafted. These factors include: the convergence of multiple conflicts that can rarely be resolved with a single instrument alone; different interpretations of the same regulatory instrument by the different actors involved; the existence of legally pluralistic contexts that make international regulatory instruments less relevant than other approaches to conflict resolution; and the state’s own inability to promote and endorse “the rule of law”.

The subsequent articles in the collection present in-depth case studies of contested climate change strategies and social and agrarian change. Work and Thuon (2017) explore the intersection of change mitigation policies and economic land concessions in Prey Lang, Cambodia, demonstrating how these two processes facilitate each other physically, discursively and economically. Grounded in detailed maps, project descriptions, on-site interviews and focus groups, the authors reveal that climate-related policies and resource extraction coexist in the same landscape, even within the same projects. They show how purportedly benevolent climate change mitigation initiatives are not only intimately linked to economic intensification in Prey Lang but also contribute to conflict and dispossession. The authors neatly disclose how, in one single landscape, the government can endorse a forest conservation project that constrains local livelihood strategies while simultaneously opening land for economic activities that destroy them. Local residents, the authors note, are confronted by government and corporate policies that support corruption and split community solidarity.

The article by Pye, Radjawali, and Julia (2017) focuses on the interactions between different types of resource extraction endeavours along the Kapuas River, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Grounded on participatory action research along the river, the authors document a number of land-use transformations based on differing appropriation and accumulation strategies according to resource (minerals, lumber, oil palm, fish), scale of operations (smallholders, transnational firms) and the relationships among the economic and political actors. These range from a REDD+ project to tree plantations, oil palm, aquaculture and bauxite and gold mining. The authors suggest that these activities, when taken together, are producing a major social-ecological transformation of the river, in terms of

water quality, fish stocks, and loss of biodiversity in the surrounding landscape. Responses “from below” have been limited, due to lack of knowledge about development alternatives, state policies and regulations and existing social divisions – including elite capture – brought about partly by these conservationists and extractivist “land/river deals”. Additionally, those willing to resist such social-ecological transformations have weak links with actors at broader scales who might support their struggle.

Lamb and Dao (2017) explore how Chinese investment has facilitated hydropower projects in Myanmar and Vietnam, and with what consequences. Chinese contractors, developers, financiers and regulators have become major players, with a role in over 100 hydropower projects of various sizes in Southeast Asia since 2000. Such involvement has sparked increasing social concern and criticism, under the presumption that Chinese players are likely to care less about social and environmental issues than other possible investors, such as multilateral institutions or OECD-based companies. Lamb and Dao argue, however, that there is scarce evidence on which to base such an argument, and suggest that there is a strategy by the Vietnamese and Myanmar governments and national media to ignore or downplay the myriad other responsible actors, including the government itself. According to the authors, both Vietnam and Myanmar need to develop more effective, transparent and robust systems of hydropower governance, while scholars and activists need to understand critiques of Chinese investment from a broader historical, cultural and political economy perspective.

Finally, Uson (2017) critically interrogates a post-disaster intervention on a small island of the Philippines, after the typhoon Haiyan devastated the country in 2013. Uson unveils how a humanitarian intervention, coupled with climate change adaptation policy and discourse, changed the direction of an existing land rights struggle between landowners, a private tourist operator and fisherfolk communities. Informed by focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, the author demonstrates how the typhoon halted the possibility of a land reform that would have favoured the interests of the fisherfolk. The disaster reconfigured social relations: on the one hand, the state facilitated the uneven distribution of humanitarian relief on the island, which marginalised specific families and allowed the private company to become a key actor in reconstruction efforts; on the other, the company forced the fisherfolk families to relinquish their land claims in exchange for financial and housing development. This story is one of “disaster capitalism” (Uson’s own words), in which humanitarian action (un)intentionally supported land grabbing and suffocated a potentially transformative land rights struggle.

Conclusion

This special issue illustrates how a range of climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives – including forest conservation under REDD+, hydroelectric power development, flex-crops for biofuel production and “climate-smart” reconstruction efforts – can intersect at the territorial or landscape level with other forms of resource extraction, for example mining, fishing, agriculture and industrial forestry activities. At times, these intersections involve coordinated political manoeuvring to legitimate certain environmental and social outcomes, as illustrated by the anti-China discourses in Lamb and Dao’s contribution, or by the coordination between conservationists, government and corporate actors to draw protected area boundaries illustrated in Work and Thuon’s Prey

Lang case study. The collection also demonstrates how climate change and other land-related interventions are situated within historical and local contexts characterised by existing struggles over land access and rights, such as Uson's described conflicts between island elites and fisherfolk in the Philippines, or between communities, government and private companies in Prey Lang, Cambodia.

Some contributions also demonstrate that these interventions produce complex and cumulative effects that cut across scales, policy instruments and actors. For example, the overlapping of agribusiness and conservation investments in Myanmar and Cambodia have aggravated pre-existing ethnic conflicts and fuelled new ones as a result of increasing land scarcity (Hunsberger et al.; Work and Thuon), while each of the land grabs along the Kapuas river described by Pye, Radjawali, and Julia has resulted in cumulative and pernicious ecological impacts, in both land and water systems.

Finally, light has been shed onto the potential influence of transnational (Claeys and Delgado; Franco, Park, and Herre) and national (Pye, Radjawali, and Julia) mobilisations, as well as of building alliances between different kinds of actors, including scholar-activists (Hunsberger et al.) to better understand, contextualise and take action to address these intersecting dynamics of environmental and agrarian change. The extent to which these mobilisations and alliances become successful in their own struggles will shape environmental and social futures, and particularly influence whether the most disenfranchised local actors can assert their rights to pursue their desired livelihoods.

Notes

1. Flex crops can be used to produce multiple products, such as food, feed, fuel or commercial and industrial products.
2. The acronyms REDD and REDD+ refer to the "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation" mechanism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) is an instrument in the 2007 Kyoto Protocol that extended the UNFCCC.

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Notes on contributors

Esteve Corbera is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Environmental Sciences and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.

Carol Hunsberger is an Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Western Ontario, Canada.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti is the Director of the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development and Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

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