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Forest plantations and climate change discourses: New powers of 'green' grabbing in Cambodia

Arnim Scheidel [a 1], Courtney Work [a b]

[a] International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), The Netherlands

[b] Regional Center for Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

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Abstract

Efforts to combat global climate change through forestry plantations designed to sequester carbon and promote sustainable development are on the rise. This paper analyses the trajectory of Cambodia´s first large-scale reforestation project awarded within the context of climate change mitigation. The 34,007 ha concession was formally conceived to promote

sustainable resource use, livelihood improvements and emission reduction. On the ground, however, vast tracks of diverse forest landscapes are being cleared and converted to acacia monocultures, existing timber stocks are logged for market sale, and customary land users dispossessed from land and forest resources. While the project adds to an ongoing land grab crisis in Cambodia, we argue that the explicit environmental ends of the forestry concession enabled a 'green grab' that not only exceeds the scale of land grabs caused by conventional economic land concessions, but surprisingly also exacerbates forest logging and biodiversity loss in the area. This case demonstrates the extent to which current climate change discourses, forestry agendas and their underlying assumptions require critical revision in global policy discussions to forestall the growing problem of green grabbing in land use.

Introduction

Sustainable forest stewardship is an important part of global climate change mitigation policy. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has supported forestry-based emission reduction through two well-known policy frameworks: Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) (Pistorius, 2012), designed to keep existing forests standing, and Afforestation and Reforestation (A/R) projects under the Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM) that promote the expansion of forest area through forestry plantations on non-forested or degraded forest land (UNFCCC, 2013). The 2015 Paris Agreement of the 21st Conference of Parties (COP) relies heavily on removing carbon emissions from the atmosphere at a later date, which may further incentivize forestry projects for carbon capture. Large-scale tree plantations are, however, riddled with problems.

In the past, difficult financial and administrative issues made tree plantations the least attractive type of Clean Development Mechanisms (Thomas et al., 2010). Where they have been established, they frequently spark concerns over adverse impacts on locals and ecosystems, including dispossession from livelihood resources, biodiversity loss, and pollution (for a global review, see Gerber, 2011; for case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa, see Lyons and Westoby, 2014; Olwig et al., 2016; Richards and Lyons, 2016). In addition,

contracts that govern investments into forest carbon tend to leave little space for local communities to participate in decisions that may affect them (Tienhaara, 2012). For South and Southeast Asia, experts acknowledge concerns, such as potential impacts on communities, as well as opportunities, such as the perceived availability of suitable land to develop afforestation projects (Nijnik and Halder, 2013). The concern of this paper is the substantial gap between policy assumptions on paper and project outcomes on the ground, as discussed for example by Clement and Amezaga (2009) for a case in Vietnam. Understanding the flawed assumptions that produce this gap is important to avoid that land-based climate change policies are merely used as legitimization framework for large land grabs that on the ground jeopardize local customary land users and the environment (Hunsberger et al., 2017).

In this context, this paper presents an empirical case study on the first large-scale reforestation project in Cambodia, established with explicit climate change mitigation aims. Through co-produced knowledge from collaborative action research, the paper analyses the formal justifications, the trajectory, and the impacts on the ground of a 34,007 ha reforestation project developed by the Korean company Think Biotech. The creation of the concession followed a bilateral agreement on forestry cooperation between Cambodia's Forest Administration and the Korean Forestry Service, which recalled the commitment to conserve the world's forest as agreed in the UNFCCC conventions (KFS/FA, 2009; Lee, 2012). The project area is located at easternmost boundary of the Prey Long forest, one of the most biodiverse lowland forests in Southeast Asia (Hayes et al., 2015). As detailed below, some parts of the project area show a degraded forest, partly because two logging concessions were previously granted in the area. Yet, large tracks of the concession are covered with diverse natural forests, now being cut-down to establish a monoculture forest plantation. The project claims to improve the environment through reforestation, even though the biodiversity and ecological functions of tree plantations cannot match those of natural forest (Bremer Leah and Farley, 2010).

Among the initial justifications for establishing this forest restoration project in an area where indigenous Kuy and Khmer farmers practice forms of low-land shifting cultivation, was that the project would stop 'slash-and-burn' activities, enhance forest protection through establishing an artificial forest, and reduce emissions to become part of the Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM). The 'slash-and-burn' activities in the project documents refers to the practice of shifting cultivation, in which fire is used to clear and fertilize land for cropping, followed by a period of forest regrowth, before plots are converted again to fields. Ironically, Think Biotech's project implementation could be described as 'industrial-scale slash-and-burn cultivation' in which vast tracks of diverse forests are cleared, market-

bound timber salvaged, and the remaining vegetation is burned to plant acacia monocultures, which are then harvested annually plot by plot, based on a 'sustainable rotational model' (see Turton and Seangly, 2016). Meanwhile, the shifting cultivators who had used these forests for generations lost access to forest resources. The initial aim of the concession to become part of the CDM or similar mechanisms – which would require verified emission reduction and contributions to sustainable development – was soon dropped as "too complicated" and the company operates as a conventional, but "sustainable" tree plantation (Interview, Company CEO, 05.11.2016). Yet, thanks to this initial environmental agenda, the company acquired land for forest restoration in cooperation with Cambodia's Forest Administration and not as an economic land concession (ELC). This allowed the company to capture three times the land-size limit of an ELC without having to create multiple companies to circumvent the legal restrictions, as many others have done. The company has also gained access to vast amounts of timber stocks located on the land to be 'reforested'.

The paper draws out how discourses and assumptions of climate change and forestry policies can reinforce the global trend in 'land grabs' (Borras et al., 2011), causing massive changes in effective control over land at the expense of marginalized groups. Some of the project's characteristics analyzed in this paper are country and case-specific and follow general patterns of other land grabs in Cambodia. However, we argue that its relevance goes beyond the country context, as the support for tree plantations as a climate change mitigation strategy might increase globally, following the 2015 Paris Agreement (Dooley, 2016; Vigil, 2018). Moreover, the configuration of this land concession shows also important new characteristics due to its environmental agenda that has added novel justifications, configurations and developments to a 'green' form of land grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012). After introducing our conceptual framework and empirical case study, we will show how this case exceeds the scale of land grabs caused by conventional ELCs, and draw out the role that discursive elements and policy assumptions of forestry for climate change mitigation played as key 'powers of legitimization' (Beban et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2011). Among these are the unfounded generalized negative assumptions about shifting cultivation, flawed perceptions over 'degraded' forest land, and the monofunctional UNFCCC definition of forests unable to capture their diverse social, economic and ecological qualities. These assumptions and definitions, we argue, require urgent revision in global climate change mitigation policies to avoid the further marginalization of vulnerable groups using the land in a sustainable way.

Section snippets

Land grabbing, green grabbing and the role of legitimization

The term 'land grabbing' was first coined to denounce the rise of large-scale land acquisitions of foreign investors in countries of the global South within the context of the 2008 financial, food and energy crisis (GRAIN, 2008). Concerns over changes in effective land control at the expense of marginalized groups and local land users sparked an urgent need to better understand the phenomenon (see special issue edited by Borras et al., 2011). Studies on land grabbing have grown substantially[2]…

The Prey Long forest and the think Biotech reforestation concession

Prey Long is a vast, but rapidly shrinking old-growth forest and one of the few remaining lowland forests in Southeast Asia. Its size is recorded from 300,000 to 600,000 ha (depending on the source), and it sits at the juncture of four provinces between the Mekong and the Tonle Sap Rivers in central Cambodia. The forest is rich in biodiversity and home to many endangered species, including Asian elephants, Gibbon monkeys and rare orchids (Hayes et al., 2015). The forest is primarily evergreen,…

Impacts on the ground: livelihoods, land uses and forest carbon stocks

We describe now the project's impacts on the ground in terms of livelihood implications, land use change, and its potential for reforestation and climate change mitigation. While the concession area covers three communes across two provinces, our results refer mainly to Kampong Cham commune (Kratie province), where the company has initiated its operations.…

Forest plantations and climate change discourses as new powers of green grabbing

The Think Biotech forest restoration project shows no signs of delivering the contributions to climate change mitigation, increased biodiversity, or enhanced local skills and livelihoods that were part of the initial formal agreement. In fact, the stated intention to register the project as a formal CDM A/R project or to participate in any other emission reduction mechanisms was immediately abandoned (Interview Company CEO, 05.11.2016) and the claims of livelihood improvements have been…

Conclusions

This paper discussed the controversial development of Cambodia's first large-scale reforestation concession, clearing diverse natural forests at the edge of Prey Long for a managed monoculture tree plantation. If one did not know the 'green' context in which the concession was set up, it would look like just another economic land concession. As so many other economic land concessions in Cambodia, it drives dispossession of local land users and environmental concerns such as forest degradation…

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