

Geopolitical Ecologies of Environmental Change, Land Grabbing, and Migration:
Comparative perspectives from Senegal and Cambodia

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Abstract

Adaptation and security framings have gained traction not only to explain the causal chains and impacts of environmental change and/or migration, but also to legitimize land intensive interventions to address them. Despite progress in the understanding of the complex links between environmental change and migration, academic and policy analysis has paid scarce attention to the ways in which environmental and migration narratives are (re)shaping access to fundamental natural resources, changing migration dynamics in the making. On the other hand, in the burgeoning literature on land and green grabs, the impacts of migration narratives on land grabs, as well as the impacts of land grabs on migration, remain underexplored. In order to fill these gaps and bridge the diverse disciplines that deal with these phenomena, this research uses a 'variegated geopolitical ecology' framework to examine the material and discursive interactions between environmental change, land grabbing, and migration. Using a global ethnographic approach, the methodology involves a historical and multi-scalar analysis together with extensive comparative fieldwork conducted in two different socio-political settings: Senegal and Cambodia. Notwithstanding important context specificities, findings across cases show how environmental and migration narratives, linked to adaptation and security discourses, have been deployed – advertently or inadvertently – to justify land capture, leading to interventions that often increase, rather than alleviate, the very pressures that they intend to redress. The research shows that despite intrinsically opposed assumptions behind the 'migration as adaptation' or 'migration as security threat' framings, they can both interact with environmental and climate change justifications in ways that create 'self-fulfilling risks' which make insecurity and maladaptation a reality – and well beyond the landscapes where land grabs unfold.