

Land grabbing, conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations: perspectives from East and Southeast Asia

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Gender and generation in Southeast Asia's corporate 'rush to land': a brief introduction

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“... whether class differentiation is strongly marked or not, ‘community’ and its reproduction is always likely to involve tensions of gender and intergenerational relations. The former are widely recognised, the latter less so” (Bernstein, 2014: 16)

Our three panel sessions on ‘gender and generational experiences of Southeast Asia’s corporate rush to land’ bring together nine studies of gender, generational and class dynamics of rural communities confronted with large-scale corporate land acquisition in Southeast Asia, an important heartland of the contemporary “land grab”. The papers provide a good geographical balance, covering both insular and mainland Southeast Asia and all the major “land rush” countries and boom crops. There is also a good balance of themes, between gender and generation, ‘impacts’ and agency, etc. and a good mix of senior and younger authors.

The importance of analyzing the gendered dimensions of agribusiness expansions and large-scale land deals was flagged in JPS some years ago (Behrman et al., 2012). Some work on this has appeared in recent publications (e.g., Doss, Summerfield, and Tsikata 2014; Julia and White 2012; Tsikata and Yaro 2014; White, Park, and Julia 2014), but it remains meagre in relation to the huge amount of research on almost every other aspects of land deals.

Researchers and activists have given even less attention to generational differences and tensions in rural people’s engagement with corporate land deals and agribusiness. This neglect is surprising. Intergenerational relationships and tensions have been a recurring theme in studies of agrarian change, especially in Africa, but they consistently receive less notice than class and gender relations (Sumberg et al., 2012).

Why has research in these two areas been so slow to emerge, and why is it important to fill this gap? “Filling a gap” is in itself not an argument; it needs to be shown, more positively, that attention to gender and generational dimensions in their intersection with class dynamics is fundamental to the understanding of the reproduction of agrarian communities in their confrontation with emerging capitalist relations.

Class relations in emerging capitalist contexts intersect and combine with other social differences and divisions, so that alongside class-like dynamics and tensions, the reproduction of agrarian communities is always a gendered and “generationed” process. Incorporation in capitalist relations (and resistance to it) is shaped by historical and existing gender relations and divisions of labour, and in turn entrenching or ameliorating gendered inequalities. Reactions (of acquiescence or resistance) are gendered, with women and men responding, both individually and collectively, in diverse ways to the promises and threats of land deals (Hall et al., 2015: 482). Likewise, incorporation is “generationed”; younger and older men and women may respond to the promises of investors and state agents, the opportunities and threats of capitalist investment, and the violence of dispossession, in quite different ways. Current debates about ‘land grabbing’ are in fact debates between different visions of the future shape of farming and the fate of rural populations. If visions of a future smallholder-based agriculture are to be realised, and if young people are going to have a place in that future, generational relations have to be taken seriously and given much more attention than has been the case in recent policy debate, and in recent research. The issue of intergenerational transfer of land rights – or, when that does not happen, intergenerational dispossession, when one generation’s land is sold off which ought to have been passed on to the next – deserves our attention. A generational and “youth” perspective adds another powerful reason to De Schutter’s arguments that large-scale land deals (whether for purchase or long lease) should be seen as the ‘last and least desirable option’ (De Schutter 2011) because they close off the smallholder option, not only for today’s farmers but also for members of the next generation, who face permanent alienation from land on which they, or their children, might want to farm, and in the absence of livelihood opportunities elsewhere (White, 2012).

Considering gender and generation means looking at how these relations and tensions play out,

not only in (small-scale) farmer households, but also in different points in class-differentiated agrarian labour regimes, and at different points in agro-commodity chains. Women and men, older and younger, may be direct producers on their own account, or unpaid family workers in family farms (including contracted farms); they may be wage workers on the farms of others (larger farms or industrial plantations); they may be actors (own-account, unpaid family workers, wage workers) in the upstream and/or downstream entities in agro-commodity chains; they may be consumers of food and other agricultural products which they have not themselves produced, and providers of care and food in households where one or more members are involved in agricultural production (cf. White et al., 2015).

“Patriarchal” power relations (in the original meaning: power of men over women *and* of old over young) and gender/generational inequalities in land rights, decision making and voice, among others, may have a decisive influence in incorporation in and exclusion from expanding corporate agriculture. These have been largely overlooked, in studies conducted from an agrarian political economy perspective.

Coming from different perspectives and scholarly traditions, a number of studies from 2011 onwards have looked at the gender dimension of large-scale land deals, corporate agriculture, agrofuel expansion, development projects, etc.

Behrman et al. suggested a process-oriented approach whereby gender constraints and differentials are seen at work at different stages of a land deal: preexisting situation, consultation, negotiation, contract development, implementation, compensation, changes in production structure and local economies and enforceability of agreements and outcomes (Behrman et al., 2012). Although this approach is not based in a particular theoretical frame, and also has practical limitations as most deals do not unfold in such an orderly fashion, it can help to identify the multiple material and non-material points where gender inequalities can manifest themselves, and to systematize the analysis around them.

In a recent special issue of *Feminist Economics*, Doss, Summerfield and Tsikata advocate a political economy approach to the study of gender and land grabbing that “combine[s] observations about broad socioeconomic trends with micro-level inquiry about households and intrahousehold relations.” (Doss et al., 2014: 16). They propose a focus on labour coupled with gendered analytical categories such as the sexual division of productive and reproductive labor; access to, ownership of, and control of resources; and gender ideologies of labor and exploitation.

Others propose a “gendered political ecology” approach. White, Park and Julia (2015) adopt a combined gendered political ecology and agrarian studies perspective in their exploration of the gender dimensions of large-scale, corporate production of agrofuel for commercial use and consumption in various Asian and African countries. The gendered dynamics of agrofuels expansion are discussed in terms of access to resources and livelihoods, division of labor and access to employment, food security and food sovereignty, and resistance, negotiation and protest. Verna examined feminist political ecology research conducted on gender and land between 1997 and 2009 in Kenya, Mozambique and Madagascar. The key point of her analysis is the continuity along history and scale of the perpetuation of patriarchy and men’s power through land grabbing (Verma, 2014).

While the papers in our panels do not all share the same framework, we feel that together they mark a significant step towards a “gendered and generationed political ecology” of capitalist expansion in rural Southeast Asia. Gendered political ecology, in our view, does not replace political economy, but applies the basic political economy questions -- who owns what, who does what, who gets what, and what do they do with it? -- to the production of environmental change, and treats gender as a critical variable in addressing these questions (Bernstein, 2010; Elmhirst, 2011; Robbins, 2004). For instance, the papers by Vanessa Lamb and colleagues on the Lower Mekong Basin region, and Rebecca Elmhirst and colleagues on East Kalimantan (both in this conference) both explore further the potentials of a feminist political ecology approach.

Younger and older people may have different interests in land deals (pro or con), and different ways of promoting their interests and engaging with state and corporate power. To the best of our knowledge, the papers by Tania Li on “Plantations and inter-generational replacement”, and by Gilda Senties Portilla on “Land concessions and rural youth in southern Laos” (this conference) are the first studies with a primary focus on generational dimensions of land deals to emerge from Southeast Asia. This stands in sharp contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, where a number of studies focusing on land-related inter-generational conflicts are available. While smallholder dispossession for plantation agriculture or contract farming schemes may make some provision for existing smallholders in terms of (reduced) land allocation, generally there is no provision for the next generation. Li’s paper shows how plantation expansion in Indonesia often leaves the original landholders in place, tucked into “enclaves” on which farmers may be able to continue farming; the real squeeze begins a generation later, when land in the enclave proves insufficient for the needs of young (would-be) farmers. This recalls the Scottish Highland Clearances of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which dispossession often left the older generation of crofters and cottars ‘hanging on’, despite the onslaught on their land and livelihoods, but still reluctant to leave. The next generation, however, was less willing to acquiesce to these straitened circumstances, often made trouble, and was encouraged and sometimes forced to migrate to the south, or to North America. No land at all was made available for young couples wanting to marry (Napier Commission 1884).

Overall very few studies have focused on the issue of political reactions from below. Julia and White (2012) and White et al. (2015) address it at the margins of their analysis by looking at women’s participation in protests and community decision-making. Miranda Morgan’s unpublished doctoral thesis on oil palm expansion in West Kalimantan is one of the few studies that focus on women’s resistance to corporate commercial farming expansion (Morgan, 2011; also Morgan 2013, currently under revision for JPS). Hilary Faxon’s paper explores the emerging gender discourse in land policy debates in Myanmar and feminist contributions to land-based social movements. Tania Li’s and Gilda Portilla’s papers both explore the implications of the generational perspective for the positioning of young people in political responses.

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An international academic conference
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International Conference Paper Series

The purpose of the 2015 Chiang Mai conference is to contribute to *deepening* and *broadening* of our understanding of global land deals, resource conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations – in the specific regional context of Southeast and East Asia, with special attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation policies as well as the role of China and other middle income countries (MICs) within the region.

The Conference Paper Series aims to generate vibrant discussion around these issues in the build up towards the June 2015 conference – and beyond. We will keep these papers accessible through the websites of the main organizers before, during and after the conference.

About the Authors

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