



POLICY BRIEF



Indonesia, Source : Curt Carnemark/World Bank

Climate change policies, land control and conflict in Southeast Asia

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Land-based climate change policies affect ecologies and livelihoods, both locally and at the landscape scale. Case study research on forest conservation, hydroelectric dams, biofuel production, and “climate-smart” post-disaster reconstruction demonstrates how such initiatives can spark or deepen conflicts.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives are undertaken for good reasons: rising global temperatures threaten the ecological basis of human life. But many actions taken in the name of addressing climate change also negatively impact lives and livelihoods. Land-based climate actions such as forest conservation schemes, renewable energy infrastructure projects, and biofuel crop production can entrench or worsen conflicts and inequalities by changing ecological conditions and patterns of land control – both at the local level and cumulatively across landscapes. People making decisions about climate change actions should understand and carefully consider these possible outcomes.

KEY RESULTS

- Climate change mitigation, economic development and conflict can be intimately linked
- Climate change adaptation strategies can consolidate land control and undermine local rights struggles
- Regulatory instruments meant to deal with land conflicts are often ineffective due to factors not envisioned when the instruments were created
- Decision makers should focus on landscape dynamics rather than single projects, make social equity a central criterion for assessing climate initiatives, and listen to grassroots actors and social movements

When land-related processes involve the purchase or long-term lease of large tracts of land, media, NGOs and academics have called these examples of the “global land grab” phenomenon (Borras et al. 2011). Such transactions have been termed “green grabs” when pursued in response to climate change and other environmental goals (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). “Grabs” undertaken for environmental ends and economic development can overlap and intersect within the same landscape, causing political and ecological spillover effects.

A landscape can be understood as an area larger than a farm but smaller than a region, in which physical, ecological and human dimensions mutually shape each other (Batterbury and Bebbington 1999; Vaccaro and Norman 2008). Focusing on the landscape scale can reveal patterns and cumulative impacts that focusing on individual projects or land parcels cannot. For example, if people are displaced from one site due to changes in land control, the social dynamics of conflict can move or spread. Likewise, the nature of contested resources in a given area (such as land, water or forests) can also change due to the impacts of activities in surrounding areas (such as agricultural run-off, dams, or concentration of hunting and fuelwood gathering into smaller areas). Thus, resource conflict does not simply erupt or escalate in a given place; it can move across physical and administrative boundaries.

Land-based conflicts sometimes take the form of physical evictions or armed violence, but can also include many other ways in which local people push back against projects that impact their lands and livelihoods. For example, local resistance can include refusal to surrender land designated for new enterprises, efforts to impede project work (e.g. blocking roads, pulling up survey stakes), or unwillingness to participate in mitigation or adaptation schemes. In some countries experiencing democratic deficits or weak land governance frameworks, the state apparatus may suppress or heavily control such mobilizations.

To take meaningful action on climate change without deepening social divides, new research approaches and empirical evidence are needed. To explore the relationship between climate change strategies, land control, and conflicts, researchers Carol Hunsberger (Western University), Esteve Corbera (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (Chiang Mai University) synthesized case study research from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam.

KEY FINDINGS

Climate change mitigation efforts and economic development initiatives often combine to spark or intensify conflicts

In a single landscape in Prey Lang, Cambodia, the government simultaneously endorsed a forest conservation project and opened land for resource extraction by awarding multiple concessions for logging, mining and plantation agriculture (Work and Thuon 2017).

The line between environmental and industrial projects became deeply blurred: one 34,000-ha “forest restoration” project, run by a public-private partnership, converted natural forest and community rice fields into monoculture tree plantations. Summarizing the collective impact of these activities, Work and Thuon (2017) write: “residents are confronted by companies literally destroying their native landscape, by carbon conservation initiatives that restrict their access to what remains, and by policies that split community solidarity and support corrupt government activities.”

Indonesia provides a second example of climate and industrial projects intersecting at the landscape scale. In West Kalimantan, a REDD+ project, timber plantations, oil palm, aquaculture, bauxite and gold mining are together transforming the Kapuas River in terms of water quality, fish stocks, and biodiversity loss, in turn exacerbating existing social divisions (Pye, Radjawali, and Julia 2017). While the cumulative effect of these ecological changes presents daunting challenges, it also opens the possibility of linking struggles against individual land grabs.

Climate change adaptation strategies can consolidate land control and undermine local rights struggles

On Sicogon Island, the Philippines, “climate-smart” reconstruction after typhoon Haiyan redirected an existing land rights struggle between landowners, fisherfolk and a tourism company (Uson 2017). The typhoon destroyed most houses, fishing equipment, and gardens on the island. The state called on private companies to “adopt” heavily damaged areas and sponsor their recovery. Ayala Corp., which already had plans to expand its tourism business in Sicogon, promised to rehabilitate the island. However, the company selectively distributed relief goods and prevented the distribution of shelter materials for people to rebuild their homes. Ultimately the company offered fisherfolk families a stark choice: accept either a cash payout or a house and lot on the mainland, waive all rights to remain on the island, and receive access to relief supplies; or refuse the offer and receive nothing. Desperation compelled many to surrender their land claims in exchange for financial and housing development. In this case, delegating post-disaster humanitarian efforts to a private company with vested interests suffocated a potentially socially transformative struggle – while drawing on the language of climate change adaptation (Uson 2017).

Regulatory instruments meant to deal with land conflicts are often ineffective due to factors not envisioned when the instruments were created

Measures for addressing conflicts may fall short due to, for example: convergence of multiple conflicts that cannot be resolved by a single instrument; different interpretations of the same instrument by different actors; legal pluralism; and the state’s inability or unwillingness to promote the “rule of law” (Franco, Park, and Herre 2017).

Nevertheless, transnational social movements such as La Via Campesina and the International Indigenous People's Forum on Climate Change have done important work by focusing attention on the links between climate actions and agrarian conflicts in the international arena (Claeys and Delgado Pugley 2017).

POLICY INSIGHTS

Focus on landscapes, not projects

Connections between climate change actions, changes in land control, and conflict can only be meaningfully understood by looking beyond the territorial boundaries of specific projects (Hunsberger et al. 2017). The cumulative effects of climate projects, resource extraction and agricultural and industrial activities in the same landscape can compound problems such as human displacement, increased competition for resources, and ecological depletion of those resources. Tools such as regional impact assessment should be used to anticipate and minimize these cumulative effects.

Make social equity a central criterion for evaluating climate interventions

Consistent with the 'just transitions' literature (Newell and Mulvaney 2013; Heffron and McCauley 2018), decisions about climate interventions should explicitly consider their justice and equity implications. Taking social outcomes seriously means expanding the focus of climate change policies beyond simply reducing emissions and/or promoting economic growth. It also means grappling with the challenges of governing across spatial scales and accounting for past injustices while protecting the rights of future generations. Creating space for public deliberation and recognizing the autonomy of parallel (traditional or Indigenous) legal systems are difficult but important steps in this direction.

Listen to grassroots actors and social movements

Researchers and local actors can and should collaborate to generate knowledge about the intersections of climate change actions, land control and conflict (Hunsberger et al. 2017). Fostering alliances between local activists and national or transnational movements can shift rights struggles from local to higher scales, in turn leveraging more powerful strategies and tools to seek solutions – particularly where local or state officials are unresponsive to local demands (Claeys and Delgado Pugley 2017; Franco, Park, and Herre 2017).

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This brief was authored by Hunsberger, C., Corbera, E. and Vaddhanaphuti, C. It draws on key findings of the journal article:

Corbera, E., Hunsberger, C., and Vaddhanaphuti, C. 2017. "Climate policies, land grabbing and conflict: perspectives from Southeast Asia." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 38(3): 297-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2017.1343413>

Cite as: Hunsberger, C, Corbera, E and Vaddhanaphuti, C. 2019. "Climate change policies, land control and conflict in Southeast Asia." CJDS Policy Brief Series. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Canada.

This policy brief was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through Global Affairs Canada, and from the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development. This publication's content in no way reflects Global Affairs Canada's official position or policies. The accuracy of the information and comments are solely the responsibility of the authors. Please note that some resources cited in this policy brief may not be available in both official languages.

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