Climate change narratives, overlapping land conflicts, and migration dynamics. Insights from Senegal and Cambodia

Sara Vigil

Developing countries have been a major target in the recent rush to acquire land in which narratives of ‘sustainable development’, ‘poverty reduction’ and, more recently, ‘climate change mitigation and adaptation’ have often been utilised as justifications. Whilst the human rights consequences of land grabbing have been well documented, and the study of the connections between climate change and migration have made substantial progress, very little attention has been given to how climate change narratives, land grabs, and human mobility shape each other and on how their combined effects will impact peace and stability. From a political economy perspective and drawing upon three case studies conducted in Senegal and Cambodia, involving more than 200 participants in semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the paper will show the multiple and overlapping interactions between climate change narratives, land conflicts, and human mobility whilst underlining their risks in terms of distress migration and intrastate conflict. At a policy level, the paper will provide recommendations on how to address these three major issues concomitantly in order to avoid the manipulation of ‘green’, adaptation, and development agendas that can paradoxically result in the decreased resilience of the most socio-environmentally vulnerable populations.

Sara Vigil (sara.vigil@ulg.ac.be) is an FNRS Research Fellow and a PhD candidate at the Hugo Observatory of the University of Liège and at the Political Economy of Resources, Environment and Population (PER) research group at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS). After studying Political Sciences and International Relations in Madrid (UNED), she pursued a Masters degree in Sociology at the University Paris V-Sorbonne. Her on-going doctoral research analyses the interconnections between climate change, land acquisitions, and migration and she conducts fieldwork in Senegal and Cambodia. During her field missions she is an affiliated researcher of the University Gaston Berger of Saint-Louis (GERM) in Senegal and of the Research Program on Climate Change, Food Security, and Agriculture (CCAFS) in Cambodia. Sara is a research partner of the ‘Migration, Environment, and Climate Change: Evidence for Policy’ project (MECLEP) led by the International Organisation for Migration, a management committee member of the ‘Environmental Diplomacy and Geopolitics’ (EDGE) EU H2020 project, and collaborates on the ‘High-End Climate Impacts and eXtremes’ (HELIX) EU project. Sara has consulted on environmental migration issues for the World Bank, the Nansen Initiative, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, and follows closely the UNFCCC climate negotiations as an active member of the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility. Sara lectures on international cooperation and migration governance at Sciences Po Paris and Paris 13 University and is an associated team member at the Centre of Philosophy, Politics and Epistemology (PHILéPOL) of the University Paris V-Sorbonne where she previously worked for the ANR-DEMOENV project.