



HAL
open science

Sara Vigil. 2022. Land Grabbing and Migration in a Changing Climate: Comparative Perspectives from Senegal and Cambodia. Routledge, 222 pages

Arlette Simo Fotso

► **To cite this version:**

Arlette Simo Fotso. Sara Vigil. 2022. Land Grabbing and Migration in a Changing Climate: Comparative Perspectives from Senegal and Cambodia. Routledge, 222 pages. Population (English edition), 2023, Book Reviews, 78 (3-4), pp.525-527. 10.3917/popu.2303.0569 . hal-04556612

HAL Id: hal-04556612

<https://hal.science/hal-04556612>

Submitted on 23 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Sara Vigil. 2022. *Land Grabbing and Migration in a Changing Climate: Comparative Perspectives from Senegal and Cambodia*. Routledge, 222 pages.

In a context of rising concern about global warming, it is hard to think of climate mitigation and adaptation to face up to climate change as anything but desirable. This useful book by Sara Vigil shows the dark underside of these concepts, highlighting how climate change discourse can be used to legitimate land grabs, impacting the most vulnerable and creating long-term effects on environment and migration. It offers both a theoretical and empirical assessment of how environmental change, migration, and land grabs shape each other materially and discursively, and profiles the associated consequences. The approach to empirical analyses is mainly qualitative.

The first chapter critically presents the mainstream theoretical frames used to understand the links between environmental change, migration, and land grabs. It first introduces the neo-Malthusian security frame, which presents population growth as a 'bomb' threatening the environment as people fight for limited resources, or security as people migrate, creating tension over resources in receiving regions, and inducing a geopolitical scramble for land and resources. It thus advocates 'land sparing': 'the decision to set aside land for biodiversity and conservation purposes'. It then presents the neo-classical adaptation frame, which argues that if correctly managed, large-scale investment in agriculture – including land acquisition – can ultimately enhance adaptation through technological improvement, innovation, and job creation. In this type of view, migration is just a way of moving labour where it is needed while releasing environmental pressure and boosting development in origin communities through remittances. Finally, Vigil presents the 'variegated geopolitical ecology' framework, which allows her to historically integrate and analyse multi-scalar discursive and material interactions and to connect the 'local' to the 'global'.

The second chapter delves into the history of Senegal and Cambodia, the countries where the three landscapes serving as case studies for this book are located, to understand the roots and trace the history of the evolving interactions between environmental change, migration and land grabs. It shows that while diverging geopolitical interests are at play in the two countries, in both cases the French colonial administration used migration to control labour for resource extraction, using tenure, taxation, and environmental reforms to force peasants to migrate for wage work, limit their access to resources, and in some cases limit the movements of others (pastoralists and swidden cultivators) in the name of adaptation and environmental protection. Senegal then moved progressively towards neoliberalism after independence in 1960. The new state's dependency on the West led it into structural reforms that altered tenure regimes and induced unequal access to irrigation and resources between rich and poor, leading to a culture of out-migration. Cambodia, on the other hand, transitioned to neoliberalism at the end of numerous armed conflicts fought on and over its territory, and in particular with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. It implemented a

legislative reform designed by donors to protect natural resources that had previously remained almost untouched. But the reform did not last long, as resources became a tool to maintain power, with tenure reforms used to place resources in the hands of the powerful at the expense of the most vulnerable.

It is in this historical setting that Vigil situates the 'green and migration grabs' that are the focus of the third chapter. She shows that both environment and migration have been used as arguments in the two countries to legitimize land acquisitions for capital accumulation and/or to maintain and reinforce the power of political and economic elites. The predominance of one argument over the other has depended greatly on the two countries' geographical assets, their position in the world economy, and the interests of donors and corporate investors. The migration argument has dominated in Senegal due to its geographical position, which allows migration to flow towards Europe. In Senegal, land acquisition has mainly been aimed at creating employment that would enable the population to stay in their communities – a way of outsourcing border controls. In Cambodia, it is environmental discourse that has been predominant, given the presence of forests and the demand for cheap migrant labour in neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Malaysia. In short, Senegal has been seen as a potential 'migration sink', while Cambodia has been seen as a 'carbon sink'.

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to case studies that zoom into three landscapes, showing the complexity of the manifestations and consequences of the phenomenon of land grabbing: the Senhuile-Senethanol biofuel project in Senegal and the Koh Kong Sugar and Kampong Thom Rubber plantations in Cambodia. The author demonstrates that while 'flex crops' – used for both food and biofuels – are on the rise, so are 'flex grabs' – flexible use of a discursive frame to give a single intervention different meanings depending on the interest and scale of actors. She shows that environmental 'branding' and migration arguments used at the international or national levels can be lost in translation on the ground or disappear as the purpose of the land use shifts, with dire consequences for the environment and for populations that are displaced and expelled, or whose access to natural resources is restricted.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, Vigil sets out to analyse how these 'local' manifestations of the land grabbing phenomenon ultimately impact the 'global' in terms of security and adaptation, and identifies the phenomenon of 'self-fulfilling risks', whereby 'false security and adaptation framings around the perceived risks of environmental change and migration... then lead to interventions that can make both security risks and maladaptation a reality'. The Senhuile case shows how resistance from 'below' following land grabs can create the very conditions (migration, terrorism) that were used to justify land acquisition in the first place. It should be noted, however, that Vigil's use of Senhuile to demonstrate the bottom-up links between land grabs and terrorism is questionable, as the threat did not materialize in Senegal and thus remains hypothetical. Future

work in other contexts such as Mali, where terrorism became a serious issue, might help to confirm the author's hypothesis. The Koh Kong case reveals how the violation of human rights in the name of the environment and the reaction by civil society that followed led to a change at the global level, as the International Criminal Court now considers land grabs potential crimes against humanity. The European Union's threat to suspend trade preferences with Cambodia on the basis of human rights violations, and the rise of China with its 'no strings attached' policies of aid and investment coupled with low environmental standards, have created a geopolitical balance that is favourable to environmental destruction. And the Kampong Thom case shows that labels matter: attaching the 'migrant' label to the poor and vulnerable and not to economic and political elites legitimizes and encourages the movement of the latter, although in reality their activities have greater destructive potential, impeding global efforts to protect the environment and biodiversity.

Overall, the book's usefulness for policy recommendations would have been strengthened by quantifying the impact that discourses and policies around one of these concepts, implemented at a specific point in time or space, have had on the others. This could have been made possible by adopting, in addition to a qualitative approach, a quantitative approach, using impact evaluation methods to compare the figures before and after reforms/policies were implemented, using national or international data on migration flows and land acquisition by international firms.

To conclude, this is a nicely written book that is essential for anyone (researcher or practitioner) working in the field of the environment, migration or/and land grabbing. It helps to understand how the past has shaped the present, the global influenced the local, and the local can move the global, in analysing the complex interconnections between environment, land grabs and migration.

Arlette Simo Fotso