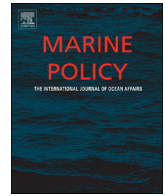




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From sea-level rise to seabed grabbing: The political economy of climate change in Kiribati

Marc-Andrej Felix Mallin^{a,b,*}

^a King's College London, Department of Geography, London WC2R2LS, United Kingdom

^b National University of Singapore, Department of Geography, 1 Arts Link, AS2 03-04, Singapore 117568, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical political economy perspective on recent and ongoing developments in the Pacific atoll country of Kiribati, where the issue of rising sea levels has become an incrementally politicised concern. Semi-structured interviews (n = 30) with decision-makers, policy advisors, scholars, and community elders were conducted in multiple sites to scrutinise the politics that frame the country's environmental predicament. Findings indicate that: (1) irrespective of considerable scientific uncertainties and data inconsistencies, previous governments have fervently abided by a 'sinking nation paradigm', unreasonably constraining political visions of the nation's future; (2) consequentially, 'adaptation' has become a metaphor for economic development conceptions, which are tied to mounting budgetary requirements; (3) climate aid is sought for adaptation initiatives irrespective of the needs and desires of island communities; (4) incentives to develop a blue-green economy have facilitated the emergence of highly problematic deep-sea mineral (DSM) initiatives, which this study regards as precursors to *seabed grabbing*. The paper, therefore, posits that marine policy makers in Kiribati – and other small-island developing states (SIDS) – need to be more vigilant to wider political economic agendas when considering options for ocean and coastal governance. Researchers and practitioners have an important role to play in this regard by privileging preferences and perceptions from coastal communities, to ensure well-informed policy decisions in times of ecological uncertainty.

1. Introduction

Few would dispute that rising global sea levels signify one of anthropogenic climate change's most daunting properties. Following the release of the second and subsequent assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the phenomenon has become particularly associated with low-lying atoll countries in the Pacific [1]. Attention-grabbing media representations of "drowning islands" as well as the vociferous stance of SIDS at international climate negotiations have lent them a distinct reputation as "guinea pigs" or "canaries in the coalmine" [2–4]. By the same token, this heightened level of attention testifies to prescient debates amongst scholars, deliberating the extent to which climate change-induced sea-level rise (SLR) will impair the livelihoods in Pacific atoll countries [5,6]; elicit environmentally induced migration movements [7–12]; and culminate in a large-scale loss of land – and perhaps even maritime entitlements [13–15].

Looking specifically at the Republic of Kiribati, this paper contends that a politically motivated emphasis on the inevitability of ecological

disaster has been mobilised to set the country on a political course that essentially regards the prospect of SLR as an all-dominant obstacle to the nation's 'development'. Whilst financially costly adaptation and relocation strategies have been accorded priority, historically rooted principles of self-sufficiency, solidarity, and frugality are increasingly taking the backseat, producing additional socio-economic limitations for a population already facing uncertain environmental changes. Instead, a policy-contingent rise in fiscal requirements has led a small group of decision-makers, in conjunction with foreign investors and advisors, to push for the exploitation of Kiribati's extensive deep-sea mineral (DSM) resources. This paper will argue the case for interpreting current DSM undertakings in the context of Kiribati as a clear occurrence of an emerging 'marine resource grab'. The term *seabed grabbing* is coined to describe the nature of the process by which control over decision-making on mineral resources has been seized by powerful actors.

To scrutinise the underlying linkages, the paper adopts a political economy lens informed by a multi-sited qualitative study conducted in 2016, which raises a number of questions. Firstly, it asks whether the

* Correspondence address: National University of Singapore, Department of Geography, 1 Arts Link, AS2 03-04, Singapore 117568, Singapore.
E-mail address: felix.mallin@u.nus.edu.

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political framing of SLR in Kiribati has employed lopsided socio-ecological narratives. Secondly, whether the interlocking of climate change and sustainable development discourse has constrained the spectrum of political visions. If so, has it increased financial revenue considerations over other socio-political issues? Lastly, to what extent may the prospect of rising fiscal requirements for adaptation or relocation options be co-opted to stimulate non-renewable resource extractivism? Has the political-legal institution-building process around DSM in the Pacific guided Kiribati into a socio-ecologically viable direction?

In posing these questions, the paper explicitly engages with scholars, policy-advisors and decision-makers in the Pacific region, who work at the interface of climate adaptation, economic development and ocean governance, interrogating the political economic logics arising from the current trajectory, as well as the policies used to tackle the challenges at hand. To begin with, [Section 2.1](#) gives an orientation of the paper's theoretical and conceptual background; [2.2](#) provides some relevant background on Kiribati's geography and mining history; and [2.3](#) briefly summarises the methodological approach underpinning this study. Based on the analysis of grounded empirical data, [Section 3](#) then systematically examines the problematic relationship between environmental disaster discourse, economic development planning and the evolution of a DSM-focused extractive regime in Kiribati.

2. Theoretical frame and study design

2.1. Theoretical frame

The geographer Mike Hulme [\[9,10,16,17\]](#) argues that the “dominating construction of climate change as an overly physical phenomenon readily allows climate change to be appropriated uncritically in support of an expanding range of ideologies.” According to his understanding, it is the ahistorical, depoliticising and “de-culturing” ways in which environment and climate are being framed by those institutions that dominate the global mainstream discourse that have led to “endow climate change with a near infinite plasticity.” The same level of plasticity has then come to define the most prevalent socio-ecological development conceptions, such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘sustainable adaptation’ or ‘green development’, which are staged as political responses to the environmental predicament [\[18–21\]](#). In particular, political economists working in the political ecology tradition have taken the task upon them to demonstrate how a mix of technocratic, managerial, and market-focused strategies has mostly ignored the political economic root causes that produce or exacerbate vulnerability to ‘environmental disasters’ in the first place [\[22\]](#). Furthermore, they have shown how the dominant ‘eco-paradigms’ were consistently undermined such that they could be deployed to legitimise a continuation of status-quo politics and expanded resource exploitation [\[23\]](#).

Gaining particular traction over the past decade, the “green economy” transformation has been described as one such political project [\[24\]](#), following which highly destructive industries are being shifted to locations, where the adverse socio-environmental impacts of production and extraction do not have to be economically internalised [\[21,25,26\]](#). The “blue economy”, with its attention to the “sustainable development” of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of SIDS [\[27\]](#), has extended similar conceptions to the maritime domain [\[28\]](#). In mainstream economic and elite policy discourse, many of the interventions advanced under these schemes are usually serving some common cause (e.g. ‘win-win’, ‘benefit-for-all’), whilst frequently seeing the enclosure of land, resource grabs, and the (violent) dispossession of people as their localised outcomes [\[29–31\]](#).

A prime arena of critical inquiry within political economy, land grabbing in relation to extractive industries is a well-documented subject matter, especially for parts of the Western Pacific [\[32–34\]](#). However, critical studies on non-fishery targeted forms of enclosure still lack a sound conceptual toolbox. A first step is offered by Bennet et al., who conceptualise ocean-grabbing as “dispossession or appropriation of use,

control or access to ocean space or resources from prior resource users, rights holders or inhabitants. Ocean grabbing occurs through inappropriate governance processes and might employ acts that undermine human security or livelihoods or produce impacts that impair social–ecological well-being” [\[35,62\]](#). In this view, the study of ocean grabbing then is a “normative exercise” that is to be rooted within the force field of (good) governance, (ethical) principles and political agency. Although a useful vantage point to reason on existing and emerging forms of marine spatial enclosure (e.g. conservation, bio-harvesting, tourism), it is difficult to apply this framework to DSM, where the term ‘dispossession’ has little purchase, as immediate impacts on “social-ecological wellbeing” will be extremely difficult to trace at this stage. Moreover, their framework has too little avail for thinking beyond a reformist political approach.

Similarly, early discussions spiked by the acceleration of DSM projects have largely been confined around questions on how to determine appropriate environmental standards and social outcomes, but have cautiously avoided the notion of ocean grabbing as well as a more systematic engagement with the wider political economy of DSM [\[36–38\]](#). In spite of scientists’ warnings as to the largely unknown ecological consequences of DSM, the bulk of the debate seems to be restricted to political pragmatism [\[39\]](#). The only remaining questions appear to be: when, where (not), and to what extent. By offering the heuristic term of seabed grabbing, this paper will instead argue that averting potentially adverse impacts stemming from future DSM industries will entail much more than a normative exercise of finding appropriate policies, codes and standards. Rather, it holds that in the case of Kiribati critical engagement with the emerging DSM regime has to be linked back to critical discussions about: firstly, the uncertain environmental manifestations of future climate change; secondly, the development paradigms that support rising demands for minerals; thirdly, histories of externally-inflicted environmental havoc; and lastly, the power structures that underpin the political and legal-institutional apparatus that currently governs marine spaces and resources [\[40\]](#).

2.2. Brief overview over Kiribati's territorial and resource history

2.2.1. The largest EEZ among Pacific Island countries

Kiribati comprises of the single raised atoll Banaba and 32 low-lying atolls, which are officially grouped from west to east into three island chains: Gilbert Islands, Phoenix Islands and Line Islands (see [Fig. 1](#)). Though not parts of the Gilbertese ancestral homeland (Tungaru) prior to British colonial occupation, the rush for phosphate deposits and cheap labour between different colonial powers in the Pacific, led to the successive incorporation of most of the previously uninhabited Phoenix and Line Islands under Gilbertese administration over the course of the twentieth century [\[41,42\]](#). Together with the Ellice Islands, now Tuvalu, these island groups – arbitrarily assembled by British administrative arrangements – formed the Gilbert and Ellice Island Colony between 1916 and 1975. Upon independence in 1979, the nature of colonial bordering consequently allowed for Kiribati to lay claim upon a discontinuous and tripartite, EEZ of more than 3,5 Million km² under the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOSC). Even with a land area of less than 811 km², the LOSC provisions turned Kiribati into the twelfth largest country globally in terms of aggregate maritime jurisdiction. Since independence, highly volatile royalty incomes from distance water fisheries have constituted an increasingly disproportionate economic determinant in Kiribati's budget composition. Between 2014 and 2016, licence fee revenues alone amounted to about 80% of gross domestic product on average, followed by overseas investments, remittances, and copra exports [\[43\]](#).

2.2.2. Extractive experiences: the exploitation of phosphate in Banaba

In order to fully understand the contemporary developments discussed in this paper as part of a contingent historical process, it is

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