



## Critical review

## Tactics of land capture through claims of poverty reduction in Cambodia



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## ABSTRACT

Poverty reduction has become a worldwide promise, yet the term itself has been commonly abused to legitimize development policies and projects with truly questionable impacts on the poor. This article critically reflects on how claims of poverty reduction through agricultural development have been turned into tactics of land capture in Cambodia. Concrete tactics reviewed here include: an abuse of a poverty crisis to legitimize the capitalist transformation of vast small-farmer landscapes; the simplification of multidimensional poverty to reductionist income and employment approaches; a systematic overestimation of project benefits to claim benefits for the public good; a systematic underestimation of negative project impacts through impact assessments to conceal deterioration of the public good; and procedural tactics to influence land allocation patterns across Economic and Social Land Concessions. A critical analysis of such processes is necessary to understand how development policies and projects can further produce multidimensional poverty, leaving behind vast landscapes of dispossession.

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## 1. Introduction

'Poverty reduction' has become a global goal and a significant aspiration, pursued not only by governments, but claimed by companies, bringing investment, jobs and incomes. Such public policies and private interventions ought to bring desired transformations among communities in need for change. Yet it is also striking how often 'poverty reduction' as a discourse has been tactically used to legitimize the expansion of so-called development projects with truly questionable impacts on those they claim to benefit: the poor (Escobar, 2012).

Focusing on Cambodia, this intervention reflects on how claims of poverty reduction through agricultural development were turned into tactics of land capture, formalized through Economic and Social Land Concessions (ELCs, SLCs). While land governance in Cambodia has been much criticized, much focus has been on the impacts of economic concessions, e.g., as drivers of human rights violations and land conflicts, in absence of bringing significant contributions to rural development (CCHR, 2013; Jiao et al., 2015; Scheidel et al., 2013; Scurrah and Hirsch, 2015; EC and IDI, 2013; Leuprecht, 2004). In order to better understand how despite these negative impacts such land development policies and projects could become so widespread, particular tactics of expansion, understood as processes that serve to justify and influence land use

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patterns, need to be critically examined (see also: Klak and Myers, 1997; Neef et al., 2013).

In this context, the paper identifies a series of processes through which particularly poverty reduction claims were turned into tactics of elite land capture on the one hand, and simultaneously into 'powers of exclusion' for the poor on the other hand (Hall et al., 2011). Found to be present in both policies and projects, these tactics include:

- (i) an abuse of a poverty crisis to legitimize the transformation of vast small-farmer landscapes;
- (ii) the simplification of multidimensional poverty to reductionist income and employment approaches, which mask people's losses;
- (iii) a systematic overestimation of project benefits to claim improvements of the public good;
- (iv) a systematic underestimation of negative project impacts to conceal deterioration of the public good;
- (v) finally, 'over-bureaucratization' of pro-poor SLC titling programs, combined with legal loopholes to allocate SLC land to elites, can be further seen as procedural tactics to influence land access and exclusion schemes.

The following sections critically discuss these five tactics of land capture in Cambodia.

## 2. Five tactics of land capture through claims of 'poverty reduction'

### 2.1. *Tactic I: Abuse of a poverty crisis*

Since the 1993 transition to a market-oriented democracy, Cambodia, formally classified by the United Nations as a least developed country, has faced large challenges in poverty reduction. According to the World Bank (2015), poverty headcount ratios at national poverty lines were at 50.2% in 2003, and headcount ratios at 1.90\$ a day (2011 PPP) were at 32.4% in 2004. According to participatory poverty assessments, rural communities identified major concerns, ranging from food insecurity, lacking assets to pay health costs, limited access to education, poor physical infrastructure and increased vulnerability due to lacking access to land and community natural resources (ADB, 2001).

Being a rural economy, in which more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas (FAO, 2015), the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) argued that agricultural development could contribute much more to economic growth and poverty reduction. In their 2004 long-term *Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency in Cambodia*, agriculture was set as a center stone of its overall development policy, stating that "*the agriculture policy of the Royal Government is to improve agricultural productivity and diversification, thereby enabling the agriculture sector to serve as the dynamic driving force for economic growth and poverty reduction*" (RGC, 2004, p. 13 emphasis added).

Two kinds of land concession systems have been central in this context: Economic Land Concessions (ELC) to attract large-scale agro-investments for agricultural growth, employment creation and local to national revenue flows, and Social Land Concessions (SLC), aiming to provide land to poor and landless people. ELCs provide exclusive land use rights under a lease contract, formally limited up to 10,000 ha for 99 years. In practice, the areal limit is commonly surpassed (Diepart, 2015). Until early 2016, more than 2 million ha granted to more than 270 companies came under ELC use (Fig. 1), causing such land deals to adversely affect no less than 700,000 people (CCHR, 2013). SLCs provide property rights for up to 0.36 ha for residential purposes and up to 5 ha for family

farming purposes (RGC, 2003). Compared to the massive amount of ELCs granted during the last decade, only a very small share of land was granted as SLC through official land titling programs to the rural poor (Licadho, 2015b; Neef et al., 2013).

There are two things to be observed here. First, Cambodia indeed has been facing a poverty crisis, which was not only identified by mainstream dollars-a-day indicators, but also through participatory poverty assessments. Second, the proposed solution to this crisis was clearly biased towards the establishment of capital-intensive large-scale agribusinesses, whereas the small-holder economy was rather seen as perpetuating poverty (Scurrah and Hirsch, 2015). SLCs in turn have been partly instrumentalised to smooth resistance to dispossession by providing land to people displaced by ELCs (Neef et al., 2013). Hence, legitimization through poverty reduction claims and the establishment of related land use regulations have become relevant in shaping access to/exclusion from land in Cambodia (cf. Hall et al., 2011).

The role of a 'crisis', as a socially agreed condition that needs urgently to be changed, I believe, is relevant in this context. It legitimizes the need to take immediate action, based on fundamental transformations, rather than modifications of existing structures that are assumed to be responsible for the crisis. Further, taking risks is accepted due to the urgent need for change, and critical voices are easily omitted in the name of generating change for the greater good (nobody wants to oppose 'poverty reduction'). The use and abuse of crisis states to legitimize the implementation of questionable development policies is also known from other Northern and Southern countries (Klein, 2008; Peck, 2006). In Cambodia, it has been the poverty crisis that was taken to legitimize the transformation of the agricultural sector, by imposing land use paradigms that favor large-scale agribusiness over small-farmers, while dispossessing them from their lands. This is the first tactic of land capture through claims of poverty reduction.

### 2.2. *Tactic II: Simplification of multidimensional poverty to income and employment issues*

Over the last decades, the conceptualization of poverty has become multidimensional, including deprivation in many dimensions of life, such as in basic needs, human needs, or capabilities and the ability to live a meaningful life (e.g., Max-Neef et al., 1989; Sen, 1999). Multidimensionality of poverty matters not only in theory but also in practice, as improvements in one dimension do not necessarily lead to improvements in other dimensions (Caizhen, 2010; Laderchi et al., 2003). Even worse, trade-offs exist, whereas improvements in one dimension, such as increase of short-term monetary income based on new employment opportunities may be associated to the deterioration of other dimensions, such as health, vulnerability, or asset poverty (land loss) in the long-term (Scheidel, 2013).

While the idea of poverty being multidimensional successfully captured the academic literature, development practice continues to be largely dominated by an income and employment thinking. Behind this bias are historical and ideological reasons, as economic measures are sometimes perceived to be more objective than non-economic measures of 'living a fulfilled life' (Sumner, 2007). Yet, from the perspective of agro-investors, who in Cambodia are strongly tied to ruling party elites (Neef et al., 2013), there are also strategic reasons to define poverty as issues of employment and monetary income, as these measures assess development pathways in a way that clearly favors large agro-projects with formal jobs and incomes over small-scale peasant ways of life. For the latter, much income is environmental and hardly well measured (e.g. forest products, non-marketed food production), livelihoods are 'self-employed' and do not always appear in statistics (e.g. labor exchange, shifting cultivators), and land uses

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