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Biofuel imaginaries: The emerging politics surrounding 'inclusive' private sector development in Madagascar



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ABSTRACT

Biofuels are just one of a host of bioeconomy initiatives which promise to deliver 'inclusive' sustainable development through innovations in bio-based products and services in the global south. Yet to critics, biofuels are seen as prime drivers in a global 'land grab,' rainforest clearance, and the dispossession of farmers. Responding to these concerns, firms in Madagascar have shifted production away from large plantations to small-scale production of the more 'environmentally-friendly' biofuel crop *Jatropha curcas*. Using a political ecology lens and building upon critical discourse analysis found in cultural political economy, I analyse perspectives of on the material effects and emerging politics surrounding a case of a British-biofuel start-up firm in the northwest Madagascar. I demonstrate that access to biofuel land and labour is dependent upon the inclusion of Malagasy in rural development projects. However, rather than delivering on the promises of biofuels, *jatropha* has largely emerged as a failed development strategy. This article examines the unaccounted for power that varied and diverse actors derive by promoting the inclusion of individuals and groups to share in benefits, and the material consequences of private sector development in the global south.

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1. Introduction

In March of 2009, many in Madagascar woke to reports of armoured tanks roving the quaint cobblestoned streets of the capital city, Antananarivo. In the midst of a political crisis dissident army troops, who had switched allegiances from President Marc Ravalomanana to the former mayor and radio disk-jockey Andy Rajoelina, were manning the armoured vehicles. The political standoff led to what many in the media were calling a 'bloodless' coup d'état; that is, an effective transfer of power to Rajoelina's new High Transitional Authority.¹ Yet after the immediate standoff subsided, around 50 lay dead and many more were wounded.²

While tensions around rising food and fuel prices had been mounting for a year, a major contribution to the political crisis came from a wave of populist anger over a controversial land deal made

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¹ The 2009 political crisis was seen as a power grab influenced both by domestic politics and external political dynamics, for more see [Deltombe 2012](#).

² As it turned out, only one tank was actually deployed. Also, exact numbers of people killed are difficult to confirm, but best estimates range between 50 and 100 casualties.

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public. The now well-known deal in question awarded the South Korean transnational Daewoo Ltd. a 99-year lease of 1.3 million hectares for export crops and palm oil for biofuels ([Andrianirina-Ratsialonana et al., 2011](#)). Rajoelina successfully mobilised waves of populist opposition by depicting Ravalomanana as 'selling off' land to foreigners for biofuels and export crops.³

Biofuels are just one of a host of 'bioeconomy' initiatives which promise to deliver 'inclusive sustainable development' through innovations in bio-based products and services in the global south. However, once seen as an environmental panacea, over the past few years biofuels have been subject to strong criticism from activists, academics, and environmental groups who claim its production is a primary driver of global 'land grabbing' and rainforest clearance, and that it inevitably competes with food crops ([Dauvergne and Neville, 2010](#); [GRAIN, 2013](#)).⁴ In Madagascar, this critique has not gone unnoticed as many firms which began with

³ A stiff wave of opposition against land deals has been led by Malagasy NGOs and associations in urban areas – i.e., Collectif pour la Défense des Terres Malgaches – see <http://terresmalgaches.info/>.

⁴ Land grabbing is defined by [Borras and Franco \(2012\)](#) as commercial land transactions and speculation by (trans-) national actors for use in biofuels and export food crops.

much larger designs of vast plantations have either suspended their work or shifted towards much smaller production of the more ‘environmentally-friendly’ plant *Jatropha curcas*. Nonetheless, contrary to the urban protests that took place in the capital during the lead up to the crisis, outward manifestations of resistance in rural areas to biofuel land acquisitions have been fairly muted (although not completely silent c.f. [Gingembre, 2015](#); [Medernach and Burnod, 2013](#)).⁵ Instead, some rural Malagasy are cautiously welcoming investors whose projects are seen as providing potential income opportunities, particularly where multilateral and bilateral development aid was previously shut off due to the crisis.⁶ It is within this milieu that private sector actors are subsidising rural development by building schools, delivering health care, fresh water, and improved crop varieties. They have, in effect, become *de facto* development agents in the process ([Foucault \(\[1978\]1991](#); [Ferguson and Gupta, 2002](#); [Li, 2007](#)). While the private sector has been involved in infrastructure building and large-scale development for years in Africa and Madagascar, what is new is the increasing role foreign agribusiness and mining firms play in small-scale rural sustainable development ([Lyons and Westoby, 2014](#)). Does this reflect a shift from what has been a development sector dominated by NGO and other civil society institutions? What are the emerging politics and material consequences of private sector development? What are the factors driving the promotion of biofuels and what does development look like *after* the biofuel rush?

This article's central aim is to draw attention to the emerging politics emanating from a discursive framing from the private sector of biofuel companies as ‘post-development’ agents. In doing so, this article directly addresses recent calls made for more robust theoretical and empirical focus on private sector development and its various implications in the global south ([Oya, 2013](#); [Scoones et al., 2013](#); [Argent and Measham, 2014](#)). To this end, I investigate the effects of the rise and fall of biofuel development through a case study of a medium-size British-owned startup called Vertifuel. Madagascar's seemingly available and cheap rural labour and ‘underutilized’ agricultural savannahs provided a good opportunity for start-ups like Vertifuel to capitalise on the island's expanding liquid biofuel sector. Access to land and labour, however, is not necessarily dependent upon direct exclusionary means of dispossession ([Harvey, 2003](#)) as much of the land-grabbing literature suggests, but rather upon the ‘inclusion’ of Malagasy in small-scale development projects and promises of rural employment ([Gingembre, 2015](#)).⁷ Results show that, over time, Vertifuel's development discourse was framed within an ‘economy of appearances’, defined by [Tsing \(2000, 118\)](#) as ‘the self-conscious making of a spectacle’ used to attract foreign investment, drive favourable investment policy, and moreover, ameliorate any resistance to its presence ([Hunsberger and Ponte, 2014](#); [Tsing, 2000](#); [Jessop, 2004](#)). As with many other biofuel startups across the global south, Vertifuel's lower than expected output and eventual bust was due to a combination of factors including local acceptance of the project,

poor performance of the crops and a sharp drop in global demand ([The Economist, 2015](#); [Hunsberger, 2010](#); [Baka, 2014](#)). Empirical results show that meagre economic benefits were captured by a small group of migrant workers mainly due to their off-season labour availability and by local mayors who were able to negotiate land deals directly with the firm. These results provide fresh insights on the negative implications of homogeneous framing by the private sector of who development beneficiaries are without any critical analysis of socio-economic inequality and distribution.

Theoretically, this work integrates two distinct but relevant sub-fields: the first is political ecology, generally defined as the access and control over vital livelihood resources; and the second, cultural political economy, which examines the performance or construction, dissemination and legitimisation of knowledge around biofuel development ([Neumann, 2005, 1](#); [Peet and Watts, 1996](#); [Leach and Mearns, 1996](#); [Adger et al., 2001](#); [Schroeder, 1999](#); [Jessop, 2004](#); [Tsing, 2000](#)). Central to this task is investigating not just how global discourses and actors' performances surrounding biofuels converge and diverge, but the material implications on local ‘environmental imaginaries’ or “‘truths,” imagination, and discourses through which people think, speak, and experience systems of livelihoods’ ([Peet and Watts, 1996, 37](#)). I explore the ways in which biofuel discourse is operationalised within ‘geographic space at the margins’ ([Moore, 2000:409](#)). This analysis helps shed light on the ways place-specific biofuel commodity production restructures ‘material relations and condition[s] of rural life’ including organising new divisions of labour and upending local customary land tenure relations ([Cocklin et al., 2002, 2](#) quoted in [Argent and Measham, 2014](#)).

1.1. Methodological considerations

Research from this article is based on two successive trips to biofuel sites in the Boeny Region in Madagascar's northwest Province of Mahajanga in 2012 and 2014.⁸ During this time, over 116 socio-economic surveys and semi-structured interviews were carried out with rural inhabitants and migrant labourers and 26 in-depth interviews with key informants including firm operators, plantation managers, local mayors and business elites.⁹ Discourse analysis and secondary economic data were compiled with the assistance of project managers and administrators of the National Land Offices and policy makers within Malagasy civil society groups. For comparison, primary and secondary data was collected from six other biofuel firms, some of which are still active and others which are now suspended or non-operational.

The bulk of the semi-structured interviews were conducted with rural inhabitants who self-identify with the Sakalava and Betsileo ethnic groups.¹⁰ Although ethnically distinct, these two groups have coexisted over a large geographic range across the northwest and central regions of Madagascar for hundreds of years. As we see below, their different livelihood strategies – the Sakalava are mainly cattle herders while the Betsileo are primarily rice growers – are one of a host of factors (labour availability, wage, access, connections) influencing individuals' ability, or willingness, to participate in biofuel development schemes.

⁵ I use the term land acquisition to denote land bought or rented for biofuel land deals.

⁶ Since new elections were finally held in 2014, there has been a slow trickle of foreign aid finding its way back into the country, though rural areas of agribusiness production have seen little of it.

⁷ Much of the critical literature on recent land accumulation draws on Marx's oft-cited primitive accumulation or Harvey's related theory of ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ which is defined as a host of violent processes (forced evictions, privatization of land, formation of exclusive property rights etc.) that displace rural populations, divorcing them of their means of production in order to create a wage-labour class ([Harvey, 2003, 145](#)).

⁸ Names of firms and informants reported were anonymised.

⁹ This was done with the skillful assistance of 6 locally hired Malagasy researchers.

¹⁰ The Sakalava (est. pop. 700,000) are one of the ‘group of 16’ smaller ethnic groups who inhabit Madagascar, whereas the Betsileo (est. pop. 2 million) are second only to the Merina in total population.

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