

The political ecology of forest plantations in the Global South

– Analyzing stakeholder perceptions about monoculture plantations in
[a case of your choice]



Context

Under the label of “green development” forest plantations in the Global South have been established in order to maximize the economic productivity of forest areas. Forest plantations are often monocultures and typically follow one specific purpose: producing either rubber, timber or palm oil. Lately, they have also been framed as sinks for carbon emissions. However, the plantations frequently cause new conflicts at the local level as they frequently exclude local people from accessing and using the forest despite people’s livelihoods depend on them. Moreover, plantation forestry has often resulted in negative environmental impacts due to the selection of exotic species or the use of agrochemicals such as glyphosate.

Forest plantations are either planted by government agencies or private companies that hold a license from the respective government. In many developing countries, like e.g. Brazil, India or Uganda, governments promote the involvement of private actors, which leads to a more complex actor constellation during the implementation.

In order to better understand the causes and dynamics of environmental conflicts that arise from forest plantations, it is important to study the power imbalances different interpretations about forests and nature of stakeholders at the local level. The analysis will use the theoretical starting point of political ecology to compare the contrasting claims, perceptions and interpretations about forest areas in order to show the political dimension of forest plantations.

Political ecology examines ecological distribution conflicts, for example over access to natural resources or services. Furthermore, it is the study about power imbalances and emphasizes the role of knowledge and discourses in environmental conflicts. Scholars of political ecology conduct research about the interaction between people’s needs and livelihoods and nature as a resource and sinks. In addition, this approach asks for the newly emerging winners and losers of natural resource management in a historical and social context.

Possible case studies could be located in Africa, Latin America or Asia and could focus on land use conflicts and livelihood impacts caused by industrial monoculture plantations or reforestation projects labeled as carbon forestry projects.

Possible research questions

What are the social and ecological impacts of the forest plantations in...?

- How do different stakeholders perceive the plantation?
- How are problems framed by different stakeholders?
- Which narratives and counter-narratives can be identified?
- Whose knowledge counts?

Methods:

Qualitative social science methods: qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis

Possible Data:

- Relevant secondary literature, project documents and gray literature (NGO reports, newspaper articles, blog posts, etc.)
- Qualitative expert interviews and field visit (master thesis)

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