

# **Accumulation by development: The key role of poverty reduction narratives for resource capture in rural Cambodia**

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## Summary

While global poverty reduction has become a central goal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is striking how often the term has been clearly abused to legitimize questionable development projects. This paper reflects on the key role that development and poverty reduction narratives, policies and projects can play for processes of resource capture and accumulation in Cambodia. Informed by a close study of various resource conflicts, registered in the Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas), several processes are identified, through which poverty reduction and development efforts may turn into key strategies for the accumulation of natural resources by powerful Cambodian elites; who in turn claim to reduce poverty and to contribute to developing their country. The paper refers to these accumulation processes, in which poverty and development narratives are central, as 'accumulation by development'.

Among the processes, described in detail in the paper, are: 1) Abuse of a poverty crisis and an emergency state to justify the implementation of questionable development projects; 2) Simplification of multidimensional poverty to reductionist income/employment approaches; 3) Systematic overestimation of project benefits (i.e. local jobs, produced public goods, taxes); 4) Systematic underestimation of negative impacts (i.e. environmental and social impacts); 5) Turning pro-poor policies into barriers of access to resources (e.g., land-titling programs); 6) Turning economic means (i.e. development projects) for poverty reduction into hidden political ends of resource accumulation; and 7) Turning political ends of development policies (i.e. poor people) into economic means for elites (i.e. cheap labor).

The EJAtlas offers an excellent platform to create public awareness on such cases in which poverty reduction policies have been clearly abused. The Atlas further allows to go beyond seeing such cases as separate stories, by identifying common dynamics and processes, such as the seven processes of 'accumulation by development', presented in this article. While the paper does not claim that these processes are always present in development projects, it argues that they may be present either partly or entirely, as hidden agenda that may support the accumulation of wealth by powerful elites, while leading to the dispossession of people from valuable natural resources. As such they provide a critical conceptual lens to reflect on the motives, uses and abuses, and impacts that poverty reduction and development policies may have on poor people and the environment.

## Keywords

Cambodia, land grabbing, accumulation by dispossession, primitive accumulation, poverty reduction, Economic Land Concessions, EJAtlas

## 1 Introduction

*“The activities of tearing down the homes... is not an eviction but just an effort to clear the area for development”* Mann Chhoeun, Phnom Penh Deputy Governor, Cambodia, as cited in a LICADHO report in May 2009 (Licadho, 2009).

Poverty eradication has become a central societal goal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not at least thanks to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that pushed it upfront in the global development agenda. ‘Poverty reduction’ as a term and as an objective has then also become something that not only governments claimed to pursue with respective development policies, but also national and multinational private entrepreneurs, who have been increasingly perceived as relevant partners in combating global poverty. While surely many of such public policies and private interventions could bring positive transformations among communities in need for change, it is also striking how often poverty reduction as a term and discourse has been clearly abused, in order to legitimize the implementation of so-called development projects with truly questionable impacts. Many of such projects did not bring any benefits to ‘the poor’, but on the contrary, have made their life a nightmare. The claimed ‘reducers of poverty’ – private companies and public law makers – have however carried away large benefits, while claiming to have alleviated poverty and/or developed the country, as the introductory example statement shows (Licadho, 2009). This paper details how ‘poverty’ and more broadly ‘development’ have become key terms in the language of Cambodia’s elite and their activities of capitalist accumulation - coming at the cost of ‘the poor’.

Critiques on development theory and practice are longstanding. Many of them are found under the paradigm of ‘post-development’, going back to the 1980s, centrally criticizing how the development discourse was constructed by the West to dominate the so-called ‘Third World’, replacing historical colonialist and imperialist regimes (Escobar, 2000). David Harvey’s (2004) concept of accumulation by dispossession, which revisited Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation (Marx, 1887, pp. 506–547) within the current context, found widespread adoption among scholars to analyze how neoliberal development projects have been pushed forward by global development institutions such World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under claims of improving the public good. However, as he argues, they have centrally served capitalist accumulation stagnated in the cores of the world economy, to expand globally through old (i.e., dispossession) and new strategies (i.e. privatization). This article aims to reflect on how particularly poverty reduction narratives, often closely linked to a broader discourse of developing poor countries, can play a very significant role in legitimizing processes of accumulation by dispossession, while causing resource conflicts. I refer to these accumulation instances based on resource capture, for which a language of anti-poverty and development has been key in their establishment, as ‘accumulation by development’.

Accumulation by development, as argued in this article, becomes possible due to a series of processes and strategies that enable turning ‘poverty reduction efforts’ into vehicles and paths for accumulation by dispossession. These processes, whose detailed description and empirical illustration

present the core material of this paper, are: 1) The abuse of a poverty crisis to legitimize the implementation of questionable development projects that reorganize property regimes and production paradigms; 2) The simplification of the multidimensional nature of poverty to a reductionist income/employment perspective that clothes development projects as beneficial to the poor; 3) The systematic overestimation of project benefits (i.e. locally provided jobs, produced public goods, taxes) to claim improvement of the public good; 4) The systematic underestimation of negative project impacts (i.e. environmental and social impacts) to conceal deterioration of the public good; 5) The turning of pro-poor policies into either barriers of access to resources for the poor, or into new vehicles of control over resources by local elites (i.e. land titling programs); 6) The turning of economic means (i.e. projects) of development interventions into hidden political ends; and 7) The turning of political ends of development interventions (i.e. poor people) into economic means for elites (i.e. cheap labor).

The first five processes can be seen as elite's strategies for resource accumulation, while the last two are central outcomes of the interplay between poverty reduction narratives and accumulation processes. These seven processes were observed through a close study of around 50 resource conflicts across Southeast Asia that I have summarized and registered in the Atlas of Environmental Justice ([www.ejatlas.org](http://www.ejatlas.org)). For the purpose of this paper, I will outline and illustrate these processes only within the context of Cambodia's agricultural development policy, which as a common context helps to understand the use and abuse of the poverty reduction narratives at both the policy and the project level. While I do not aim to claim that these seven processes are always present in development policies and projects, I argue that these processes *may* be present, either partly or entirely, as hidden agenda to support accumulation based on dispossession of poor people from their lands in favor of large external capital investments. As such, I hope that these seven processes may serve as critical lenses to reflect on the motives, (ab)uses and impacts that poverty reduction and development policies may have and how elites may capture them to push accumulation processes even deeper into the frontiers of economic development: into the so-called 'underdeveloped' regions and worlds of the so-called 'poor'.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 introduces concepts and empirical materials. Section 3 discusses the five strategies of 'accumulation by development', while Section 4 discusses the outcomes in terms of twisting means and ends. Section 5 concludes.

## **2 Concepts and materials: Accumulation, the EJAtlas and Cambodia**

### ***2.1 Accumulation by dispossession and by development***

Within political ecology, many scholars have commonly framed the study of resource conflicts as linked to the ever growing metabolism of societies, requiring fresh resources for the expanding capitalist world system (Martinez-Alier, 2009, 2002; Muradian et al., 2012). Among the widely used concepts to study current processes of capitalist accumulation in relation to resource conflicts, is Karl Marx's notion of primitive accumulation (Marx, 1887, pp. 506–547), extended and adopted to the current context by David Harvey under the term of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004).

Marx developed the concept of primitive accumulation to describe how the preconditions for capitalist accumulation were created for the first time, i.e. the origins of surplus generation that made accumulation first possible. He referred to it as a *“process which takes away from the laborer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage laborers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it.”*(Marx, 1887, p. 508). While Marx suggested that primitive accumulation was a historical and transitory phase of societies moving to capitalist systems, which then would be replaced by accumulation based on expanded reproduction (i.e., growth), some neo-Marxists scholars suggest that primitive accumulation is a persistent process, central to capitalist accumulation in general and not only in its origin (Glassman, 2006).

Among these scholars has been David Harvey, who argued that primitive accumulation is an ongoing process, specifically relevant to sustain capitalist accumulation in times of over-accumulation through expanded reproduction, requiring new spaces for capital investments. To avoid calling an ongoing process ‘primitive or ‘original’, Harvey proposed to refer to it as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and in doing so added a whole new range of processes relevant to the current capitalist world economy (Harvey, 2004). Accumulation of dispossession spans thus not only into the global South through the expansion of neoliberal policies supported by global organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but also occurs within the global North itself, whereas privatization has become the ‘cutting edge’ of accumulation by dispossession, followed by bio-piracy or the appropriation of intellectual property rights. In summary, accumulation by dispossession can be seen as the expansion of the neoliberal project across the North and South, which typically involves the state as a crucial actor in supporting the expropriation of resources from one class for the accumulation by another class, legitimized through claims of improving the greater public good, for ‘everyone, everywhere’ (Harvey, 2006, p. 146).

The critical analysis of processes of dispossession and capital accumulation within Cambodia’s agricultural development project that are closely linked to a narrative of poverty reduction is the aim of this article. Such processes share features that fit into both notions of primitive accumulation as well as accumulation by dispossession. They share particularly with the first the characteristic of occurring in those areas that nowadays are least integrated into the capitalist market economy. Hence they provoke or deepen the divorce of the producers from their means of production (i.e. land), impose property regimes (i.e. private property rights), while undermining self-sufficiency (e.g. home-production for household consumption) and labor exchange outside the market (for Cambodia see for example Scheidel et al., 2014, 2013). But moreover, dispossession legitimized through poverty reduction narratives also relates much to ongoing discussions under the term accumulation by dispossession; in particular to the expansion of neoliberal policies across the global, which here are targeted at poverty reduction and legitimized through claims of creating a better society, by helping the poor out of their misery.

In the following I do not distinguish in detail between the two configurations of accumulation, but focus generally on those processes in which resource accumulation on the one side and dispossession on the other side are closely intertwined with poverty reduction narratives, embedded in a the broad language of development. I shall refer to these processes as ‘accumulation by development’.

## **2.2 The EJAtlas: a vast collection of ‘development conflicts’**

The Atlas of Environmental Justice ([www.ejAtlas.org](http://www.ejAtlas.org)), hereafter EJAtlas, represents currently the largest, growing inventory of resource conflicts and cases of dispossession. Many of the registered cases can be found to be legitimized by public policies or private actors, claiming them to be so-called ‘development projects’ for the ‘greater good’. On the ground, many of such cases were reported to rather support elite’s processes of resource accumulation. As such the EJAtlas offers a vast database, whose possibilities for research in political ecology need yet to be explored (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

While some of the first articles that are now being published are based on a statistical approach to the EJAtlas data (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016; Özkaynak et al., 2012), this paper takes rather a qualitative approach, by using the inventory to observe how and where narratives of poverty reduction and claims to improve the public good were present in environmental conflicts in ‘poor’ regions. The seven processes of ‘accumulation by development’ described in this article have been identified through a close study of more than 50 environmental conflicts that I have followed and registered in the EJAtlas<sup>1</sup>. The research work on these cases included a detailed study of the project that caused the conflict, which included for each project a review of official governmental documents that supported the projects (laws, policies, concessions, etc.), a review of the company profile (justification of activities, funding sources etc.), formal environmental and social impact assessments before the implementation, real social and environmental impacts after the implementation, the role of protesters and their motives of mobilization and conflict outcomes, among other issues.

The projects reviewed were mainly land conflicts within Southeast Asia linked to the development of large-scale agro-business, but also to hydroelectric dams, mining, and urban infrastructure development. Among the sources of these project reviews were the academic literature, grey literature (reports and statements), official documents and news paper reports. Not all of these conflicts shared all the features of accumulation by development as described below. Some did not share any of these processes, some shared a few, and some shared almost all. As such I also do not wish to claim that these processes are always present in poverty reduction efforts, but they rather should serve as a critical conceptual lens to analyze the motives, uses and abuses of poverty reduction narratives and their potential consequences on resource accumulation and dispossession.

While observed across Southeast Asia, this paper presents and applies the processes to Cambodia’s agricultural development policy. This allows locating them within a common country

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<sup>1</sup> A public visible ID for each conflict cases, something is currently missing in the EJAtlas, would improve how the Atlas could be used as a large inventory to reference conflict cases.

context as well as to track the use of poverty reduction narratives across different levels, in particular at the governmental level (policies and law) as well as at the company level (project justifications and assessments). The next section will present a short overview on Cambodia's agricultural development policy and argue how Cambodia's poverty crisis has been used to implement questionable land use policies and projects.

### **3 Cambodia's agricultural development project: five strategies of accumulation by development**

#### **3.1 'Solutions' to the poverty crisis: Large-scale agro-investment**

Cambodia, being formally classified by the United Nations (UN) as least developed country, faces large socio-economic challenges. Despite of rapid economic growth, the per-capita GDP has been chronically low at 897 current US \$ (2011) and poverty headcount ratios in terms of income below 2 dollars-a-day (PPP) were at 56% in 2007 (World Bank, 2010a). Rural communities have further identified via participatory poverty assessments a variety of other major concerns. Among them have been food insecurity, lacking assets to pay health costs, limited access to education, poor physical infrastructure and particularly increased vulnerability due to lacking access to land and community natural resources (ADB, 2001; Ballard et al., 2007). Being a rural economy, in which 80% of the population lives in rural areas and around 75% of the active labor force works in agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) considered that agricultural development could in fact contribute much more to economic growth and poverty reduction. In their 2004 *Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency in Cambodia*, agriculture was set as a center stone of its overall development policy:

*“Indeed it is necessary to enhance and broaden the base for economic growth by opening and utilizing the potentials in other sectors, **especially in the high-potential agricultural and agro-industrial sectors**, so that the nation will obtain larger positive windfall gains in the **improvement of the livelihoods of the rural people**. 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).*

To achieve this, two kinds of land concession systems have been central; Economic Land Concessions (ELC), to help attracting large-scale agro-business for rural growth, employment creation and tax flow generation on the one hand, and Social Land Concessions (SLC) on the other hand, which should provide land to poor and landless people (Thiel, 2010). ELCs provide exclusive land use rights under a lease contract, formally limited up to 10,000ha for up to 99, whereas in practice the areal limit is commonly surpassed (Vrieze and Naren, 2012). As of late 2015, at least 2.1 million ha came under ELC use<sup>2</sup> and have caused that no less than 700,000 people have been adversely affected by land deals (CCHR, 2013),

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<sup>2</sup> For a breakdown of ELCs into investment purposes and origin, see [http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land\\_concessions/](http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land_concessions/)

including violation of human rights, dispossession and forced evictions (Licadho, 2009; Vrieze and Naren, 2012). SLCs can provide property rights for of up to 0.36 ha for residential purposes and up to 5 ha for family farming purposes (RGC, 2003). While there have been public programs to title SLCs, as discussed in Section 3.5, according to the NGO Cambodian Human Rights Task Force (CHRTF, personal communication) a large share of SLCs however has been granted to private entrepreneurs rather than poor or landless people.

Two things need to be observed here. First, Cambodia has indeed a poverty crisis, which is not only identified by mainstream dollars-a-day measures, but also through participatory poverty assessments. Second, the proposed solution to this crisis is clearly biased towards the establishment of profit-oriented, capital intensive, large-scale agribusiness, as illustrated by the large amount of land granted as ELCs, whereas SLCs have been partly instrumentalised to smooth resistance to dispossession (Neef et al., 2013). This type of agricultural development mirrors common neoliberal development policies (e.g. World Bank, 2010b, 2007) of improving rural incomes and productivity through creating employment and closing the yield gap by industrializing agriculture, based on foreign investment into infrastructure development and technology transfer. However, in practice, the ELC scheme has produced massive conflicts over land and forced evictions, while drastically marginalizing the peasantry (CCHR, 2013; Licadho, 2009; Scheidel et al., 2013; Vrieze and Naren, 2012). Abuses of different emergency states to legitimize the implementation of questionable neoliberal policies are well known from other areas (Klein, 2008; Peck, 2006). In Cambodia, it has been the rural poverty crisis that was taken to legitimize the transformation of the agricultural sector, by reorganizing property regimes and production paradigms to favor external capital investments over small-farmers, dispossessing them from their lands.

### ***3.2 Elite's capture of the definition of poverty reduction: employment, income***

The poverty crisis however is far more complex to solve than by providing new employment and income opportunities, which on the ground have often simply replaced insufficiently former self-employed activities and environmental incomes of smallholders. Monetary income *does matter* for poverty reduction, however, *it does not measure* well poverty reduction (Scheidel et al., 2013). The poverty crisis is a multidimensional crisis, which includes deprivation in many dimensions of life, such as for example in basic needs (Hicks and Streeten, 1979), human needs (Max-Neef et al., 1989), the ability to share the customs of a society (Townsend, 1979), happiness (Rojas, 2008), or the freedom to live a valued and meaningful life (Sen, 1999). Multidimensionality of poverty matters not only in theory but very much in practice, as many studies show that the assessment of what are successful poverty reduction strategies largely depends on the question of 'poor in what?' Improvements in one domain do not necessarily lead to improvements in other domains (Caizhen, 2010; Haveman and Wolff, 2005; Laderchi et al., 2003; Rojas, 2008). But even worse, trade-offs exist, whereas improvements in one dimension, such as increase of short-term monetary income and employment opportunities can be associated to the deterioration of other dimensions, such as health, vulnerability, or asset poverty in the long-term (Carter and Barrett, 2006; 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 reasons, rooted in the origin of poverty studies in the urban North; practical reasons, as income and employment are relatively fast measures, whose methods are already well-developed; as well as ideological reasons and perceptions, as economic measures are sometimes perceived to be more 'objective' than non-economic and qualitative measures of living a fulfilled life (Chambers, 1995; Sumner, 2007). Yet, from the perspective of a capital holding elite, there are also strategic reasons to focus on employment and monetary income for poverty reduction, as these measures provide a type of assessment of development pathways which clearly favors large agro-projects, with defined employer-employee relations and the provision of formal monetary incomes (i.e. as large-scale agribusiness do), over small-scale peasant ways of life, in which much income is environmental and not measured (i.e. forest products, non-marketed food production), in which livelihoods are 'self-employed' and/or do not always appear in employment statistics (i.e. labor exchange), and in which land uses (i.e. agricultural lands, forest uses) are often not recognized and registered in official statistics and public land management information systems (Fox et al., 2009; Thiel, 2010; Work and Thuon, 2016). Defining poverty reduction in terms of increasing employment and formal incomes further also favor the state in their intentions to tax labor, land and incomes to extract surplus from rural areas.

In Cambodia, there are numerous examples of policies and projects that reduce poverty alleviation to increases in income and employment, to be achieved by attracting investment to develop of industries and infrastructure. A policy example is the ELC sub-decree targeting agricultural development, stating among their purposes for which land can be granted *"To increase employment in rural areas within a framework of intensification and diversification of livelihood opportunities"* (sic, RGC, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. While it thus underlines the role of formal employment, the ELC policy has been completely blind to the more than half a million of self-employed farmers who have lost their lands, livelihoods and access to environmental incomes (i.e. resin trees in forests) to make way for ELCs (Scheidel et al., 2013).

A concrete project example is the ELC of Cambodia's Phnom Penh Sugar Company (PPSC), owned by a ruling party senator and business tycoon, which caused one of the most depressing cases of dispossession in Cambodia. 681 families were forcefully evicted, while 1,500 families (around 7,000 persons) were partly or entirely dispossessed from their land. The promised new employment involved cases of child labor. The working conditions have been so dramatically harsh and dangerous that several workers have been killed so far by cane cutting machines. Despite of this depressive performance, the project claims to provide more than 5,000 jobs (and associated incomes), while having brought large infrastructure development based on an investment of 200 million USD. Moreover, the project was able to receive a fixed minimum price on their sugar exports to the European Union (EU), under EU's Everything but Arms (EBA) trade scheme, intended to support the development of least developed countries (see EJAtlas entry for more details)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> EJAtlas entry: <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/blood-sugar-land-grab-by-phnom-penh-sugar-company-kampong-speu-cambodia>

Many other cases across SEA, registered in the EJAtlas, show how in fact the number of people claimed to be employed temporarily in development projects is often similar to those dispossessed forever, losing their self-employed livelihoods. See for example the entries on the Jalaur River Multi-Purpose Project (JRMPP) Phase II Dam, Iloilo, Philippines<sup>4</sup>, or the Nam Ngum 2 dam in Vientiane, Lao PDR<sup>5</sup>. The first claims to produce more than 17,000 temporary jobs during the construction phase, while more or less 17,000 indigenous people need to be displaced forever. The second claims to have produced 6,000 temporary jobs, however also at the cost of displacing 6000 indigenous people.

This elites' capture of definition of poverty reduction, employment, and more broadly development, based on a reductionist approach to multidimensional poverty, favors a positive perception of extractive projects over the perception of people's needs that cloths accumulation projects with humanitarian intentions, while masking people's losses. The simplification of multidimensional poverty to income and employment is what I call the second strategy of accumulation by development.

### **3.3 For the 'greater good' (I): Systematic overestimation of project benefits**

Beyond such reductionist assertions of poverty reduction, the claims to improve the public good for 'everybody, everywhere' can sometimes also take the form of a systematic overestimation or pure invention of project benefits, on which basis a project is granted, however whereas the pursuit of these benefits was seemingly never part of the project's agenda. According to the sub-decree, any ELC can only be granted if they provide and follow a master plan of activities that contribute to the broad goals of the sub-decree of increasing agricultural productivity, creating employment, attracting investment and generating communal, provincial and state revenues through tax flows. Evidence for a massive overestimation of these benefits at the project level is provided by the fact that the government had to cancel a large number of ELCs because they did not follow their promised activities, but rather only used the granted concession to get short term access to log timber resources located on their land, without any intention to further develop the land (Scheidel and Thuon, forthcoming).

An illustrative example for this is the World Tristar Entertainment Concession in the Koh Sla Region, Cambodia<sup>6</sup>. The concession, granted to develop maize bean and cassava plantations, located in one of the poorest areas, provoked hope for many villagers to gain access to additional employment opportunities. However, the company dispossessed people from their land, but did not even develop the land to offer new employment activities. In 2011, the concession was cancelled after an investigation that revealed that the company was involved in illegal logging of Rosewood (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*) inside and outside the concession area. Another example is the 34,000ha Think Biotech reforestation concession, whose sub-decree justifies the extraordinary size (3 times the legal limit of an

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<sup>4</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/jalaur-river-mega-dam-project-philippines>

<sup>5</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/nam-ngum-2-dam-displaced-over-6000-ethnic-minorities-in-vientiane-lao-pdr>

<sup>6</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/world-tristar-entertainment-land-grab-in-the-koh-sla-region-kampot-cambodia>

ELC) in the name of preserving forests, biodiversity and reducing greenhouse gases from slash-and-burn agriculture. The concession is currently driving forest conversion from a diverse secondary forest, cut down to plant a vast acacia monoculture, whereas so far there is no evidence available of how this project could actually contribute to emissions reduction, or biodiversity protection (Scheidel and Work, 2016; Turton and Seangly, 2016). Another example from the Philippines is the Jalaur River Multi-Purpose Project (JRMPP) Phase II Dam on Iloilo<sup>7</sup>. It is a 'large' dam in terms of funds allocated to the project; however, it does not bring the expected benefits. It claims to irrigate an area of 32,000ha, of which 22,400ha were however already irrigated by existing irrigation systems, which seriously questions its added value in relation to the massive costs of construction.

In such cases, the promised benefits remain largely of rhetoric nature, whereas the impacts on the ground are real and of serious concern, affecting people and the environment. Such a systematic overestimation or even pure invention of project benefits in order to increase legitimacy of development projects is what I call the third strategy of accumulation by development.

### ***3.4 For the 'greater good' (II): Systematic underestimation of project impacts***

On the other side of the coin of systematic overestimation of project benefits lies the systematic underestimation of negative project impacts via Impact Assessments (IA), usually conducted prior to the project start and required to achieve green light to move forward. Several degrees of 'underestimation' can be observed. Firstly, gradual concealment: impact assessments that do include all potential dimensions relevant to be assessed, however, where the degree of impact within each dimension is underestimated in comparison to the real impact after project establishment. Secondly, partial concealment: impact assessments that do cover some dimensions, however, arguably not all relevant dimensions. And finally, complete concealment, which refers to impact assessments that were never conducted, or at least were never made available to the public.

Both gradual and partial concealment can be often observed for the construction of large hydroelectric dams. While such projects are not always explicitly linked to a narrative of poverty reduction, they are usually embedded within a discourse of economic development by supporting poor people and economies through the provision of infrastructure, such as electricity and irrigation sources, the generation of temporary and long-term employment during construction and operation phase, and the securing of large investments that would benefit the local and national economy. Flawed impact assessments were reported for example for the Lower Season II Dam in Steung Treng, Cambodia. They were criticized of not following international standards and focusing only on immediate impacts, whereas the impacts of the dam are expected to be of transboundary nature (See EJAtlas entry for more details)<sup>8</sup>. Similar stories were observed for the Xayaburi mainstream dam<sup>9</sup> and the Nam Theun II dam<sup>10</sup>,

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<sup>7</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/jalaur-river-mega-dam-project-philippines>

<sup>8</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/lower-season-ii-dam-will-displace-ethnic-minorities-in-stung-treng-cambodia>

<sup>9</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/xayaburi-dam-laos>

both located in Lao PDR, as well as for the JALAU II mega dam project<sup>11</sup>, the Kaliwan dam<sup>12</sup> and the Laiban dam<sup>13</sup>, located in the Philippines. Other dams, such as Lao's Nam Ngum 2 dam<sup>14</sup>, were reported to not having disclosed impact assessments at all, leading to complete concealment of impacts before construction. (see EJAtlas entries for more details on these cases).

Complete concealment is a big issue regarding Cambodia's ELC scheme. Although the sub-decree requires per law an environmental and social impact assessment in order to grant an ELC, many if not most ELCs were reported to be granted without any impact assessment at all (REFERENCE). Well known examples include the previously mentioned World Tristar Ltd. and the Phnom Penh Sugar company concession, as well as two other sugarcane concessions that received EU's EBA subsidies in Oddar Meanchey<sup>15</sup> and Koh Kong province<sup>16</sup>, in spite of involving forced evictions, child labor and so on. Such a systematic underestimation of depressing consequences, taking the form of different degrees of concealment of project impacts, can be interpreted as a relevant step taken by project holders to avoid blurring their claims that their development projects would improve the public good, while legitimizing their own processes of resource capture. I call this the fourth strategy of accumulation by development.

### ***3.5 Do the twist: Turning pro-poor policies turn into barriers of access to resource for poor and into vehicles of access to resources for the rich.***

The fifth strategy of accumulation by development is the turning of pro-poor policies into either barriers of access to resources, or even into vehicles for further resource accumulation by powerful elites. In comparison to the more general agricultural development policies and projects discussed above, legitimized through a poverty reduction narrative, I refer here particularly to those measures and policies that have been explicitly designed for the poor, in order to support their physical, economic or institutional situation. I will take the example of Social Land Concessions (SLC), introduced in Section 3.1, which according to the sub-decree are *“legal mechanism[s] to transfer private state land for social purposes to the poor who lack land for residential and/or family farming purposes”* (RGC, 2003).

An example of how this policy has turned into a barrier of poor people's access to resources is Cambodia's LASED program (Land Allocation for Social and Economic Development), financed with around 13 million USD by the World Bank (ca. 11 million USD) and Germany's technical assistance

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<sup>10</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/nam-theun-2-hydropower-dam-on-indigenous-land>

<sup>11</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/jalaur-river-mega-dam-project-philippines>

<sup>12</sup> EJAtlas entry: <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/kaliwa-dam-new-centennial-water-source-project-ncws-quezon-philippines>

<sup>13</sup> EJAtlas entry: <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/laiban-dam-new-centennial-water-source-project-ncws-quezon-philippines>

<sup>14</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/nam-ngum-2-dam-displaced-over-6000-ethnic-minorities-in-vientiane-lao-pdr>

<sup>15</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/forced-evictions-and-land-grabbing-for-sugarcane-plantations-oddar-meanchey-cambodia>

<sup>16</sup> EJAtlas entry: <http://ejatlas.org/conflict/land-grabbing-and-forced-evictions-by-koh-kongs-sugar-industry-cambodia>

agency (GIZ). The project, which aimed to allocate 10,000 ha of land to 3,000 poor families, was implemented between 2008 and March 2015 (Licadho, 2015; World Bank, 2014). This massive amount of time and money, reserved to allocate 10,000 ha, is in very sharp contrast to the ease with which the Cambodian government has granted hundreds of thousands of hectares of ELCs during the same period. While many, if not most ELCs, skipped the process of conducting social and environmental impact assessments before granting, the LASED program conducted them with much care, requiring large funds to pay consultants and infrastructure developers, as well as much time, during which the government granted massively ELCs. Following an investigation on the program's effects on the ground, right group Licadho concluded that much, if not half of the granted SLC land was not fertile and of poor soil quality, including rocky and sandy soils, for which reason many farmers have been de facto unable to make use of their SLC and face now food security threats. This however has put them further into a difficult legal situation, because they only receive official land titles, if they also start to cultivate the land within a short period after granting (Licadho, 2015). While the participants have been waiting for years to receive their SLC, they find themselves - 7 years later - in a situation in which they are still without secured access to fertile land. Meanwhile, land has become a very scarce resource on the country level, due to the massive granting of ELCs (Scheidel et al., 2013). In spite of these facts, both the World Bank and GTZ describe the project as a success to be scaled-up, with significant positive impacts on the rural poor (Licadho, 2015).

Two other examples illustrate how the SLC policy has been turned into a *de facto* vehicle of granting access over natural resources to local and national elites. The first example comes from Pursat province, where a commune chief has been accused by several villagers of illegally clearing a forest, used by the community. It turned out that the commune chief was clearing this forest in order to grant it as 'SLCs' to other local elites, who wanted to establish small-scale fruit and cassava plantations (author's field notes, 2015). Whether this land can, or has been, really transferred as a Social Land Concession remains doubtful, however, the use of the SLC framework enabled both the commune chief and local elites to enter into business and to access land, at least for some years. On the country level, there are further examples of how SLCs are producing local land conflicts between newcomers who were granted an SLC and former villagers<sup>17</sup>. An even more illustrative example is however the fact that some family members of the highest ranking ruling party ministers own a Social Land Concession! While these persons are surely not the poor farmers that were initially targeted by the policy, there are 'loopholes' in the SLC sub-decree, which can make them legal holders. Obviously, it dismisses the legitimate purpose of the policy to provide land to poor people in need and rather converts the policy into just another tool for elites to gain access to valuable natural resources.

#### **4 Outcomes: means and ends turned upside down**

The previous section has identified several processes through which development and poverty reduction narratives, policies and projects have turned into strategies and tools to legitimize so-called

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/social-land-concessions-climb>

development projects that should benefit the poor, which however on the ground have resulted in very questionable impacts on the poor, while benefitting largely a small but powerful elite. This section closes the article by summarizing these outcomes under the heading of two consequences of accumulation by development; firstly, how the 'means' of poverty reduction efforts, i.e. development projects, turn apparently into new ends of accumulation; and secondly, how the supposed ends of poverty reduction efforts, i.e. poor people, are turning apparently into means for developments projects.

#### **4.1 Means to ends: poverty reduction projects turn into new vehicles of resource accumulation**

In the introduction to his article "After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?", Immanuel Wallerstein explains how in 1900, the French used to employ the expression "*mise en valeur*" when referring to "*development*" of their colonies. *Mise en valeur* means literally "*making into value*" and as an expression and metaphor it refers to "*to exploit, draw profit from*" (Wallerstein, 2005). While this somehow represents the European view on the meaning of economic development of their colonies at that time, it also invokes the need to ask the question of '*development for whom?*' According to the French colonialists, development was not something that in the first place was created to benefit people native to the colonies, but rather to benefit the colonialist nations in control over them. This is in line with post-development thoughts (Escobar, 2000).

Nowadays, the motives behind the goals of global poverty reduction measures differs to the colonial version of development as it has turned into the 'world biggest promise' (Hulme and Scott, 2010), in which the beneficiaries of poverty reduction narratives, policies and projects, should only be the poor themselves. The legal framework for Cambodia's land and agricultural sector, would actually allow for providing some benefits to the poor, if implemented in a participatory and respectful manner, that put's the poor's needs first. But projects within these frameworks, as illustrated in this article with the many cases registered in the EAtlas, are rather designed to maximize profits for few, capital holding elites. These projects, supposed and claiming to support development for 'poverty reduction', then completely lose their role to do so and their purpose becomes much closer related to the French colonial meaning of development, in which the main beneficiaries of such policies are national and international elites who control, implement and operate such projects. Hence, they are turning from means for poverty reduction into new ends of resource accumulation.

#### **4.2 Ends to means: poverty reduction and poor people turn into rhetoric and economic means for elite's resource accumulation**

Recognizing accumulation as the real end of many of Cambodia's agricultural development projects for 'poverty reduction', it remains than to discuss the role that the former ends of these policies and projects - 'poverty reduction' and the 'poor' – are taking within these accumulation projects.

Regarding the aim of 'poverty reduction', what remains then is a mere rhetorical use of the narrative, in order to turn it into an important means of legitimization for accumulation projects, as argued above. The elites' capture of the narrative of poverty reduction has allowed pushing resource accumulation projects even deeper into the current frontiers of economic development: the regions of the monetary income poor subsistence communities, whose livelihoods operate to a substantial degree outside the cash economy. Processes of dispossession have followed, in which hundreds of thousands subsistence farmers have lost land under a rhetoric of transforming 'underutilized land' into productive land in order to enable "*the agriculture sector to serve as the dynamic driving force for economic growth and poverty reduction*" (RGC, 2004, p. 13). Primitive accumulation has occurred, whereas land has been turned into capital, farmers into wage labor (for neighboring Laos see e.g. Baird, 2011), and the subsistence economy has been increasingly transformed into a market-based economy at the cost of 'self-employed' peasants (Scheidel et al., 2013).

The 'poor' people themselves have become central to these new accumulation projects; not only as a means of justification, but ultimately as they have were turned into cheap labor for these projects. This has become most visible in those cases, in which farmers who had lost their central livelihood asset land became directly dependent on wage labor offered by the company who dispossessed them. Such depressing cases in which farmers ended up as plantation workers on their own land have been observed for example in the ELC projects of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company Koh Kong sugar company, both mentioned above. In both cases, an urgent need for livelihood activities to survive was created by brutal and forced evictions. In the Koh Kong case, the livelihood crisis was further intensified by shooting of poor people's livestock that was grazing on not yet developed company land. These events have created immediate and urgent need for any livelihood activities for survival so that some farmers were forced to accept work on the plantations. The provided jobs however did not follow a logic of providing safe conditions and adequate incomes, but rather followed a logic of minimizing costs in order to maximize benefits, as the facts show that the plantation work involved child labor and even led to people's death in sugarcane cutting machines.

In these cases, the so-called poor, who were supposed to be ends of agricultural development policies have miserably turned into nothing else than economic means, i.e. cheap labor, for accumulation projects. Against the backdrop of such depressing facts, it is needless to say, that all political and intellectual efforts should be pursued to avoid that 'development' and 'poverty reduction' projects continue taking this path.

## 5 Conclusions

*"The government talks about poverty reduction, but what they are really trying to do is to get rid of the poor. They destroy us by taking our forested land, 70% of the population has to disappear, so that 30% can live on". Villager, affected by an Economic Land Concession, as cited in Licadho (2009)".*

No doubt, many poverty reduction projects across the world have brought desired change for many people. However, it is striking how often claims to reduce poverty have been also clearly abused to implement hidden agendas that do not benefit local communities but rather increases their economic hardship. This article has reflected on the key role that different kinds of direct and indirect poverty reduction policies and projects have played for processes of accumulation by powerful elites in Cambodia, at the cost of those who are supposed to benefit from these measures: the poor.

By drawing on empirical examples registered in the Atlas of Environmental Justice, the paper has identified a series of processes through which broadly development and particularly poverty reduction policies and projects have been turned into strategies for resource accumulation. These processes, loosely referred her to processes of 'accumulation by development', include the abuse of a poverty crisis to justify the immediate implementation of questionable development projects; the reduction of the multidimensional poverty concept to a neoliberal version of income and employment; a systemic overestimation of project benefits; a systemic concealment of negative project impacts; and sometimes a tricky twist of turning policies explicitly designed and targeted for the poor into either barriers of access to resources for the poor, or vehicles of access to resources for the local and national elites. Among the major outcomes of these strategies of accumulation by development is a twist of ends and means: development projects, supposed to be means of creating better lives and livelihoods seem to turn into hidden ends of resource accumulation at the very frontier of economic development: the 'poor' and 'underdeveloped' regions. The rhetorical ends of such projects, i.e. poor people as beneficiaries, have often turned into economic means, i.e. cheap labor, to make accumulation projects possible. The stories on the ground that accompany these processes are depressing.

Creation of public awareness and claims for accountability for those projects, in which 'development and poverty reduction has gone the wrong way' is one relevant measure to be taken to help avoiding repetition of such cases elsewhere. The EJAtlas offers an excellent and engaged space to do so, by showing the existence of different realities than those often claimed in formal reports of projects and policies. Furthermore, the inventory also helps to make sense of the single cases by going beyond seeing them as separate case studies, but rather as expressions of systemic dynamics. This is also what this article has tried to offer to the reader; an identification of processes and strategies of accumulation that repeatedly appear across cases. While these processes are obviously not always present in development projects, I hope that their identification may serve as a critical conceptual lens to reflect on the use and abuse of poverty reduction policies and projects; not only in Cambodia, but also in other regions.

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