
Water intensive agricultural growth in North-Africa and changing gendered farm identities and practices: the Moroccan case

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Résumé

Morocco has embarked on a water-intensive agricultural development model, premised on transferring water from lower-value food crops to high-value export crops and the extension of irrigation frontiers. These water transfers are strongly promoted by the national government through subsidies and other kinds of support, and are embedded in a model of green growth that is anchored in the belief that sustainability (manifested most visible in the use of efficient and modern water management technologies such as drip irrigation) can be combined with agricultural intensification. Experiences to date question this belief, as studies show a growing competition over water resources and the rapid expansion of groundwater use, causing groundwater levels to drop dramatically. This puts millions of rural livelihoods at risk. Moreover, the production of high-value crops is premised on cheap and flexible labor much of which is provided by (poor) women, and as such restructures labor and tenure relations along existing gender hierarchies. In sum, the present pathway of agricultural intensification in Morocco appear both unsustainable and inequitable.

In light of these changes, the present article aims to shed light on the social and ecological impacts of water-based agricultural growth models. It looks at how contemporary processes of agricultural intensification in Morocco re-pattern (gendered) relations of agricultural production (tenure and labour), focusing both on relations between different people and on those between people and water. It aims to do so, firstly, through an in-depth examination of different possible farming and water use configurations and their respective gender arrangements in two areas facing water intensive agricultural dynamics (the southern province of Tinghire, and the Saïss region situated mid-north of Morocco). Based on these findings, the article aims to produce a palette of stories of change and illustrate what water intensive agricultural transformations mean for whom. By doing so, it illustrates how various rural actors creatively re-negotiate the rules of the game for their own purpose, reinventing farming identities and practices in the process. The findings illustrate diversified and pluralized imaginations of future pathways for agricultural development with a special attention to those that are sustainable and social just.

Mots-Clés: North Africa, water, intensive agricultural growth, gender, labour, alternative futures

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