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# Adapting to what? The Political Ecology of Sugarcane Plantation in an Upper Egyptian Village

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## Résumé

Sugarcane production in Upper Egypt provides a case study to explore the delicate relation between free markets forces and state control under neoliberalism. On the one hand, sugarcane is the only year-round cultivated cash crop that was in a sense protected from the deregulation of the Egyptian agriculture sector, for the government still contracts harvesters and buy sugarcane at a fixed purchase price ever year. On the other hand, harvesting sugarcane highly depends on a deregulated free market to secure agricultural inputs needed to harvest the crop. Indeed, farmers suffer from the high costs of sugarcane cultivation (e.g., irrigation costs, high prices of chemical fertilizers, uncertain access to bank loans), and the limited return given the increasingly low purchase price set by the Egyptian Sugar and Integrated Industries Company. In the meantime, new actors, precisely foreign investors, are emerging to either export sugarcane to Egypt or to create an industrial market for the sugarcane surplus. This uneven, problematic and uncertain contractual relation has thus far received little scholarly attention. Drawing on archival research and fieldwork with members of the Sugarcane Production Alliance in an Upper Egyptian village located in Luxor governorate, this paper analyses the concept of "adaptation" in the context of sugar cane production. Taking a political ecology approach, which address the relational, contextual and network-based nature of agricultural production, I argue that the notion of adaptation here encompasses a variety of meanings that include, but not limited to, adapting to environmental challenges (e.g. water scarcity, soil degradation, biodiversity), political changes (e.g. state policies, purchase price), and market forces (e.g. agricultural inputs, labor arrangement, bank loans, emergence of foreign investors). Ultimately, this paper provides ethnographic evidence to how the process of control grabbing takes place, which in that case is illustrated by the power of private sector and foreign investors to partially control the sugarcane plantation process and accumulate profit. Last but not least, it contributes to an emerging body of multispecies ethnographies that seeks to understand everyday struggles, political conflicts and economic uncertainties, while considering the relation between farmers and the landscape they inhabit.

**Mots-Clés:** political ecology, adaptation, sugarcane plantation, upper Egypt, control grabbing

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