
Renewable energy, land grabs and the political economy of authoritarianism

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Résumé

In the Middle East and North African (MENA) region renewable energy is framed as a progressive technology that is a solution to climate change and an additional source of revenue for the region's economies. Across MENA there are reports of major solar and wind projects that reduce the internal consumption of hydrocarbons and export energy to markets abroad. Most of the literature on the green energy shift approaches the subject from a technocratic or normative perspective and there is dearth of critical interrogation of these projects and their developmental benefits. Often the technology is fetishised and assumed to be a positive as a result of its modernising influence.

One issue that has been occluded is the consumption of land as green energy and particularly solar power require large open spaces. The repurposing of land as a source of energy production, in contrast to hydrocarbon based energy, reintroduces a tension over land that has largely been absent since the industrial revolution. According to Tilzey: "land again becomes the principal contention as the basis for either the production of renewable energy, or for the production of food" (Tilzey, 2018: 199). Moreover it places greater demand on existing farmland and resources.

This creates several questions over land use in North Africa. How does this affect the rights of marginalised smallholders? While the land used for these projects is presented as arid desert land they feature agrarian users such as pastoralists or farmers on the political, ecological and economic fringes. What does the use of these areas represent for other land users, both in the present and historically?

How do these projects represent special "zones" that have been seen elsewhere in the built environment and rural space in the region that feature specific forms of regulations and labour conditions. According to one study, these represent forms of "spatial and political-administrative exceptionality ... that allow political and economic actors to exercise authority and commercial power," (McEwan, 2016: 2). This manifestation of new forms of governance and political power in the Middle East has precedent in the form of enclosures that were previously established in the extractive industry.

Lastly another question is the manner that capitalist agriculture and renewable energy interact. There is much evidence from across North Africa to suggest that land grabs and agriculture enclosures have utilised renewable technology in order to lower the costs of hydrology.

This research will adopt a qualitative methodology that will use semi-structured interviews and secondary sources such as media, company reports and NGO reports. It will focus on projects in Egypt and Morocco.

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Mots-Clés: Renewable energy, North Africa, environment, political economy, agrarian change