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Title:

Land and capabilities under global change: the case of Northeast Madagascar

Abstract:

Globalisation of land is a reality in much of the African continent. The opening up of national land markets to foreign investment, implementation of biodiversity conservation schemes managed by international conservation NGOs or increasing flows of international trade on land-based commodities provide vivid examples of this intensifying trend. However, while some of these processes have received attention from researchers and development practitioners, knowledge gaps remain in our understanding about how these dynamics affect local well-being. To advance towards a better comprehension of the interplay between global socio-economic processes and local realities, in this paper, we present results from a well-being assessment conducted in two study landscapes of Northeast Madagascar. Concretely, we explore local understandings of a 'good life' through the capability approach, first presented by Sen (1999) and further developed by Nussbaum (2000).

Our study region illustrates the implications that some of these global processes might have on local contexts for two main reasons. First, its status as a global biodiversity hotspot has led in recently decades to the creation of several externally-funded protected areas including much of the forests occurring here. While the objectives of these initiatives were to secure conservation of biodiversity and carbon sequestration, these developments have also led to the closure of the forest frontier and a significant strain on communities' livelihoods living in the area. Second, within Madagascar, the Northeast is a prime location for cash crop production for the international market. In this regard, vanilla and clove, the two main cash crops in the area, have recently experienced a sharp price spike in global markets, which is driving rapid changes in both local well-being and in the landscapes of the region.

Main findings of this research include the realisation that capabilities of local populations show a bundled character, meaning that changes in one well-being aspect might trigger changes in a whole set of capabilities. More crucially, these insights also suggest that these dynamics might give rise to trade-offs between capabilities, where an aspect locally considered crucial for having a 'good life' might improve at the expense of others and vice versa.