

# Decentring bioeconomy: green extractivism, fractured social relations, and forsaken responsibility in rural Ghana

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## Abstract

Green extractivism questions the framing of land-intensive projects as compatible and essential for climate action. The need to unpack how green extractivism projects emerge and how their impact on existing land users, as capital moves towards new frontiers in pursuit of further accumulation, is increasingly gaining attention in global development thinking. However, the roles which institutions in host countries play in institutionalising the regimes of dispossession to further green extractivist projects remain underexplored in the literature. A regime of dispossession is the established framework and approach for redistributing resources and may range from cooperative to coercive strategies. A poor understanding of how local institutions enable, impede, or reproduce such mechanisms confounds any attempt to develop critical stops, gaps, or pathways to overcome conflicts that characterise many green extractivist projects in many African countries. Therefore, our paper seeks to contribute to unravelling this puzzle by analysing the African Plantations for Sustainable Development plantation project, framed from the onset as a “sustainable bioenergy” intervention.

The APSD emerged in Ghana in the late 2000s, appropriating 82,000 ha of arable land in Ghana’s fragile transitional landscape and dispossessing several marginalised communities. The company operates primarily in Ghana’s Atebubu-Amantin Municipal and Sene West District, where it has established nearly 9000 ha of monoculture eucalyptus plantations. Data were collected through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with people (56) in communities and hamlets within and around the APSD lease area. This was complemented by interviews with public officials (8), traditional leaders (7), non-governmental organisations (3) and a company representative. The interviews traced APSD’s acquisition of the community lands, associated promises, and the mechanisms it uses to exclude communities from its operational area. Consistent with our analytical framework, we found that the APSD employed a mix of normative persuasion, material compensation, and coercion, gravitating towards the latter as local communities resist their dispossession and the company’s broken promises. Fissures in consent as a bridge between legal and illegal land transfer enabled indigenous chiefs to dismantle communal land relations with tacit state support; the latter acts in alliance with APSD to impose regulations and supply military officials to forestall active resistance from the affected communities. The dynamism of the conflict imperils peace and security in an already fragile landscape, comparatively neglected by the Ghanaian government in development actions. Moreover, our analysis demonstrates how the regimes of dispossession play out at the intersection of state and traditional authorities in a financialised economy to enable foreign investors to dispossess and fix local communities in

specific spaces and exploit them. We unpack the fluid and exploitative nature of power relations in the polycentric context within which the APSD operates, provide a reality check and lessen global actors' packaging of bioenergy plantations and related bioeconomy projects as sustainable. We argue that addressing the burdens the APSD and related projects impose on local communities lies at the intersection of decolonising the traditional authorities' role in land allocation and building alliances that transform consent, as a one-off instrument for land enclosures, into a recursive phenomenon. Within the broad debates on land, development, conflict, and peace, our recommendation contradicts the current prescription articulated by neoliberal institutions. However, it appears essential for tackling green extractivism, safeguarding community land rights, and ensuring land-related investments provide equitable outcomes.

Keywords: land-use conflicts, rural development, bioeconomy, environmental justice