Between a Rock and a Stormy Place: from Overheating to Expulsion in Subic Bay (Philippines)

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the dynamics behind recent land and water appropriations in Subic Bay (Philippines). The communities adjacent to the former US Naval Base Subic Bay have undergone major transformations since the US military left in 1992. Through the establishment of a Freeport Zone, the area has become a hub for foreign direct investors seeking to profit from the Philippines’ low labour costs. Today, the most important investor in Subic is a South Korean conglomerate that has built one of the largest shipyards in the world in the area. The shipyard, providing labour to tens of thousands of workers, has also led to the dislocation of hundreds of subsistence fishers. With their old fishing grounds lost due to increasing pollution and newly established water boundaries, these villagers find that both the land and water they depend upon are increasingly becoming a scarce good.

KEYWORDS Dispossession; land; water; environment; crisis; Philippines

Introduction: a million dollar view

‘It looks so peaceful here, doesn’t it? But so much is going on … ’ In early 2014,1 I found myself walking down a particular gravelled path for the first time, past a number of grazing goats, into a small settlement on the rural outskirts of Subic Town. ‘Make sure to take in the Million Dollar view’, Monica,2 one of the KPD activists3 who accompanied me that day was joking. We gazed down at the Subic Bay, which lay in front of us in all its bright-blue glory on this sunny morning. The destination of our walk was the hut of Lucy, a key contact in this fishing village for the leftist activists. Soon enough, we spotted Lucy’s wooden shack amongst those of her neighbours and found the young woman resting in her humble residence, her new-born child on her arm. Just a few days earlier, her baby had arrived, weeks early and born via a C-section, a fact that Lucy readily attributed to the stress she had experienced over the last few months. She and everyone around her were facing an eviction from their tiny parcels of land close by the sea, even though they had only come to settle on them at the behest of the government five years earlier: ‘Finally our mango trees our blooming, and now they want us to leave again!’

Land and water are key natural resources that have come under great pressure in the Philippines over recent decades. The widespread dispossession experienced by peasants
in the Philippines has been the subject of quite a few reports (e.g. Franco and Borras 2007; Borras and Franco 2011; de la Cruz 2011; Salerno 2011; Manahan et al. 2014). Filipino subsistence fishers, however, often find themselves denied access to both land and water, with their dire circumstances also a symptom of the accelerating deprivation of the coastal ecosystems they depend upon (e.g. Dunaway and Macabuac 2007; Eder 2009; Cabral and Aliño 2011). Small-scale fisher communities, it has been argued, may be exceptionally placed to facilitate a ‘serious transition towards an ecologically and socially just food regime’ (Buxton et al. 2014). Their fishing techniques tend to do much less harm to local ecosystems than corporate seafood regimes that favour large-scale commercial fishing, and their usage of coastal areas typically leaves much less damage behind than industrial and recreational (i.e. touristic) engagements with shorelines (Franco et al. 2014: 15ff). However, these potential ecological benefits of subsistence fishing are rarely appreciated, and Philippine fisher communities such as the one I describe here increasingly find themselves crowded out by a combination of exogenous social, environmental and economic processes that are symptomatic of an ‘overheated’ globalisation (Eriksen 2012).

To be sure, the squeeze on land and water is felt differently in various locations. The post-colonial specifics of Subic Bay, with its business-friendly environment that has attracted a number of foreign direct investors, have significantly increased the pressure on impoverished land- and water-dependent communities in the area. The sitio (village) we visited in Subic in 2014 is a small fishing community of roughly 100 families, located in barangay (district) Cawag of Subic Town, an urban entity of app. 90,000 inhabitants. Together with parts of the Bataan Peninsula, which lies on the other side of the vast body of water that is the Subic Bay, this area has for much of the twentieth century played a crucial role for the US military apparatus overseas. Generations of US sailors stationed at the US Naval Base Subic Bay, for many decades the largest US naval installation abroad, would come to this rocky terrain to conduct military exercises that involved both land and sea. Much unexploded ordnance and contamination is said to have been left behind by the Americans; a serious clean-up, however, was never conducted (Asis 2011).

A number of informal settlers came to this remote part of Cawag during US military times already to make a combined living out of fishing, growing fruit trees and vegetables on their lots, and occasionally selling food and drinks to the US sailors (Mangampo Ociones 2006). Given the good fishing areas nearby and the scarcity of land elsewhere in the Subic Bay area, their numbers would swell after the sailors left in 1992. In the mid-2000s, however, a South Korean company, Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction (an offshoot from the larger Hanjin conglomerate), arrived on the scene, and began to construct one of the world’s largest shipyards in Subic. Hanjin – faced with a rapid decrease in profits in Korea, where it had entered the shipbuilding market in the late 1980s and where labour unrests were slowing down its smaller shipyard in Pusan (cf. Baca 2011) – was looking for a manufacturing site that would allow it to lower production costs. Subic Bay promised to provide cheap labour and amicable conditions to the aspiring Korean FDIs. With Hanjin’s founders already familiar with the area through their subcontracting experiences with the US military, the deal was swiftly closed. Their $1.6-billion investment, which steamed ahead under the presidency of Macapagal-Arroyo, has in the meantime turned Hanjin into the single largest foreign investor in the country. With 26,000 workers employed at the shipyard as of late 2014 (Remo 2015), the shipyard facilities are indisputably the
crown jewels of the Subic Bay Freeport Zone – that is, the state-run special economic zone that has been established to manage the land and facilities left behind by the US Armed Forces.

The Korean project that went ahead from 2006 has altered the physical and social landscape of Cawag, Subic Town in drastic and often unexpected ways. While the shipyard has attracted countless young, male workers from far-flung provinces to the area, leading to a 42.4% population increase in Subic Town alone between 2000 and 2010, at the same time thousands of informal settlers living nearby the shipyard had to make space for its construction after the 300-ha land lease had been signed. What is more, roads were built into the mountainous stretches of Cawag and large power lines put up for the foreign corporation. Once ship production commenced, tens of thousands of workers were bussed to the shipyard on a daily basis, inadvertently triggering an explosion of malaria cases in the Cawag area, as labourers and residents nearby unwittingly became the human hosts for the malaria parasite (dela Cruz 2009; cf. Orejas 2008c; Gonzaga 2010; Orejas 2012).

As a consequence of all these activities, many of the fisher folks in the area now found themselves cut off from the shoreline where their boats were moored (cf. Cullen 2008). The fishing grounds in the vicinity were rapidly becoming a thing of the past, too: While the worsening pollution of the bay and overfishing had already taken its toll on the fish stocks in Subic Bay, circumstances for subsistence fishers were further worsened by the fact that Hanjin was granted a 200-metre no fishing zone around its premises, with its security guards on occasion harassing fishermen even outside of this area (Orejas 2008b).

Many of Cawag’s residents, like the villagers of the sitio I visited, found themselves unprepared to face these major changes that were brought into their locality. Their houses and gardens, situated too closely to the shipyard, were demolished, and they were relocated to higher-lying areas that they often found to be of lower quality than the original land they had lived on, with their access to the sea now seriously hampered (cf. Orejas 2007). And some of the relocation sites that the government had identified for them turned out to be only a temporary solution to the heightened precariousness these people have been facing ever since the Koreans arrived: Incidentally, just a few months prior to my visit to Cawag, in December 2013, another round of eviction notices had been handed out to app. 1000 families living close by the shipyard. This time around, however, it was not the shipbuilder seeking to get a hold of the land, but a private individual with a land title, with speculations running high amongst the residents that he wanted to sell the land for industrial development, once it would be cleared of its current inhabitants. To be sure, Cawag is a prime contender for more industry to settle, with a 600-megawatt coal fuelled power plant to be erected to the left side of Hanjin over the next few years.

The sweeping privatisation and commodification of communal land and water, occurring with ever increasing speed over the last few decades of neoliberal globalisation, is a much commented upon phenomenon that has wreaked havoc in many places (cf. Harvey 2003; Swyngedouw 2005; Heynen & Robbins 2005; Sneddon 2007; Roberts 2008; Li 2009; 2011; 2014; Hall, Hirsch & Li 2011; 2012; Levien 2012; Perreault 2013). In Southeast Asia, as Hall, Hirsch and Li have delved into (2011), landlessness and dispossession have traditionally been a much less severe problem than in other regions of the world. A recent wave of enclosures, however, has significantly altered the picture in this part of Asia, too. Subic Bay, in a way, is an epitome of many of
these heightened conflicts over the commodification of natural resources. Subic, with its intensely successful Freeport Zone plays a key role in ‘the postcolonial fictions of neoliberalization’ (Gonzalez 2010: 64) dominating the Philippines these days, as the vast terrain becoming vacant after the departure of the Americans has by now become the launching pad for foreign corporations seeking to make an entry into this country.

‘The neoliberal perspective triumphed by default [in the Philippines]’, Walden Bello has argued (2009), diagnosing a total lack of alternative visions that could potentially lead to more equitable economic growth in the archipelago. One of the consequences of this endorsement of free market values has arguably been the spiralling out of control of a complex process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) that has had detrimental effects on people’s ability to make livelihoods. With land and water enclosed for the sake of mining corporations (Holden et al. 2011), large-scale environmental conservation projects (Buescher & Dressler, 2012), and for the benefit of industrial conglomerates like Hanjin (Cabral and Aliño 2011), to give just a few examples, people from many corners of the country nowadays find that they cannot make ends meet anymore. Yet, while attention to such conspicuous instances of land acquisitions is indeed much needed, these dramatic cases only offer a partial view into the myriad ways in which dispossession takes place in the Philippines nowadays.

Equally as often, the reasons behind the dispossession of fisher folk and peasants in the country are hard to pinpoint onto one source (e.g. a foreign business) only. Environmental, (geo-)political, demographic and economic factors all play an equally as important role. In the next section, by relaying the story of one displaced fisherman who sought work in Subic, I shall extricate how the squeeze on natural resources in the Philippines occurs through a conjunction of a social, economic and environmental factors. The heavy environmental toll that global capitalism has started to take on our planet, we shall see, comes to act upon the location of Subic and its subsistence fishers in numerous ways. In the third section, I shall further contextualise the difficulties Subic’s fishing communities face by engaging some findings made within the recent land grabbing debate. Finally, I will investigate a missing link between environment and economy, namely the control over one’s immediate environment, and briefly touch upon a curious gender dimension in the local struggle against the enclosures affecting the communities close by the Korean shipyard.

Increasing pressure on natural resources

I heard about Francisco, a fisherman from Masinloc who perished in his late 20s, only years after his death. In April 2014, his uncle was sitting with me in the shade of one of his mango trees in a village on the outer stretches of Masinloc, where he explained to me how the flowers on that tree did not bloom anymore as they used to. The harvest of his family was now often reduced by a third compared to what they were able to collect in the past. Making a living out of fishing, Francisco’s uncle said, had become more difficult, too: Due to the noise and heat created by a coal plant nearby, which was erected in the 1990s, the fish that they previously depended upon were gradually driven away. Young men such as Francisco were first trying to make a livelihood out of further driving into the South China Sea – but overfishing, increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, and the hostile Chinese coast guard often put an end to such attempts. So Francisco did what many other young men from Northern Zambales had done.
before him: he got on one of the many buses that shuttle internal migrants across the province to the next larger urban area, located some four hours away – Subic Bay.

At the Freeport in Subic, Francisco quickly found work; following promises about decent housing and good wages, he became a welder at the Korean shipyard. The reality at the shipyard was rather different from what he had imagined, though. Sharing a room with eight other men while sending his meagre savings back home to his wife, Francisco fell ill with Malaria that he had contracted at his workplace. Francisco died at a clinic a few days after the illness was discovered – there was talk of food poisoning, too, and that the combination had been too much for him. His uncle said, ‘You know, they didn’t even tell us what happened there in Subic. We still don’t know, really. I guess we’ll never find out now.’ After a short pause, he added, ‘development is not for us’, before he fell back into silence.

Many of Cawag’s residents, just like the late fisherman Francisco, are recent arrivals to Subic, whose lives have been deeply affected by the shipyard nearby. They hail from all parts of the archipelago, from various ethnic groups, and from a multitude of urban and rural settings. Most of them were equally as much driven to the area by the prospect of jobs. Others cited different reasons: Nanay Karen, who had already been displaced numerous times since their arrival in Cawag, told me that she was from Metro Manila, but left her informal settlement there because of air pollution: ‘Before moving here, I had a baby that was very sick. The doctor advised us to keep the baby away from dust and pollution, to transfer the baby to a place with fresh air.’ Many of her current neighbours hail from far-flung regions such as Northern Luzon, Mindanao or Visayas, where they abandoned their homes due to civil war, mis-harvest, or the destruction caused by super-typhoons that have become an ever greater problem due to climate change (cf. Tsuboki et al. 2015). Unlike other new arrivals to the Subic area, who tended to flock to the more urbanised areas, however, these migrants chose less populated coastal region of Cawag to live in, which allowed the men in the households to make a living out of fishing, and to delay their incorporation into the wage labour market as they still had that another option to support themselves.

One of the greatest concerns for quite a few of the subsistence fishers that I encountered in the Subic Bay area is indeed whether the rise of heavy industries nearby will entail the demise of their particular form of making a living. The seemingly imminent loss of land and water access figured most prominently in their narratives. In addition to their concrete fears of (repeated) expulsion at the hands of big capital in the area, other less tangible phenomena also contributed to their sense that things were getting worse: The heating up of the seas, which has led to increasingly irregular and violent weather patterns is a major concern that Subic’s fisher folks have voiced to me. The devastating results of overfishing was mentioned frequently, too, together with worries over an expected local raise in sea water temperatures that may come with the new coal plant that is to be built in Subic soon.

It is clear that the cumulative costs of global capitalism keep piling up, and that the more impoverished human populations of our planet bear the brunt of the price to be paid for the ‘Great Acceleration’ (Steffen et al. 2007: 614). The double-bind between unbound economic growth and the survival of our environment that is plaguing our planet has found a troubling local form in the Philippines. In the wake of Super-typhoon Haiyan that left up to 7000 people dead, the country can undoubtedly be considered to be one of the main victims of climate change these days (cf. Kreft et al. 2014). It is, however, also a nation that is increasingly racking up its own CO2-emissions in
order to combat its economic deficiencies (cf. Greenpeace 2014). To solve the country’s huge poverty issues, Foreign Direct Investment has been embraced by a series of neoliberal governments as the panacea to the Philippines’ misfortunes. And in order to become more attractive to foreign businesses like Hanjin, large investments in fossil-fuel-related projects are now deemed necessary. Currently, 17 coal plants (including the coal plant in Masinloc) exist in the Philippines; however, an additional 45 plants, many to be financed through overseas investors, are at various planning stages now (Lagsa 2014; Tupaz 2015). One of these plants, incidentally, is to be erected in Subic Bay, next to Hanjin’s shipyard – a project co-financed by a Taiwanese corporation, which is bound to attract further development to Subic.

The Subic Bay, however, is a body of water that, even without the presence of a coal plant, has already been deeply impacted by environmental degradation in the view of many. The rapid pollution of the sea due to industrial and household waste is an ongoing process that has been verified in the preliminary findings of a study undertaken by Berkman Systems Inc., an environmental management firm that has investigated the air and water quality in the vicinity. In 2012, Danny Piano, president of the Subic Bay Chamber of Commerce, cited the (yet to be published) report: ‘The level of coliform, a bacteria commonly used as an indicator of the sanitary quality of water, is unbelievably high.’ Coupled with the toxic waste legacy left behind by the US Navy, the local waste disposal problem has increasingly turned the bay into a ‘threatened resource’ (Gozaga 2012). When in the summer of 2014 some sections of the bay turned blood-red, due to an iron ore spill at the transshipment stations anchored in the bay that are owned by Brazilian conglomerate Vale, some residents took this as a clear sign that ‘Subic Bay is no longer safe. The water is polluted by industrialization [and] ship building. Environmental protection was ignored because it’s all about money’ (Macatuno 2014).

### Subic expulsions: land and water grabs for foreign capital

After the departure of the US Navy from Subic in 1992, fears of economic stagnation in the Philippines ran high. With the closure of the base, tens of thousands of jobs in Subic Bay were lost overnight, and Subic Bay’s urban centres threatened to become ghost towns. However, soon after the departure of the US Armed Forces, who had to leave the country after the base agreement was not renewed, the abandoned Naval base in Subic was converted into the Subic Bay Freeport Zone (Reyes 2015: 6ff). After some unsuccessful years, during which the Freeport only managed to attract minor investors and found itself embroiled in political conflict (cf. Kirk 1998: 89ff; Bowen et al. 2002), the big break came for the Freeport’s managers with the announcement that Hanjin would build its shipyard here. As a result of this, the Freeport is nowadays the most booming Special Economic Zone in the Philippines. Providing nearly 90,000 people with jobs in 2012, app. 53,500 of the positions within the Freeport could be found in shipbuilding, in the maritime sector, or in other manufacturing industries during that year (Garcia 2013; Subic 2013). With this abundance of jobs in the area, which are truly a scarce resource in the rest of the country, both land and water have increasingly been turned from a common good into a precious commodity.

The recent developments in Subic Bay could easily be understood as the outcome of a diffuse neoliberal process famously termed ‘accumulation by dispossession’ by David Harvey (2003 – for a critique, see Hall 2012) – a coinage which points to a seemingly opaque development that leads to people’s expulsions. The term ‘land grab’ and its
somewhat less famous equivalent of ‘water grab’ (cf. Rulli et al. 2013) on the other hand, point to an ostensibly much more transparent development, where one actor wilfully appropriates these vital resources for their own benefit. ‘Land grab’, unlike the more cumbersome ‘accumulation by dispossession’, has enjoyed much circulation amongst NGO circles over recent decades, but until recently has not been all too prominent in the social sciences. A number of publications, however, such as those published by The Journal of Peasant Studies (see, for instance, Borras et al. 2011; Li 2011; de Schutter 2011; Fairhead et al. 2012; Levien 2012), have sought to change this. Much research in different fields has recently been undertaken to explore the question of large-scale land acquisitions, with the term ‘land grabbing’ perhaps capable of providing a link between seemingly incommensurate disciplines such as anthropology and geophysics. Some environmental ramifications triggered by large-scale land acquisitions, for instance, have recently been explored by geophysicist Eli Lazarus, who argues that even in the wider context of human activities that are changing the surface of the Earth in unprecedented ways [...], land grabs produce singularly rapid transitions in physical environments at vast spatial scales. [...] The rate at which land grabbing consumes large quantities of physical space destabilizes functioning in environmental and social systems alike. (2014: 74)

With most authors taking part in this debate focusing on large-scale agro-business deals, the industrial case presented here may not instinctively fit under this umbrella term. Borras et al. (2012), however, have proposed a triple emphasis on (1) power (as in, who controls the land that is up for grabs), (2) scale (both in terms of land scale, and the scale of capital involved), and (3) crisis, which they argue are decisive criteria that allow the distinction of land-grabbing from other forms of acquisitions (2012: 404). They highlight the convergence of a number of crises in the global arena, and argue that these conjunctures play a key role in the rapid spread of land grabbing in our day and age. Thus, land grabs ‘occur primarily because of and within the dynamics of capital accumulation strategies responding to the convergence of multiple crises: food-, energy/fuel, climate change and financial crisis’ (ibid). To this list, ‘security crisis’ could certainly be added, which for the Philippines, in particular, has become an issue of grave concern in regard to their increasingly tense relations with China, which, for the most part, is a conflict over rapidly dwindling fishing grounds.

Another author who also stresses convergence and conjuncture in the way she has appropriated the term ‘land grabbing’ is Saskia Sassen, whose recent book Expulsions (2014) deals with this matter eloquently. She brings the grab for land together with a number of other large-scale issues (such as fracking, finance capitalism and climate change), all of which are subjects that can no longer be kept within the boundaries of nation-states. These emergent global tendencies, Sassen is convinced, lead down one particular road: toward expulsion. We have reached a new phase of global capitalism, Sassen argues, or rather, are finding ourselves at ‘the systemic edge’ these days, where both old and new capitalist regimes still have a veritable presence in our lives. And ‘the key dynamic at this edge’, she argues, ‘is expulsion from diverse systems in play – economic, social, biospheric’ (211).

Another important voice in the debate on land grabbing is anthropologist Tania Li (see e.g. Li 2009; 2010; 2014). In her article Centering labor in the land grab debate (2011), she points to the often highly asymmetrical labour arrangements forged between land grabbers on the one hand, and the original settlers on the other. In reference to Li’s body of work, Borras et al. (2012) emphasise that there are ‘occasions when
land and cheap labour are needed by capital. In this case, (some of) the occupants of the land are thus incorporated under a variety of institutional arrangements, usually adversely’ (412). Hanjin’s engagement with Cawag’s fisher residents is certainly one example of such an uneasy incorporation. Often, little compensation was paid to the expelled residents, but instead an informal deal was struck that allowed quite a few men of the communities near the shipyard to get jobs. The men’s precarious alliance with Hanjin, however, usually turned out to be rather short-lived. Despising their back-breaking and dangerous jobs as welders that left them with little flexibility, many of them reverted back to fishing within a year or two, only to find that their best fishing grounds had been incorporated into the water terrain that the shipyard claimed for itself.

A missing link between economy and environment

The front of resistance against land grabbing for large-scale commercial businesses, as Borras et al. (2012) have argued, typically runs along two distinct courses: one is the struggle against dispossession through displacement by those who find themselves excluded; and the other is the struggle against exploitation undertaken by the workers that are included in the enterprise. ‘These two fronts do not usually complement each other; they tend to be separate and are at times marked by political tension’ (2012: 413). Cawag’s impoverished residents, however, have repeatedly positioned themselves rather contrary to this claim, as quite a few of the area’s inhabitants have also been involved in ‘Samahan ng mga Manggagawa sa Hanjin Shipyard’ (short: Samahan), the unofficial union at Hanjin that has been founded with the support of KPD activists. It is striking, however, that neither the villagers nor the activists in their midst have framed the rapidly unfolding changes through a third possible line of argument (which Borras et al. also neglect to comment upon): namely, a focus on the environmental consequences triggered by the series of land-grabs. For the most part, the villagers seem to conceptualise their struggle as one over land and labour only, with ‘nature’ becoming the odd one out. This is an interesting omission also because of the plan to build a coal plant nearby, which for a while was a much publicised environmental case due to the persistent lobbying of some active citizens in Subic. Clearly, the role played by activists is crucial in the way a land dispute is ultimately framed, with the KPD and its leftist ideological underpinnings foregrounding class issues over those of the environment.

On occasions, however, nature did become part of villagers’ speech about their difficult lives in the shadow of the Korean shipyard, and it was usually expressed by conveying a sense of loss of control over one’s immediate natural surroundings. ‘Before Hanjin, we were not in trouble. We were in peace with our environment.’ This statement, made by Nanay (Mother) Nelly, one of the older village residents I spoke to, points to the modesty of their lives before Korean ‘development’ arrived. The settler’s inclusion into the state’s infrastructure has always been rather patchy, so until recently, their reliance on the natural resources they found in their immediate environment was much greater than today. As no paved road was available in this particular area prior to Hanjin’s arrival, any trip to Subic Town could only be undertaken by boat, and the 30-minute boat ride to town was only possible during good weather conditions. During the rainy season or when a typhoon was in the area, they had to make a three-hour long foot journey to town instead.
Everything would change once Hanjin started building their shipyard in the vicinity, however. The construction was not officially announced to the villagers, instead ‘we just saw that there were movements in the area, the mountain was being flattened and there were workers’. The inclusion into the road network of Subic town seemed like a welcome improvement at first, and so was the fact that some motorbike taxis would now make their way to their area. The arrival of so many jobs, too, ‘at first seemed like a gift from God’, as one resident put it. However, the disturbances to the environment nearby also led to the acceleration of another, more insidious development: the malaria numbers in the region suddenly exploded. In 2009, for instance, a record number of 2277 cases of malaria were reported in Subic Town; this small municipality during that year accounted for a stunning 90% of all malaria cases in Central Luzon (Orejas 2012), with Dr. Esther Evangelista, the hospital administrator of the nearby town of Castillejos, commenting: ‘When they constructed the shipyard, it disturbed the environment. And then as more people went there to work, some of them got sick. It still happens to this day’ (Gonzaga 2010).

Not only were the informal settlers nearby the shipyard gravely affected by malaria (practically everyone I spoke to had been ill with malaria at some point during the last few years), but the shipyard workers themselves suffered from the epidemic, too. According to unofficial labour union Samahan, by 2010, the number of workers who passed away due to malaria (like Francisco from Masinloc) had reached 54 (Jabola-Carolus 2010). To make matters worse, the mosquitos of remote Cawag are said to have been ‘hitching rides’ in the hundreds of buses that shuttle the Hanjin workers back to the more populous areas of Subic, with previously unaffected areas now apparently seeing malaria cases, too. For residents living nearby the shipyard, the malaria epidemic is often judged as yet one more sign that they are no longer in control of their immediate environment, and that nature is now dominated by a number of new forces. For those most gravely affected by the deterioration of the local environment, the sense cannot be shrugged off that things have literally gotten out of hand.

**Struggle against dispossession**

‘Most of the people gathered here at the moment are women,’ KPD-activist Richard explained during our conversation with a group of villagers living some three kilometres away from the shipyard. ‘Because most of the men are at sea to fish, and some are working for Hanjin. So when the demolition teams come, it is the ladies here who will be at the forefront of the struggle.’ The women, I was to learn, had already been at the frontline during an earlier struggle. It was in 2007/08 – the first few villages nearby had already been demolished to make space for the shipyard – when these residents, too, were visited by state officials who declared they were to leave the area. In nearby Agusuhin, one of the first few sitio affected by Hanjin, those who refused to move had apparently been forced out by armed men (Orejas 2007) – a story that travelled far enough to make most others nearby accept the eviction notices. However, once it became clear that no relocation site would be provided for their sitio by the government (which the villagers from Agusuhin had been given – cf. Orejas 2007) the residents decided to take to drastic measures: They started a sit-in in front of the mayor’s office in Subic, with 51 families taking part in a struggle that would last for eight days.

For the most part, it was the women who would defend the picket line – many of their husbands, after all, had to report to their jobs at the very shipyard that was
displacing them. Some of the women protestors were pregnant back then, one had just given birth, many more had brought young children along, which did not stop authorities from having the protestors sprayed with water from the municipal fire truck. ‘We were able to steal the fire hose and point it at the police officers’, one of the women chuckled, and KPD-activist Richard added: ‘It was the first time in the history of Subic to have such a kind of mobilization and struggle. The station commander of the Philippine National Police assigned to Subic fell over from the pressure of the water cannon …’

‘It’s a long story of struggle’, Nanay Karen summed up the events.

We made an agreement [out of this] that we would move, as long as there was a relocation area for us to start anew. They didn’t need to force us; we promised we would move out peacefully if they would provide relocation first. When they identified this place, little by little we moved from the old village area to settle here. When they demolished our house, I received 7,000 pesos [= 120 Euros] for the materials I used, and they said, buy new materials for your new site. […] We took some of the wood we used from our old house. We dragged it into the sea so it would float, and moved the wood over here for us to use again. […] When they gave this site to us, it was really a grassy land. We worked very hard here. Our bodies got tired all the time; our skin was dry and dark from the long hours of exposure to the sunlight.

Despite all these difficulties, in December of last year, a new round of eviction letters was sent out, which, according to the KPD-activists, went out not only the residents of this sitio, but to nearly 1000 families living in the vicinity. This time around, instead of Hanjin, a Filipino individual was claiming the land they were on – land that the government just a few years ago had identified for them as a proper relocation site. KPD-activist Monica summed up how, in her view, such a situation could come about:

You know, in the Philippines, our government and law will always be leaning towards the one who has the paper to say, ‘Hey, this is our property,’ even if [the actual villagers living on the land] have grown all their hair here, and moved here when they were young, lived here until their adult years, like Tatay [word for ‘father’, referring to an old man in the group], who has been here for so long now. It really doesn’t matter to them.

Quite a few residents, I was told, were already packing their belongings and leaving. Others had sold their claims to the land to at least make a tiny profit out of their ordeal. Many of the women were still defiant, as Nanay Karen explained:

We are getting tired of what the government is doing to us. Is it because we are poor – that’s why they can’t identify a place for us to stay, to raise our children at? We already fought once, so we will stand firm, and we will fight again.

**Conclusion:** The great Subic squeeze

Subic Bay refers to a body of water squeezed between two landmasses – the Redondo and the Bataan Peninsula, which used to be home to the largest US Naval base overseas. It is also the name of a landed area in which many impoverished communities are currently finding themselves squeezed by powerful forces acting upon their territory. The vast Korean shipyard will probably soon be rubbing shoulders with a coal plant – and the fishing communities of Cawag, once again, may be in the way of ‘development’. Infighting was brewing in the village during the weeks after our first encounter, people I had spoken to get into arguments with others over the potential course of
action to be taken. More individuals quietly packed up their belongings and left their homes for unknown destinations.

The sense of a negative kind of acceleration, of too many changes taking place at once, and of a loss of control over one’s immediate environment, was clearly tangible during my conversations with fishing villagers in Subic. While the villagers in one sitio in Cawag did not frame their struggle against capital as one also pertaining to environmental issues, the bay’s degradation is something they experience daily when they try to catch fish and return empty-handed. Their surroundings, which they depend upon for their survival – the trees and vegetables they have planted, the fishing grounds they visit – is being done away with. To be sure, the environmental deterioration of Subic will be accelerated through the loss of such communities, as subsistence fishers, living on small plots of land, certainly have a smaller detrimental impact on their immediate surrounding than, say, shipyards and coal plants.

In the meantime, pollution is increasingly affecting the bay, and the reduction of the fish population – caused by a combination of overfishing, the dumping of unfiltered sewage and industrial waste into the bay and a lingering US legacy of contamination – impinges upon the resource-poorest people first. With the dwindling of sea life, the men of Subic are increasingly forced to sell their labour either to corporations like Hanjin, or to bigger boat owners in the area, as their small boats are not safe enough to drive outside of the relatively sheltered bay. The open sea, however, holds many dangers of its own. Extreme weather phenomena are seemingly on the rise, making open-sea fishing an ever-riskier business. One of the most detrimental forces to be encountered in the open sea, however, is the Chinese coast guard, which aggressively pushes Filipino fishermen out of contested water terrains to secure the best fishing grounds for themselves. The skirmishes between Filipino and Chinese fishermen at the Scarborough Shoal (Whaley 2014), in turn are increasingly utilised as a justification for ever more militarisation of this stretch of sea, and incidentally, are also used to lobby for a return of the US Navy to the Philippines. A vicious kind of feedback loop, combining a range of environmental, social, politico-economic and security issues, comes alive here, which will be hard for the Subic’s residents to break in the years to come.

Notes

1. As part of ERC Advanced Grant funded project ‘Overheating. The Three Crises of Globalization’, I have conducted seven months of field research in Subic Bay, where between September 2013 and April 2014 I explored the impact of the South Korean shipyard on the communities nearby.
2. Throughout the paper, pseudonyms have been used and small personal details changed to protect the identities of informants.
3. The KPD (‘Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya’, Movement for National Democracy) is an organisation from the Philippine radical Left. It focuses on forging multi-sectoral alliances amongst the most impoverished segments of Philippine society (i.e. amongst urban poor communities, fisher folks, indigenous people and informal laborers), where they try inciting a mass movement for social change.
4. At the time of its construction, Hanjin’s shipyard in Subic was said to be the world’s fourth largest shipyard. The shipyard is under Korean management, with many of the foremen being Korean, too. However, all the ‘rank-and-file’ workers are Filipino.
5. For a history of Hanjin’s involvement with the US Armed Forces, see Woo (1991) and Glassman and Choi (2014).
7. The neighboring areas of Castillejos and Olongapo have equally seen a rise in residents that can partially be attributed to the lure of the shipyard. Data found at National Statistics Office of the Republic of the Philippines (http://web0.psa.gov.ph/).

8. Exact numbers on how many people were displaced between 2006 and 2009 are impossible to come by – KPD-activists, however, said that approximately 1,000 families were affected. Through data given in newspaper articles on the topic (see Domingo 2006; Mangampo Ociones 2006; Orejas 2007; Orejas 2008a; 2008b), together with several smaller displaced sitio that were not reported on but that I came across during field research, it seems that this number of 1000 relocated households is relatively accurate.

9. Piano went on to explain that while the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has set the water quality standard for total coliform to 1000 mpn/100 ml (i.e. most probable number of coliform per 100 ml of water), the average downstream coliform level in all 13 rivers (within the bay) was more than 800,000 mpn/100ml (Gonzaga 2012).

10. Even though ‘Samahan ng mga Manggagawa sa Hanjin Shipyard’ (Association of Workers at Hanjin’s Shipyard) was boasting a membership of several thousand workers in 2010, Hanjin has so far refused to acknowledge this union. They argue that they are the wrong address for their workers’ claims as practically all of its Filipino workers are employed through its network of subcontractors. Additionally, quite a few workers associated with Samahan have been laid off, or are facing discrimination at the shipyard (such as delayed promotions, harassment, etc.). The Filipino Department of Labor, faced with the unionisation requests made by Samahan (and similar organisations) has also argued that Philippine Labor stipulates that workers can only unionise within the companies that employ them (i.e. their subcontractors). Samahan, as a result of this, has registered as an association instead, but Hanjin objects to the usage of its name in the association’s title. The legal case over this issue has gone through several instances already.

11. For more information on this struggle, see the website of the anti-coal coalition http://notocoal.weebly.com/nocoal-news.html#.VPmuyXbKxaQ.

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