

Environment and Justice

Human-environment relations in Asia, Africa and the Middle East are changing at an ever-increasing pace. Previously 'remote' spaces and 'inaccessible' natural substances are being rendered accessible for global markets by new technologies and infrastructures. With this access comes new modes of production, consumption, and living that, in turn, bring long-lasting pollution. At the same time, the effects of anthropogenic climate change are transforming agricultural, pastoral and maritime practices.

The projects of the research unit Environment and Justice examine these changes from both contemporary and historical perspectives. Through case studies drawn from the region, these projects seek to answer three key questions:

How have local actors been acting and reacting to such transformations, and how have they been evaluating them?

To what extent have they been discussing shifting human-environmental relations in terms of justice/injustice, or other related alternative concepts?

What analytic concepts should we use to properly describe the relations between environmental change, social differences, and political hierarchies in these regions?

Research Projects

- *Revisions of Rurality: Expertise, Experience and Exchange in the Production of Environmental Knowledge in a Changing Middle East, 1950s-2020s*
PD Dr. Katharina Lange, Head of Research Unit
- *Greenbelt Destruction: The Suburbanization of the Ghouta of Damascus, 1970-2000*
Claudia Ghrawi
- *Urban infrastructure in pre-2011 Aleppo. Civil agency and state-power dynamics between water provision and waste disposal (Normality and Crisis, BMBF)*
Lisa Jöris
- *A Feminist Political Ecology of Seaweed Farming: Gendered Livelihood Strategies in Aquaculture in the Western Indian Ocean*
Lotte Knotte
- *Debating Extraction: Plural Visions of Infrastructure in Papua, Indonesia*
Dr. Jacob Nerenberg
- *Precarious Half-Lives: Co-habiting with Radiation and Ignorance in Mailuu-Suu, Kyrgyzstan*
Dr. Nikolaos Olma
- *The History of Poverty in the Southern Red Sea Region (DFG)*
Dr. Steven Serels
- *Knowledge, Temporalities and Questions of Justice. Negotiating Coastal Futures in West Africa in Times of Climate Change (Andrea-von-Braun-Stiftung)*
Juliane Schumacher

Environment and Justice

Revisions of Rurality: Expertise, Experience and Exchange in the Production of Environmental Knowledge in a Changing Middle East, 1950s-2020s

PD Dr. Katharina Lange

Focusing on questions of cultivation in Syria and pollution in Kurdistan-Iraq, this project analyses the transformation of exemplary case studies of Middle Eastern ruralities. Drawing from literature and archival research, oral history, and ethnographic fieldwork, it examines the translocal relations and encounters through which knowledge about rural environments has been, and continues to be, produced, disseminated, exchanged, and (de- or re-)contextualized. These are approached as a social field characterized by hierarchies and uneven power relations. Rather than assuming a simple, directive transfer from urban centres to their hinterlands, the project aims to uncover the manifold webs of relations that connect and intertwine rural spaces and urban hubs across broader geographies.

Debating Extraction: Plural Visions of Infrastructure in Papua, Indonesia

Dr. Jacob Nerenberg

This research examines debates about land-use change in Indonesia's easternmost region of Papua, where various agencies channel investments in infrastructure expansion as part of an Autonomy program meant to resolve long-standing political conflict. Papua is a site of resource extraction operations for international and domestic capital, and critics frame infrastructure investments as means to increase access to minerals. The promise of connectivity is broadly appealing for indigenous subsistence farmers in the province's densely populated central highlands, historically marginalized within national rural development policies. Infrastructure proposals intensify contention among development agendas based on extraction of valuable resources or improvement of agriculture. The research project investigates how infrastructure investments affect debates about land use, and how different regional political actors and power blocs define just development.

Precarious Half-Lives: Co-habiting with Radiation and Ignorance in Mailuu-Suu, Kyrgyzstan

Dr. Nikolaos Olma

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this project explores the socio-environmental consequences of Soviet-era uranium mining and processing in Mailuu-Suu, Kyrgyzstan. Two decades of uranium processing generated tons of radioactive residues, which were piled in slag heaps in the open air, contaminating the air, water, and land in and around the town and exposing the local population to chronic low doses of radiation. Nevertheless, the impact of radiation on the inhabitants' everyday lives has remained unstudied due to a state-imposed 'regime of ignorance,' which recalibrates scientific norms in order to reinterpret notions of risk, essentially resulting in alarmingly low public awareness levels. By examining the workings of this regime, this project contributes to our understanding of the legacy and contested liabilities of the Soviet Union's military-industrial complex and the nexus of toxicity and knowledge production.

Environment and Justice

Greenbelt Destruction: The Suburbanization of the Ghouta of Damascus, 1970-2000

Claudia Ghrawi

This project investigates the growth of Damascus between 1970 and 2000 in the context of transnational flows of investment capital, especially from the Arab Gulf countries. The accelerated transformation of the city since the early 1970s garnered haphazardly governed urban sprawl, land speculation and ecological disaster. This is exemplified with a pilot case study on the Ghouta, the old oasis of Damascus. In local memory its suburbanization is linked to the depletion of natural water resources and the pollution of the air, as well as to changing land regimes and a reversal of traditional life. The project explores how this contentious process triggered local attempts at governance outside the realms of the state and a possible solidification of communal identities along religious lines.

The History of Poverty in the Southern Red Sea Region

Dr. Steven Serels (DFG)

This project examines the long-term factors that have precipitated the current crisis of poverty in the Southern Red Sea Region (SRSR). The SRSR is comprised of modern-day Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Historically, communities in this region harnessed the natural environment to produce sufficient surplus wealth to support a multifaceted socio-economic system that transcended ethnic, linguistic and political divides. Tragically, these regional links ensured that impoverishment, when it set in, was a cascading phenomenon. This regional crisis was set off by local responses to an unprecedented two-hundred-year-long mega-drought that started in the mid-seventeenth century. These responses altered the SRSR socio-economic system in ways that dismantled the traditional social safety net and increased competition over life-supporting resources.

Knowledge, Temporalities and Questions of Justice. Negotiating Coastal Futures in West Africa in Times of Climate Change

Juliane Schumacher (Andrea-von-Braun-Stiftung)

The project studies how climate change is changing coastal planning and development in Senegal, analysing the knowledge(s), predictions and narratives involved. Consequences of global warming are affecting livelihoods in West Africa, leading to an entanglement of actual experience and model-based predictions of rising sea levels, salinization of estuaries and declining fish stocks. At the same time, both international and regional actors are trying to 'mainstream' climate mitigation and adaptation in coastal and regional planning, altering regional economic dynamics and negotiating different development paths. Drawing on theory and methods from Political Ecology, Environmental Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies, this project explores the relation between different forms of knowledge, imaginaries of the future and notions of justice, and the material infrastructures and practices they inform.

Environment and Justice

Urban Infrastructure in pre-2011 Aleppo. Civil Agency and State Power Dynamics Between Water Provision and Waste Disposal

Lisa Jöris

Looking at the time before the advent of the Syrian revolution in 2011, this project engages with practices of city dwellers in Aleppo aimed at improving their access to urban infrastructure. In narrative interviews, former residents of Aleppo share their memories about their room for maneuver as well as its limits and about their relationship to other actors mediated through infrastructure. The project focuses on two fields: water provision and waste disposal. These themes were framed in different ways. While water provision is portrayed to be mostly a political issue, waste disposal is expressed to depend extensively on the conduct of fellow residents. Against this background, this project asks what informed the articulation of the interlocutors' agency and the capacities of other relevant actors.

A Feminist Political Ecology of Seaweed Farming: Gendered Livelihood Strategies in Aquaculture in the Western Indian Ocean

Lotte Knotte

This ethnographic research project explores the livelihood strategies of women working in coastal aquaculture in the Zanzibar archipelago, specifically in seaweed farming on the shores of the island Unguja. The local farms, run predominantly by female farmers, serve a growing demand for seaweed extracts that are used as thickening and stabilising agents in the global cosmetic, food and medicine production. Throughout the last decade, Zanzibar's seaweed farmers have been facing several challenges through climate change and global warming that affected the seaweed's growth and led to a sharp decrease of produce within the sector. Drawing from feminist political ecology, this project examines local discourses of environmental change, gender, labour and justice and embeds them in the wider public discourse of the heightening global climate crisis.