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Narrating Green Economies in the Global South

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Abstract This paper discusses how persisting, powerful narratives inform and shape the green economy in the Global South. Green economy strategies often evolve around market-based and technological solutions to the planetary crises, particularly in industrialized countries. In developing countries with rich resource bases, however, green transitions often imply various forms of modernization of the ways in which natural resources are managed, utilized and controlled. This, I argue, is a result of the process in which the green economy agenda is shaped by elites through narratives that feed into and inform green economy discourses and policies in resource-rich countries in the Global South. While much literature discusses variegated green economy schemes in the Global South and their outcomes, this paper discusses how these practices and policies are driven by powerful narratives that essentially shape green economy agendas. I argue that a persisting neo-Malthusian narrative of resource scarcity, degradation and overpopulation co-exists with a resource abundance narrative, holding that pristine natural resources are vast, but under threat, and that capital, ‘know-how’ and technology can protect and develop these resources while at the same time accumulate economic growth. As a result, the green economy in the Global South is often narrated and implemented under a discourse of modernization of natural resource management.

Keywords: green economy; narratives; discourses; Global South; modernization discourse; natural resources

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the converging crises of food, finance and energy between 2007 and 2009, the planetary crisis received increased attention in political, popular and academic circles. For many, this represented a ‘unique moment in history, in which major environmental and economic challenges could be tackled simultaneously’ (Tienhaara, 2014, p. 1). Global policymakers, such as the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, began working on strategies to redirect the crises of

the economy, the environment, and persisting global poverty. These efforts materialized at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, in 2012, where one of the main outcomes was the conceptualization of the green economy (UNEP, 2011).

A green economy is an economy ‘that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental and ecological scarcities’ (UNEP, 2011, p. 16). There are many ways in which the green economy is being implemented in practice, but there is an overwhelming emphasis on market-based and technological solutions to environmental challenges (Scoones et al., 2015). In industrialized countries, the focus is usually on investments, technology and innovation in renewable energies, as well as making fossil fuels more energy – and cost-efficient, much along the lines of ecological modernization (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000). In the Global South, however, green economy measures are usually implemented in natural resource sectors (Brown et al., 2014; Bergius and Buseth, 2019; Buseth, 2017; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017; UNEP, 2011; World Bank, 2012).¹ One reason for this is that the combined targets of the green economy – poverty reduction, climate measures and economic growth – have spurred initiatives that aim to merge these agendas in the same package. A wide range of initiatives targeting the management, utilization or protection of natural resources are being rolled out under green economy banners across the Global South, and a substantial amount of published research discusses the logics and consequences of various green initiatives (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017; Death, 2015; Ehresman and Okereke, 2015). Investments and capital accumulation targeted new sectors after the financial crackdowns of 2007–2009. There is an increasing trend that investments in natural resource sectors are being framed as ‘green growth,’ merely based on the combination of economic growth and natural resources. In line with Harvey (2001), Patel and Moore (2017) argue that such use of natural resource sectors is based on capitalism’s constant drive towards expansion, or a ‘spatial fix.’ Bergius and Buseth (2019, p. 59) also state that ‘green sectors in the Global South have become important outlets for international capital in recent years – reinforcing a contemporary cycle of ‘material expansion’ in this stage of capitalism.’ Kröger (2013) found similar patterns in his study of ‘forestry capitalism’ in Brazil, and Benjaminsen

1 The ‘Global South’ is a broad and imprecise category of which all countries are of course not homogenous. There is furthermore obviously no dichotomy between the ‘Global North’ and the ‘Global South’ – neither geographically nor politically-economically. However, some sort of generalizing terminology is unavoidable for the purpose of discussing discursive trends. Policy documents, policymakers, actors and existing literature make the same categorization. There are therefore many exceptions to this categorization, but the broad division nonetheless remains. When referring to the ‘Global South’ throughout this paper, it generally means not industrialized, developing countries with rich resource bases, typically ‘poor’ countries in the Southern hemisphere.

and Bryceson (2012) discussed capital accumulation, or ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ through acquisition of land and coastal reserves in Tanzania.

Many studies criticize various ‘green’ schemes and their implications as consequences of the green economy; examples include REDD+ (Lund et al., 2017; Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2017), carbon forests (Leach and Scoones, 2015; Lyons and Westoby, 2014), climate-smart agriculture and the new green revolution for Africa (Bergius et al. 2018; Bergius and Buseth, 2019; Newell and Taylor, 2018), biofuel production (Boamah, 2014), nature conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015; Sullivan, 2013), and ecotourism (Fletcher and Neves, 2012). Such studies are important for understanding how the green economy manifests, but there is a gap in research on the discursive *drivers* behind green economy agendas (Scoones et al., 2015). As Asiyanbi (2015) argues, a growing body of work on ‘neoliberal natures’ has failed to make enough effort to assess how discourses of the green shift are being translated into realities on the ground. It is therefore important to analyze the green economy not only by its actual implementations, but also by discursive drivers behind these policies and practices (Bailey and Caprotti, 2014). In order to address this gap, this paper discusses how narratives and discourses inform and justify green economy agendas in resource rich developing countries in the Global South. Building on Hajer (1995), the contribution lies mainly within discussing how two distinct narratives inform green economy discourses and policies.

These narratives are (1) a persisting neo-Malthusian narrative of resource degradation, scarcity and overpopulation, and (2) a narrative of resource abundance in the context of the Global South. Several powerful actors, such as the World Bank (2013; 2019), base their policy agendas on the idea that resource bases in developing countries are rich and pristine, but threatened by degradation, as also Scoones et al. (2018) found. Key policy documents hold that capital and technology inflows will protect these natural resources and at the same time accumulate green growth and development under the threefold goals of the green economy (OECD, 2009; UNEP, 2011; World Bank, 2013; 2019). Indeed, Scoones et al. (2018) argue that ‘scarcity’ narratives became dominant motivations and justifications in the rush for Africa’s farmland after the food price pike in the years 2007–2009.

In this paper, I argue that such narratives have been a driving force also in behind green economy policies in the Global South at large since Rio+20.² This is supported by Bergius et al. (2020), who demonstrate how degradation narratives have justified and paved the way for the implementation of a green economy in the case of Tanzania.

2 Many countries in the Global South also apply technology-centered green economy approaches, such as in energy or industrial innovation (see e.g. Death 2016). Some countries across the Global South have more comprehensive green economy strategies than others, and some countries’ strategies delve more into innovation, industry and renewable energy. See e.g. <https://www.un-page.org/countries/page-countries> for a broad policy/UN-oriented overview of green economy strategies and measures in selected countries across the Global South (accessed 20.12.19).

The result is a strong modernization discourse holding that natural resources and land use systems in developing countries must be modernized in order to reach the prosperous levels of societies in the Global North, along the lines of Rostow (1960) and classic modernization thinking. Modernization as a development idea was most prominent during the post-war era (McMichael, 2012), but has roots back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century enlightenment history in Europe, where a dualism between humans and nature held that humans should control nature (Descartes, 1985, pp. 142-143). People living in the colonies, of course, was considered part of *nature*. This dualism and urge to control *nature* and underdeveloped areas of the world by far justified colonialism, and later ‘development.’ As Bergius and Buseth (2019, p. 59) hold, modernization thinking in the post-war period ‘spelled out a geographical divide between the ‘progressive’ cores of ‘modernity’ and the ‘lagging’ peripheries of ‘tradition.’ Development equaled modernization, and controlling nature and resources through the use of capital and technology was core in this thinking. The dichotomy between humans and nature, and the urge to modernize, has later been reframed under the green economy as a core part of contemporary global capitalism and the climate crisis. This links to a general recent turn towards involving private sector actors in development programs, and the ‘trade not aid’ trend, which has spurred an increase in public–private partnerships and philanthrocapitalism in many sectors, including environmental policies (Adelman, 2009; Arndt and Tarp, 2017). This private turn often combines development, climate measures and economic growth, effectively channeling donor money into green sectors in the Global South (Arndt and Tarp, 2017). Bergius et al. (2018, p. 825) hold that in Africa, the green economy is increasingly manifested through the use of green agendas in order to strengthen the idea that development equals modernization through ‘capital-intensive land investments.’ Green (2015, p. 632) argues that after the converging crises of the late 2000s, development funding has largely been prioritized towards the private sector. This is part of the reason why the modernization discourse has revitalized under the green economy. Bergius and Buseth (2019) call this ‘green modernization,’ and discuss how this discourse has advanced certain ‘incarnations’ of dominant modernization narratives, such as capital and technology transfers, mobility of land and people, a renewed traditional/modern dualism, and new private-sector versions of ‘stages to growth.’

Current green economy debates, policies and practices are essentially *apolitical* (Newell, 2015), meaning that they pay little or no attention to power structures or policy implications of green transformations. Indeed, Newell (2015, p. 69) argues that policy and scholarly debates have focused more on the ‘governance of transitions than the politics of transformations.’ Political ecology may therefore offer a useful framework for the study of how narratives and discourses drive policies in natural resource management. The interaction between natural resources, power and politics is of main concern for political ecologists, who seek to unmask power structures and key assumptions underpinning natural resource management (Adger et al., 2001; Peet

et al., 2011). Political ecology is, according to Forsyth (2003, p. 2), useful as a framework to explain ‘the social and political conditions surrounding the causes, experiences, and management of environmental problems.’ Political ecology seeks to critically see the environment, and natural resources, through a contextual approach; it sees the nature as power-laden, and focuses on multilevel connections, structures and actors in the environment and among decision-makers and hierarchies of power (Adger et al., 2001). Stott and Sullivan (2000) emphasize the importance of tracing environmental narratives by identifying power structures, and a key approach within political ecology is to link discourses to current environmental policies. Political ecology is useful for the analysis of power and multilevel politics in environmental governance (Adger et al., 2001), such as the green economy, and therefore undergirds the discussion in this paper.

The findings presented in this paper are based on a review and discourse analysis of policy documents,³ and data collection undertaken between 2015 and 2017. I applied qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with key actors in global and multinational organizations and institutions working within the green economy in different ways.⁴ The analysis furthermore builds on event ethnography (Campbell et al., 2014) carried out at several big international green economy policy conferences.⁵ I analyzed the data qualitatively, particularly under a discourse and narrative analysis framework through methods of coding and identification of regularities across transcripts and documents, building on Foucault’s (1972) ‘archaeology of knowledge’ and ‘genealogy of power’ (Foucault, 1980) which treats power as *productive*, meaning power can be influential through discourses. The analysis was further built on Roe’s concept of policy narrative analysis (Roe, 1994), and Dryzek’s framework for analyzing environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2013).

3 The analyzed documents are primarily key policy reports and strategies by UNEP, the OECD, the World Bank, the Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE), and the World Economic Forum (WEF). I also reviewed project strategies and documents from REDD+ projects, Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes, and agricultural corridors in Africa, in addition to White Papers and investment strategy papers by selected investors.

4 Actors interviewed were working in international or multinational institutions or organizations, many of them in institutions operating across several countries in the Global South. I also interviewed informants at government level and with investors in specific countries. Most of the informants were representatives from multinational organizations or institutions working also outside the respective country in which the data collection took place. Most importantly; the trends described in this paper are similar across many countries in the Global South (see e.g. Bergius and Buseth, 2019; Dawson et al., 2016; De Schutter, 2015; McKeon, 2014; Moseley, 2017; Patel et al., 2015).

5 The events took place at OECD in Paris in 2015, in South Korea, led by OECD, UNEP, PAGE and the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI), in 2016, in Dubai in 2016 (the World Green Economy Summit) (followed online), in Oslo in 2016, and in Tanzania in 2017 (an annual meeting of a multinational green growth scheme). The events are not further identified since informants who spoke here are anonymized in this paper.

2. Discourses and narratives

I follow Hajer's (1995, p. 44) understanding of a discourse as a 'specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities.' Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2017) define a discourse as a shared way of comprehension that can be regarded as lenses that you see a certain topic through. Dryzek (2013, p. 9) holds that a discourse enables 'those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts.' Discourses legitimize knowledge, and 'coordinate the actions of... people and organizations' (Dryzek, 2013, p. 10), especially in global politics, power and practices (Hajer, 1995). According to Svarstad et al. (2017, p. 356), discursive power is being exercised 'when actors such as corporations, government agencies or NGOs produce discourses and manage to get other groups to adopt and contribute to the reproduction of their discourses.' I see discursive power as being exercised also when a discourse has the power to influence policy or actions.

A narrative is a social construction of a more specific case. For this study, narratives are important as *drivers* of assumptions, discourses and policies. According to Roe (1991, p. 288), development narratives exist 'to tell stories or scenarios that simplify the ambiguity' of practitioners, bureaucrats and policymakers, especially in rural development. A narrative is a *story* that usually has a beginning (typically a problem), a middle, and an end, which can be a solution, a premise, or a conclusion in an argument. Narratives are meant to simplify and inform the reader, but also to provoke feelings, and the actors in a narrative are often portrayed as heroes, victims or villains. Roe (1991) argues that development narratives are not so much concerned with what *should* happen as with what *will* happen. The objective of such narratives is therefore often to persuade the reader to engage in or act upon the presented problem. Roe's (1994) concept of narrative policy analysis can be used to explain how certain stories dominate and how they lead to action through policies or implemented schemes. Molle (2008, p. 31), for example, draws on narratives as storylines to explain how policy is formed in the water sector in Africa. In this paper, I discuss narratives that drive discourses, to illustrate how green economy policies are formed and shaped. I examine how discourses shape agency and policy, and how discourses are informed and driven by narratives, as selected bits of information. For this purpose, I find Hajer's (1995, p. 61) work on discourse institutionalization useful, to shed light on how and when a given discourse is translated into policy and institutional arrangements. Hajer (1995, p. 1) defined environmental discourses as 'fragmented and contradictory,' and as 'an astonishing collection of claims and concerns brought together by a great variety of actors.' He used the example of ecological modernization to demonstrate how discourses were translated into politics. For this paper, Hajer's (1995) work is relevant for understanding how discourses feed into the formation of green economy policies.

3. Green economies

UNEP's report *Towards a Green Economy* (UNEP, 2011) has been essential for the mainstreaming of green economy concepts, agendas and policies after Rio+20. Furthermore, OECD's report *Green Growth: Overcoming the Crisis and Beyond* (OECD, 2009) has been particularly influential in the business sector and for governments of industrialized countries. According to the OECD;

Green Growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies. To do this, it must catalyse investment and innovation which will underpin sustained growth and give rise to new economic opportunities. (OECD, 2011, p. 4)

The above-discussed green economy definitions are widely used among different actors, including environmentalists, practitioners, the business sector, and politicians, and has brought together actors with different agendas behind the same proclaimed, but fuzzy, goals.

Given the ambiguity of the green economy, it is necessary to distinguish between green economy schemes that are being rolled out in various contexts, on the one hand (Death, 2015; 2016), and green economy discourses that *shape* the policies behind these practices, on the other hand (Dryzek, 2013; Scoones et al., 2015). Following Hajer's concept of 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer, 1993), many distinct versions of a green economy can be identified, and the green economy has been categorized discursively in several ways (see e.g. Bina, 2013; Ehresman and Okereke, 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Scoones et al., 2015). Death (2015) discusses how various discourses are manifested in national green economy strategies and policies, and how they – despite being fundamentally different – are categorized under the same green umbrellas by their proponents. This illustrates how the green economy agenda is being narrated in different ways despite the lack of a common understanding of the concept.

It also, however, illustrates a blind spot towards discursive drivers behind the green economy in the Global South. Most green economy approaches and agendas discussed in the literature predominantly fits industrialized countries and wealthy societies. And they can – broadly – be summarized in two overall discourses: green growth and green (technological) transitions. However, when implemented in the Global South, typically resource rich developing countries, these agendas merge into a *modernization of natural resource management* discourse. This does not only represent an increasing *practice*, but also a distinct green economy *discourse* that has not been sufficiently recognized in the literature. I argue that this discourse is a result of how prevailing narratives feed into green economy agendas in the process towards policy implementation.

4. Narrating problems and solutions in the green economies of the global south

The combination of green growth and technological transitions unveils an interesting merging of ideas – or to put it another way, it illustrates two strangely intertwined ways in which the green economy is being narrated in the Global South. The long-standing degradation/ overpopulation narrative, is coupled with a belief that we can overcome the scarcity crisis if we invest in natural resources, in terms of both capital and technology (Scoones et al., 2018). This is justified by a narrative saying that while Africa’s natural resources are being degraded, they are also pristine, abundant and vast, only waiting to be ‘developed.’ In sum, these narratives comprise a *modernization of natural resource management discourse* particularly evident in the Global South. The narratives represent a ‘problem’ storyline of resource scarcity, degradation, poverty, and overpopulation, and a ‘solution’ storyline saying that we can add technology, ‘know-how’ and capital into natural resource sectors in order to overcome the aforementioned challenges. Informed by this, the green economy in the Global South is therefore often implemented through schemes that seek to protect, modernize or profit from ‘green’ sectors, resulting in transformed ways in which natural resources are managed, governed and controlled.

4.1. *The problem: ‘poor people make poor land’*

An initial driver behind the green economy in the mid-2000s was a recognition that the pressure on the planet is reaching its limits (Rockström et al., 2009; UNEP, 2011). This ‘limits’ idea is by no means new, rather it represents a renaissance of long-standing ideas. Malthus suggested this link already in (1798 [1998]), claiming that population growth would outstrip food production. A few hundred years later, The Club of Rome’s 1972 report *The Limits to Growth* discussed how population growth and unsustainable use of the world’s resources threatened the planet and humanity (Meadows et al., 1972; see also Ehrlich, 1968). Dryzek (2013) argues that after a short decade of ‘environmental problem solving’ in the 1960s – closely linked to the first photography of Earth from space, Carson’s 1962 publication *Silent Spring* and eventually the ‘environmental awakening’ in the US – we saw the rise of a ‘limits and survival’ discourse in the 1970s. Dryzek (2013, p. 25) holds; ‘exponential growth in both human numbers and the level of economic activity meant that there was no time to lose, for humanity seemed to be heading for the limits at an ever-increasing pace. Hitting these limits would mean global disaster and a crash in human populations.’ This discourse has persisted, but was situated more in the background during the 1980s’ and 1990s’ sustainability discourse. Rather, under the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s, a Promethean view that the Earth was in fact *unlimited*, gained traction. The argument was that indigenous people had always developed substitutes to resources that had run out, or – a more updated version – technology would find

solutions (Dryzek, 2013, p. 26). This view paved the way for the rise of ecological modernization. The main tenets of eco-modernization, is an ecologization of production, market and regulatory reforms that reflect ecological priorities, and the ‘greening’ of both social and corporate practices – predominantly focusing on countries in the Global North (Low and Gleeson, 1998). Simultaneously, with regards to the global South, the link between poverty, population pressure and environmental degradation was reframed. To the WCED (1987), it was important to present new and more optimistic ideas about sustainability, prosperity and economic growth – as opposed to the doom predictions by Meadows et al. (1972). This was in line with the general turn towards neoliberalism and the focus on ‘human development’ we saw towards the end of the 1980s. But the perceived link between poverty, population and degradation was strong:

Many parts of the world are caught in a vicious spiral: poor people are forced to overuse environmental resources to survive from day to day, and their impoverishment of their environment further impoverishes them, making their survival ever more difficult and uncertain. (WCED, 1987, p. 28).

Two decades later, UNEP (2011, p. 15) said that ‘the link between population dynamics and sustainable development is strong and inseparable’ and that

[a] transition to a green economy can assist in overcoming the contribution that population growth makes to the depletion of scarce natural resources. The world’s least developed countries (LDCs) are more strongly affected by environmental degradation than most other developing countries, so therefore they have much to gain from the transition to a green economy. (UNEP, 2011, p. 15)

This overpopulation narrative is strong and persistent. Ojeda et al. (2018, p. 1) found that environmental policies in the Anthropocene builds heavily on a ‘larger project of population control,’ and demonstrates several ways in which elites, policy-makers and scholars have ‘updated Malthus’ ideas of human population stretching natural limits, applying them to problems like soil erosion, deforestation, pollution, and now climate change’ (2019, p. 2). Indeed, Scoones et al. (2018) argue that the crises of 2007–9 ‘galvanized a series of scarcity narratives justifying interventions around land and resources.’ Scarcity narratives are not new, but they have been renewed under global warming and the green economy, in new packages, and laid an important foundation for how actors think about natural resource sectors in the green transitions of resource-rich developing countries. One contemporary example of this narrative, as reemerged under the green economy in the Global South, is The Nature Conservancy’s Adopt an Acre program, which enables consumers to ‘adopt’ (in the exchange for a donation) a piece of land in order to protect it from degradation.⁶ On a webpage that has since been removed, they argued that

⁶ <https://www.nature.org/en-us/membership-and-giving/donate-to-our-mission/other-ways-to-give/adopt-an-acre/> (accessed May 29, 2019)

60 percent of Africa's lands and waters – community property, in a sense – are managed by the people who live on them ... A continuing threat is their lack of control over the communal lands and waters they depend on for survival.⁷

Also UNEP (2011, p. 14) states that:

Currently, there is no international consensus on the problem of global food security or on possible solutions for how to nourish a population of 9 billion by 2050. ... Freshwater scarcity is already a global problem, and forecasts suggest a growing gap.

These narratives 'prove useful for elites who seek to avoid responsibility' – for conflicts, for scarcity or simply as an alibi for continued economic growth (Ojeda et al., 2018, p. 6). Furthermore, this illustrates the story about how 'we' should intervene in natural resource management in order to 'save' the planet's degrading resources, and at the same time make money. As the above quote from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) shows, green economy policies are based on a narrative that poverty and over-population contribute to resource degradation. Proponents of this view hold that population growth is threatening natural resources, and measures to halt population growth should therefore be an integrated part of the solution to hinder planetary degradation – particularly in the Global South, where the problem is perceived to be most serious (World Bank, 2012; WCED, 1987).

Powerful actors and policymakers regard traditional sectors such as small-scale agriculture and pastoralism as inefficient and 'backwards' production systems that are degrading the environment (Bergius et al., 2020; World Bank, 2013). Although many have raised questions about this link (e.g. Gray and Moseley, 2005), these narratives are still frequently used, and feed into green transition agendas in the Global South. For example, the World Bank report titled *Inclusive Green Growth: The Pathway to Sustainable Development* holds that one main problem for what is usually called 'natural capital' under the green economy, is that soil is being degraded because of 'poor' use, and that 'land users need to be given the right economic incentives in preventing or mitigating land degradation' (World Bank, 2012, p. 110). One chapter in the report is devoted to describing how natural capital, primarily in developing countries, should be managed in new ways in order to implement a green economy. One problem that the World Bank points to, is how resources such as forests and fisheries in developing countries usually are open access and poorly managed, and should change (echoing Hardin, 1968). It also holds that soil degradation is a problem due to poor agricultural and grazing practices, which must be managed in new ways. These views are rather common in key green economy policy documents, such as those by UNEP (2011), the OECD (2009) and the World Bank (2012; 2013; 2019). The policy agendas echo the 'limits and survival' discourse

⁷ <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/africa/howwework/index.htm> (accessed March 11, 2014)

of the 1970s, and we see a trend where contemporary policy frameworks for environmental management meet longstanding narratives that have informed and justified natural resource management for centuries (Roe, 1991; 1994).

Decision-makers, practitioners and investors, as well as local and national elites, argue along similar lines.⁸ For example, one senior representative of a prominent global agribusiness company said the following about smallholders in the African country in which he was based:

Also soil degradation here is a big, big thing. And one of the main reasons is how badly [the smallholders] treat the soil. First of all on the animal life, they devastate absolutely everything they don't need ... Because they have this thing, smallholders, and then what they do, because they have such a low productivity, they just devastate everything, and it will devastate more and more [soil].⁹

A number of other informants echoed these views. When asked how or why a green economy should be implemented in the Global South, the response was usually along the lines of 'because land is becoming degraded,' 'because of mismanagement of natural resources,' 'because of deforestation,' or 'rural farmers don't know how to treat the soil.'¹⁰ Policy-makers at both global level, in multinational organizations, or national authorities produce the same story – not based on scientific research, but based on strong, persisting beliefs and the fact that 'others' tell the same story.¹¹ UNEP (2011, p. 15) for example argues that '[a] transition to a green economy can assist in overcoming the contribution that population growth makes to the depletion of scarce natural resources.' This storyline is frequently referred to in national investment strategies and natural resource policy documents in countries in the Global South (e.g. SAGCOT, 2013; World Bank, 2019). This illustrates how narratives form discourses that feed into policy and political decisions. Others have identified similar stories that mask the political and economic realities of overpopulation and resource scarcity (Ojeda, 2018).

The green economy is often branded and implemented in ways that do not correlate well with the ambitious promises made in policies and strategies. The reframed policy agendas of scarcity, limits and degradation illustrate how narratives form 'solutions,' following Roe (1991). As Adger et al. (2001, p. 683) claim, since discourses are often based on 'shared myths' of the world, 'the political prescriptions flowing from them are often inappropriate for local realities.' Elite narratives about resource management and control have proved to survive despite evidence of the contrary. Political ecologists have repeatedly debunked narratives about environmental scarcity and degradation in the Global South (Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Leach and Mearns, 1996),

8 Informant 7, May 6, 2015; informant 45, April 27, 2016.

9 Informant 37, March 8, 2016

10 Informant 2, May 4, 2015; informant 15, November 6, 2015

11 Informant 2, May 4, 2015; informant 45, May 27, 2016.

but such research is hardly taken into consideration in the formation of environmental policies (e.g. Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2017). Roe (1991) pointed to several discourses from rural Africa that have persisted despite ‘strong empirical evidence against its storyline.’ Gardner (2017), moreover, demonstrated that global elite policies influence conservation schemes based on discursive policies rather than local realities. Instead, the resource degradation narrative has proved to be stronger, and has – by far – justified control over nature through centuries. This provides an explanation for why there still is a belief in the necessity of ‘us’ intervening to ‘save’ nature from ‘them’ (Eddens, 2017; Gardner, 2017).

4.2. *The solution: modernizing natural resource management*

Elites have historically sought to control nature, but the reasoning has changed over the centuries. While colonialism and the development era of the 1950s and 1960s at least in part was justified by a constructed ‘need’ to save nature, this was reformulated during the ‘limits’ discourse of the 1970s, and again under the ‘sustainable development’ discourse of the 1980s and 1990s. Today, policymakers and powerful actors have constructed new ‘solutions’ to environmental degradation based on a strong belief in modernization through technology and capital in natural resource sectors in the Global South.¹² This is linked to a perceived realization of the green economy’s ‘triple bottom line’ of people, planet and profit – a threefold goal that targets the crises of poverty, the climate and the economy in the same package (Bergius and Buseth, 2019).

One way in which this shift becomes obvious, is how the story about *growth* has changed. Peculiarly, the ‘*limits to growth*’ idea – or *story* – has turned into ‘*green growth*’ under the green economy. Indeed, one of the headings in the UNEP (2011, p. 14) report reads *From crisis to opportunity*. This illustrates how rhetoric and policy has changed from *limiting* the use of nature to a focus on economic *opportunities* in nature (World Bank, 2013). This shift offers a useful bridge between the ‘problem’ narrative outlined above, and the ‘solution’ narrative, which holds that there is an *abundance* of natural resources and available land in African countries. In this way, narratives about scarcity and abundance are intertwined and set to represent two sides of the same story. This win-win narrative holds that the world’s natural resources are pristine and under threat, but at the same time valuable, with tremendous potential for capital accumulation. This well illustrates the aims of the green economy, and how the narratives and discursive drivers have shifted. This was also

¹² Another highly relevant field in this context, is the resource curse literature. The natural resource scarcity/ abundance dualism in the resource curse theory is obviously useful also for the modernization discourse discussed in this paper, but going into these arguments would be beyond the aims and scope of the paper. However, see e.g. Rosser (2006) for a review.

found by Scoones et al. (2018), who argue that an abundance narrative exists alongside the scarcity narrative, holding that investment areas are ‘abundant, empty, idle and underutilized.’ This feeds into policy agendas, investment strategies, green economy strategies and mainstream green growth rhetoric (e.g. World Bank, 2019; SAGCOT, 2013). Policymakers, practitioners and governments adhere to the story that degraded or underutilized resources will prosper and be of high economic value only if we allow technology and market forces to ‘develop’ them (World Bank, 2013, 2019).

Key green economy policy documents usually focus on the latter (i.e. the potential for capital accumulation). For example, one-third of UNEP’s report *Towards a Green Economy* (UNEP, 2011) is devoted to natural capital and how we should invest in it in order to establish a green economy. This includes both protection of natural resources to hinder planetary degradation, and modernization of the utilization and management of natural resources for the purpose of development and (green) economic growth (OECD, 2009; UNEP, 2011; World Bank, 2019).

One striking example in my data comes from the Global Green Growth Summit in 2016, where a senior associate from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) started his panel talk by announcing to the 1200 people in the audience, ‘If you’re from an African government, please sell your land to investors! In that way we can create green jobs for the poor!’¹³ This view illustrates the focus on capital investments and modernization of natural resource management in the green economy of the Global South, and the belief that external intervention is necessary. Such policy (‘creating green jobs on land sold to foreigners’) is a result of the belief in the degradation narrative, as well as the focus on poverty (‘we can give *them* jobs’). The quote came from a leading green economy policymaker, and his audience consisted of other leading policymakers at global, regional and national level – including typically various UN organizations, OECD and World Bank representatives, as well as government and other representatives from the Global South and Global North, representing respectively the receiving end on the one side, and donors/ investors on the other side. The quote obviously does not only illustrate this person’s view, but it represents a strong, leading narrative that is being passed on and circulated within a broader community of policymakers, decisionmakers, and elites, which essentially has consequences for how the leading discourse institutionalizes through policy.

Brockington and Ponte (2015, p. 2197) argue that initiatives such as carbon payments, ecotourism, and biodiversity offsets largely illustrate the green economy in the Global South. Such schemes are frequently used by its proponents as examples of how nature can be protected while at the same time accumulate economic growth. This illustrates how actors and discourses have changed the rhetoric from a focus on global crises and planetary degradation to a story about investment opportunities, as well as how new management schemes should be implemented in order to

‘restore’ natural capital (OECD, 2009).¹⁴ For example, the OECD (2011) argues that natural resources should be conserved and ‘used more efficiently’ in order to achieve green growth. Similarly, the World Bank recently published a report on why improved management, modernization and protection of Tanzania’s natural resources are crucial in achieving ‘green development’ and sustainability (World Bank, 2019). In an earlier World Bank report, 10 out of 16 principles for how to establish green growth in the Global South, deal directly with modernized environmental management (World Bank, 2012, p. 17). They emphasize carbon pricing, stricter water regulation, better forest management, coastal zone and fisheries management, land use planning, and more ‘targeted’ agricultural practices. For example;

[d]ifferent resources require different types of policies. For extractable but renewable resources, policy should center on defining property rights and helping firms move up the value chain. For cultivated renewable resources, policy should focus on innovation, efficiency gains, sustainable intensification, and “integrated landscape” approaches. (World Bank, 2012, p. 105)

When introducing the World Bank’s *Climate Change Investment Plan for Africa*¹⁵ during the Global Green Growth Summit in 2016, a senior World Bank representative working on climate change policies, said that,

in the agricultural system, there’s lots of changes to think about, and thinking about changes in livestock feeding, that can on the one hand increase productivity, on the other hand increase resilience to climate change, and on the third hand reduce emissions. It is possible to have these win-win-win solutions. These are the three underlying principles for our climate change actions.

Moreover, the same representative said ‘we’re working on the sustainable land management program, working nationally to transform landscapes at scale in order to build this resilience.’¹⁶ It is interesting enough how he emphasized that *they* were working on landscape transformations in a foreign country, which clearly illustrates the belief in the necessity of external interventions in natural resource sectors in the Global South. But essentially, this urge to ‘transform’ landscapes rests heavily on the degradation narrative. The idea that natural resource sectors must be managed in new ways – i.e. modernized – continues to inform and shape policy.

14 Informant 59, September 8, 2016; informant 53, September 7, 2016; informant 48, August 6, 2016.

15 The policy strategy was called a ‘Climate Change Investment Plan’. I was unable to find a document with this title, but the World Bank does have an *Africa Climate Business Plan*, which might have been what the representative referred to. For the 2016 version, see <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/publication/africa-climate-business-plan-key-messages> and for an updated version see <http://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-climate-business-plan> (both accessed May 30, 2019).

16 Informant 53, September 7, 2016

This exemplifies how ‘green growth’ agendas have been influenced by persisting narratives, and is evident in both policy documents and among informants interviewed.

Modernization is seen as both necessary and obvious in sectors that are perceived as traditional, outdated and underdeveloped, such as pastoralism and agriculture and other land use systems.¹⁷ These narratives are therefore particularly evident in the agriculture sector and the new green revolution for Africa (Patel, 2013), which increasingly has been merged with the green economy (Buseeth, 2017; Moseley, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2010). The Malthusian dilemma of how to feed the world’s growing population is a powerful narrative (World Economic Forum, 2010). Under the green economy, efforts in developing the agriculture sector have been combined with environmental concerns and climate measures. This conceptual fusion proposes a greener repetition of the original green revolution (Conway, 1997) to feed a growing world population sustainably. A general argument is that developing countries should ‘upgrade’ to the level of developed countries’ production systems by a ‘flow of knowledge, experience and equipment from one area to another,’ usually from developed countries to developing countries (UNEP, 2011, p. 234). UNEP (2011, p. 36) too, holds that one of the most pressing problems in the contemporary world is ‘feeding an expanding and more demanding’ world population, and ‘attending to the needs’ of those that are undernourished, while at the same time addressing climate change. Hence, ‘environmental degradation and poverty can be simultaneously addressed by applying green agricultural practices’ (UNEP, 2011, p. 36), a trend that is increasing under brands such as ‘climate-smart agriculture’ (FAO, 2010) and ‘agriculture green growth’ (SAGCOT, 2013). The World Bank, for example, presents agribusiness in Africa with the narrative that while Africa has ‘an abundance’ of both land and water, it lacks the capital, knowledge and technology to ‘unleash’ its opportunities (2013, p. 17). The World Bank also holds that Africa has become the ‘final frontier’ for agribusiness (World Bank, 2013, p. 17), which exemplifies the understanding of the green economy as a ‘spatial fix’ in contemporary capitalist reorganization (Harvey, 2001; Patel and Moore, 2017). Other proponents hold that ‘there is substantial untapped potential for the development of the continent’s water and land resources for increasing agricultural production’ (NEPAD, 2003, p. 24), and ‘[t]he continent is endowed with many natural resources, including plentiful land and fertile soils’ (UNECA, 2013, p. 8). In an interview, an informant who was a foreign land investor in an African country asked,

Have you ever flown across this country? All you can see is vast land areas which are just laying there. As far as your eye can see. There is plenty! Of no use! And, you know ... the massive population growth ... the number of people in this country is going to reach ... yeah. It’s a foreseen catastrophe.¹⁸

17 Informant 53, September 7, 2016

18 Informant 7, August 6, 2015.

Another self-proclaimed green growth investor repeatedly said how the local community was ‘*scratching dirt*,’ living from day to day, degrading the soil, the water and the forests in ignorance.¹⁹ According to this informant, the best solution to the problem was to establish large-scale commercial farming that had the knowledge and the technology to manage the land ‘correctly.’ The collaborating authorities on the specific project this investor was working on, adhered to this story too – at both regional, national and global levels (World Economic Forum, 2010; World Bank, 2012; 2013; 2019; SAGCOT, 2013). The narratives of overpopulation, resource degradation and a predicted Malthusian crisis were the most mentioned reasons why investments in natural resource sectors in developing countries are necessary.²⁰

Clearly, there is a framing of villains in this picture: poor people degrade the soil with their outdated production systems, lack of knowledge and ignorance. These people are also often regarded as ‘victims’ in the same story alongside nature as a victim. The ‘heroes’ in the narrative are policymakers, practitioners, environmentalists, and investors who bring green growth, capital inflows, technology transfers, and essentially *modernization* to solve the degradation crises. Scholars have contributed to this view for decades. For example, Hollander (2003, p. 2) writes,

The real enemy of the environment is *poverty* – the tragedy of the billions of the world’s inhabitants who face hunger, disease, and ignorance each day of their lives. Poverty is the environmental villain; poor people are its victims. Impoverished people often do plunder their resources, pollute their environment, and overcrowd their habitats. They do these things not out of willful neglect but only out of the need to survive.

Not only foreign investors hold this view, but also elites and national stakeholders promote similar views when arguing why a green transition is necessary. Such scarcity narratives feed into policy formation (Hajer, 1995). This is evident through for example various large-scale land investment schemes that have been rolled out since the triple F crisis (Buseth, 2017; Scoones et al., 2018; World Economic Forum, 2010), aiming to improve production, alleviate poverty, accumulate economic growth, and at the same time curb climate change.²¹ Policy strategies in such initiatives are to a large extent based on narratives of scarcity and degradation, presenting problems presumed to be solved by technology and capital inflows to natural resource sectors that are not utilized to their full potentials.

19 Informant 76, November 4, 2016

20 Informant 11, August 12, 2015; informant 4, May 7th, 2015, informant 14, November 6th, 2015

21 Examples include the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT), the Beira Agricultural Growth Corridor (BAGC) in Mozambique, the Ghana Commercial Agriculture Project (GCAP), the Green Belt Initiative (BGI) in Malawi, the Bagré Growth Pole in Burkina Faso, and the Nacala Growth Pole in Mozambique, also called the ProSAVANA project.

Finally, deeply integrated in these narratives and the modernization discourse, there is a strong belief that in order to save the world's natural resources, we must attribute monetary values to them (OECD, 2009; UNEP, 2011). UNEP (2011, p. 18) holds that 'environmental valuation and accounting for natural capital depreciation must be fully integrated into economic development policy and strategy.' Furthermore, UNEP (2011, p. 19) argues that we need to better control the environment in order to make money from it:

The role of policy in controlling excessive environmental degradation requires implementing effective and appropriate information, incentives, institutions, investments and infrastructure. Better information on the state of the environment, ecosystems and biodiversity is essential for both private and public decision making that determines the allocation of natural capital for economic development.

This quote illustrates the two-sided belief in the need to intervene in ecosystems in order to ensure capital accumulation, and to protect nature. It links to the broader debate on neoliberal natures, discussed by e.g. Bigger and Dempsey (2018), and demonstrates the contemporary turn towards a modernization discourse in natural resource management in the Global South.

Commodification of natural resources and ecosystem services (Brockington, 2011; Sullivan, 2013) has directed many actors' interests towards what are perceived as 'underdeveloped' markets in the Global South (World Bank, 2013). Büscher and Fletcher (2015, p. 273) argue that the new mode of accumulation is best described as 'accumulation by conservation,' defined as 'a mode of accumulation that takes the negative environmental contradictions of contemporary capitalism as its departure for a newfound 'sustainable' model of accumulation for the future.' Whereas the green growth discourse rests on a narrative about a need to 'price nature,' it merely implies 'pricing nature to save the *economy*,' and not necessarily 'pricing nature to save *nature*' (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016). When implemented in the Global South, this narrative is informed by the aforementioned degradation narrative, and is accordingly transformed into a 'saving nature' storyline that masks how these 'natures' initially were framed as investment opportunities (Bailey and Caprotti, 2014; Death, 2015). This is obvious in particularly OECD's reports (e.g. 2009). This justifies interventions in nature, and largely explains how the green economy is regarded as an opportunity to find new ways to profit from natural resources (Brown et al., 2014). Under the green economy, actors focus more on utilizing natural resources than on regulating production or consumption systems, which are much more damaging to the planet – but that would disturb global capitalism (Kenis and Lievens, 2016; Patel and Moore, 2017). Biopower and capital accumulation must not be underestimated as driving forces in this discourse, or to put it another way, as driving forces in redirecting the attention away from the fossil industry. Thus, in line with Harvey (2001), the frontiers of this discourse appear as 'spatial fixes' to capitalism's internal contradictions (Harvey, 2014; O'Connor, 1991). This means not only expanding into new

‘spaces,’ but also finding new solutions (‘fixes’), which are often short-term and not sustainable. From this perspective, the green economy emerges as a new ‘frontier’ in contemporary capitalist reorganization.

5. Conclusions

Bailey and Caprotti (2014, p. 1799) argue that green economies in the Global South represents is a ‘mosaic of practices that displays both synergistic components and dysfunctional overlaps and which has hazy systems of accountability for ensuring consistency between higher level visions of the green economy visions and on-the-ground green-economy strategies.’ We see through piles of existing research that development interventions and green economy initiatives often are peripheral to on-ground realities. This is the result of how policy agendas are driven by prevailing and persistent narratives and discourses, and the gap can be explained by the ways in which policies are informed and shaped by narratives and discursive powers. Hajer’s (1995, p. 61) concept of discourse institutionalization is useful to illustrate how actors interpret, shape and transform the green economy agenda. Actors consciously or unconsciously draw on a variety of selected arguments and narratives to establish new agendas and policies in responses to new situations, such as the green economy (Buseth, 2017). In this paper, I have discussed how long-standing narratives have revitalized to inform, justify and drive contemporary green economy agendas in resource-rich countries in the Global South. Particularly two narratives feed into the formation of green economy agendas in the Global South: first, a neo-Malthusian ‘problem narrative’ of resource degradation, scarcity, and overpopulation in poor countries, and second, a ‘solution narrative’ saying that we can overcome the crises by modernizing natural resource management and utilization. In this regard, the ‘degradation’ narrative is coupled with an ‘abundance’ narrative, holding that while the planet’s natures are pristine and under threat, they are also abundant and underutilized, and should be invested in – or ‘developed’ – in order to accumulate green growth, as well as for the purpose of environmental preservation. In sum, this represents a modernization of natural resource management discourse in the green economy in the Global South.

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