

# A Diversity of Migration and Land Couplings: An Introduction to the Special Issue “Migration and Land”

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## 1. Introduction

Human migration and land are inherently connected, as people move from, through, and to places with diverse land processes and systems. Migration—be it internal or international, permanent or temporary—has various outcomes for lands and territories. Likewise, land processes and systems can also drive migration in different ways. This diversity results in complex and uneven land–migration couplings mediated by sociocultural, economic, and political factors. This *Land* Special Issue brings together contributions from across the world that address the land–migration interface broadly and thereby further extends our understandings of the range and complexity of the relationships between land and migration. We start by noting the persisting need for additional research and follow by describing how the articles in this collection extend our knowledge.

Much of the recent literature on migration and land has focused on changing land systems—how migration can lead to changes in how and by whom land is used, and how other changes in land systems reflecting environmental change can serve as a driver of out-migration [1]. In much of this research, rural, land-based livelihoods serve to connect land and migration. Since the publication of this collection, in 2020 and 2021, several important reviews have come out on published research on the migration–land coupling. Mack and colleagues [2] examine the research on remittances and land change as one important conceptual subset of research on the migration and land nexus. The authors find that very few of the reviewed studies focus on the direct relationship between the receipt of remittances and quantitative changes in land. In most cases, the relationship between remittances and land changes is mediated through household income and agricultural development and productivity. Hermans and McLeman [3] review the research on the linkages between migration, climate change, and land degradation. These authors note that the linkages are complex and often not well documented because they occur in a broader context of socioeconomic, political, demographic, and environmental processes. Sunam and colleagues [4] analyze how transnational labor migration in Asia can lead to deactivation and de-agriculturalization of rural areas, as well as the onset of re-agriculturalization, which ultimately affects land. Finally, Kelley and colleagues [5] examine the research on how mobile smallholder labor and the resultant capital shape and are shaped by transformations in land use and ownership across Southeast Asia. These authors also consider how large-scale land enclosures figure into the migration–land coupling.

These recent reviews illustrate the complexity of the interactions between land and migration and the need to continue to broaden and diversify our lenses. This Special Issue demonstrates the potential of this diversity, as we kept the focus open in our call



**Citation:** Schmook, B.; Carte, L.; Radel, C.; Aguilar-Støen, M. A Diversity of Migration and Land Couplings: An Introduction to the Special Issue “Migration and Land”. *Land* **2023**, *12*, 1366. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12071366>

Received: 15 June 2023

Revised: 28 June 2023

Accepted: 5 July 2023

Published: 7 July 2023



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for submissions. The nine contributions in this Special Issue include various types of research questions and cover multiple migration origins and destinations. Latin America dominates, reflecting significant attention in the research community to the migration–land nexus in this region. Five articles address case studies set in Guatemala, Mexico, and Chile. Three of these articles (Johnson [6]; Fernández Casanueva [7]; Angelsen et al. [8]) involve migrants heading to international destinations to escape precarious livelihood conditions. The two others are focused on internal migration. Two articles in the collection present case studies from Europe. Zimmerer and colleagues [9] focus on the transformation of agri-food land systems in Spain, while Egidi and colleagues [10] cover various locations in the Mediterranean, where migrants are retired people escaping from the cool northern climates. Two final articles focus on China and analyze land dynamics associated with internal migration flows. Lui and colleagues [11] examine large-scale, rural-to-urban migration to the Pearl River Delta, while Cao and colleagues [12] analyze interprovincial migration.

Each of the nine articles has unique contributions and extends knowledge of the migration–land nexus in a different way. While diverse, when taken together, the contributions to this Special Issue advance our understanding of the migration–land coupling by addressing four major connective themes: the conceptualization or meaning of “land;” the land–migration nexus in contemporary agrarian questions; how migration is pivotal to an interactive rural–urban system; and how diverse methods and geographies produce a variety of understandings. We next provide an expanded summary of each article and its contributions, followed by a brief elaboration of the four themes.

## 2. Contributions of the Individual Special Issue Articles <sup>1</sup>

Angelsen and colleagues [8] examine how migration and associated remittances affect forest cover, using data from eight communities in Guatemala and in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The authors test the now well-established theory that out-migration and remittance receipt can help drive forest recovery or expansion. However, what they find is that migration in these cases did not take away pressure from forests. Their research demonstrates that there can be negative impacts on forest cover when migrants have money and find attractive opportunities to invest in agriculture. In their study locations, migration has not implied an exodus out of agriculture; on the contrary, many returning migrants have invested in agriculture.

Cao and colleagues [12] consider a very different aspect of land in relation to migration—how the urban regulation of land shapes the living conditions of rural-to-urban migrants. The authors draw on data from over 300 Chinese cities with different land systems to examine the spatial variation in housing conditions for migrants and construct a regression model to identify influences on that spatial variation. An important contribution of this research is to highlight land processes in urban, migrant-receiving contexts. By considering how cities, land, and development policies shape these processes, the authors demonstrate how process variation leads to greater housing condition inequality in some cities as compared to others.

Carte and colleagues [13] explore how the expansion of monoculture forestry plantations in Chile is connected to decreasing rural populations. Their mixed-methods study reveals a statistically significant relationship between the expansion of forestry plantations and declining rural populations in their study area. Their qualitative data show how the forestry industry has impacted local rural communities and livelihoods. They highlight forest plantation expansion as a possible driver of migration in the area. These results emphasize the negative externalities of extractive modes of development and underline how rural restructuring and extreme shifts in agricultural land systems can result in migration. Importantly, the authors demonstrate the complexity of these relationships.

Egidi and colleagues [10] examine the phenomenon of international retirement migration from northern to southern Europe and its consequences for local rural communities through a comprehensive literature review. Retirees from northern European countries are increasingly attracted to locales in the Mediterranean for the climate and lower cost of

living, among other reasons. In particular, the authors discuss the motivations and profiles of international retirement migrants as well as the major spatial patterns of destinations, mainly coastal districts, but increasingly the rural countryside, in the Mediterranean region. Their commentary highlights that local governments could harness retirement migration to address population decline and decay in rural spaces; furthermore, the authors argue that effective planning initiatives and a sophisticated tax system can help to reconcile demographic shrinkage and to meet the needs of migrants in their new communities.

Fernández Casanueva [7] contributes to our knowledge of the Guatemala–Mexico border, a crucial territory connecting Central and South America with North America, in terms of transnational trade and human mobility. She examines the role of the local actors who enable the connection between the two countries along the Suchiate River. These often overlooked but crucial enablers of migration movements are money changers, transport cyclists, motorcycle taxi drivers, and rafters. Her analysis contributes to new understanding of how lands at international borders are shaped not only by migrants, but also by a cluster of immobile actors. The lands of these enablers of migration have been heavily transformed over the years by an international border of geopolitical importance. This border has forced these actors to adapt their livelihoods to its needs, and the needs of those who transverse it, in order to remain on their lands. To be able to stay, they facilitate the movements of others across the border. Fernández Casanueva [7] emphasizes the need for migration studies to consider not only regional, national, and international levels, but to also focus on the local level, where intricate land–migration relations such as these can be detected.

Johnson [6], with his research undertaken in Guatemala, reveals the experiences and consequences of “failed” migration for migrants and their families. His timely and important emphasis is on the consequences of failed migration, referring to migrants who did not make it to the U.S. or who have been deported after their arrival. These migrants invested a lot of money to make their passage to the U.S. and often became heavily indebted as a result. Failed migration is a frequent outcome of contemporary unauthorized migration under expanding border and immigration enforcement, and it has not yet received sufficient attention in research and debates on migration and agrarian change. Johnson’s article highlights how migration under expanded enforcement can reverse the “channels” of change commonly used in the literature to assess migration outcomes. Rather than driving remittance inflow and labor loss, migration under contemporary enforcement can instead result in debt and asset dispossession, increased vulnerability, and heightened local labor exploitation among migrants and their families. The result is the creation of an “enforcement landscape” as opposed to a remittance landscape.

Lui and colleagues [11] examine the large-scale movement of Chinese peasants into cities and what happens to land in the sending communities. Using survey data from rural-to-urban migrants in six cities in the Pearl River Delta, the researchers model the migrants’ decisions of whether to rent out their left-behind farmland. They assess variables related to the economic benefits of renting out the land, their living conditions and integration in the destination cities, and factors connected to other household members. What they find is that the farmland rental behavior of these rural-to-urban migrant workers was not simply based on economic rationality, or a consideration of the economic benefits of renting the land. Migrants were more likely to choose to rent out their land when they had fewer children, received urban social insurance benefits, and reported a willingness to remain in the city for more than five years, among other significant factors. Their study extends the existing literature on the land-related behavior of rural-to-urban migrants in China to include the social considerations as well as economic ones.

Robson and colleagues [14] consider the impact of rural outmigration on community forests, which are the base of livelihoods in numerous communities around the world. Rural outmigration, especially of youth, can make it hard for communities to have enough members invested in forestry and to sustain forest governance. Through a series of workshops with youth in forest-dependent regions of nine different countries, the researchers explore whether community forestry is, or could be, a viable option for youth in a globaliz-

ing world. Although a majority of the youth expect their aspirations to take them away from these communities, some will stay, and many would like to be able to return. The study findings suggest the importance of engaging and empowering youth to participate in community forestry, especially in a context of international expectations that many of these communities will play a leading role in forest governance.

Zimmerer and colleagues' [9] key contribution at the land–migration nexus is their examination of how in-migration supports the transformation of the agro-export sector in the major global exporting region of Spain and the Mediterranean. Continued rapid expansion of vegetable and fruit cultivation for export is accompanied by labor, gender, food, and housing issues associated with rapid urbanization and the growth of peri-urban spaces. The authors argue that understanding this land–migration nexus is key to responding to the environmental and social issues involved. They argue that their study can help advance research at the nexus of migration and land by expanding emerging ethical, justice, and policy concerns to new food and agricultural land systems.

### 3. Connective Themes

At first blush, the different research questions and aims of the authors in this collection on migration and land are so disparate that they appear to have little in common. However, in looking across the separate contributions, we can identify various themes that connect them. Four themes in particular are important to highlight here.

#### 3.1. Conceptualization or Meaning of “Land”

Different and sometimes competing conceptualizations or meanings of “land” contribute to a diversity of ways through which land and human migration are coupled. These differences are evident when looking across the research in this Special Issue, but they also emerge strongly within particular studies here. Cao and colleagues' [12] work in China highlights how urban land's exchange value and its use value can be in conflict and lead to poor housing outcomes for migrants to Chinese cities. Likewise, Liu and colleagues illuminate how migrants' connections to land in their origin towns can reflect more than its productive value. They show that those connections vary based on the urban circumstances of the migrants. Other studies in this collection demonstrate how conflict between uses, or “land meaning,” by different actors with varying power is central to land–migration couplings (e.g., [13]). Fernández Casanueva's [7] work at the Guatemala–Mexico border, in contrast, demonstrates the differing meanings of a border and its land, as a place to be traversed and regulated versus as a home.

#### 3.2. Land–Migration Nexus as Central to Contemporary Agrarian Questions

Land change is fundamental to larger waves of agrarian change, which also address human questions of labor, subsistence, and social wellbeing. Most of the authors in this collection help us to reflect on contemporary agrarian change, with rural out-migration continuing to play a key role in changing patterns of land use and/or land ownership. Questions of whether or not cultivated land remains cultivated [8] or is cultivated by others [11] remain core concerns of researchers. But agrarian change processes themselves, such as the expansion of extractive and export-oriented land uses, can drive migration flows, whether out of rural spaces, as Carte and colleagues [13] demonstrate in Chile, or into peri-urban spaces, as Zimmerer and colleagues [9] demonstrate in Spain. The latter article, in particular, focuses on the development and socio-environmental relations of agrarian capitalism and how that relates to global labor markets.

Johnson's work reveals a set of dynamics and outcomes that have been largely overlooked in research on agrarian change, including the possibility of variable migration pathways and their unique consequences for landscapes. It also speaks to the challenges posed by “slow displacement” [15] under contemporary migration enforcement regimes. While some approach migration as a strategy to avoid displacement from land and livelihoods, Johnson's [6] research reveals how migration, at times, reinforces displacement and

proletarianization among migrant-sending families. In doing so, it highlights the production of new forms of differentiation in smallholder communities, tied to the transnational enforcement of mobility restriction.

### *3.3. How Migration Is Pivotal to an Interactive Rural-Urban System*

In this article collection, the linkages between rural and urban places are evident and varied, suggesting an interactive system and continuing the longstanding critique of the conceptual separation of rural and urban spaces for understanding land systems. The research of Liu and colleagues [11] demonstrates how processes and outcomes in urban destinations can shape the decisions of migrants from rural areas to rent out the farmland they leave behind. Better conditions and integration in urban areas increase the likelihood of land rental, while connections to hometowns and rural family members decrease it. In this way, outcomes for land in rural, migrant-sending locations depend on both processes in urban destinations and processes that continue to connect people in urban places to rural places. In other examples, Robson and colleagues [14] link the aspirational opportunities available to youth in other places, especially urban areas, to the future of community forestry in rural, forest-dependent regions. Fernández Casanueva [7] illuminates how the spaces and lands of the border are socially and politically constructed by the flows of people and goods, whose movement is linked to processes in both urban and rural regions, blurring the distinction.

### *3.4. Diversity of Methods and Geographies Shapes a Diversity of Understandings*

The diversity of geographies we write, and write from, shape the articles' foci and perspectives on the land–migration nexus. This includes not just the geographic case study focus of the authors, but also how that combines with the research methods employed. The five studies based in the Americas incorporate qualitative approaches, either on their own or as a part of a mixed method strategy. Fernández Casanueva's [7] qualitative approach allows her to illuminate the experience of individual lives at the Guatemala–Mexico border, where facilitation of border traffic in all its forms allows some individuals to remain in place. Carte and colleagues [13] combine qualitative interviews, focus groups, and mapping workshops with governmental census and forestry data. Angelsen and colleagues [8] combine qualitative and quantitative information gathered through household surveys with remote sensing analysis of land change. Johnson [6] supplements quantitative data on migration financing and debt with qualitative interviews to uncover how very uneven the experience of migration is for everyone in the communities where he worked. Robson and colleagues' [14] qualitative methods consist of youth workshops, questionnaires, and in-depth case studies. Turning to the articles with research situated in Europe, Zimmerer and colleagues' [9] article on labor migration in Spain uses a qualitative approach based on interviews with structured and semi-structured questions, while Egidi and colleagues [10] take a quantitative approach for their study on retirement migration in the Mediterranean. The two articles on China use quantitative approaches, with statistical models built from national census data [12] and survey data [11]. These diverse methods produce diverse understandings that together can broaden our conceptualization of land–migration couplings.

## **4. Conclusions**

Consistent with some of the articles that have been published on land and migration since the publication of this Special Issue in 2020/2021, the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate that the migration–land nexus is complex and mediated by multiple factors. These nine articles contribute to a better understanding of these connections between migration and land by addressing four important linking themes. Many of the articles address multiple linking themes. Different conceptualizations or meanings of “land”—in different geographic regions and by different actors—contribute to a variety of ways in which land and human migration are linked. Most of the articles address the land–migration nexus and its relevance to contemporary agrarian issues and contribute to



evolving thinking about contemporary agrarian change. This is important as migration from rural areas still plays a key role in changing land use and/or land tenure patterns. Migration's pivotal role in interactive urban–rural systems is another important theme addressed in several of the contributions. The authors highlight the many connections migration builds between rural and urban places and emphasize the need to conceptually link rural and urban spaces to better understand land systems and their changes. The authors of this Special Issue also employ a variety of methods that shape the focus and perspectives of the articles on the land–migration nexus. In presenting a range of themes, approaches, and case studies from around the world, this Special Issue contributes to broadening and diversifying our conceptualizations and understandings of the intersections between human migration and land.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft preparation, B.S., L.C., C.R. and M.A.-S.; writing—review and editing, B.S., L.C., C.R. and M.A.-S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Acknowledgments:** We acknowledge all authors and reviewers who participated in this Special Issue.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Authors were asked by the editors to share what they identified as their articles' most important contributions. Author responses shaped the content of this section.

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