3 Environmental crisis narratives in drylands

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Introduction

Drylands are where the world's first civilizations developed and still sustain millions of livelihoods. Yet they are persistently portrayed in policy and development literature as marginal, fragile, disorderly wastelands, prone to desertification, overexploitation, and constraints on productivity. Drylands are instrumental to a range of current 'crisis narratives' such as climate change, migration, and conflict. Less conspicuous crisis narratives also underlie the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

There are of course other, contending storylines celebrating resilient resources and resourceful pastoralists, making the most of the diversity and variability of their environment that 'induces an inherent ingenuity' in the dryland users (if still 'outsider' narratives). Meanwhile, persistent findings of increasing vegetation have started to appear, contradicting 'irreversible' desertification as an 'undisputed fact' (Sullivan 2000: 15; Reenberg 2012). The resulting picture led Behnke and Mortimore to claim:

> If desertification denotes an environmental crisis consisting of irreversible degradation on a sub-continental scale, then the most significant thing about desertification in the Sahel is that it never happened.
>
> (Behnke and Mortimore 2016: 3)

While quite successful in other domains, resilience narratives appear to have made few inroads into the prevailing Malthusian[2] crisis discourse on drylands. Framing situations as crises gives the latter an 'edge' over alternative narratives. Global narratives dominating agricultural policy, Kratli (2013) notes, rest on crisis scenarios, presenting drylands as 'wastelands' (Hoover et al. 2020: 37), not belonging to anyone, low on production efficiency, unable to meet future food demand, complicated even more by 'global climate change and food price spikes'. Crisis scenarios 'generate extra-ordinary consensus, open up new avenues of legitimacy and stretch thresholds for accepting sacrifice' (ibid.)—that is, when collective survival is at stake, people will accept more hardship than normally, even if it hurts them.

Other elements of winning narratives (Box 3.1) like these are intuitiveness and an appeal to simple, causal, and explanatory beliefs (Molle 2008), clothed in neutral scientific language (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Shore and Wright 2003). The basis of these narratives, however, may not be all that scientific (Sullivan 2000; Verhoeven 2014), though scientists' involvement provides an aura of 'scientistical' (Ribot 2004: 74) objectivity and truth and a buffer against counterevidence (ibid.).[3]

Not everyone has the same 'say' in what knowledge is (Sullivan 1998) and which knowledge counts. Indeed, these narratives have 'bankrolled decades of development interventions, research and international debate in drylands around the world' (Batterbury and Warren 2001: 3).

This chapter will examine the evolution of narratives in some of these domains: the myth of water and climate wars, the resource curse, the allure of energy transitions and the inconvenient effects it hides, and the misconceptions underlying the SDGs. In the field of the environment, some aspects of the global lexicon of sanctioned buzzwords and narratives tend to change at a breakneck turnaround speed, while others adaptively persist, mutate, or merge. Actors may pragmatically and strategically mix and match (elements of) institutions and related discourses to justify courses of action (Haller 2019).

We will briefly illustrate the 'life cycles' such labels and narratives go through— and assess the *effects* of such narratives. New narratives appear, take centre stage for a time, and then fade away, prompted, boosted, and buoyed by specific actors, coalitions, and epistemic communities. If received wisdom claims drylands are unruly, the implication is that they need to be controlled, regulated, and homogenized (Sullivan 1998). However, hegemonic narratives always leave spaces for contending narratives to be heard, opening up the scope for debate, and promoting 'polyphony'—the inclusion of many voices (Scott et al. 2018).

Box 3.1 Winning narratives

According to Kratli (2013) winning narratives contain the following:

1   A crisis scenario, to generate extra-ordinary consensus, open up new avenues of legitimacy and stretch thresholds for accepting sacrifice. The global narratives that have dominated agricultural policy are built on crisis scenarios around meeting projected food demand, now complicated by global climate change and food price spikes. The role given to drylands and pastoralism in these narratives shows little consistency, aside from characterizing them as lacking in some way—for example: unproductive, resource scarce, fragile, marginal, remote, and using resources that are uninteresting for other uses. A closer look reveals pastoralism's many positives. The increasing recognition that

pastoralist systems in the drylands can work with environmental var-
iability, rather than against it, opens up an alternative storyline for
global food security under climate change.

2   A logical structure firmly rooted in a world-view that is simplistic,
powerfully intuitive, and widely held (e.g. the Malthusian argument on
food and population; the 'tragedy of the commons'; resource scarcity in
the drylands; economies of scale).

3   A politically neutral concern. Narratives are political in their making
and operations but favour arguments that allow them to steer clear of
the political arena and avoid inconvenient questions.

4   A fertile ground for programmes of scientific research. Support from
scientific networks provides a narrative with the aura of apolitical
authority associated with the objectivity of scientific methods, and it
cushions the challenge from contrary scientific evidence.

Some theory on narratives

Environmental issues are almost inherently discursive, characterized as they are
by 'a complex and continuous struggle over the definition of the meaning of the
environmental problem itself' (Hajer 1995). Hajer has therefore championed
looking at environmental policies through a narrative lens, as a framing contest.
This narrative turn builds on thinkers such as Lukes, Foucault, Gramsci, and
Bourdieu, who have contributed to the recognition that ideas and concepts ar-
ticulated through discourses[4] and ideologies are part and parcel of the expression
and effectuation of power. Ideas can have a direct political impact, and power
relations are in large part about ideational processes, especially the capacity to
convince other actors to mobilize and coordinate their efforts in a certain way
because it is in their perceived interest to do so (Béland 2010).

Narratives provide a 'deep structure', filling uncertainty gaps in understanding
the world we live in. Narratives are sense-making constructs on how situations
and contexts have evolved, in which the sense-making is a precursor to action.
Narratives persuade others to take certain kinds of action (Czarniawska-Joerges
and Joerges 1988; Haller and Galvin 2011).

To make sense of the world, we cannot live without narratives, myths, and
'fairytales' (Van Eeten 1997). Narratives fill in the blanks to simplify and ra-
tionalize decision-making. They evolve in order to make sense of a messy reality
and to point the way forward (e.g. development project discourse, conservation
discourse, poverty eradication discourse). Policy narratives are 'scenarios (stories
and arguments) that stabilize the assumptions for decision-making in situations of
high turbulence and dynamics' (Roe and van Eeten 2004: 36).

However, some narratives are actively promoted internationally at the expense
of others. Blaikie (2009) notes a reflexive relationship between the power of the
author of the narrative and the narrative itself. A resonant narrative will have
to be disseminated and concretized by social actors with divergent agendas. This

requires welding actors and discourses together as a discourse coalition, an *alliance* between catchy rhetorical devices, normative values, and sources of expertise. Those in authority have better means of broadcasting the narrative, as they have a network of allies and, if necessary, the means of coercion. 'Narrative framing' is a strategy to crystallize certain meanings at the expense of others, by developing narratives with a view to making a certain discourse of future actions hegemonic and legitimate (Haller and Galvin 2011). Once a narrative has become hegemonic, everyone will have to draw upon the hegemonic storyline if their contribution is to be taken seriously (Hajer 1995).

Narratives take the form of a story of how a situation came to be, and related discourses present a normative perspective of what should be done. Narratives thus have the following components:

1 –a beginning (e.g. assumptions, problem framing, and choice of issues)
   • intrigue and tension
2 –a development or 'plot' (e.g. argumentation, supporting evidence, justifications, troublesome side issues, and other relevant circumstances)
   • complications, reactions, resolution; and
3 –a conclusion: the moral (what should be done and policy recommendations on the way forward).

Narratives are thus populated with characters (heroes, villains, and victims) and their relationships/dynamics, entangled in plotlines, with complications, reactions, and a resolution. These plotlines unfold in particular settings (Scott et al. 2018) and have resonances.

Here, we look at a particular class of narratives – the crisis narrative:

> [a] rhetorical strategy by means of which the shadows of past catastrophes, or an impending one, are invoked to authorize particular forms of political power, or the use of collective power and resources, while depoliticizing the catastrophe in question.
>
> (Vázquez-Arroyo 2013)

Catastrophization—that is, invoking an impending catastrophe—lifts an issue out of normal democratic debate to life-and-death level, for immediate intervention with extraordinary measures (Warner 2013). In so doing, such narratives can be argued to set in motion an 'anti-politics machine' à la Ferguson (1990) (see e.g. Symons 2014). This fast-tracks measures and resources but takes place at the expense of a considerable loss of accountability.

Imaginaries

What Molle (2008) has called 'Nirvana concepts' underpin overarching frameworks that promote or strengthen particular narratives or storylines and that legitimize specific blueprints or models of both policies and development interventions. Nirvana concepts, narratives, and models/icons are 'all ideational

and ideological objects which emerge at some point in time to typify a certain view, approach, or "solution"' (Molle 2008: 131). These concepts and narratives are 'warmly persuasive' (Williams 1976) and endowed with 'almost unimpeachable moral authority' (Cornwall and Brock 2005). They create or strengthen

> social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to actors creating or reinforcing the narratives.
>
> (Bachrach and Baratz 1962: 948)

They are fed by 'imaginaries', which can be understood as the set of institutions, logics, values, and visions that spur ideas on what best fosters development in response to crisis narratives. The 'energy transition' is one such powerful imaginary (e.g. Movik and Allouche 2020).

Next to the paradisiacal 'attractors' we posit stand concepts and narratives with fear appeal—the 'repellents' spurring the idealized imaginaries. Environmental and climate mass migrations, environmental and climate wars, and deforestation and desertification myths are popular narratives, often rooted in colonial and Eurocentric beliefs of 'the South' as the site of backwardness, disease, and disaster (Bankoff 2001). Narratives of 'insecuritization' spread widespread unease and dread, and in so doing legitimize providers, 'dispositifs', and infrastructures of protection and defence. Securitizing (Buzan et al. 1998) and catastrophizing/crisification narratives (Ophir 2010; Warner 2013) open up space for radical change but also for authoritarian clampdown (Lebel et al. 2005; Pelling and Dill 2010), by calling into being a live-or-die situation overriding all other considerations, procedures, and checks and balances, seeking to jolt authorities into immediate, extraordinary defensive action.

The spread of ideas through policy transfer

Crucially, narratives travel (Gabriel 2016), among organizations and discourses; they can 'colonize other narrative spaces, they grow, they shrink and eventually they die' (Gabriel 2016: 209). The study of the 'social life' of narratives (Molle 2009) is closely related to several strands of policy-transfer studies

> concerned with the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system.
>
> (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000)

Policy transfers contribute to policy convergence and can be spurred by a range of processes, including *emulation* (borrowing and adapting ideas and policy approaches or tools), *penetration* (when transfer is the result of coercion or injunction

to conform), *harmonization* (made necessary owing to political interdependence), and *transnational policy communities* of experts and professionals

> that share their expertise and information and form common patterns of understanding regarding policy through regular interaction (international conferences, government delegations and sustained communication) […].
>
> (Stone 2001)

Relevant organizations in this process may be think tanks such as the OECD, UN agencies (e.g. UNESCO, FAO), aid agencies (e.g. American USAID, German GIZ), consultancy firms (which 'package' reports and recommendations according to the lexicon used by the agencies and ministries that employ them), international NGOs (e.g. World Wildlife Fund, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, International Rivers), academia, the various promoters of regional and global expert meetings (e.g. on water), and multilateral development banks (most prominently the World Bank).

While adopting policy ideas may be an explicit conditionality for receiving aid, such policy transfer may feel anything but voluntary when not presented as a conditionality. Transnational actors have the direct capacity to influence national policymakers largely by shaping their perceptions of what is good for them (Biersteker 1992; Orenstein 2008). Gatherings such as bi-annual COP global climate conferences and the triennial World Water Forum are conveyor belts for such ideas (Warner 2000; Mukhtarov 2014). Strategic elements in this endeavour are 'emulation', institution shopping, and selection of related ideologies with discourses and narratives, and 'penetration' (the activation of legal and legitimacy-producing ideologies). Especially, when it is a case of 'one-size-fits-all', this can be entirely inappropriate for the recipient context (Stone 2017).

Words themselves do not shape or change social reality; they need to be spoken in a complex context to 'work'—that is, to be 'performative'. To be 'felicitous', a 'speech act' needs to be spoken from a position of authority and resonate with the historical and cultural context of its intended audience (Austin 1975). While there is an obviously asymmetrical power relation between speaker and audience, the audience is not entirely powerless. As Butler (1997) has shown, meaning is not fixed and rigid; a speaker cannot control a hearer's interpretation, and a hearer can subvert and 're-inscribe' the intended meaning to perform differently.

For counterclaims to make an impact, they will need to develop into coherent counternarratives, which by their existence draw attention to the fact that there is a hegemonic narrative in the first place. In this sense, Gabriel (2016) claims, narrative and counternarrative require, co-create, and define each other. Stories of suppression will only reinforce the persuasive power of counternarrative (Gabriel 2016); see also our 'water wars/peace' example below. But suppression is not necessary; 'rendering technical' (Li 2011) appears to be a potent process to obscure and depoliticize a narrative and to make it travel. Let us see how this works.

Depoliticizing narratives

Just as in the world of politics, where words such as *reform*, *modernization*, *productivity*, *competitiveness*, *flexibility*, and *value creation* are used as assumedly neutral, positive, and desirable terms and contribute to depoliticizing a debate, the environmental world is permeated by a number of such concepts—for example, the *water–food–environment nexus*, *energy transition*, and *benefit sharing*. Another example of a globally hegemonic 'applause' concept is 'resilience', which has remained wildly popular despite having been amply shown to cover a multitude of sins and legitimize state retreat. The meanings that such buzzwords and labels acquire implicitly tell a larger story. Resilience, for example, implies that we have become too dependent on the welfare state, which has repressed people's own resourcefulness, and this resourcefulness will supposedly manifest once we give people space to show their true selves (Grove 2014).

The following examples will focus on:

1 the selection of discursive elements in a narrative
2 the interpretation and presentation of these elements as a convincing narrative ('label')
3 the use of scientific and expert information to strengthen the narratives and its extensions to discourses
4 the rise, reproduction, and (if any) decline of a (counter)narrative
5 the effect of narratives 'on the ground'.

The water wars narrative

The media-friendly 'water wars' narrative appeared after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It combines a Malthusian scarcity narrative with a Hobbesian state-centric anarchy narrative, leaving no choice but top-down intervention in (potential) conflict zones, the prime candidates for which are all in drylands: the Middle East, South Asia, and southern Africa. Kaplan's (1994) popular 'New Anarchy' article, a hallmark of this narrative, notably depicted Africa as a dreary place, fraught with chaos, violent contest over scarce resources, desertification, and deforestation. With global environmental consciousness on the rise, there was a receptive audience for doomsday scenarios such as that of the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972).[5] These scenarios began to focus on water when the 1977 UN Mar del Plata conference highlighted local scarcities, but things really took off in the 1990s with Gleick's *Water in Crisis* (1993), which was updated annually. A host of books and articles followed in the 1990s, carrying a simple 'Water wars' title, echoing also in NGO and politicians' discourse.

At the time, riparian states made belligerent noises over both the Nile and Euphrates, while Israel saw its Palestinian 'water intifada'. While passions ran high in the 1990s, it certainly cannot be ruled out that garnering international attention and lavish funding was part of the contesting governments' plan. Attention and funding came in large doses as the Clinton Administration established an

environmental security directorate at the US State Department, and the UN and bi-national donors funded the Nile Basin Initiative, including large infrastructure. To our knowledge, the Jonglei Canal project in Sudan is still on the agenda.

Four major university groups—based in Oregon, Toronto, Oslo, and Geneva— have carried out decades of extensive research seeking to link resource scarcity to violent conflict, including water wars. None of these groups managed to find a solid relationship between scarcity and violent conflict.

The water wars narrative has never gone away; it gets repeated in media stories every so often and has re-emerged as 'climate wars' (Welzer 2015). A 'growing consensus of global warming as a driver of violence' (Verhoeven 2014:786), as most recently expressed by European Commissioner Timmermans (Harvey 2021). The civil wars in Darfur, Sudan,[6] and Syria have been labelled climate wars (refuted for Syria by Selby 2019). Notably, however, water scarcity was *not* the key issue in these countries. On the contrary, it can be argued with equal force that water scarcity has brought countries together (e.g. in East Africa) rather than caused war.

Indeed an influential 'water peace' counternarrative from Oregon's Aaron Wolf (Wolf 1995) has appeared, claiming, so far without serious contest, that countries have not fought only over water; even the 1967 Six-Day War was primarily about non-water issues. Wolf's narrative has spectacularly reversed the water wars narrative. Nevertheless, the 'water peace' argument does seem only to have reinforced the search for water wars' potential in order to prevent such wars.

The prediction of water wars in drylands has taken a continuing hold on researchers and government and UN agencies. In 2019, The Hague Water, Peace and Security initiative, involving well-regarded The Hague-based institutes such as the World Resources Institute, IHE, the Clingendael think tank, and Deltares consultants, is funded and tasked by Dutch authorities to predict resource conflicts and migration flows. In the process, they reproduce the image of the problematic South (water conflicts somehow never take place in Europe) and invoke the spectre of coming catastrophes. Presented even to the UN Security Council, the consortium promises an early warning tool using climate data to predict 'conflict hotspots'. Given that an explicit action link with the military is made in the baseline report, one wonders whether pre-emptive intervention is also on the menu.

The Sustainable Development Goals narrative

The SDGs narrative, recently (2015) produced by the UN General Assembly, comprises a set of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all', to be realized by 2030.

While the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are still far from realized, the new environmental crisis narrative propagates a claim that the crisis is produced locally and that (under)development issues need to be viewed as entwined with environmental issues. As Escobar (1999, 2005) shows, these terms have been defined externally to the global South and, especially, dryland areas.

This narrative not only flows from a Malthusian storyline of poverty and hunger induced by overpopulation and underdevelopment, similar to the above water wars narrative; it is also based on the premise of 'independent' sovereign states free to choose their development path as a matter of just getting the right projects implemented, rather than on problems of local unequal resource ownership relations and global exploitative systems. Local actors (the rural poor and pastoralists) are framed as the problem, and states should fix their destructive actions by addressing the 17 SDGs and a plethora of sub-goals. These goals range from the eradication of poverty and hunger, and via health and gender issues, clean water and energy, working conditions, industries and infrastructure, to clean cities, responsible consumption and use of land and water, and the reduction of CO_2 emissions.

Four of those goals especially—inequality reduction, peace, justice, and labour relations—invite issues of power analysis but are void of any such analysis, while the approach to participation in dealing with these topics is on the level only of what states will do. There is no attempt to analyse local realities or to reflect on how inequality was created and is perpetuated in the first place, no power analysis on what triggers continued conflicts, and no attempt to identify who defines participation.

Specifically, the SDGs do not address property rights issues, the dismantling of common-property systems and institutions and their transformation into state and private property since colonial times. Furthermore, the SDGs do not engage with continued multiple resource grabs (Allan et al. 2012) by states and companies, legitimated as beneficial development based on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes since the global food, finance, and fuel crisis of 2007–2008 (Haller 2019; Gerber and Haller 2020), and worsening underlying poverty *and* environmental degradation. Last but not least, there are no gender and local-level minority-specific reflections in the SDGs on involving local innovations or crafting innovative local institutions for resource governance (see Haller, Acciaioli and Rist 2016).

A literature study (Haller et al. 2018) confronting SDGs with newer publications in social anthropology, geography, development studies, political ecology, and political science revealed that the SDGs would need at least a reformulation and a more bottom-up approach to make these goals truly sustainable (Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 SDGs deconstructed

- The selection and combination of 'poverty out of the blue' and the persuasive combination with environmental degradation that obscures power constellations, as analysed by political ecologists (see Robbins 2004; Blaikie and Brookfield 2015), marks the beginning of the SDGs narrative centred on states and investors as main actors to fulfil these goals.
- The SDGs present the convincing hegemonic narrative that the environment has to be fixed now, which is based on a labelled 'pure

nature' ideology, as if no people had ever lived in these environments, as if these were not cultural landscape ecosystems (see Fairhead and Leach 1996), and as if there has been no local development, no property rights institutions, and therefore no resource management—but only a 'tragedy of the commons'. The ideological basis is therefore not just that these lands are *terra nullius* (no one's land) but *terra nullius naturalis.*

- The SDGs are based on disconnected, scientific expert-driven natural science and neoliberal economics narratives from scholars who are legitimate champions in their field but are used to producing a scientifically legitimate framing of the crisis.
- Finally, the SDGs are also 'productive', as they legitimate 'grabbing' processes in the framing of conserving the environment and ushering in an environmentally sound resource governance and management based on new legal environmental-friendly frameworks (Larsen et al. 2022). This can be seen as 'institution shopping' (Haller 2010) on the part of powerful local, national, and international actors. They have the option to use these narratives and the discourses emerging from them to tap state and international funding.

The energy transition narrative

The energy transition narrative can be traced back to Germany in the 1980s, when the term *Energiewende* (Ger. 'energy transition') was first coined (Krause et al. 1980). The term entered the German policy debate for the first time following the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 (Leipprand et al. 2016). Four decades later, the term has spread across Europe and around the world; and although at first it was linked to the anti-nuclear-power movement (Leipprand et al. 2016), today the energy transition narrative is largely an imaginary that speaks to the climate (change) crisis narrative.

In the energy transition narrative, the problem is climate change and the use of fossil fuels (the villains in the story), and the solution is a move towards renewable energy sources and e-mobility (the heroes). The narrative fits into a larger debate on climate action and is supported by scientific projections of global warming and the catastrophic impacts if insufficient action is taken to reduce fossil fuel (carbon) emissions (IPCC 2018). 'The future' looms large in climate change studies and debates, and 'sustainability'—a concept that means different things to different people—has emerged as the way forward to counteract this apocalyptic future (Bryant and Knight 2019). The energy transition narrative resonates with these debates, as it contains a vision of a decarbonized and sustainable energy future.

The energy transition narrative has entered the public and policy domain in the global North. Following the 2015 Paris Agreement, the EU, for example,

committed to climate neutrality by 2050 and in the European Green Deal (the EU's overarching climate policy framework), a pathway towards a 'sustainable future' was set out, including provisions for a transition to clean energy (EC 2019 COM 640). However, in stressing the urgency of climate action and the 'good' (High and Smith 2019) of the energy transition, certain struggles and dynamics go unnoticed. Energy transition policy narratives influence consumer demands, restructure global markets, and travel beyond the policy world to the private sector. Companies and investors, in turn, react to energy-transition-influenced market changes by developing new technologies and rushing to the areas that hold the resources (wind, sun, minerals) necessary to bring about the energy transition, often in the global South, including in dryland areas. The largest renewable energy projects in Africa with European investors—for wind power in Kenya (Cormack and Kurewa 2018; Achiba 2019) and a solar project in Morocco (Ryser 2019)—are both located in drylands; they are also both controversial projects accused of local land grabbing (see Chapter 7, this volume). Projects such as these tap into an energy transition narrative and the closely related 'green' rendition of the SDG (particularly SDG 7, which promotes clean and sustainable energy) to legitimize their investments. However, such powerful global narratives typically hide detrimental impacts, especially at the local level.

Policymakers tend to be country-centric—Eurocentric in the case of EU policymaking—focusing on changing the businesses, households, and behaviours of their citizens, while paying less attention to the corporate responses and problematic consequences that their policies may have in other parts of the world. One of the sectors that have been heavily targeted by European energy transition policies is the transport sector, in particular the automotive industry. On the one hand, this is because road transport accounts for most of the emissions in the transportation sector (EC 2016 COM 501); on the other, it is attractive for policymakers to focus on a specific industry (ICTSD 2017), as it offers a simpler target compliance (Kent Weaver 2009). It follows that numerous countries and cities in Europe have announced future bans on petrol and diesel vehicles. These announced bans, in combination with policies such as the plan to roll out a European network of publicly available electric recharging points (EC 2016 COM 501), have contributed to an increase in the demand for electric cars. Also, European citizens feel 'good' about contributing to the energy transition by acquiring an electric vehicle.

Key minerals required for the rechargeable lithium-ion batteries of electric vehicles include lithium and graphite, and these are both found in dryland areas. Most research has focused on the 'lithium triangle' in the Atacama Desert and neighbouring dryland areas of South America (e.g. Agusdinata et al. 2018). Graphite, however, which the EU declared a 'critical raw material' in 2017 (EC 2017 COM 490) and which is found in the southern African drylands, remains largely unstudied; hence its local impacts have been neglected to a large extent. Northern Mozambique has one of the largest deposits of unexplored, high-quality graphite in the world. Over the past years, this dryland region has seen a corporate rush by graphite mining companies. Graphite mining, however, often involves the displacement and resettlement of local populations. It is widely acknowledged

around the world that people's livelihoods are frequently undermined and social life irrevocably disrupted after resettlement (Cernea 2003; Vanclay 2017). Mining-induced displacement and resettlement are thus among the hidden effects of policies geared towards an energy transition.

Unlike other narratives discussed in this chapter, which claim to describe or intend to 'fix' a drylands-specific problem, the energy transition narrative targets a global challenge. Nevertheless, it circulates primarily in the global North (there is no energy transition debate in Mozambique, as of writing in 2020). Yet the narrative informs policies and investments that have far-reaching indirect and problematic effects in dryland areas, which may be minor in relation to the historical and contemporary impacts of the fossil fuel industry in the drylands (e.g. coal mining in South Africa, oil prospecting in the Okavango Delta) but nevertheless need to be discussed. This is not to say that the energy transition narrative causes nothing but problems—indeed, it also creates opportunities and brings benefits; but because it is framed as being inherently 'positive', it tends to brush aside the cross-scale politics and inconvenient effects of a process that is complex and heterogeneous, in the name of the fight against climate change.

Discussion and conclusion: ears to the ground

Discourses help us make sense of chaotic reality, but they come at a cost: their normative content is far from neutral, and the sender is not merely mediating the narrative. Discourses have consequences: in the case of drylands, these consequences often lead to policy action intended to minimize variability and heterogeneity in the environment (Hoover et al. 2020). Rendering narratives in technical and scientific jargon lends force and felicity to development narratives; at the same time, counternarratives can evolve, subverting or challenging and uncovering hegemonic narratives.

In narratives and discourses, certain words, labels, and images are chosen as 'hooks'. For example, the narrative of local environmental destruction of 'pure (pristine) nature' by local people (i.e. poachers) and the discourse of conservation in the form of fortress or top-down 'co-management' are loaded with words. The narrative of 'wasteland' and the discourse of sustainable green development that can be realized there (see also Gerber and Haller 2020) legitimizes the denial of common-property rights and the use of common-pool resources in these areas, as if they can be 'grabbed' for free. Examples are solar or windmill fields in Morocco and Kenya.

An especially powerful hook propelling a narrative is the crisis label, a 'claim of urgency employed to characterize a set of contingencies that, taken together are assumed to pose an immediate and serious threat' (Spector 2020: 1). Proctor urges us to ask if the claim-maker benefits from the crisis label, from the events that are bracketed in or out and how this is legitimized. A crisis legitimizes problem-solvers—for example, the 1990s water-war narrative legitimized US military deployment in various 'hotspots'.

We have provided brief examples of pervasive drylands narratives, or global narratives with effects in drylands, that are power-blind, a-historic, ignore highly unequal distributive outcomes and are often based on assumptions that are plainly wrong. They reflect a deliberate or more subconscious elimination, obfuscating power relations (cf. Ferguson 1990). Among these narratives, the SDGs and Paris Agreement on climate change are quite recent, both surfacing in 2015, but older narratives such as the energy transition and water wars have proved persistent. These narratives, however, are not immutable; they may change, receive new meaning (energy transition), be challenged, or be overtaken over time in response to challenging narratives. For example, exploiting competition between donors may provide spaces to challenge or modify conventional development wisdom. It has indeed proved possible to challenge the anti-politics processes with alternative discourses for development in co-conservation schemes (Galvin and Haller 2008), land-based investments as commons-grabbing processes, and the development of bottom-up alternatives; these possibilities spark hopes of viable counternarratives.

Counternarratives can successfully find discursive alliances, though not necessarily followed up by more than symbolic action. The water wars narrative of the 1990s was contested by a liberal-institutionalist (power-blind) water peace narrative, while in the desertification domain, ideas about indigenous technical knowledge and common-property management rules became current in the aid bureaucracies (Swift 1996). Such counterpoint has not been particularly audible in the domain of the energy transition and SDGs; however, governments in the global South, such as Mozambique, are asking themselves why they should transition to renewable energy while sitting on deposits of coal, when the global North relied on this fossil fuel to strike it rich. We note that counternarratives often bring an explicitly historical lens that unsettles the dominant narratives.

Highlighting such emerging domains—where empowering drylands narratives remain uncontested and fossilized and their effects on the ground obscured—can help to reveal how narrative space is taken up, challenge these narratives, and uncover budding counternarratives. An analysis of power relations in the selection and the shaping of narratives—for example, with the help of Gaventa's (2006) Power Cube—may also point to the conditions and niches for a more inclusive co-shaping of narratives, an unveiling of voices, and an imagining of alternatives that otherwise remain hidden from sight.

To be clear, narratives can be useful and productive, mobilizing people into necessary action. Analyses such as those in this chapter risk picturing the arena as one of the misguided narratives contested by worthy counternarratives. In real life, narratives and counternarratives form a discursive ecology, a nexus of all kinds of interacting discursive life forms in various stages (Gabriel 2016). Subaltern counternarratives are not, by definition, more equitable and sustainable than dominant ones. Also, to highlight depoliticizing processes is not equivalent to calling for re-politicization of everything. Extreme politicization can lead to ritual 'tribal' standoffs for the sake of opposition, as we are currently witnessing in US politics.

Nevertheless, obscuring the strongly socially distributive effects of discourses and the interventions they legitimize can be no less destructive. Showing how dryland narratives occupy spaces and render value-laden ideas technical may help to make such narratives and attendant policies more polyphonic, thus '(re)politicizing' them in the sense of 'the imagination of alternatives' (Guzzini 2005).

Notes

1 We thank Martina Bozzola, Svetla Bratanova, Cyrus Samimi and Han van Dijk for engaging with the authors about the chapter and Jesse Ribot for his thoughtful review of a previous version. All ideas and argument contained here are of course solely the authors' responsibility.
2 After Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), who assumed that exponential population outpaces the linear growth of available resources, leading to a steady reduction in living standards and, to some, inevitable violent conflict.
3 Ferguson (1990) has shown the importance of policy discourses in depoliticizing development problems into technical problems that can be solved by the development business. In the process, territories are simultaneously turned into objects in need of intervention. See also Engström and Hajdu (2018).
4 Discourse is defined as '[a] specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that is produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer 1995: 60) or '*an institutionalised way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power*' (Link 1983: 60, in Wodak and Meyer 2015). Discourses not only express how social actors envision the world, but also significantly contribute to how they shape and constitute the world (Wodak and Fairclough 2004). A discursive formation is like a screen on which hopes and fears, perspectives and demands are projected (Torfing 1998). For this formation to gel, concepts necessarily have to be somewhat ambiguous, nebulous, so that it can be 'all things to all people', uniting disparate interests in a 'concept of control' (Overbeek 2004). This interpretative flexibility however also makes such concepts bound to disappoint (Warner and van Buuren 2011).
5 The Club of Rome is a private foundation established in 1969 by a group of European scientists concerned about the future of the globe. Their 1972 report, *Limits to Growth*, caused a global stir.
6 'Water scarcity root of Darfur conflict': https://www.voanews.com/africa/water-scarcity-root-darfur-conflict [Accessed 2 March 2021].

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