

Introducing **Marie Gagné**

Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Concordia University.

Marie Gagné is enrolled in a Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec-Société et culture (FRQSC) in the Department of Political Science at Concordia University. Marie's broad research interests include questions of land access, agricultural development, natural resource management, and food security. We talked about her GLD grant-awarded project, her current forest and biodiversity conservation consultancy mission, and her dream of a carbon-neutral house.

Your postdoctoral project, "Protests against the Large-Scale Land Acquisitions, Electoral Democracy, and the Emergence of Rural Citizenship in Senegal," received a GLD Short-Term Research Grant last semester. Can you brief our readers on what this project aims to do?

My project examines the implications of large-scale land acquisitions for electoral democracy and citizenship in Senegal. Senegal's land deals for agriculture and biofuel production have increased dramatically in the last two decades. These projects often encroach on populations' farmland and pastures, which can profoundly disrupt rural livelihoods and welfare. In response, aggrieved communities have frequently organized opposition campaigns to prevent the seizure of their land, most of which is managed by elected municipal councils. Citizens have, in many cases, ousted municipal governments with a record of poor land governance. In other cases, incumbent candidates have been re-elected despite widespread opposition to land deals. My research seeks to understand this intriguing variation through statistical analysis and qualitative interviews. The plan is to correlate the disaggregated 2009, 2014, and 2022 municipal election results with my dataset of land deals in Senegal to



measure whether contested land deals lead to party turnover at the local level. Fieldwork in Senegal will provide critical insights into the democratic aspirations that citizens have in terms of land governance. Four case studies will be selected to cover various power configurations between municipal governments and rural populations regarding land acquisitions. This research not only engages with enduring theoretical discussions about the foundations of state legitimacy in Africa but will also provide policy guidance on how local institutions can administer land in a more accountable manner, in the context of Senegal's protracted land reform.

You are currently on a three-month consultancy project on forest and biodiversity conservation in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. What is the intended goal of this project?

"This latest consultancy opportunity aligns neatly with my commitment to mobilizing the potential of social sciences in the service of evidence-based policy solutions on a topic close to my heart. With this project, I hope to offer my modest contribution to the fight against climate change."

I am so enthusiastic about this project, which I carry out in parallel with my postdoctoral fellowship. The West Africa Biodiversity and Low Emissions Development (WABiLED) program is a four-year program funded by USAID and implemented by Tetra Tech ARD to combat wildlife trafficking, reduce deforestation, and diminish greenhouse gas emissions. Tetra Tech ARD hired me as a political economy analysis expert and team leader to better understand and address the complex and sensitive issues around land tenure, protected areas management, and gender and youth inclusion in four transboundary forest landscapes of West Africa. The goal is to grasp the socio-economic, political, and cultural realities in the countries and selected landscapes where WABiLED intervenes to guide its programming and to share information with partners and stakeholders. The study will identify the formal and informal institutions, traditions, and actors that influence conservation efforts, paying particular attention to decision-making dynamics, incentives, and interests of different groups shaping or constraining sustainable land use activities. Over the years, I have held different research positions outside academia. This latest consultancy

opportunity aligns neatly with my commitment to mobilizing the potential of social sciences in the service of evidence-based policy solutions on a topic close to my heart. With this project, I hope to offer my modest contribution to the fight against climate change. It will also allow me to discover four new African countries and move my research agenda in exciting directions. I am really curious to learn more about local users' connections to the forest. Who knows, I might also be able to admire chimpanzees and other wild animals in their natural habitats!

I have heard you would like to learn more about eco-construction in preparation for a planned relocation to the countryside. Could you tell us a bit more about this vision of yours?

I aspire to live closer to nature and have a carbon-neutral house, which is a house that releases no CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere, equipped with a geothermic heating system and a natural pool. I also wish to have a fruit and vegetable garden to attain self-sufficiency, food autonomy, and a slower pace of life. I feel more serene in the countryside. I hope to realize this dream within the next 5 to 8 years!



*Marie beside a farmer in the Senegal River valley.
Photo Credit: Marie Gangé.*

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