Gendered surplus people, food security, and maladaptation to climate change in northern Ghana

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The floodplain of the Black Volta River traverses the Ghana-Burkina Faso international border and offers considerable potential for agriculture. Yet, it is a risk-filled landscape with acute vulnerability to flooding. In this presentation, I explain why agriculture in the floodplain remains so popular when it manifestly causes more problems. I draw upon Karl Marx's theory of relative surplus population, and empirical fieldwork using in-depth interviews with farmers and government officials (n=68). Overall, I argue that mining-induced land displacement, leading to landlessness and the creation of a relative surplus people, compels farmers to engage in floodplain agriculture despite heightened vulnerability to climate extremes. For landless women in particular, an additional pressure is gendered responsibilities in household food provisioning, as well as subjectivities linked to norms of being good wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. To reduce agriculture's vulnerability to flooding, farmers often raise artificial levees on the floodplain or alter fields to drain water more quickly. I assess the maladaptive outcomes of these practices including rebounding and shifting vulnerability, as well as eroding sustainable development options. Ultimately, I show how climate change maladaptation scholarship could be advanced to focus more critically on political-economic dynamics, gender, and intersectionality.

Hanson Nyantakyi-Frimpong is an Assistant Professor of geography at the University of Denver. His research focuses on the human dimensions of global environmental change, and sustainable agriculture and food systems.

Following the seminar, a social hour (4:45pm–6:00pm) will take place at the Tivoli Tap House patio on campus to continue the discussions. Please join us!