

Commentary

Power and politics in forest transitions

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As a number of nations have transitioned from net deforestation to gains in forest area, forest transitions have become a focus of research in recent years, raising expectations for preventing or reversing global climate change. Transition drivers, enabling global policies and the ecological ramifications of forest transitions have all been the subject of this study. Reforestation and forest restoration are recognised as major contributions to climate change mitigation, particularly in the tropics, leading to global programmes like REDD+ and the increased promotion of industrial tree plantings, which frequently compete with agricultural and industrial land use change. Forest carbon sequestration has a huge potential contribution in Asia Pacific, where REDD+ initiatives are anticipated to contribute up to 40% of world sequestration.

Key words: Premodern state formation in Africa, government, democracy, collective action, traditional social evolutionary theory, cross-cultural comparison

INTRODUCTION

While research has emphasised state actions as drivers of forest changes, the complicated, power-laden processes via which these shifts occur have received less attention. The continuing forest transition in Lao PDR (Laos) is explored in this article, as well as the politics of growing forest cover. The Southeast Asian country, which is landlocked and hilly, is on the verge of a forest transformation. Since the 1990s, the Government of Lao PDR (GoL) has been devoted to forest extension, with a goal of 70% forest cover by 2020. Despite high-level political agreement on forest expansion, real reforestation and forest policy are challenged, and forest expansion gains are scattered.

Results-based payments from REDD+ have established themselves as an essential political-spatial approach to push for the green development project, in addition to these offsetting schemes. REDD+ intends to create comprehensive, long-term, and nation-wide methods to avoid emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, as opposed to offsetting programmes, which are largely individual and place-specific projects. The GoL has utilised international financial, institutional, and technical resources from REDD+ to develop bureaucratic machinery that combines the international programme with

national goals and prepares for results-based payments to meet its target of 70% forest cover. The Green Climate Fund authorised a pilot programme in 2020 for about 8.4 million tonnes of emission reductions per year (USD 5/tonne) in six highland provinces of Laos. This equates to USD 42 million over the 2020–2025 period. While this looks to be a considerable amount of money for REDD+ initiatives, it only amounts to USD 21 per person for five years for two million people in the six Northern provinces. The ultimate contract volume was significantly lower, while further funding is being considered.

CONCLUSION

Forest transitions are controversial political processes, as this essay has demonstrated. We arrived to this conclusion by constructing a conceptual framework based on political ecology and critical state theory, which we used to examine the current forest transition in Lao PDR, identifying three development projects and contrasting their politico-spatial tactics and power resources. We discovered that Laos' forest transition is entwined with a dominating extractivist development strategy that modifies forests through wood extraction and large-scale land acquisitions, despite the fact that forest conservation is deeply entrenched in security concerns. Green development techniques that focus on offsetting, results-based payments from REDD+, and industrial tree plantings are gaining momentum in an effort to update the extractivist development

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trajectory as these tactics exhibit flaws, but their value remains fragmented. The green development project has yet to substantially threaten the prevailing trajectory of development in terms of systemic power resources, as financial flows from extractivist activities greatly outnumber green funding. Expansion of industrial tree plantations on degraded state forest property is now viewed as the most potent technique for bringing extractivist and environmental interests together. On the outskirts, we discovered a livelihoods-based development

initiative that supports forests as multifunctional landscape components and draws its major power from the integration of local livelihood issues. However, bottom-up and localised solutions, particularly participatory land-use planning and decentralised agrobiodiversity commercialization, remain an ill-fit within the state logics of diverting profits from forests into state bureaucracy, and hence only replicate themselves in the margins.