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Rubber plantation in the Northwest: Rethinking the concept of land grabs in Vietnam

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Abstract

At first glance, rubber plantations in the Northwest of Vietnam do not appear as so different from 'large scale land acquisition,' which is quite common in the Global South. However, when we closely examine how many processes in plantations work, we can see that they are many different processes at work than those that take place in other countries where transnational or domestic corporations purchase or lease land for growing food, fibre or fuel crops. Rubber plantations have been strongly supported by the government and promoted as a way to industrialize and modernize the uplands, while claiming to narrow the economic gap between the uplands and lowlands. Drawing on fieldwork in two villages in Son La, and on a review of policy papers and documents, this paper identifies the political mechanisms and policies that have emerged as critical factors enabling the dispossession of land for the development of a market economy with a socialist orientation in Vietnam. The paper seeks to understand how institutional control over land and over the discussion of political subjects produces control. It argues that land grabs for rubber plantations in Northwest Vietnam are moves to strengthen state sovereignty. This land seizure has indeed created a new way of land governance that hitherto did not exist in Vietnam.

Keywords: Rubber plantation; dispossession; industrialization; market economy; Vietnam.

Introduction

The growing literature on ‘land grabs’ reflects rising concern by activists and researchers about the problems of dispossession, exclusion and adverse integration that local communities face. ‘Land grabs’, ‘land acquisitions/appropriation’, or ‘land deals’ are various terms commonly used to depict processes of taking away land from the commons or from smallholders, either by purchasing or leasing (for commodity crops, fibre, fuel crops), or by appropriating (for state use purposes such as reservoirs or national reserves) (Fairhead *et al* 2012, Sikor 2012, Borras *et al* 2011). These processes open the way to “a truly wide-ranging global ‘land reform’... – a regressive land reform where governments take land from the poor and give (or sell or lease) it to the rich” (White *et al*, 2012, 620). Since this implies transferring land use rights and ownership from the poor to the powerful, land appropriation/acquisition involves injustice (Fairhead *et al* 2012). This indeed alters land tenure relationships that have existed in the localities for a long time, and marginalizes local people. While the majority of the literature on land grabs seems to focus on the international drivers (McMichael 2012, Zommers 2010, De Schutter 2011), limited attention has been paid to how developing countries’ governments have been involved in this process (Lavers, 2012). More particularly, studies on agrarian change and rural transformation in South East Asia in the last decade have mostly emphasized crop booms and their impacts on local livelihoods (Hall 2011, Hall *et al* 2010, Barney 2008, Li 2002). These crop booms have included coffee, shrimp, cocoa, rubber, oil palm, and fast-growing trees, and the expansion of these crops in Southeast Asia has been driven not only by large international and domestic investors, but also by smallholders (Sikor 2012, Hall, 2011, Li 2002). There has also been a lack of analysis on how land grab processes are linked to state development strategies—that is, how land grabs help strengthen a state’s dominion over its people and how these projects have transformed agrarian settings in the affected areas.

This paper examines these issues in Vietnam, where the government’s long-standing development strategy is to claim the maintenance of an egalitarian land policy, provide equal development for all its people, especially for the uplanders, and ensure security for ethnic minority people. However, recently the government has promoted large scale rubber plantation in the Northwest mountains, urging farmers to contribute their land to the rubber projects. Thousands of hectares of farming land and forest have been converted into rubber plantations in various provinces in the Northwest: Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien, including areas where people were resettled to make way for the Son La dam – the largest dam in contemporary Vietnam. Differing from other places where land was considered as marginal or empty in order to be set aside for commodity production (Borras *et al* 2011), the land taken away for rubber plantation in Northwest Vietnam was farming land that resettlers had received as compensation for their displacement from land flooded by dams. The Vietnamese government sees rubber as a strategic commodity, and the expansion of rubber plantation as an economic development opportunity for the poor of the Northwest mountainous area. However, the development of rubber plantations in the resettlement areas raises questions about land rights, ownership and life stabilization of the displaced households - problems of food security, of labour, of employment and of culture. Following Borras *et al* (2011), my research is guided by the basic questions of agrarian political economy recently highlighted by Bernstein (2010): Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with any surplus wealth that has been created? (Bernstein 2010).

My primary interest in this paper is to examine the government’s motivation and its involvement in promoting rubber plantation and how this relates to domestic political dynamics and to the politics of resource governance. I aim to understand current forms, logics and mechanisms that enable land acquisition in Vietnam. Such politics, I suggest, play a very important role in strengthening state sovereignty and have created a new way of land governance at the local level. I seek to understand how these mechanisms work on the ground, and the implications this has for the lives and livelihoods

of villagers who are the owners and users of the land .

Outwardly, large areas of the tree plantations in Vietnam are operated by rural households on small plots ranging from around one to a few hectares (Sikor, 2012). This does not mean, however, that private and state plantation companies have not been able to grab large areas of land from small households for their projects. Using the case of rubber plantation in the Northwest uplands, I argue that land grabs in Vietnam are not absent, it just takes a different form and it works differently from circumstances elsewhere (Fairhead *et al* 2012; Borras *et al* 2011). At the same time, land grabs in Vietnam are disguised under the name of development and modernization. Thus, different from Sikor (2012) who states that in Vietnam's land policy, credit policy and state investment work to enable household plantations, thereby allowing people to hold on to land (Sikor, 2012, 1085, 1092), I argue that a vision of industrialization and modernization favours a kind of 'state-capitalist'¹ politics of possession operationalized through shareholding and labour contracts (land, credit and state investment favour state capitalist projects). The clear result in my case study is that villagers lose their land. What happened to the villagers in my case study in fact is prompting questions on what makes the difference between places and/or over time.

The paper draws on field work in two resettled villages in Son La province from 2009 to 2013: Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom. The survey was conducted for 75 out of 80 households of the two villages. In-depth interviews were mostly in Vietnamese but on several occasions in Thai when the interviewees did not speak Vietnamese. The translator was from the commune authority. Notes were taken during the interviews, as most of the time interviewees did not want to be recorded. These two villages lost their original land, which was used for construction of the Son La dam and its reservoir. They were given new land in compensation, and then were forced to contribute to the rubber company some of the already small pieces of land they had just received. Under the rubber program in the Northwest region, the policy is for each household to contribute 1 ha (10,000m²) of their farming land for rubber plantation. The lease is for 30 years. In return they are allowed to have one member of the household employed as a paid worker for the rubber company. Since each person received only 2800-3000m² of farming land in the resettlement site, almost no farming land is left for a family of four to grow their own crops. It is not yet known whether, after the initial growing period of 6 years, the rubber trees will actually be able to generate latex for tapping in the 7th year, as expected by the government and the company. The future for these families is very uncertain: they do not know how they will have enough income if they must rely on just the one family member working for the rubber plantation. So why did the resettlers agree to become paid workers and give up their land in the first place? What happens with their land use right once they contribute the land to the rubber company? How have the resettlers adapted to becoming paid workers in the recent years, and how has the rubber program affected people's lives and livelihoods? The paper will explore some answers to these questions.

In the following sections I will begin with an overview of the dynamics of the process, the role of the state and its logic in rubber development in Vietnam in general and the Northwest in particular, and how the rubber project is linked to the national development strategy. I then analyze roles of other stakeholders in rubber plantations in the Northwest in order to understand the mechanism enabling this process, and how this process is linked to state sovereignty and to resource governance. I will later

¹ In this paper I use the term state-capitalist to indicate situation when a socialist state creates partnerships with private companies to promote market economy. This is aligned with what the Vietnamese state has claimed itself after "Đổi mới" – Market oriented economic socialism or the market economy socialist orientation [nền kinh tế thị trường theo định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa]. Under this system, despite the diversified economy and forms of ownership, state-owned enterprises still play a key role in the economy and land is under public ownership. The state decides key projects/directions for its economic development and promotes the implementation through state-owned enterprises. In cases where state-owned enterprises become joint-stock companies, they still operate under state direction.

examine some implications of this process for the local land, lives and livelihoods, labour and culture, before I conclude the paper by highlighting some key points.

Dynamics of rubber development in Vietnam

Rubber plantation came to Vietnam about 1897, brought by the French colonists who invaded Indo-China region. In 1930, the French planted 10,000 ha of rubber and harvested 11,000 tons of latex. In 1950, the planted area was 70,000 ha. In 1970s, the total area of rubber plantations in the whole country was about 76,600 ha (of which only 5,000 ha were in the North, the remaining were mostly in the southeastern and the Central Highlands), with annual production of 40,200 tons (Tran 2008, 2, 4). With the economic reform in 1986, rubber smallholders created a remarkable change in the rubber sector of Vietnam.² The transition to a market economy in Vietnam has also encouraged rubber smallholdings to develop. However, due to a major decline in the world rubber price in the 1980s, neither smallholder plantations nor large scale plantations were able to significantly develop during this period (Tran 2008,8).

Since early in 1990s, the Vietnamese government has started to consider rubber as a strategic crop and has created favourable conditions for development of the rubber sector. This is in response to the world's consumption of rubber, which as pointed out by Fox and Castella (2013, 159) has increased at an average rate of 5.8 percent per year since 1900. As a result, the area of rubber plantations in Vietnam increased from about 250,000 ha in the early 1990s, with total production of 103 thousand tons, to 405,000ha with total production of 290.8 thousand tons in 2001 (Tran 2008, 4).³ Despite the competition for cultivated land between various industrial crops with similar ecological requirements--like coffee, pepper, fruit trees etc.--the government of Vietnam established a policy to further develop the rubber sector.⁴ In 2012, due to a rapid rise in production, Vietnam rose to the fourth position (ahead of India and China) among rubber exporting countries, ranking only after Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia (Vietnam Rubber Group 2012). Currently, more than 80% of rubber production of Vietnam is produced for export; of this total the Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG) -- the largest state-owned rubber company in Vietnam -- accounts for 70%. In 2012, Vietnam exported more than 1 million tons of latex, valued at around US\$3 billion (Vietnam Rubber Group 2012, 2). The price of rubber rose continually at the beginning of the 21st century, further encouraging the expansion of rubber plantations in different regions throughout the whole country, including the Northwest mountains, where rubber trees had never before been planted. By 2008, the target was that by 2015 the country would have 750-800,000 ha of land in rubber production, of which 500,000 ha would be under tapping (Vietnam Rubber Group 2008,15).

As mentioned earlier, rubber is not only considered as a strategic crop, but also as an important direction for developing the country's economy and improving the lives and livelihoods of upland people, helping to narrow the economic gap between the uplands and the lowlands. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in his speech at the sector meeting in 2005 emphasized:

“Over the last 10 years, the Rubber group has achieved leaping steps with a high

² Before the economic reform (doi moi) of 1986, land had been assigned to cooperatives. There were no smallholder rubber plantations.

³ In the same period (early 1990s), rubber plantations in Thailand occupied 1,884,000 ha, of which 52% was high yield rubber variety; the production of dry latex was 1,786,000 tons. Indonesia at this time had 3,155,000 ha of rubber plantation and production of 1,429,000 tons (Tran 2008, 4)

⁴ Decision No 15/2003/QH11 dated 17 June 2003 by the National Assembly on tax exemption for rubber plantation using agricultural land;

Decree 129/2003/ND-CP, dated 3 November 2003 by the government to articulate Decision No 15/2003/QH11

growth rate, especially in production, income and revenue to the state budget. It has created jobs for tens of thousands of people and significantly contributed to economic development in remote and mountainous areas where ethnic minority people reside. Their achievements deserve high respect and compliment.”⁵ (Sonlarubber.com, 2011a)

Thus, the goal set by the government is to increase rubber plantation in the upland areas to create more jobs and to improve the lives of upland people. Notably, the government is encouraging large scale rubber plantation, arguing that even though small growers need less input, the rubber they produce is grown in isolated and distant areas where it is difficult to apply advanced technologies easily. Additionally, small stockholders’ rubber plantations are distributed in scattered fields, making it difficult to gather latex, lowering the quality of the latex, and raising the cost of production.⁶ So, instead of encouraging rubber smallholders, the government has prioritized large scale plantation.

However, the politics surrounding this rubber project was never simple. The government’s orientation toward plantation rubber was a result of pressure from an increase in international demand for rubber as well as from lobbying by domestic rubber investors. At the international level, since the world demand for rubber has increased in the last decade, the government has been pushed to prioritize rubber development. Higher rubber prices in international markets also mean that domestic rubber investors can gain more revenue from rubber plantation. According to Mr. Nguyen Dinh Trac, General Director of Duc Long Gia Lai Group⁷, one of the largest rubber groups in Vietnam, the investment cost for rubber plantation is VND130 million (USD6,500) per hectare.⁸ After 6 years of initial growth tapping can begin and continue for 25 years. At the end of the project life logging the rubber trees can bring additional revenue. The revenue from logging alone is enough to cover the investment cost (the cost of clearing the land and planting and raising the trees). Mr. Trac also highlighted that if, on average, one hectare of rubber gives 2 tons of latex each year, this will bring VND2.5 billion (USD125,000) in revenue annually. (Duclonggroup.com, 2010) According to an interview with VRG officials in 2011, even though the rubber price might have been going down, expected revenue from rubber logging would still be significant and make it worthwhile for rubber companies to invest in rubber planting.⁹ Growing rubber, therefore, has increasingly been considered as an agricultural practice with superior revenue. As a consequence, rubber companies have been extremely active in lobbying the government to get more land in order to expand their plantations.¹⁰ Thus, the government supports large companies, not because smallholders have to be inefficient, but because of strong lobbying by domestic investors. This has resulted in the fact that by 2010 the Vietnamese government has allowed rubber companies to convert to rubber plantations most of the land intended for the national program of planting 5 million ha of forest. This land is mostly concentrated in the central, central highlands, and south east areas. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) also issued guidelines for planting rubber on forest land (MARD 2009). Furthermore, in 2013, the Prime Minister signed a new decision on restructuring the agricultural sector which pays much attention to the expansion of rubber plantation.¹¹ As a result, the rubber plantation area in Vietnam in general and in the Northwest in particular has been steadily increasing over the last few years, especially between 2008-2012. By early 2014 the total rubber area of the whole country had

⁵ A speech by the Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung at a Rubber Sector meeting in 2005

⁶ Interview with VRG’s officials, 9 November 2011

⁷ Duc Long Gia Lai group is a Joint Stock Vietnamese company. It is an entirely private company.

⁸ In 2012, the exchange rate was USD1=VND20,000

⁹ Interview with VRG’s official in Son La, 9 November 2011

¹⁰ Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on 15 August 2009.

¹¹ Decision 899/QĐ-TTg dated June 10, 2013 on restructure of Agriculture sector emphasizes on expanding rubber plantation.

already gone beyond what was targeted for 2015 (Thitruongcaosu.net, 2014).

In addition to the domestic development of rubber production, Vietnamese rubber companies are actively investing in new rubber plantations in Laos and Cambodia. According to a report from VRG (Tập chí Cao Su Viet Nam, 2012), the Vietnamese government has helped to promote these rubber plantation in Laos and Cambodia. After having successfully planted rubber in the south and central regions of Laos, in 2012, VRG expanded its rubber plantation in northern Laos. By 2012 VRG had planted 70,000ha of rubber trees in Cambodia. In 2013, it is continuing to add 25,000ha, and in 2014 it plans to reach a total of 100,000 ha of rubber plantations in Cambodia, one year earlier than the agreement signed by the two governments.

In brief, I would like to highlight the critical role attributed to the state in enabling rubber plantations both within Vietnam and in neighbouring countries. Some may simply see this as a way that the government helps its large companies respond to world market demand. But in fact, the role of rubber plantations in the government's development strategy, and the centralization of investment policy, raise political questions regarding development priorities in Vietnam: what role can local authorities and communities play in determining development strategy in their locales? And what mechanism has been used to govern resources in favour of the new development strategy? In the next section, I will explore these questions by examining how the rubber promotion policy was realized and promoted in the Northwest region of Vietnam.

Rubber plantations in the Northwest

With the aim to expand rubber plantations, since 2000s, scientists and Vietnam Rubber Group have actively looked for new land area for rubber, including non-traditional environments. The northwest has become a new strategic region for rubber plantations, regardless the fact that virtually all land was allocated to/used by villagers already. Specifically, in 2006, first 3,000 ha of rubber were planted in the Northwest. Since 2007, the rubber development program in the Northwest region has been directed by and been the subject of major interest for the Prime Minister. Opinions of the Central Communist Party, the government and functional offices on rubber plantation development in the Northwest region provinces, as well as policies issued by the Province People's Committee (PPC) of these provinces, make clear that this program is strongly linked with the socio-economic development plans for the region. The program is considered to be a key component in helping to solve the problem of sustainable livelihood for the communities affected by the construction of the Son La hydropower plant. In this program, the PPCs of Son La, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien closely collaborate with the Vietnam Rubber Group.¹² Rubber joint-stock companies in Son La, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien are the local joint-stock companies; they directly implement the development of large scale rubber plantations in the Northwest region. So far, rubber has been planted both in the resettlement areas of the Son La hydropower project and in the lands of the host communities.

In addition, according to the central government as well as the provincial government, large-stockholder rubber projects aim to improve the environment (by raising the percentage of green coverage) and also alleviate poverty for ethnic groups (Son La People's Committee, 2011). The Province People's Committee issued an important decision in 2011 to emphasize "Development of rubber trees is a focal task of the province's Communist Party, and of administrations at all levels, in order to realize and implement the party's and the state's development strategy on agriculture, farmers,

¹²The Vietnam Rubber Group established on re-structuring the Vietnam General Rubber Corporation is a multi-ownership Group, in which dominant capital ownership belongs to the State. Other members of the VRG includes stock companies with more than 50% registered capital owned by VRG, joint-venture companies with less than 50% registered capital owned by VRG, and other service companies.

and rural areas for the aim of improving the material and spiritual life of our ethnic minority people”¹³ However, one issue that has not been mentioned in any document related to rubber plantation in the northwest is the environmental risk of growing rubber in that region. Particularly, the risk of freezing temperatures: rubber stops producing around 4 degrees C, and dies at 0 degrees C. For example, between 2009-2010, extreme cold weather killed 95% of rubber trees planted in the four provinces of Phu Tho, Ha Giang, Yen Bai and Lao Cai and 5% in the provinces in the Northwest (Báo Giao thông vận tải, 2013). So it is not easy for rubber to make it in a non-traditional environment like the northern uplands of Vietnam, no matter what the government wants to do.

In Son La province, villagers/resettlers contributed the land they had, and thereby became shareholders of the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company¹⁴. Land contributed by the local people is calculated at a value of VND10 million/ha (USD650)¹⁵ corresponding to one thousand shares (each share is valued at VND10, 000 (USD0.65)). Workers are employed by contract. The Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company has responsibility for the cost of production. Once the rubber trees mature and produce latex, all costs are factored into the total cost of production for purposes of calculating the dividend. Son La PPC has the responsibility to support the plantation both in policy and implementation. The District People’s Committee (DPC) and Commune People’s Committee (CPC) have the responsibility to coordinate land measurement and allocation, and to inform and mobilize the local people to contribute their land. In other words, following the direction from the central government, local authorities at all levels are in charge of recovering land from farmers to give to the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company.

VRG targets the planting 50,000 ha of rubber in the Northwest in 2015. Even though 50,000 ha might be a small footprint on the landscape of the Northwest, it is very important as many people’s livelihoods depend on it. In 2014, construction of rubber processing factories will be commenced in Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien. Partners in the building of the rubber processing factories come from India and Japan. By the end of 2013, Son La province has 6,700ha planted. According to the plan, Son La will have 10,000 ha of rubber in 2015 and another 10,000ha in 2020, while Lai Chau seeks to increase its rubber plantation to 65,000ha in 2020, higher than the amount set by the government (Sonlarubber.com, 2014). All the land for this rubber project is taken either from farming or from forest lands. So how is VRG able to proceed with this process?

Without support from the government, VRG itself cannot get the land for its project. It may be useful to go back to the period before the rubber trees arrived to the Northwest region in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the situation. In fact, before 2007, the plan to bring rubber trees to the Northwest was quite controversial. Many people, including officials from the MARD, and from line agencies at provincial and district levels of Son La province, were concerned about the soil and climate conditions in the area, as well as about changing ethnic minority groups’ farming practices and livelihoods.¹⁶ The struggle resisting the plan lasted a few years until the Prime Minister visited the Northwest region in 2006 and reaffirmed that the rubber plantation should be developed there.¹⁷ The rubber plantation program since then has been integrated with the task of industrialization and modernization for the Northwest region, and aimed at transferring upland small farmers into workers in concentrated large production. Since the Northwest is also where more than a hundred thousand

¹³ Decision No 363/2011/NQ-HĐND, dated 18 March 2011

¹⁴ Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company is a member of VRG with VRG holds controlling shares (over 50% registered capital)

¹⁵ Exchange rate of 2009

¹⁶ Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on 8 &10 August 2009 and on 5 July 2011. Interviews with local officials in Son La on 15 November 2009.

¹⁷ The rumour was that during the visit, Mr Prime Minister pointed his hand to China and asked people surrounding him “why can China plant rubber successfully on the other side of the border and we cannot do it here?” The project started almost immediately after that.

people were displaced to make way for the Son La dam, the government already had funding available to help the resettlers recover their livelihoods. It was decided to use a large amount of this funding to promote rubber plantation as a means of livelihood recovery.¹⁸

The process of acquiring land for the rubber plantations was not simple or easy. Local authorities through their institutions played very major role in this process. For example, in Son La province, beginning in 2007 the provincial government directed its districts to set up taskforce groups, physically based in all communes and villages that had potential for rubber plantation, in order to propagandize and persuade villagers to contribute land to the rubber program. The provincial government then formed the Rubber Development Steering Committee to supervise and guide the program. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, President Nguyen Minh Triet, and Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh all took turns visiting Son La province and its rubber plantations. In 2011 the province even issued a book that compiled all the policies which had been issued in 2009-2011 related to rubber, for its cadres to use (Son La People's Committee, 2011). Mr Nguyen The Luan, Deputy head of Son La's Rubber Development Steering Committee indicates:

“... our province issued new policies, which in principle satisfactorily addressed issues related to the rights and interests of farmers. We also successfully organized a workshop on how farmers contribute their land use rights in return for shares in the rubber development project. This model is relevant to the practical conditions of the province, contributing to the industrialization of our agriculture and modernization of our rural areas, which creates motivation for sustainable development, building favourable conditions for propagandizing and persuading people to join the rubber development program.” (Sonlarubber.com, 2011b)

The point here is that under the direction of the central government, the provincial governments did whatever they could to fit the rubber program into their economic pictures. Pressure from an increase of the rubber price in international markets in the early 2000s as well as from domestic investors were catalysts for particular policies pushing for more land appropriation for the rubber project. These were critical elements of changing resource governance in the Northwest, as I will explore in a later section on the implications of these policies for land use issues. The authorities at lower levels were placed in a situation where they had to create favourable conditions for domestic investors to expand their businesses. This whole process also reflects close links between the state and its large companies (both state-owned and private) in pursuing ‘development’ policies.

Study site

Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom villages were selected for this research. They are resettlement villages in Muong Bu commune (Muong La district, Son La province). By 2009, the population in Muong Bu commune consisted of about 2,242 households with a total population of 10,004, with the majority of Black Thai ethnicity. The main crops are maize, rice, and cassava. The local people also engage in other income generating activities such as livestock husbandry, raising honeybees (for honey), and fish ponds. Small business also provides a considerable income for Kinh and Thai people living along provincial roads, especially in recent years since the construction of the Son La dam began. Muong Bu was assigned a quota of 450 ha of rubber plantation land by 2015; this land diverted to rubber

¹⁸ Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on 8 & 10 August 2009 and on 5 July 2011. Interviews with local officials in Son La on 15 November 2009.

production will come from the lands of 625 households.

Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom are almost entirely Black Thai people. Before dam-induced resettlement, they lived in Tra and Kia Mon villages, Muong Trai commune, 30-40 km from the resettlement site. These two villages were the first ones selected in Muong Bu commune to participate in the rubber plantation program. This group is part of a rehabilitation program for resettlers in Son La province.

According to the research survey, there are 80 households in these two villages, of which 79 households are Black Thai and one household is La Ha ethnic minority. Right after receiving farming land in the resettlement site, people were persuaded to contribute most of their land to the rubber plantation program. Villagers were very reluctant to join the project as they had little knowledge about rubber plantation and were not sure how stable their income would be. People were concerned about not having land to work on. However, after a long process of persuasion, Huoi Cuom village contributed 40 ha out of 42 ha of their farming land, including ponds, to the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company; this land comprised 95% of their total existing farming land. Huoi Hao village contributed 79 ha (almost all of its farming land). In Huoi Hao common land was also appropriated for rubber plantation.

Figure 1: Location of the project site



Role of different stakeholders and local participation in the rubber project

Even though MARD (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) resisted the rubber program for some time, once the program started MARD became responsible for issuing a number of policies to guide its implementation. According to MARD “The development of rubber in mountainous provinces should focus on large scale plantation at the beginning stage. Once the large scale plantation becomes stable, small rubber farms will be developed and serve as satellites for the large scale businesses. The state will give favourable investment conditions.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Công văn số 3492/BNN-TT ngày 20 tháng 12 năm 2007 gửi Thủ tướng Chính phủ về định hướng chủ trương phát triển cao su tại các tỉnh Tây Bắc [Document No 3492/BNN-NT dated December 20th, 2007 by MARD sent to the Prime Minister regarding direction and policies for rubber plantation in Northwest region provinces, page

The below box summarizes roles of various stakeholders in rubber plantation. In this process, the authorities recover the land, the company invests in planting, and local people contribute the land and become rubber workers.

Box 1: Summary of different stakeholders' roles in the rubber project at the local level

Provincial authority: provides funds to support conversion of lands to rubber plantations (mostly in terms of advancing money for purchasing seeds and fertilizers for intercropping maize in rubber plantation during the first three years, giving loans of 5-10 million VND (USD260-520) to poor households for livestock raising, building new kindergartens for rubber workers' children, etc.), and for training farmers to be rubber workers. These works are implemented by the Son La Rubber Company (TLHD No 98/DC NCDD-PTCCS [Tài liệu hướng dẫn Số 98-ĐC-BCD PTCCS], page 7)

District, commune authorities: implement the province's policies in terms of reviewing plans, preparing cartography, redistributing land to the rubber company, and persuading local people to contribute their land (Decision No 197/TB-UBND, dated November 20th, 2007)

Son La Rubber Company: invests in the entire production circle from land preparing to seedling, planting, and harvesting (Decision No 98/DC-BCDD-PTCCS, page 10).

Local people: contribute land for rubber plantation. One hectare is valued at VND 10,000,000, or 10,000 shares. Local people get benefits from company dividends, and from payment for contract work with the company (Decision No 98/DC-BCDD-PTCCS, page 9). Local people also supply their labour to the project.

In fact, local people's participation in this development plan was *very* limited. Methods used for convincing people to '*voluntarily*' take part in this program were done in the old way: a top-down approach. The district management board for the rubber plantation coordinated with the commune management board. The party secretary acted as the head of the propaganda team to divide the households into small working groups, 4 villages in each group. The district management board was responsible for preparing communication documents for these activities. However, in most villages, villagers did not passively follow the demand for land recovering. As mentioned above, villagers were concerned about not having land for farming and they felt uncertain about their future. That's why they often did not agree to give away their land at first, and it took time for the authorities and the rubber company to get people to join the project, especially in resettled communities where people have a very limited amount of land after resettlement. Questions often raised by villagers in these meetings include: What does shareholding mean? What benefits would they get? What would other members of the family do without land? Could they get their land back if they wanted to? What will happen if rubber trees do not produce enough latex? Etc.

According to one member of the Commune's Project Communication team, the commune's communication team usually had to hold meetings, normally 5-7 times, with the villagers to explain how beneficial the project would be and what kinds of benefits people were going to receive. In some cases, mobilization was very difficult; for example, in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom villages, meetings were held 12 times. That was because the other affected villages were not resettled villages. Each household in the other villages in this area had several hectares of farming land (Dao 2012, 197). If they contributed one hectare, they still would have land for farming in case things went wrong with the rubber trees. However, Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom are two resettled villages. As mentioned above, the resettlement was already a hard hit for them. The resettlers lost their old, more extensive farming land; each household received only approximately one hectare of farming land in the new place. They wanted to hang on to the small piece of land they received as compensation after the resettlement, and

1]

continue to grow maize, cassava and other crops as they used to. One villager said: “We only have one hectare after the resettlement. The land is something real and tangible that my family depends on. If we contribute it to the rubber company, we do not know what will happen in the future”.²⁰ In the cases of Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom, the commune’s staff had to go to each household to persuade them participate in the project. Since many of them did not agree to join the project at first, villagers were even told that if they did not participate in the project, they could not have access to benefits such as health care or education for children. Specifically, their children would not be able to go to school because the new schools were built by the rubber company. And when they were sick, they would not be able to enter the hospital.²¹ Village leaders and Communist Party members were asked to become first participants to set an example for other villagers to follow. All of these activities had the aim of *encouraging* the local people to contribute land. At the end, most of the households agreed to contribute their land, even the people who originally were strongly against the project. There were a few important reasons for their agreement: first, they were afraid of losing the above mentioned benefits in terms of health care and education for children; and second, if their land was located in the middle of the rubber plantation, it would be impossible for them to go work on their land everyday without causing any damage to the surrounding young rubber trees. Furthermore, the penalty for damaging rubber trees was too high for them to afford, as I will describe in the following section. It might also be worth noting that while the headman of Huoi Cuom did not seem to have strong opinions regarding the project²², the headman of Huoi Hao was very supportive to the project and he actively pushed his villagers to join it. In the end, villagers did not seem to have a choice in this matter. Only one family, whose land was not located on the hill that the rubber company wanted to use, was able to refuse to join the project. That family was able to keep farming on their land and did not encounter as many difficulties regarding income stability as did the families who joined the project. Some other families whose land included sections not on the same hill are also doing better as they are still able to grow maize and other crops on their remaining land.

It appears that the above-described extensive government involvement was a critical precondition for forcing households to join the project. Government policy was indeed a critical dynamic that caused changes the uplands in many ways, especially in the way resources (in this case land) is governed and in agricultural settings as I will explore in the following section.

Implications of the rubber program for the villagers

On the land issue:

In Vietnam, land rights were a key arena not only of policy making but also of the everyday dynamic of state dominion. Land rights were closely connected with the exercise of state control (Sikor 2011). In many cases, it does not matter who has the title to the land, it matters what the state wants to do

²⁰ Opinion of a villager in one meeting held by the local authorities to persuade people participate in the project, November 11, 2009.

²¹ In Vietnam, if rural people have health insurance, when they get sick they need to go first to the commune clinic. Then the commune clinic issues documents to send sick people to the district hospital. From the district hospital they may be sent to the provincial hospital and then the central hospital if necessary. If people go directly to the hospital at higher levels without going through local clinics, the insurance company may refuse to cover their costs. So, if villagers refused to join the rubber project, they would not be considered part of the commune and when they get sick they would not have access to the commune clinic.

This information comes from interviews with villagers on 10 November 2009, and 2 May 2013. However, when asked, the local authorities’ representatives did not confirm that this method was used to force villagers to join the project.

²² His family only had to contribute 5000m² which was located on the hill that was planned for the rubber plantation. He still has more than 5000 m² which is located separately, not on the rubber planning areas. In 2013, his family earned more than 10 million VND (USD500) from growing maize on that 5000m².

with the land. In the following I will briefly illustrate how the state and rubber investors use land as a critical resource to bind people to policies that were against their own interests and preferences. And why did the local people, despite being aware of the potential problems that the rubber project might cause to their lives, still agree to participate in it?

Ethnic minority groups in remote upland areas of Vietnam have long been self-sufficient and self-provisioning. Local food production has played an important role in ensuring their food security, and people have been careful to hold on to their land. That is why many of them refused to join the rubber plantation project in the first place. However, since the state had already allowed the rubber company to start the project in the area, the villagers' choice was not simple. According to the rubber company, if villagers kept their farming land in the middle of the rubber plantation, came to work on their land and by accident damaged one of the young rubber trees, the penalty would be VND 200,000 (around USD11 in 2012). This is quite a lot of money for these poor people. The possibility of owing this penalty amount for damaging one rubber tree put much pressure on the local people, and was one of the reasons that made them decide to contribute their land. Upon agreeing to land contribution, the local people had to fill in the form "Registration form for land contribution as holder for the Rubber Joint-Stock Company"[Phiếu đăng ký góp đất vào làm cổ phần công ty cao su]. This form contains the following requirements: to (1) Register to contribute their land to the planning area for rubber plantation and (2) Follow the rights and obligations of shareholders as mentioned in the labour contract. The form was not only evidence that villagers were 'voluntarily' contributing the land, but it also tightly bound the villagers to the rubber project.

Joining the rubber project also worsened the villagers' struggle over their land use rights. The resettlers had just moved to the area and received the land as compensation for resettlement, but they had not yet received the 'red book' (*sổ đỏ*) – the legal title land use document -- for the land they had received. The villagers were concerned about this, but once they were told that they would be given the 'red book' as soon as they contributed their land, they were happy. However, several problems then arose. First, the resettlers received the 'red book' document only for the amount of land that they had contributed to the rubber company, *not* for the entire land, including residential land, that they had received as compensation for moving from the dam site.²³ Second, after issuing the 'red book', the district's People's Committee kept the original copies of the 'red books'; villagers were allowed to keep only the photocopied version. This practice of keeping the 'red book' with the district People's Committee was applied only to those households which had contributed land for the rubber project. The district authority will hold those 'red books' for 30 years for 'safekeeping'--but also to make sure that villagers will not be able to take their land back in case they change their minds about joining the rubber plantation. Even though villagers have land use rights, they became 'landless' and entirely dependent on the rubber company and the authorities. They no longer have the right to determine the usage of their land. Son La Rubber Company is the party on the no-risk side of the rubber plantation contract.

The government's favour and support of the rubber project was of great benefit to the rubber company when implementing the project. This favour raised questions of justice and exploitation--it is the problem of taking from the poor to give to the rich. In addition, because of various conditions favourable to the rubber company surrounding the land acquisition, the rubber company was allowed to avoid following some of the government's own land acquisition policies. For example, in 2009, the compensation price for production land acquisition was set by state policy at VND 48 million/ha (around USD 2700),²⁴ and land which had been used for annual crops was paid for in cash. However,

²³ By law, resettlers will eventually receive the 'red book' for the all the land they received from compensation, but they had not yet received it by the time this research was conducted

²⁴ Exchange rate in 2009: USD1= VND 17,800

for the rubber plantation project this same kind of land was evaluated at only VND 10 million/ha (USD562), and will be paid by shares, not cash, and only after the trees have matured and rubber can be tapped (Decision No 98/DC-BCDD-PTCCS).

My survey (Table 1) shows that 49.3 % of the households in the study site contributed almost all of their land for rubber plantation and 34.7 % contributed half of their total land. Only 2.6 % of the households contributed little or no land, but they will eventually have to do so if their land is in the planning zone. Thus, in the long-term the livelihoods of the two villages will become reliant on the rubber plantation. In some special cases, land owners were above 60 years old and/or had disabled children; members of these households are basically physically unable to go to work for the rubber company. The promise was they would receive some support from the local government, and once the rubber could be tapped they would receive income from their company shares. In the meanwhile, they have no land for farming and are unable to do anything about this situation.

Table 1: Land contribution in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom villages

Village		Number of surveyed households	Area of land to contribute %				
			0	1-20	21-50	51-80	81-100
<i>Total</i>	HHs	75	1	1	10	26	37
	%	100	1.3	1.3	13.3	34.7	49.3
<i>Huoi Cuom</i>	HHs	37	0	0	6	15	16
	%	100	-	-	16.2	40.5	43.2
<i>Huoi Hao</i>	HHs	38	1	1	4	11	21
	%	100	2.6	2.6	10.5	28.9	55.3

In the form of synthesis, I want to highlight the relationship of the state and the villagers in the Northwest region. Once the state became directly involved in matters of land appropriation in favour of rubber investment, it set out rules and regulations that brought its people hardship. The situation that district authorities hold the villagers property-title ‘red books’ as a way to strengthen their control of the villagers/rubber workers within the project had never happened in Vietnam before. This control can be seen as a part of a process to promote a socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam. Stated differently, in this economic system, the state, emphasizing economic development for socialism, through its institutions, controls people using various methods--and land entitlement is a particularly effective method. Agrarian political economy questions are contextualized in this situation and shed light on understanding the unequal power in development in Vietnam.

On income and livelihoods:

While the governments at central and provincial levels argue that the rubber project can play an important developmental role in the Northwest uplands, including job creation, food security and modernization, in reality there has been a different outcome. Food insecurity has become an acute issue only a few years after the project began. Indeed, local people’s changes in income and livelihoods in the study area reflect the problems associated with rubber plantation in the entire Northwest region. The situation changed only gradually after the villagers’ land was given to the rubber plantations, and it was hard for people to realize the problems right away. In the first three years, when the rubber trees had not yet created a canopy, households were still allowed to intercrop maize and soybeans, but not cassava. When these lands were prepared for intercropping among the rubber trees, families were not allowed to burn weeds in place, but had to physically remove the weeds,

far away from the trees. They were also not allowed to use buffalo to plough. Instead, only hoes could be used for preparing land for intercropping in the rubber plantation, leading to low yields and requiring more man-days. Yields from intercropping have been low compared to before. Even though it has been common in many rubber plantation schemes that the first few years were difficult, the problems incurred by villagers in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom were aggravated by lack of support from the government during this period. Alternative livelihoods were very limited and not every household was able to find other sources of income to supplement their work as rubber workers.

Work at a rubber plantation is not easy and has not brought enough income to the villagers. According to the local people, the jobs of watering, weeding and inter-rubber-field road construction are very difficult; it is very hard to complete one standard man-day of labour (in 2009 one standard man-day of labour in Son La was 57,000VND, equivalent to USD3). For example, to water the trees, they must climb the plantation hill carrying water on their shoulders. There are few water sources and the workers must convey the water from far away. Because of this they are not able to carry much water per trip. They must be in good health to perform such labour on the steep hills. For weed removal, the company requires that 60 trees be weeded per man-day. Inter-rubber-field road construction is even more difficult, due to the steep and rocky terrain of the area. Because of this, many people were not able to perform the required man-day in a 24 hour period and earned only VND 17,000/ day (less than a dollar). Villagers have started to worry about how to support themselves. One villager said:

“I am so worried, every day I am worried. Whenever my child comes back home earlier than usual I am even more worried, because how can I feed my family of six mouths today?” Another person complains that “Every day, we have to go to Lam Truong market, 15 minutes by motorbike, to buy rice on credit for eating. Now all the land has been contributed [to rubber plantation]. Also, how can I have land for building a new house for my children when they get married, and there is even no land for growing vegetables”.²⁵

After three years, people experienced even more changes in their income and working conditions. First, they were no longer allowed to intercrop within the rubber plantation and this led to a further reduction in family income. Second, the paid work available for them to do decreased drastically, because once rubber trees start growing well they need weeding only twice a year and fertilizing once a year. The villagers do not even have to water the fields, as only young trees need to be watered. Tapping will not happen until the 7th year of growing. In 2013, the average salary of rubber workers in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom villages was 600,000VND per month (about US\$30). The villagers were unable to earn enough to provide a minimum salary even though pay for one standard man-day of labour in Son La by 2013 had increased to VND 120,000 (USD 6) for all types of work (compared to USD3 in 2009) as it was hard to complete one standard man-day of labour. Low income also means food insecurity for these families. Worse, before, when they still were able to plant maize, whenever they were in need of some basic things such as rice or foodstuffs they were always able to borrow from convenience stores in the commune and pay later when they harvested their maize. However, things changed completely once monthly income began to depend entirely on daily work for the rubber plantation. Now in 2013, the owners of convenience stores in the area have stopped allowing the villagers who are rubber workers to buy anything without immediate payment. According to some villagers, this new rule has been put in place because the store owners know that they may not be able to get the loaned money back: the workers may not have enough money to pay off the loan at the end

²⁵ Interview on November 11, 2009.

of each month.

Compared to income from maize cultivation, income generated from rubber is not high and is less certain. Before, if villagers were sick or busy with other activities and did not go to their maize fields for 2 or 3 days, there was no effect on maize yield or on income. Now, after they became workers at the Son La Rubber Company, if they are absent one day and do not go to work at the rubber plantation, their income declines (and if they do go to the rubber plantation but do not work to a satisfactory standard, they are not paid at all). Moreover, with maize cultivation, most of the time villagers could easily estimate their income so that they could budget for annual household expenses as well as other expenditures, such as house repair or renovation. For example, according to a member of the village management board in Huoi Cuom Village, in 2008 his family produced 7 tons of maize/ha.²⁶ His family therefore received a total of VND 18 million/ha after 6 months of work. However, it has been difficult for the villagers to forecast total income when they are employed as rubber workers (see Table 2 comparing maize growing and rubber planting).

Table 2: Comparison between maize growing and rubber planting

	Rubber planting	Maize, cassava and soyabean growing
1	Long and difficult work: - The trees need watering - Cultivation must be done by hand - Requires digging holes for planting - The same work is assigned to men and women	Much less effort: - No watering - Buffaloes for ploughing - No digging - Men are responsible for the hard work; women have other tasks
2	Time, work: - Determined by the Company, - Whole working day, more time - Continually work for the whole year	- Independence, self-management - Shorter working time: 6 – 9 AM; 3 – 5 PM - Intensive work but for only in 3 months of the year in the cropping season
3	No previous experience: - Need to learn new skills; yield and income decreased; increased working time; decreased time for rest and taking care of family	Have previous experience - It is not necessary to learn; higher yield, more time for rest
4	Income: - Unstable - Unable to estimate - Unable to make plans for expenditures for future »» »» Very worrying	- Relatively stable - Able to estimate - Able to make plans for expenditures for the future »» »» No worry

Sources: Survey in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom in 2009

Labour issues:

Land seizure in Vietnam involves investments and dispossession, expelling many villagers from agriculture without absorbing their labour into the economy. This has greatly transformed the agricultural structure and agrarian settings in the area. It has created an agrarian labour question (Bernstein 2004), that involves large ‘surplus populations’ of the dispossessed (Li 2009, 2010, Araghi

²⁶ Meanwhile the Son La Rubber Company estimates that maize production from intercropping among the young rubber trees is only 5 tons/ha.

2010). Tracing agrarian transformation and changes in labour settings in the project sites helps understand how state policies have driven people away from their familiar daily practices.

In order to obtain land for rubber plantations the project gave people a false impression of their future working conditions. For example, before their contribution of land the villagers in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom villages participated in different meetings to hear about the rights and interests they would enjoy when joining the project as paid workers. Apart from the rights listed in the official documents guiding rubber plantation, staff at the provincial, district and commune levels also verbally promised local people that they would have other benefits, including buses to bring them to and from the rubber area and trucks to transport fertilizer and seedlings (since the plantations are so large and hilly). These promises were never fulfilled, making the local people wonder about the rubber plantation's actual benefit for the development of their household's economy.

The rubber company was not transparent in its process of signing contracts with the villagers. By 2012 the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company had recruited 2,200 long-term workers and 2,400 temporary workers (Son La Rubber Company 2012,5). But when asked, most of villagers said they had never received a copy of the contract with the company; some others had never even signed a contract. According to a staff member of the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company, the delay in signing contracts was due to the fact that the provincial government and the company had not yet come to a consensus on the contents of the contract.²⁷ In addition, project documents and labour contracts, read to people in community meetings, were in Vietnamese, a language which was not well understood by some participants. My survey shows that people were confused about their interests, responsibilities and benefits. The contract form for land contribution provided by the management board, describing the responsibilities and obligations of stakeholders, is not written clearly. The final article of this form states that "rights, obligations, legal interests, and legal consequences of the signing of this contract are well understood by the two parties". This raises some other important questions: How will the villagers confirm the contract if they do not fully understand the contract language? And how will they be able to deal with any disputes that may arise in the future? Once the households sign the contract, they cannot ask for their land back before the contract ends, which is 25-30 years later.

Working conditions in the rubber plantation have also been quite controversial. The villagers work 30 days per month. Even though each household has one person employed as a paid worker for the rubber company, the payment is based on the amount of work completed every day, and usually the whole family does the amount of work assigned to the one worker. They do not have other work elsewhere for additional income. The labour tools provided are not sufficient and are not always available at the needed time. This affects workers' incomes as well as their health. Two households are provided only one crowbar and one hoe to share, tools which are used only for digging and for turning up rock when contour lines are made. This has sometimes caused conflicts between the households. If the local people are not able to deal with the tool scarcity issue themselves, they must wait until the tools become available. Unfortunately, income is calculated by man-day. If workers must waste time waiting for work tools, their daily income might be far below the standard. They need hoes, shovels and knives for hole excavation, hole filling, and weeding, tools not provided by the company. If their family does not have these tools they must buy them. When asked about such problems, one leader from the Son La Rubber Joint-stock Company said that "Hmm, people like to complain no matter what. You know, they are farmers; hoes and shovels must be available in their houses. The project doesn't need to provide all these tools for every household if they already have the tools at home".²⁸ Interviews with company staff show that in general, for the company, the opportunity for the villagers who used to be petty peasants to become workers at the plantation was a big improvement and the

²⁷ Interview with a staff of Son La rubber company on May 2, 2013

²⁸ Interview with a staff of Son La rubber company on November 12, 2009

villagers should be proud of instead of complaining about the working tools and equipments. But in fact, the lack of these tools affects relations among labourers and with the Son La Rubber Company. In addition, the local people also said that after 8 months, they received only one of the two sets of working clothing that were stipulated by contract for one year, 1 pair of boots, 1 raincoat and 1.5 kg of laundry detergent. Receiving only one set of working clothes made it difficult for them to work every day and still keep adequate hygiene; if they washed the work clothing they had no clothing to wear the next day.

The agrarian setting and people's ways of working in the field are completely changed once they join the project. According to a villager, for each maize crop his family needed to work mostly during the first three months, starting when the fields were planted. From the fourth to sixth months, they only needed to work on the crop occasionally. September is the month of harvest. After harvest they spent time with their families, visited friends and relatives, repaired or built houses, or collected fuel wood or gathered forest products for sale. This has long been the traditional schedule of terrace farming for the Thai people. However, working for the rubber company they are no longer able to control their time. Due to the lack of advance planning by the rubber company, every morning labourers must go to the rubber hill without knowing whether work is available or not. There they wait for work; those who come first may find work, those who come later may find no work and must wait for possible assignments until finally coming back home empty-handed.

The upland ethnic people were not accustomed to the intensive work schedule set by the rubber company. Now they have to work on the same land as before, but in worse conditions. The type of work people have to do now is radically different from their past experience. Becoming rubber workers did not mean becoming modernized, as set out by the state. People became totally confused as to their interests and responsibilities: they are not sure about what they own and what they are supposed to receive. All this has led to a major transformation of agrarian settings in these areas. The rubber project did not only change the agrarian landscape, but it also changed the cultural landscape and local people's working habits, as I will explore in the next section.

Changes in customs and traditions in non-farming activities

Customs and traditions of the local ethnic groups have been overturned by the change of work. Labour distribution by gender is very common within Thai families and other ethnic groups in the Northwest region (Dao 2012,199). Men and women share farming work in specific ways. However, labour distribution among contract workers at large-stockholder rubber plantations does not follow this traditional distribution, as all workers must follow the company's rules. The separation by gender of production activities in traditional families is broken. Since a family contributing 1 ha of land to the rubber company is allotted only one rubber worker job, the rest of the family has nothing to do unless they want to voluntarily help the family's rubber worker to fulfil the daily work quota. These workers are farmers, and they do not have other skills to apply for different jobs somewhere else. In addition, according to their culture women do not go out to look for jobs. So if the family has given up its fields to the rubber company the only thing the women and children are able to do is to help the men working in the rubber plantation as they are unable to work elsewhere, away from home.

Rubber plantations have also altered relationships among the villagers and destroyed the reciprocity system in the village. Before, when they were still growing maize and beans, family members and relatives used to help each other during the sowing or harvesting seasons. Family and friends usually formed a group and rotated from one family's field to another's to prepare the land, weed or harvest, so on and so forth. They are not able to help each other the same way when they work for the rubber company because everyone wants to maximize his or her own working time each day to get more payment. Worse, there have been a number of cases when villagers in the same village have

fought for more convenient working spots. Nobody wants to work on distant or steep plots. In 2012, a rubber plantation worker in Huoi Cuom was hospitalized after a fight for a good work location, and the commune's police had to come to solve the problem. People become angry with each other over issues related to the work, and are often envious if someone receives a more favourable task in the morning assignment.

The local authorities were aware of these problems and wanted to do something to remedy them. So in some places district level officials tried to reduce this conflict and stress by encouraging villagers to practice some of their traditional activities, such as the throwing balls festival (*ném còn*). However, the villagers said that they were exhausted at the end of the day and had no interest in practicing these activities. And even though there were *ném còn* games going on elsewhere, they had no energy to go and see them. One female from a *ném còn* team said that “we used to practice throwing, but now nobody wants to see these contests so we stopped”.²⁹ After a while no one even thought about practicing their traditional activities anymore.

Under the new conditions, it has been difficult for the villagers to maintain many of their former practices. When they found themselves unable to do anything to break down the new rules, they were forced to conform to them. However, not everyone has kept silent. In fact, there have been some negative reactions to the rubber project, even though these have been very limited. Below are several stories of incidents where villagers have reacted against the rubber project.

Social responses to the rubber project in the Northwest region

At the national level, rubber in the Northwest has become a sensitive topic for researchers. Getting access to research sites and meeting with provincial officials has become extremely difficult. Thus, there has been little research by academics on this topic yet. So far, the Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD) is the only non-governmental organization (NGO) doing research on this topic in the Northwest region (Luu *et al* 2009). Since rubber production in the Northwest is a program of the central government, and the provincial authority has been very cautious when addressing this issue, problems stemming from rubber plantations which are faced by local communities have not been covered by the media.

Even though the policy for rubber development in the Northwest region has been fully agreed upon at the central level during the process of execution of this policy, settling disputes over land allocation for rubber plantations has proven to be a very difficult task and a slow procedure (Muong La DPC 2009,5). As mentioned before, it has always taken a quite long time for the authorities to persuade villagers to contribute their land. Moreover, the monitoring of project implementation has not been completely effective. These delays in execution and the lack of monitoring have directly affected the interests of rubber workers and their families. In some cases, it has stirred a quite strong reaction from villagers. In group discussions at the village level in Huoi Hao and Huoi Cuom, villagers have indicated that if they were to begin again, most of them would never contribute their land (73.3 %).

In some other villages of Muong Bu commune, village leaders persisted in not agreeing to contribute their land. This was the case with PB village: the village's leaders were aligned with their people and refused to sign any contract with the rubber companies no matter how many times the district and commune authorities held meetings to explain how good the project would be to their lives and to the nation's economy. The local authorities ended up not taking any land from the PB village for the rubber project. The result may be due to the village's resistance but may also because Muong Bu commune had already met the quota of land contribution to the rubber project assigned to them from district authorities. Another special case is Tat village in Muong Bu's neighboring commune,

²⁹ Interview on 10th November 2009

which illustrates a more extreme level of people's reaction: villagers cut down the entire rubber plantation in their villages (trees that were already 2 to 3 years old), arguing that they did not see that the rubber trees would bring any good to their communities. These lands were then returned to the villagers for farming. But there remained a question: How to compensate the rubber company for the loss in its investment in land preparation and young trees? The company filed the letter of grievance to the province's People's Committee. However, the villagers were poor and they did not have enough money to compensate the company. The local authorities did not want to apply legal procedures to the poor villagers. One of the government officials at the commune level said "you cannot ask the villagers to compensate for the rubber trees they cut down as they have no money. They are so poor already".³⁰ This case has been pending since 2012. To avoid similar things happening in other communes, the authorities and the company have worked together more closely to protect the rubber plantations from this sort of action.³¹

Since the rubber planting project was *initiated* by the Prime Minister; it has become a 'must do' project. It has shoved aside everything in its way. The project was proclaimed to be for the development and modernization of the uplands in particular and the country in general. The project serves the government's goal of transforming small and scattered upland production into a concentrated large-scale production. It might also make it easier for the state to control the uplands. So if people reacted against the project, they were criticized as being 'against the state's will and power'. That explains why, even though some of the government officials at district level were concerned about the problems that would arise from villagers contributing most of their land to the rubber project, they still had to come to persuade villagers to contribute the land.³² One official said "that's part of our job. What do you think we can do? You see even the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development did not agree with the project at first, then later had to support the project and issue documents describing how to implement the project. Hopefully the project will bring benefit to people at the end." One official in Muong La who strongly expressed his concern about the feasibility of the project was later transferred to another job. As a result, the social response to the project has been relatively weak. However, people do respond to this project, in one way or another. And even though villagers' reactions never make the headlines, they still have strong feelings about the conversion of their agricultural lands into rubber tree plantations.

In a nutshell, government agencies, local authorities, headmen, state-owned and joint-stock companies all have very important role in villagers/resettlers' access to land and their livelihoods. Staff from the rubber company consider the project as a favour and good opportunity for the petty peasants to improve their lives. They are concerned about how well the trees grow rather than about the livelihoods of the villagers. At the same time, officials from local authorities have different views about the project; not all of them supported the project to take away villagers' land. State officials were not entirely indifferent to villagers' welfare. Some of them cared and supported the villagers. And as mentioned above, the contract-signing process between villagers and the rubber company was delayed due to the fact that the provincial authorities did not fully agree with the terms and conditions set out by the company. However, apparently local authorities have only a limited ability to influence the central government's strategic program. This explains why in general the officials were cautious in what they said or how they reacted, as they did not want to bear negative consequences. For upland villages, the headman is a key person, so if the headman strongly supports the project, he will find a way to push other villagers to join the project (as in the case of Huoi Hao). If the headman refuses to join the project, it is less likely that other villagers will go ahead and join (PB and Tat villages are

³⁰ Interview on May 2, 2013

³¹ Interview with a local authority staff on May 2, 2013

³² Interview with a local authority staff on November 15, 2009

examples of this). However, as mentioned above there are many other factors affecting this land dispossession process, such as location of the village's farming land, the targeted quota given to the commune/district by higher authority levels, and others. There is no simple explanation why things happened in certain villages but not in others.

CONCLUSION

Research from the two resettlement villages studied highlights the problems caused by land seizure for rubber plantations in the Northwest of Vietnam. A new method of land control was created to support the rubber investors. Rubber companies were given power to determine which crop to plant, how to market the crop, and how the original land owners would be paid for their labour. Local authorities and state agencies did not cooperate well in ensuring local people's interests and the development of their household economies. In terms of labour issues, the interests and responsibilities of the two sides (farmers and the rubber company) are not clearly set forth in the contract of land contribution. People's land rights and ownership have been distorted. Even though they do have land use rights, farmers are no longer able to control their land and decide how it will be used. As a consequence, labour issues and food insecurity might continue to be critical problems in the area for the next few years and even up until rubber tapping begins. Since tapping must be carried out before sunrise, it will be difficult for women to join, which will negatively affect their daily income. And even if women could do tapping, there might be other social problems associated with women working on a large plantation at 3AM. In addition, no one is sure about the latex quality before the trees are tapped, and even if the latex quality is good, the current drop in the world rubber market will make it more difficult for improving food security for the workers.

In summary, rubber plantations in the Northwest region are an actual enclosure of land, dispossession of its previous users (in this case, they are villagers/resettlers) and establishment of new production and labour regimes. The two case studies show that land grabs are not absent in Vietnam, and Sikor's argument that Vietnam land policy and state investment allow people to hold on to land does not apply in the case of the rubber plantations in the northwest. In this particular situation, the state and its large corporations have collaborated in creating a new mechanism to take away the land and to control people. Stated differently, the state's vision of industrialization and modernization favours a kind of 'state-capitalist' politics of possession functioning through shareholding and labour contracts. The way that local authorities retain the villagers 'red books' to make sure these people are bound to the project and have no way to escape is totally new in Vietnam. This politics of state formation helps strengthen the state's power and its sovereignty over the people. Local people are the ones who suffer the most: they either become paid workers or have no land to work on. They work for the investment project and get less than minimum wage. Even though people, including villagers and NGOs, consciously or unconsciously react to the unjustness of this project, so far there has not been much they could do at a large scale to change the situation. Resettlers/villagers, while they are not passive victims of the state-capitalist project, continue to be trapped in this new situation. Institutional control over land and over political subjects produces and strengthens the dominion of the state and of large investors in the upland areas.

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