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Land concessions and rural youth in southern Laos

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Abstract

Scholars have produced valuable insights on the question of recent “land grabbing” in the global South. They have, however, insufficiently studied the issue from below, particularly from the point of view of a crucial group in the land conundrum: the rural youth. This paper brings to the fore the perspectives of Laotian rural youngsters amidst a hasty agrarian transition, in which the *borisat* (company) –in the form of large monoculture plantations– has permeated both the physical landscape and the daily narratives of people. Critical stances on the Foucauldian approach of governmentality are useful to challenge the idea that (young) rural populations facing agrarian change are mere ‘subjects of power’. Through ethnographies in the province of Champasak, the paper analyses how do young people’s aspirations of a ‘better life’, either verbally expressed or enacted through other media, play a role in the way they understand and cope with outcomes of livelihood change vis-à-vis more powerful actors, including their root households. Although young people’s aspirations reflect a growing material impossibility to inherit or acquire farmland, there are also subjective meanings that unveil a preference for salaried work (off-farm), which more rapidly fulfil needs of autonomy and peer identification. Land concessions for rubber and coffee plantations, which predominantly target young labour in the studied sites, have become a source of such salaried work –not without major constraints and exploitative situations for the majority.

Introduction

During an agriculture workshop in Pakse, Laos, in 2011, discussions evolved towards what seemed to be a broad consensus among workshop participants: that, to the detriment of local livelihoods, rotational cultivation continues to be constructed as an unsustainable practice, even when there is evidence showing otherwise.¹ While a speaker gave a lengthy comparison of upland (rotational) dry rice and lowland (irrigated) paddy farming, which favoured the former as more meaningful for upland ethnic minorities, a young villager timidly whispered to the person sitting next to her: “Paddy rice is much easier for us to do...” A participant took the floor to put forward what she did not dare to. An uncomfortable silence in the room; then discussions continued with minimal attention for the remark. After the session was over, she clarified the following to the curious participants who approached her:

We have to work more hours for cultivating dry, and then for weeding... It is very tiring! If I could or knew how to do wet rice, I would do that. It is the same for others in my village... But we cannot do it; we need to help our families.

She belonged to an ethnic minority in the Bolaven Plateau, who, up until the previous year, had been a full-time rotational cultivator. Farming now only took place during the weekends, for she had been ‘very lucky’ to have joined a small grassroots NGO project, as local staff, a few kilometres away from her house. Yet, many times over she found herself hoping to engage in a more intensive system of agricultural production. She was however missing the resources and knowledge, and had now other responsibilities to attend to. The salary she received was crucial in supporting her poor household, made up by many younger siblings. She was saving some of that money to set up a small hairdressing shop in her village, which was another ‘exciting’ interest she had (and visibly so; washed-off red dye decorated her hair). While she took joy in her family farming, she found it simpler to have a regular salary. Moreover, any window of opportunity to take action towards shifting to another farming method was evermore dwindling as rubber companies in the area had rendered land scarcer. She considered it fortunate that no *borisat* (company) had targeted land in her village but uncertainty was aloft, as nearby villages had seen a considerable reduction. In a seeming contradiction, she considered it an advantage that many youngsters in her and other villages had a conveniently proximate employment option in the *borisat* for whenever they needed cash.

Her statements and particular understanding of the situation seemed to deviate from imputed attributes or responses of peoples ascribed within certain livelihoods. Did other young people like her see the situation in similar terms, or was she an exceptional case? When other young farmers gave similar, puzzling accounts, it prompted me into investigating what I consider a fundamental, yet understudied part of agrarian transformations unfolding in Laos: the perceptions, aspirations and spaces of agency among the rural youth with respect to their farming and/or non-farming futures, in a context of commercial large-scale land concessions.²

In order to lift Laos out of its ‘Least Developed Country’ status by 2020, the government has been pursuing a five-year strategy (2011-2015) of industrialisation and modernisation aimed at

¹ The “Agriculture, Community Land Management and Climate Change” workshop, held on June 2011, brought together scholars, development practitioners and community members working on these issues at the regional and local levels. The author of this paper was an attendee.

² This paper is part of a PhD that seeks to answer: 1) what are the structural changes brought by agroforestry land concessions upon land use and ownership relations; labour organisation; and land-related beliefs in southern Laos? And 2) what are the livelihood responses and aspirations of young farmers? When research started in 2011, scholarly material specific to Laos that could help me ground the latter question was scarce, yet inspiring. The work of Holly High (2008, 2013) and Roy Huijsmans (2011), in particular, has made me feel less of a loner in my second endeavour.

national development, reduction of poverty and a maximisation of benefits from human and natural resources (GoL, 2011). Such strategy dates back from the ‘New Economic Mechanism’ reform in 1986, when the economy was liberalised after the failure of collectivisation (Evans, 1995; Bourdet, 1995; Rigg, 2009). While not renouncing its political orientation, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party encouraged a capital-intensive development in the nation’s main comparative advantage, which is land. The agricultural, forestry and mining sectors as key targets of investments (mostly foreign) made possible through land concessions.

The agrarian transformations that have been propelled by recent policies and land interventions have had more far-reaching effects than the ones tried out in the past. If one considers the legacies of dramatic events succeeding one another from 1946 to 1986³ –with state goals, strategies, and personnel to execute them, shifting so rapidly; if ever truly achieved–, the new market-oriented project seems to be more effective in its ambitious development aims within hurried deadlines. While some territories and populations were somewhat spared by state strategies during the French rule and the abovementioned period (Taillard, 1989; Evans, 1995; Stuart-Fox, 1995; Pholsena, 2006; Baird, 2009); the post-1986 era, entangled as it is with the global economy, is more pervasive in nature. The central state’s role and mode of engagement with land policy implementation has also been modified since, mostly delegating it to local governments who have a weak capacity and are easily co-opted by powerful interests (Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). In a country where 80 per cent of its 6.9 million people are dedicated to semi-subsistence agriculture, largely using rotational cultivation methods (Rigg, 2005; Ducourtieux, 2009), farmers’ lives perspectives represent an interesting microcosm where the intensity of agrarian change can be examined. It is, however, important to qualify such farming population, a considerable number of which was born after the ‘New Economic Mechanism’.

The demography in Laos, particularly in rural spaces, is interestingly a very young one. More than 40 per cent of Laotians are below 18 years of age, and 33 per cent between the ages of 10 and 24, with a growth trend that is foreseen to remain in the future (UNFPA, 2014). Higher proportions of young people are found in rural areas, where their main livelihood is farming (Nielsen and Chanhomphou, 2006). These figures and facts mean that many farmers of today were born in between 1990 and 2004, a period in Laos that was marked by economic aperture, development programmes, the opening of the country to international tourism, improvements in infrastructure, transport and communications –including the arrival of TVs, mobile phones, and subsequently (a few years later), the Internet. Since rural areas did not remain untouched from these novelties through the several development programmes and implementers at the time, many of these spaces became more aware of themselves through what they lacked and what they needed. The lives of these youngsters have thus been different to those of their forbearers. Strikingly, despite their demographic weight now and in the years to come, and despite their closer encounters with the development machinery, young farmers in Laos, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia (White, 2011), are not given a central place in agricultural policies or in the study of ‘land grabbing’ from their point of view.

With the above opening anecdote, I do not intend to disqualify well-documented cases in which exogenous factors, e.g. public policies and land enclosures, are rendering traditional land use systems untenable, and thus forcing peasants out of them (Vandergeest, 2003; Lestrelin, 2005; Ducourtieux, 2009; Baird, 2011). Undeniably, land concessions are making farming in Laos notoriously difficult and unsustainable for many. I am not oblivious either to paramount discourses of national progress that for decades pervades in the form of development projects by state and non-state agents. My intention here is more modest, yet critical of long-standing oversimplifications of Laos that tend to oppose the

³ To recall this history, in between 1946 and 1986, Laos was dragged into two major wars; it gained independence from France; it reinstated a constitutional monarchy; and, upon the Pathet Lao victory, it started a socialist state-building project, whose economic pillars were then dropped.

modern to the traditional, the lowlands to the uplands, and domination to resistance. The aim throughout these pages is to contribute with endogenous factors, as to get a close-up picture of the extent and manner in which individual agency, even in least-expected situations or contexts, reveals itself within broader structures of regional and global economic forces and technological frenzy.

The paper has four sections. After presenting the methodology, the concept of ‘agrarian transition’ is discussed through critical approaches of governmentality, in an attempt to comprehend the inner workings and effects of *agrarian* transitions through the lenses of *youth* ones. A third section is devoted to ethnographies of young people from different villages, with a preceding subsection setting the regional background in which personal stories take place and the specific livelihood trajectories across two districts. The fourth, concluding section synthesises the minutiae of young peoples’ perspectives and reflects on major commonalities and differences found, stressing key features of their lived and wanted experiences amidst agrarian change and current dynamics of land grabbing.

1 Methodology

Fieldwork has spanned over seven months throughout 2012-2015 in villages of Bachiang and Paksong districts (three in each), in Champasak province. Research was complemented by observations and background information obtained during a six-month stay in a village of Bachiang in 2011. Primary sites were selected based on the presence of large-scale land concessions for rubber or coffee for at least five years; accessibility during rainy and dry seasons; and on various degrees of proximity and road infrastructure from the provincial capital of Pakse –with remoter sites up to 4 hrs away (by motorbike), combining paved and soil roads; and the closest 20 minutes away, situated by a paved road. Secondary villages and towns were also visited, where young villagers temporarily work or study. Fieldwork was possible through two permits granted by the central authorities: one for a research project on land acquisitions and food security, led by the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and the University of Bern, and the other for a project on the feminisation in commercial agriculture led by the National University of Laos and the University of Bern.⁴ Contrary to initial expectations, having a permit largely allowed unsupervised interviews, as well as village stays. It also played a crucial role in making informants, research assistants and translators feel safer with regards to specific information on land concessions, considered by most a sensitive topic.

This paper presents personal trajectories in three villages: Thongpao and Huaytong, in Bachiang, and Lak Sip Ha, in Paksong. Stories and visuals were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with village youth (married and unmarried) between 13 and 25 years old, participant observation⁵, photography and auto photography. Using their (or household) mobile phones, several youngsters showed interest in the latter method, with the single instruction of taking photographs of whatever they considered important in their lives. Since few of them carried out the exercise, most of the collection proceeded with existing images and audio-visuals stored in their mobile phones⁶. The personal stories and photos have been authorised and are credited to pseudonyms, some of which were chosen by respondents themselves. Two local translators and farmers, Baw Hu and Nakkeo, a young man (25) and woman (21) respectively, were sometimes active in youth discussions or interviews. They occasionally feature in some of the narratives below. Direct quotes are

⁴ For full descriptions: http://www.snis.ch/project_large-scale-land-acquisitions-southeast-asia-rural-transformations-between-global-agendas, <http://www.r4d.ch/E/employment/projects/feminisation-agricultural-transition-rural-employment/Pages/default.aspx>

⁵ This included activities such as farming chores, cooking and meal times; collection of NTFPs and fishing; village festivals, rituals or social gatherings.

⁶ This turned out to be a reciprocal exercise, as all of them always asked me to show them pictures of my family and friends in my phone.

not literal citations, but are a translation from the original statement made in Lao or in the local indigenous language.

2 Governmentality from below: The ‘agrarian’ meets ‘youth’ transitions

The concept of ‘agrarian transition’ can be understood as the transformations that agriculture-dependent rural societies undergo towards more industrialised and market-oriented modes of production. Several processes have been identified as key in agrarian transitions, such as: agricultural intensification and territorial expansion; integration of production into a market-based economy; acceleration of urbanisation and industrialisation; heightened migrations of people within and across national borders; new forms of private, state and supra-state regulations developed and formalised to govern agricultural production, including the territories, the populations and exchange relationships involved in such production; and a re-arrangement or rift in the society-nature relationship (Rigg, 1998; De Koninck, 2004; McGregor, 2008). Other scholars have added a process of spatial or landscape reconfigurations that accompany the realignment of agriculture and other production sectors (forestry, mining, tourism) into the global market (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995; Zoomers, 2010; Hirsch, 2011; Hall et al. 2011).

Underpinning the above processes are unequal power relations, which may help us comprehend the dynamics in which global flows, uneven benefits, and actors of change intersect and reconfigure rural spaces, lives and livelihoods (De Koninck, 2004). Analyses anchored in the Foucauldian approach of governmentality⁷, devoted as they are in the study of power, have thus been attracted by agrarian transitions. In this vein, the social transformation taking place in Southeast Asian agrarian societies can be understood as a social *fragmentation*: “Social groups facing socio-economical or territorial challenges [are] becoming a part of a broader collectivity [associating them] with recent comers bringing new techniques, institutions and modes of intervention” (Bourdier, 2009: 182). The underlying idea in this ‘fragmentation’ is that farming communities, especially indigenous peoples, have little to say or do, and thus behave as ‘subjects of power’, who are intervened by the mentalities, techniques and rationalities that are implicit in agricultural development agendas (Baka, 2013). Tania Li has rooted the design and strength of such agendas in what she calls the ‘will to improve’ of various state and non-state actors, who share claims of expertise in identifying deficiencies and corresponding technical solutions for vulnerable people that need to be directed and enhanced in their capacities for action (Li, 2007). However, the reactions of those ‘meant to be improved’ arise in forms that blur the line between objects and subjects of power, especially with regards to intended effects and demands from each other. According to Li, Foucauldian studies provide enough grounds for “the “strategic reversibility” of power relations, as diagnoses of deficiencies imposed from above become “repossessed” as demands from below” (Li, 2007: 26). Rule, however, has seldom been examined through documenting “what *actually* happen[s]” (O’Malley and Clifford 1997: 502; Li, 2007).

On this regard, the literature on governmentality and on ‘land grabbing’ seem to mirror one another in that they have remained focused in the analysis of governmental and investor schemes, their assemblages of practices, agents and their antagonisms. Analyses of ‘land grabbing’ have largely concentrated on setting the trends and unveiling the drives and implementation techniques of states, international organisations, and other supra- and transnational entities in the rush for acquiring land for market-oriented purposes (Cotula et al., 2009; Hall, 2011; Stephens, 2011; Wolford et al., 2013). It is

⁷ Referred here as the ensemble of institutions, mentalities, techniques and tactics produced by a governing entity (Foucault, 1982: 220-21), in which power is wielded in a way to mould “...the acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour” of individuals (Foucault 1980: 124-125).

perhaps due to this one-sided focus that those affected by land deals have often been displayed as either ‘victims’ or ‘beneficiaries’, in opposing narratives and advocacy debates of ‘land grabbing’ versus ‘land investments’. There are, however, various calls for in-depth research on what happens to the other side of the equation, encouraging empirical material on specific local political economies (White et al., 2012; Borrás and Franco, 2012) that allow us to interrogate ‘power’ and its contestations (Peluso and Lund, 2011) and how those being excluded may also participate in active or subtle ways in land-related interventions (Hall et al. 2011). Researchers focusing on development policies in Laos are also incorporating the subjective meanings that shape responses and livelihood strategies beyond mere acceptance or outright resistance (High, 2008, 2013; Huijsmans, 2011).

In addition to Li, there is an important body of anthropological literature that portray recipients (or subjects) of agrarian transitions beyond being mere controlled subjects. The work of Mary Beth Mills on internal migration of (mostly young) rural Thai women indicate a reworking or renegotiation of relationships by agents who, despite their difficult circumstances, consciously aspire to a lifestyle out of their rural livelihoods:

Rural farmers must grapple with dominant narratives of national progress as standards of success that few can hope to achieve... However, there is always some slippage between dominant meanings or ideals and the ways that people encounter and interpret them in everyday life... Such breaks between received meanings and lived realities can provide space for alternate understandings and messages to be produced [from marginal positions] (Mills, 1999: 16).

Similarly, agrarian change in Indonesia has seen former peasants in South Sulawesi joining the peri-urban workforce in factories “in ways that often disempower and exploit them... [Yet] they are also interacting with these processes as heterogeneous and diverse agents” (Silvey, 2000: 512). Derks (2008) has further challenged the view of rural Khmer women being trapped between restrictive customs and global economic forces. Their search for an increased mobility, their creativity for finding jobs outside their villages and for negotiating traditional family obligations are among the in-detailed accounts of their aspirations in fulfilling what they consider ‘being modern, in Cambodia’s transition from a socialist state to a market economy.

Rigg claims that peasants’ aspirations in Southeast Asia are “increasingly informed by a wish to avoid farming, and the ‘household’ is being restructured as the genders and generations contest and renegotiate their respective roles” (Rigg, 1998: 497). In Laos, Bouahom et al. (2004) and Rigg (2005) have studied change in peasants’ livelihoods that result from a stress on farmland, distinguishing ‘distress’ from ‘progressive’ types of diversification. While the authors are not in disagreement with mainstream Lao studies that focus on a causal chain of events that lead to reduced farming or out-migration strategies⁸, they acknowledge that there are instances where choice is also reflected –in addition to livelihood diversification as a response to shocks. A closer look to young people’s responses and aspirations, and the way these are enacted in their social contexts, might provide some interesting clues on how governmentality works from below and produces complex understandings of agrarian transitions. Further, it helps us analyse ‘land grabbing’ from the standpoint of a generation that does not necessarily rejects farming as a source of living, but which faces several constraints, as well as pull factors of interest.

The generational aspect in ‘land grabbing’ studies is nonetheless rare (White, 2011; Berckmoes and White, 2014), but there is an urgent need and motion to develop this important link, given that the

⁸ An outcome evolving from declining swidden rotations, forests encroachments and a subsequent depletion of river sources, as evidenced in Shoemaker et al. 2001.

future of farming is closely related to the generation who will inherit (or be dispossessed from) land (White, 2011). Seen in their transient status, time is in the detail of ‘agrarian change’ inasmuch as ‘youth’. While the former is more fast-paced oriented with clear future implications regarding land availability, the latter might prefer to invent and reproduce itself on the everyday present that emphasizes needs such as the formation of identities, which are deeply influenced by peers (White, 2012). Thus, the motivations and preferences of young people throughout *their* own transitioning along *the* transition are particularly telling of lived and wanted realities of ‘here and now’. Berckmoes and White (2014) further propose that young people are seen in relation to larger social structures, through the concepts of ‘social reproduction’ and of ‘generation’. Social reproduction is defined as “the material and discursive practices that enable the reproduction of a social formation (including the relations between social groups) and its members over time” (Wells, 2009 quoted in White, 2012:16). It is important to note, however, that this reproduction does not take place in a void; it feeds and is informed by the larger political, social and cultural context in which it is played out. Therefore, it is useful to think of ‘generation’ as *relationship*, rather than a static social category within a macro-structure that solely distinguishes and separates social groups in relation to their age. Although not explicitly stated by Berckmoes and White, seeing ‘generation’ as an active ingredient also brings agency to the picture –mostly attested by “continuities and discontinuities in these processes” of social reproduction (2014: 2).

3 Youth lived (and wanted) realities in the Bolaven Plateau

The personal stories and visuals in this section were collected in villages of the Bolaven Plateau, pertaining to Bachiang and Paksong districts of Champasak province. Before presenting them, it is important to recall the dynamics that have marked the agro ecological space where these youngsters live, as well as the specific livelihood trajectories pertaining to their respective places of origin.

3.1 The space, the villages

The Bolaven Plateau stretches across Champasak, Sekong and Attapeu southern provinces of Laos. Covering a surface of 4,800 km² –with high (upland) areas reaching 1,350 m, and lower (hillsides) elevations ascending from 500 m–, it has a low population density of 31 people per km² (Fortunel, 2007). The area is primarily inhabited by autochtone ethno-linguistic Mon-Khmer groups (Goudineau, 2008; Baird, 2010) and, secondly, by allochtone Lao-Tadai groups (Fortunel, 2007), who rely on semi-subsistence rotational agriculture. Most farming is manual.

The Plateau has incessantly featured in colonial and post-colonial government schemes as a valuable source of wealth ready to be untapped and controlled for mainly two reasons: due to its peculiar conditions for timber, mineral extraction and coffee cultivation, and as a source of actual or potential upland non-Lao ethnic resistance to state policies (Moppert, 1978; Stuart-Fox, 1995; Pholsena 2006). Different periods of state control over the region have therefore combined development mandates with concerns of national security, accentuating one aspect over the other to best fit national and international political circumstances throughout colonisation, the Laotian Civil War⁹, collectivisation and the opening of the economy. After market-oriented reforms, the Plateau has mostly mobilised development drives, with state strategies that are fed on ‘frontier’ type of narratives that call for intervention in the name of poverty-reduction, forest conservation and the integration of ethnic minorities into national prototypes (Ducourtieux, 2009; Baird, 2010).

⁹ From 1955 to 1975, this war was fought between the royalist government forces, backed by the US, and the communist Pathet Lao, which was supported by North Vietnam.

Less fitting into the frontier image is the Plateau's lowest aggregated rate of poverty of all other agro ecological regions in the country (Epprecht et al., 2008). When zooming in our lenses and disaggregating poverty-related data, we can hardly talk of one single, homogenous frontier. The 2003 national population census revealed that more than 50% of the 139 districts in the country are poor, with 47 districts identified as top priority for poverty reduction strategies across the 16 provinces of Laos (GoL, 2004). While Paksong concentrates a coffee-related affluence due to apt soils and their more intensive use, which has kept it out of the 'poor' category, Bachiang district is in the priority list. The notion of 'patchworked frontier' (Barney, 2009: 147) seems therefore more suitable when thinking of differing and overlapping strategies of resource governance in the Plateau.

In addition, it is necessary to see the Plateau under a broader regional perspective. With paved roads connecting district towns with the provincial capital of Pakse –a major trade crossroad to Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam–, the Plateau is conceived as a geopolitical nod to strengthen the country's integration to ASEAN, a member since 1997 (Nolintha, 2012). Further, lying relatively close to the Thai international border, the Plateau has a transnational aspect that is often a trait of 'frontiers', and arguments in favour of tighter state control (Hall, 2013). Certain hillside areas are only two hours away (by motorbike) from the Chong Mek checkpoint with Thailand, and are part of an intensified network of (legal and illegal) trade and movement of peoples across the international line. Local livelihood trajectories are, in various degrees, inescapably intertwined with such dynamics, and this has been the case even before the opening of the economy (Rigg, 2005).

The villages presented below, in Bachiang and Paksong, were founded from 1961 to 1974, a period that saw the escalation of the Laotian Civil War. Despite intense bombardments and movements of people, collective memory stresses a time of plentiful land resources, with livelihoods tied to the cultivation of rice, coffee, vegetables, fruits, peanuts, cardamom and livestock raising. After a brief and faintly enforced collectivisation¹⁰, farming took place as usual: 'without count of village lands or farming plots; [in principle] families could clear as much as they wanted'¹¹ under customary arrangements mediated by village chiefs or between families. Subsistence farming was practiced in rotational mixed-cropping systems with long fallows of minimum five years. In lower areas, paddies complemented rain-fed rice. Rivers and forests also provided a major source of nutrition (fish, wild game, NTFPs), especially in between the dry and wet periods (February-April), coinciding with the end of the coffee harvest and the start of a new rice farming cycle.

The Land and Forest Allocation Programme (LFA), implemented in the 1990's, constituted a crucial change in peoples' *modus vivendi*. LFA was a nationwide process that intended to validate, restrict or eradicate certain land uses –in favour, or in lieu, of more efficient ones. The programme provided the villages with their first maps ever, indicating borders and land use zones; it also intended to provide temporary certificates for agricultural and forest lands (Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). LFA was coupled with a ban on rotational cultivation and with other poverty-reduction plans, often entailing village resettlements into focal areas –nearby roads, markets, schools and clinics (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004). Although none of the visited villages were resettled, LFA had a notable effect on them. Government and development aid agencies encouraged cash crop intensive agriculture over 'unproductive' fallow land. Paksong district saw a boom in its coffee production, a small industry that had been fruitfully initiated by the French (1920-1940) but interrupted by wars (Sallée and Tulet, 2010). Coffee has since become the main source of income in Paksong district, mostly in Robusta type, followed by an increasing production of Catimor and Arabica. Without proper, elevated soils for coffee and without sufficient attempts at developing higher-value cash crops, the usual rainy-season crops for sale in Bachiang remain corn, peanuts and fruits, in encroaching rotational systems. Cassava is a

¹⁰ Villages loosely participated for 2-3 years.

¹¹ Interview with village authorities, 26 February 2014.

recent addition, sold in the dry season. In 2014, households covered in Bachiang presented an average yearly income of 9 million kip (1,125 USD) for the sale of cash crops, against those in Paksong whose average was 35 million kip (4,375 USD).

In all studied sites, the implementation of LFA was instrumental in identifying fallow land –then labelled as ‘idle’, ‘unused’ and therefore eligible for development. In this way, LFA prepared the ground for investments to materialise in the form of large-scale land concessions granted by the State.¹² On the ground, however, the programme had a limited attainment level due to a weak or absent enforcement. As told by many villagers, they were able to continue ‘farming as usual’ because government officials had rarely monitored the area. Thus, rotational farming and NTFPs’ collection had somehow persisted prior to the concessions. LFA’s weak implementation also meant that the step of handling land use certificates went largely missing, especially for fallow land, which later facilitated land concessions.

Thai and Vietnamese investors have massively revitalised coffee and rubber, respectively, in the Plateau (Schönweger et al., 2012). In addition to coffee, the French had established in 1930 a small rubber plantation in Bachiang that, unlike coffee, failed (Manivong and Cramb, 2008). Nowadays, concessions for rubber in the area are operated by large capital estates, mostly Vietnamese. While the north of Laos is well-known for Chinese contract-farming investments –which, depending on contractual terms, allows small farmers to keep their land and provide their labour in exchange of seeds, equipment, know-how and markets–, those arrangements do not yet exist for rubber in Champasak province. Large rubber plantations are mostly found in the Plateau’s western hillsides of Bachiang, with (so far) one plantation in Paksong (Schönweger et al., 2012), whose higher elevations are more suitable for coffee than rubber. In addition to plantations in the agroforestry sector, the Plateau is a hotspot for mining, hydropower and tourism (Fullbrook, 2009; Srikham, 2010; Nolintha, 2012; Delang et al. 2013).

The implementation of land concessions proceeded in similar ways across villages. Without previous meaningful consultations with villagers, local authorities and investors made a formal one-time announcement regarding the plans, alleged benefits and vague remarks about compensation payments for cultivated land comprised within the concession area. There was no compensation for ‘uncultivated’ (fallow) land. *Borisat* representatives also engaged into purchases of additional land directly from villagers. In many instances intimidation took place but some villagers reported having approached the company themselves and willingly sold their land. Clearing took place relatively fast following the announcement. The average household ‘compensation’ per cultivated hectare was 1 million kip (125 USD).¹³ To put this figure into perspective, one bag of sticky rice (50 kilos) currently costs about 240,000 kip (30 USD); it was reported that back in 2006 such price was not much lower. The average interviewed household (eight members) consumes at least 2.5 rice bags per month, amounting to 600,000 kip (75 USD). The average payment for daily tasks at rubber and coffee plantations across villages is 30,000-40,000 kip; for monthly rubber tapping the average is 1 million kip for male tappers, and 700,000 kip for female tappers.

3.2 Sout and the boys¹⁴ - Thongpao village, Bachiang

When we first met in 2011, Sout looked younger than 15 years old, the age she claimed to be. She was not certain either, as birth registries at village level are seldom kept and her parents only remember an

¹² The legal definition of ‘concession’ is tied to such previous identification by LFA: a grant of land to foreign and national investors on areas classified as pertaining to the State (Schönweger et al., 2012).

¹³ Conversion rate is USD 1 = LAK 8,000.

¹⁴ Narratives are based on interviews, informal conversations and observations held through January-February 2012, July-August 2013, January-March 2014 and January-February 2015.

approximate year. Sout lives in Thongpao, a village of Taoy ethnicity and language whose majority of 120 households (571 people) are catholic¹⁵, combining animist and/or Buddhist beliefs and traditions. The village lies by a soil road bordering with Salavan province. Access to a main paved road is four kilometres away, after which it takes about two hours to reach the province capital, Pakse. In 2006, Thongpao fell under a concession area granted by the central government to the Vietnamese Yao Tieng Rubber Partnership Company. The village had to give up 68% of its size, i.e. 273 ha out of 400 ha. Sout recalls:

Before the *borisat* came, my family had 5 hectares, which included a rice paddy near a river. We cultivated rice, peanuts, corn and other vegetables. We used the land for about three years and then leave it resting for 4 or 5 years. Corn and peanuts were for selling... We sold them here to whoever came to buy or in Laongam's market [a nearby district town in Salavan province]. The rest of the crops were for eating. We also hunted and collected vegetables and seeds in nearby young forest... but there is not much forest left now.

After the company cleared the land, her family was left with 1 hectare of rice paddy. The company allowed them and others to keep planting corn and peanuts in between the small rubber trees, but they had to stop when the trees were tall enough, which obstructed the sunlight from going through. Up until 2011, four out of six members of her family had been working for the rubber plantation, at different periods and for different tasks (planting, weeding, applying fertiliser). Her younger siblings, a brother and a sister, later dropped secondary and elementary school, respectively, and joined work 'on-and-off' at the plantation, whenever they were hired. Her older brother left the village for a while, to take on a temporary job at Pakse, consisting in drying coffee in a factory. According to Sout, he sent some money back home, but most of it he kept for himself. Then again, he left to Salavan province where he worked for a small family business making fruit-flavoured sorbets. He did not send any money that time around. When the rubber trees were ready for tapping, he came back to the village to work for the plantation again. Sout's parents gradually stopped working at the plantation because they were considered old and slow for tapping tasks. They were also having several health issues that some village elders attributed to angered (village/forest/ancestral) spirits. The family had no money to cover reparation rituals that entailed the purchase and sacrifice of livestock.

In 2011, a local NGO approached the village authorities and invited the village youth to participate in a non-formal education curriculum on sustainable agriculture and green business. Boarding in a school during weekdays was necessary, but the NGO provided food as well as a local monthly stipend to cover for transportation and other expenses. The school was located in another village, about thirty minutes away by motorbike. In order to complete the programme, it was mandatory for students to propose a small project to support or diversify their own livelihoods, which could benefit from financial and/or technical support from the NGO depending on feasibility and commitment. Sout, together with six other teenage boys from Thongpao, joined the school for four months. During the weekends, they went back to their village to work either at home or at the plantation. The main stated reason behind their motivation to attend the school was learning English, which was also part of the curriculum. "I wanted to learn it for fun", Sout mentions, but "now I forgot it", just as she claims to have forgotten most of the other things she learned there. Her parents let her go because she wanted to go, but there was also the hope that she would learn things that could help the household in making more income. After finishing, Sout and the others set up individual frog-raising ponds next to their houses, for selling purposes. Their ponds did not last long; little

¹⁵ According to a village elder, conversion took place before Thongpao was established in 1961.

maintenance was given and they stressed they did not know how to carry along with the planning without regular and direct supervision from school staff. Only one of the boys has made use of some English in a short-term job at a tourist guesthouse in Paksong.

A few months after Sout completed the school programme, her family seemed to rush into a troubled decision. Her parents negotiated and agreed on her price as a bride to a 19-year-old boy in the village, toward whom Sout was not indifferent. Sout, however, expressed her disagreement and made it extensive to her parents and some village friends that she preferred to continue learning. In the end, her mother persuaded her. Sout felt socially bound: “My family needed the money... and I did not want to embarrass them”. According to a custom, her parents would have been forced to pay the same amount that the groom’s family had offered, in case the arrangement would not lead to marriage. After her wedding in 2012, her husband built a small house a few metres away from her parents, but it was agreed that they would still depend from her parents’ remaining land.

A year later, Sout’s parents, through some savings and a loan from relatives, were able to purchase, from another family, an additional hectare of land adjacent to their paddy. Most of such land is now devoted to the planting of cassava, which has become in Thongpao and nearby sites the favoured cash crop, known to be easy to maintain. Some villagers have turned to cassava despite knowing it is hard on the soil after some years. Vietnamese and Thai middlemen sold them the crop for planting it; they later came to buy it in dried form to then re-sell it to biofuel factories. Sout’s husband explained: “We don’t use it for eating; we have our own type, which you can eat, but now we prefer to plant only this type. It’s not tasty, but we just sell it. Then we have money to buy food and other things”. In January 2015, fully loaded trucks were roaming the area while Sout’s family was busy cutting and drying cassava. If time allowed them, they would also take on daily paid chores at the plantation.

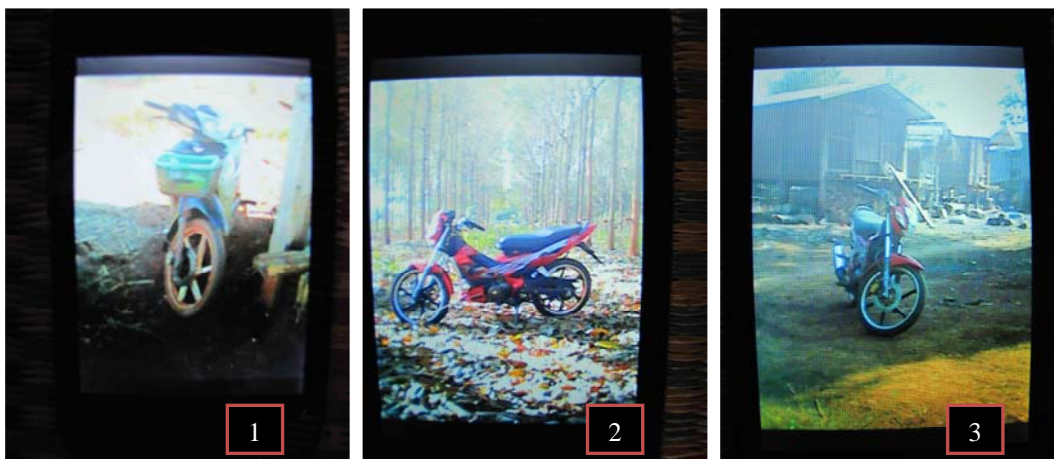
As for the other boys who finished the NGO curriculum, most of them are partly working at the plantation and partly engaged in farming with their families, who have also started planting cassava in their remaining land. Their parents, however, do not envisage a farming future for them; they would like their children to have a paid job, preferably with the government. For those without much social networks outside of the village, the *borisat* is for now the main provider of salaries.

Een and Joy, 18 and 19 years of age respectively, are good friends of Sout. They are still unmarried and do not see themselves espoused in the near future; their parents also want them to wait for better times, for now they do not have money for wedding arrangements and they need their labour. These teenagers have been exposed to salaried work at either the rubber plantation or in villages/towns of other districts and provinces. In 2013, they found work together in a construction company in another province. Joy was making bricks; Een was digging holes for water pumps. They were both engaged for one month. Joy was expecting to earn around 1 million kip, but his salary was based on how many bricks he could produce and the machine was wrecked for a week. He earned 800,000 kip and Een got 1 million kip. Upon enquiring whether they had spend or saved the money, Joy smiled and took out a phone from his pocket: “I bought this... (giggles). It costed 600,000 kip”. He gave the rest to his family, a household of six who are better off than most other families in Thongpao. Een bought jeans and t-shirts worth of 300,000 kip and gave the remainder to his family, which is larger than Joy’s. He already had a phone, which he had purchased for 250,000 kip with part of the salary from the rubber plantation, but it was a bit broken and malfunctioning, so he wished he could buy a nicer one soon. For a laugh, I often reminded them of my own phone: “See, I still have the same for many years now, it is even more broken than before but it still works”. They always stared at it with surprise and they are convinced the reason why it probably still works is obvious: “a real iPhone must be so good that even broken, it works”. In relation to the iPhone, the boys mentioned a song and video called “Sao (girl) iPhone 5” -<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y16CC6Q68TU>. When I saw it, I thought it looked like an exaggerated version of the local phone frenzy reality –according to Baw Hu, my

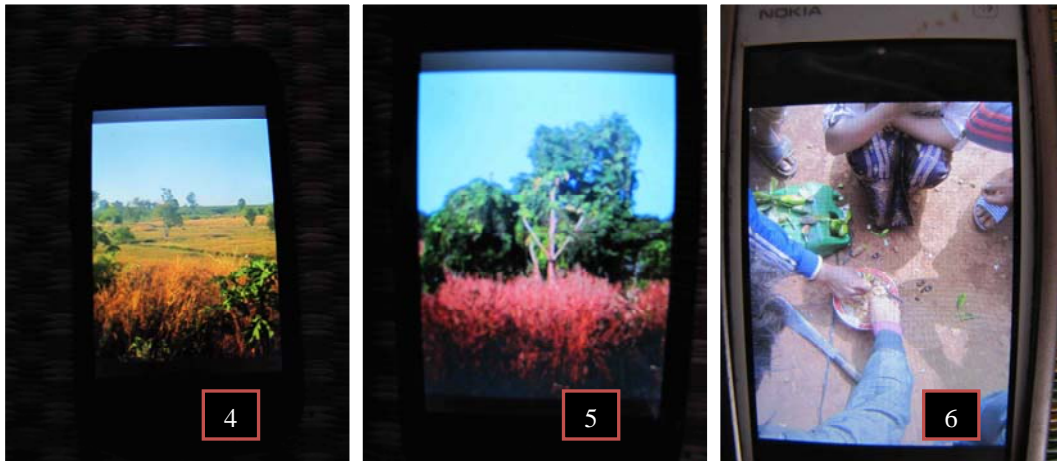
translator, from what he has seen in his village, it is not so far from it.

Joy said his parents were not mad at him when he showed them his new phone: “They said it was up to me”. From other conversations held with parents, there was a general indication that they are hopeful but cannot force their children to support them with the money they get from salaried work. “Once there is someone in the village with one of those things, the others also want to buy... and they need to find money for that ...”, a village woman elder stated. Everyone shares the output of the labour they provide within their household farming, but their salaries are theirs and they can therefore decide. Parents usually give their children money to buy basic things, like clothes, sandals or school material, but not mobile phones or other costly goods –with some exceptions, like the mother in the video.

Een and Joy have not yet experienced work in Thailand, but have heard bad stories from a few others who were there and came back. In discussions with other young ones, the *borisat* was often presented as an option to stay in the village –“we can choose now to stay” –, despite the poor employment conditions and variation in the recruitment of people. For the majority of them, having cash is relatively better than having land that produces only food for the household. The perceived on-site regularity of obtaining cash through the plantation put them closer to achieving three main wants: ‘a motorbike’, ‘clothes’, and ‘mobile phones’. In his phone, Joy has images of his old (i1) and new motorbike, with backgrounds that he found beautiful, such as rows of rubber trees (i2), and in front of wooden-made houses that were being refurbished with concrete materials (i3). He, too, wants his house made in concrete.



His phone photos included other type of landscapes. One was a paddy field (i4), which he had driven by many times on his way to a river to wash himself. One day, he stopped his motorbike and took the picture. For him, rotational fields did not look beautiful; on the contrary, he found them ugly. He thinks the paddy is special. He also enjoys photographing forest. He showed pictures of very small patches of young forest left (i5). According to group discussions, most of the forest cleared by the *borisat* was young (land in fallow). It was in this secondary forest where villagers (usually men/boys) did most of the hunting, as the old forest was farther away. Youngsters think that forests are vital as a reserve for farmland, as a NTFPs collection ground, and as a “beautiful space”. Sout pointed out it was rare to find wild fruits and edible plants in the forest left; she had a photo of one such “happy” occasion (i6).



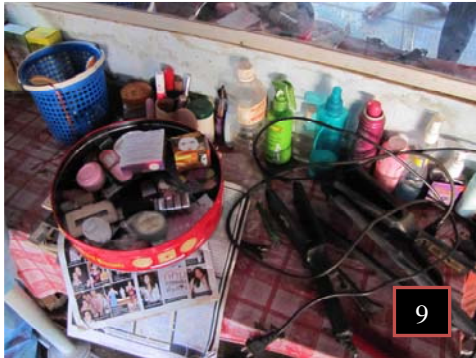
Joy also has a selfie that he particularly liked (i7). His front hair tips are coloured with hydrogen peroxide, which he had bought in Laong-Am for 15,000 kip. Then, a girl he finds “very beautiful” (Een and Baw Hu agree): a Korean actress (i8).



Haircuts and cosmetics are increasingly becoming a ‘want’ for both girls and boys. On festival days, teenagers visit small hair dressing saloons in nearby villages to get make-up, a hairdo or nails coloured. The basic kit of one such saloon is shown below (i9; photo by author). Some boys¹⁶ also apply face powder as to make the skin look white. Since there is no such service in Thongpao, Vietnamese and Chinese motorbike peddlers come to the village to cut hair, or more precisely, to buy hair, and sell other ‘beauty’ goodies, including jewellery. During one of our conversations, Sout had just gotten a haircut from one of these peddlers, who come to Thongpao almost everyday for the past three years. They have a (natural-hair) wig-making business for weddings; they rent the ready-made bride’s cone-shaped hairdo that is traditionally used. Sout needed money to buy a wedding gift for a friend, and to help her family to pay back loans. She received 100,000 kip and two skirts in exchange for her hair. She claimed to have had a say in her new look (i10): they cut her hair in layers; in a way that resembled a Thai actress she had seen on TV. Although Sout’s phone did not store an image of the celebrity mentioned, she had many of other TV artists (i11). Entertainment TV programmes accompany most of her evenings, while she is cooking or eating with her family. The boys occasionally visit on weekends and stay around watching TV (i12, i13). Televisions are common items

¹⁶ Not necessarily *ladyboys*.

in the majority of households ever since the *borisat* set up electricity; its installation was not free of charge –each family had to pay 1 million kip for the battery the company purchased.



Detail from TV screen
(Charles Chaplin !)

Now that Sout is married, she does not envisage another livelihood for her and her husband outside farming, for which she would like to have land of their own: “a good garden that could provide enough for us”. Under the present circumstances, however, she thinks it is difficult that only farming covers their needs for which she would like to learn other skills, such as machine sewing or textile related skills. In the absence of any such trainings or viable access to them, the *borisat* is perceived as having brought some advantages. The opening of new roads (even if still made of soil), for instance, has allowed cash crop diversification, and more trade and transport opportunities. Further, despite exploitative experiences she has had at the plantation, such as reduced monthly salaries at bosses’ discretion and a serious back injury due to carrying heavy bags of fertiliser, she seeks and expects employment there, among other reasons: “to keep money for myself”. Unlike Een and Joy, part of her salary goes to her root household on a more frequent basis, but certain things are enticing to her own personality and surroundings. Last year, she wanted to buy a new phone, which could download and store larger music files –she loves listening to love songs in Thai, Lao and English. Internet is accessible through pre-paid SIM-card credit. For the time being, she has a phone that Baw Hu considers a good one.

3.3 Sisouk and Petsamai¹⁷ - Huaytong village, Bachiang

Sisouk is 24 years old and not yet married. He was 16 when he finished secondary school in the district town of Bachiang, about 10 km away from his village, Huaytong. Sisouk wished he could have continued studying but his family had no money to support him, and he needed to help them with finding cash. He currently works with Viet-Lao Joint Stock Rubber Company, which in 2005 started clearing a concession area of 68 hectares, in a village whose previous size was 144 hectares. Huaytong currently has 221 inhabitants comprised in 46 households.

Back in 2005, his five-member family had lost three hectares of land to Viet-Lao. The total ‘compensation’ received (900,000 kip) –substantially less compared to the low average paid per ha across villages– had been barely enough to buy rice to cover for two months of household needs. The land they lost had been previously used for various subsistence crops, including rice, in a rotational system. His family was left with less than 1 hectare of land planted with rambutan and *sisiat* trees, whose yield and sale is limited to the rainy season. As narrated by Sisouk:

When the *borisat* came, I was hired to plant rubber trees, cut weed and apply fertilizer. For every planted tree, I got 1,000 kip. For cleaning (weeding) around one tree, I got 200 kip... I don’t remember how much they paid me for applying the fertilizer but in total [for all tasks performed], my salary was about 600,000 to 800,000 kip per month. It was very hot to work there and very tiring... sometimes I fell sick.

He did planting of rubber trees for about three years, until 2008. At some point, he wanted to find another job. The following year, Thai recruiters came to the village to find people to work at a local market in Ubon Ratchathani, just across the border with Laos. He went with them; they fixed his passport. He decided to take the job because he wanted to earn more money; a friend of his had also spoken positively about working in Thailand. He earned 8,000 bath (240 USD) per month, which was enough for him to live there, so he occasionally sent money back home. He was in charge of carrying products and keeping check of the inventory. He quit after two and half years and came back home. There is a subtle smile in his face when he says to Baw Hu in anticipation: “I know you will ask me now why I came back to the village if money was enough... but I just did not like it there”. Baw Hu was indeed about to inquire that; he often posed questions of his own. Sisouk replied: “I want to be able to stay here in my village, and having money here”. He went on describing his boss as being nice, but he did not like the city, he missed his home.

In 2013, when the rubber plantation was ready for tapping, he worked for Viet-Lao again. He earned around 1 million kip per month doing the rubber tapping from June 2013 to mid January 2014, when the tapping would stop until a next cycle in June. Some months he gained 2 million, depending on how many trees he could tap, and the amount of milky latex sap found in the trees. One litre of such milky sap was paid in the margin of 800 - 1,000 kip. According to Sisouk, there is no difference in salaries by gender or ethnic group; people are paid based on the amount of latex sap they obtain, not on the task itself. His 17-year old niece, Petsamai, from a different household, clarified that women are generally paid less but she thinks this is because they cannot tap as fast as the men do.

Petsamai also works for the company; she taps fast enough and earns roughly in the same range her uncle does monthly, but not as regularly because her family still has 2 ha of farmland planted with coffee and fruit trees. She completed the third year of elementary school and then stopped. Her family did not have enough money to support her studies and they needed her to help at home, taking care of her younger siblings, a responsibility commonly found among older sisters in the village. She started

¹⁷ Narratives are based on interviews and casual conversations held in July-August 2013 and in January 2014.

working for the *borisat* in 2010 when she was 13 years old: “I lied to them about my age”, she said while giggling. She told them she was 18; otherwise, she claims, they would not have taken her for the tapping. Children normally do the weeding and clean the land, but she wanted to tap rubber to earn more money. According to Sisouk and Petsamai, in the initial years of the plantation, children were also paid per-month, just like adults, because there was a lot of work to do and the *borisat* could not find enough workers. They were digging holes, planting trees, cutting grass, clearing the land from dry leaves, and applying fertiliser. Now children’s work is more occasional; they get paid per day. A day in the life of Petsamai as a rubber tapper looks like this:

At 1.30 am, she wakes up. Then she prepares her working material, take some water, and then leave. She drives the motorbike slowly because it is still dark. She arrives in the plantation at 2.30 am. Then she starts tapping and finishes a group of trees at around 5 am. She lets the milky sap leak; she waits up until 9 am. She just waits there with the others; they sit and talk. They play some music on their phones. Sometimes, if there is someone selling, she buys bread or a snack to eat. Then, she collects the water in a big bucket and takes it to the team leader. He weighs it and registers the kilos. They pay her at the end of the month. He finishes the weighing at around 10 am. After that, they sometimes need people to stay and do some more work, such as weeding or applying fertilizer. This might take until 2 or 3 pm. She stays sometimes; allegedly she will receive an extra in her salary. Other times she goes home after tapping. (Either way) when she gets home, she eats and sleeps. Then, in the night, she helps with housework, go to bed and wake up again.

Sisouk thinks that salaries at the plantations are enough to buy food but not enough to put money aside. Although many families have been able to acquire at least one motorbike, often with salaries from the plantation, “it takes time to pay back because we get them on credit”. Sisouk’s family has one but it constantly needs to be repaired. His phone shows one he would like to have (i14); it belongs to a friend.



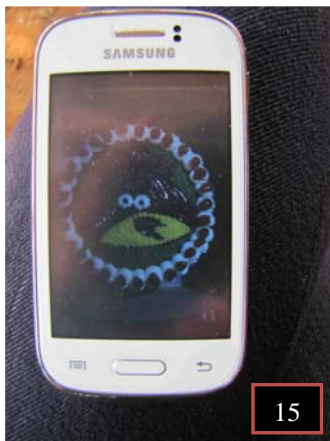
On top of it, he has a boss whom he dislikes, but overall he prefers to stay in Huaytong. Sisouk’s main aspiration is finding a job in the government because “those are the good jobs”. He considers it ‘good’ because “you do not have to change every time; you can stay there all your life”. He, however, does not have any friends or connections that could help him through. Baw Hu makes a joke saying that working for the government might also require having a boss, to which he replies:

Yes, but I could [bear with that] because then I would have a very good job... My Vietnamese boss at the plantation is not nice, and the work isn't either... If you work for the government, you become an official worker, and people respect you more. You have a steady job until you stop, and even after you can continue receiving money!

...Agriculture is what I know and what I do... and I like to think and do alone. I would like to have land and dedicate myself to agriculture, but it is difficult because there is not much land... Even before *borisat*, it was difficult for parents to give land to their children. We are not so many in my family, but now my parents have no land to give.

Sisouk and Petsamai agree that people working for the government not only have more money, but they attain a higher social status. For Sisouk, it is clear that the benefits outweigh his reluctance to having a boss. However, he cannot achieve such a goal not only because of the lack of networks, but also because he cannot think or plan how to achieve it under a current situation of working everyday to have money for food. He describes an ideal scenario: one in which he could combine working for the government, preferably at the district level (not too far from home), while still doing farming –“just like Mr. Phet”, an elderly person in the village whom he thinks of as his role model.

Petsamai aspires to open a convenience shop to sell snacks and other items, but she does not know how to start such a business. Throughout my interactions with her in the past two years, she seems and says to be generally satisfied with her life as it is, with the caveat that “perhaps the company could pay us more money, so we can buy more things” or “a project could come to the village to teach us how we can find more money”. She gives most of her salary to her family, but keeps some to buy clothes and all sort of sweet snacks; she keeps a picture in her phone of the first birthday cake she tried at a friend's party (i15). There is a small convenience shop in the village (i16, photo by author), which sells less elaborate versions of the cake in the image. Petsamai is not exceptional in her taste for sweet; many youngsters and children in Huaytong buy sugary stuff in the shop. Baw Hu once proposed to me that: “Instead of buying fruits to share during group discussions, why don't you just buy sweet snacks from the shop...? They would be more happy, and me too!”



In the last year, Petsamai's six-member family has been able to put some money aside to start building a new concrete-made house adjacent to their current bamboo and wooden hut. Just across her house stands what Petsamai considers a “beautiful house”, even if still under construction (i17, photo by author). It belongs to a family whose three eldest daughters now live and work in Thailand. When they have come visit their family, Petsamai has heard them say how much fun it is to live in Thailand. Even if she would not like to leave her village, Petsamai talks about them and their lifestyles with

admiration. According to her, “they look like people in the TV, very beautiful. And they wear nice jeans and short skirts except in festivals, when they wear the Lao skirt... they respect our customs”. These three women aged from 21 to 25 send money home frequently. One of them works as a domestic worker, the other two in a candy factory in Ayutthaya. Their parents did not want them to go, but the first one who left (seven years ago) insisted and persuaded them through a friend who talked to them positively about her own experience with domestic work. Eventually, her parents agreed and she left through a recruitment service that fixed her passport. The other two daughters followed some years later, one of them leaving two small children behind whose father had previously quit the family to pursue his dream of becoming a famous Lao singer –which he achieved at the provincial level; his children sometimes watch him on TV. The girls’ parents, who now take care of the grandchildren, stated that the money sent last year by their three daughters has mostly been used to buy a washing machine and for re-building their house with concrete. “We are not done yet, we want the top floor also in concrete”.



Petsamai occasionally expresses a wish for going back to school, but then disregards the idea because it is too late for her, and in any case, she expects to get married soon. Marriage is linked to a phase in life in which (formal) education does not fit in. “I want to get married because if I do not do it now, I will get too old and then nobody would like to marry me”. Her father says he also needs to ensure his daughter is not alone, and that the family would benefit from an additional labour input. Since they will not have enough land to give her, her future husband will join her root household and help with farming.

According to village customary authorities, when children within a household get married, they should receive used (cultivated) land from their parents. Three decades ago, each family could provide permanently cultivated land to their wedded children, planted with coffee or fruit trees. For rotational land, the children could clear land from secondary or old forest. Now it is complicated to do that. In a context where land is getting scarcer, certain social norms regarding land transfer and inheritance have been relaxed. Arrangements are discussed and negotiated at each household’s discretion. For instance, if land is not enough for all children, the siblings might agree on a rotation system, where each one can hold a portion of land or a number of trees for determined periods. Another commonly observed situation for young wedded couples is to keep on living with and working the land of their root households for longer years. For all those couples who set up new households and try to make it on their own with little land, the situation is very difficult. A village chief once explained that one could distinguish ‘the poor’ from ‘the very poor’ by seeing whether it was a young couple or not, and worse if they had many young children. If so, it was very likely they fitted into the latter category.

3.4 *The girls and Khone*¹⁸ – *Lak Sip Ha, Paksong*

Gathered in front of a fire to keep us warm, a group of eight unmarried Laven girls (aged 16 to 24) in Lak Sip Ha tell about their experiences as coffee farmers. *Lak Sip Ha* literally means “Km 15”, which is the distance it lies from Paksong district town, by a main paved road in the direction to Sekong province. The village is situated at an altitude of 1,200 m for which it gets particularly cold during the dry season. Nakkeo, a 21-year old girl from Salavan province has joined me as translator for this occasion. The girls are very excited to have the opportunity to meet someone who is studying to be an English teacher. Nakkeo is equally excited for she wants to learn more about coffee cultivation: “I am curious to learn; as a little girl I planted rice and vegetables, but not coffee”. One of the girls gives a brief account of recent changes in coffee production:

In the past, all families were farming *café khan* (Robusta coffee). But about five years ago, we started doing Catimor because many *borisat* came and they asked us to do that. They said we could sell that to them. We thought it was going to be hard because they applied chemical fertilisers, but now everyone wants to do it because it is easy... and the price is better. Specially the young households, they only want to do Catimor. In the future, they think they will stop cultivating *café khan*. For now we farm a little because we respect our parents, who still farm it, but actually none of us want to farm it any longer.

Laven families founded Lak Sip Ha village in 1974, which is still primarily inhabited by Laven (85%), followed by a small proportion of Lao-Loum households. In the 1970’s they farmed rice in shifting cultivation systems; coffee was planted in little amounts. Now it is the inverse. One of the village headmen explains:

The government came in 1997 and said we could no longer clear and burn land because we would soon finish it... that it was better if we cultivated coffee or fruit trees in permanent lands. They said we had to plan ahead and stop shifting all the time... They also told us we had to preserve forest, especially near our river (Mauchang Mai). We agreed and delimited 50 ha of old forest to protect. We also left the rice fallow lands grow into young forest.

Not all families in the village stopped shifting cultivation, for two frequently-mentioned reasons: after planting the coffee trees there is still a waiting period until they grow and can be harvested; then, there was also the fact that “the government did not come back to check what we did”.

In 1999, a Lao company called Inta Group came to survey the land, together with public officials. The government granted 413 hectares of previously classified ‘uncultivated land’ for planting coffee. Then, in 2006, Inta transferred the concession contract to a Vietnamese coffee company, Tín Nghia. Around the same time of Inta Group’s survey, another Lao company, Dao Heuang Group showed interest, but it eventually established a plantation elsewhere, a few kilometres away from the village. In only sixteen years, 86% of the village forest, which had been demarcated for protection, had disappeared. It would take a few more years before villagers were de facto prevented from having access to approximately 43% of the village lands, which have been highly solicited by different stakeholders. The total village land, as determined by the Land and Forest Allocation programme in

¹⁸ Narratives are based on interviews, casual conversations and observations made through January-March 2014, and January-February 2015.

1997, was 1,746 ha. The evolution of land encroachment looks as follows:

1999: 413 ha to Inta Group.

2003: Japanese company, SCOP, receives 100 ha for a vegetable plantation. In 2011, investment failed and abandoned the land. People from a neighbouring village, closer to the plantation, are currently using the land. Allegedly, it will be granted to another company, but there was no precise information from local or district authorities.

2005: Dak Nong Co. Ltd receives 30 ha over grazing lands.

2006: Inta Group transfers its concession to Tín Nghĩa.

2007: Korean SPC Group gets 100 ha for a coffee plantation just above the Mauchang Mai river. The company encroached on the forestland that was supposed to protect humidity levels.

2009: Singaporean company Outspan receives 115 ha for a coffee plantation.

Despite the encroachments, most families were able to keep cultivated coffee lands of 3 ha in average. During coffee harvest time “very few people go work for the companies because they must take care of their own harvest first”. For families with more than 4 ha of coffee land that is already producing, income from coffee was reported to be enough, if the price and weather conditions were good. For families with less than that (or with patches that are not yet producing), coffee sales are only enough to buy rice and some other foodstuffs, but nothing else. Salaried activities then complement households’ income.

In 2007, the girls started working for the Vietnamese and Korean coffee companies, but they stopped shortly afterwards because what they earned was not enough to sustain their families. In the plantations, they planted the coffee, cleared grass and planted the shadow trees. “It’s up to the worker, to get paid per day or per month. We usually prefer to be paid per day... We got around 25,000 kip per day so we could only buy a few little things, like cooking ingredients”. They thus considered it was better to focus on their own farming affairs. Some other villagers worked in the initial years for the companies with the mere purpose of learning some farming techniques, but then they left. The girls claimed not to have learned anything. The companies they worked for did not provide any training, just instructions. “We have heard people say they learned something at *borisat* Outspan, but their salaries were also low, so we didn’t go work there”.

The majority of villagers prioritise work at their family farms; when they finish tasks at home, then they go work for other families who might still need labour during the dry season or who are planting pumpkins and other vegetables for the rainy season. Work for the companies is generally described as a last resort. As of last year, some companies have been forced to increase their payment to their workers, as to be at the same level of smallholder vegetable-farming families: 40,000 kip per day for planting tasks (usually girls); 50,000 kip for harder tasks (for boys), such as digging holes. For harvesting tasks, most farmers prefer working with other families once they finish their own harvest. They receive 1,000 kip per kilo of cherries when working for other families; companies normally pay them 800 kip per kilo harvested. According to Lak Sip Ha villagers, most workers at the Outspan plantation (Theravada) come from outside –a company representative confirmed this and added that they come from Attapeu province.

As most other unmarried boys in Lak Sip Ha, Khone (22), who later participates in a mix-gender discussion, farms coffee in his parents’ farmland. Priority goes to his family farm, engaging in other work only if he has free time. Recently, he worked for Outspan as well as Dao Heuang during coffee harvesting period. Up until early last year, he was studying the 7th year of high school in Paksong district but his parents needed him to help with their 6-hectare coffee farm. Khone is expecting that,

after some time helping at home, he might be able to continue his studies. He would prefer not to dedicate himself to farming:

I think farming is too hard... (He sighs). I think that working for the government is better. I would prefer to find a good job in the city because life here is difficult. If I cannot go back to study and I stay here and get married, I want to marry a girl who works for the government or who knows how to cook so we can set up a restaurant and sell food in the village while I continue farming.

In reflection to Khone's remark, one of the girls adds that for them it is not a matter of choice:

Nang: Sometimes we do not want to have a farm... if I could choose, I think would like to have a job with the government too, but farming is what I know and we all here have done it always, so we are okay with it. So for now, we think we will still do it in the future.

In previous 'girls only' discussions, Nang and the others have stated that for women choice was also more limited.

Nang: For us farming is more difficult. When we go to the farm, we women do everything that boys usually do; our tasks are the same. But then in the house, it is only us who work. In the house, boys are only relaxing, eating, sleeping, playing football, or just doing nothing. But this is normal for us.

Song: Sometimes, when I get tired, I get angry at my brothers, but my parents do not get angry at them.

Nang: From our heart, we really do not accept this behavior from them; we do not accept that we work more than men do... but how can I explain to you? We think we cannot change it.

Win: We girls still listen to our parents; there are others in the village who are not like us, but then they go out a lot (for work) and can decide for themselves.

In further informal conversations, Khone explains that he thinks most other youngsters, and his/their parents for that matter, want to continue farming or they cannot decide because they have not attended or learned at school. Nakkeo, my translator, thinks this might be true pointing at the fact that the formal education level of the girls does not surpass the fifth grade of elementary school. For her, education has also been key to be able to diversify from her farming chores. Formal education, however, does not weigh in the perspectives of many other interviewed youngsters in Lak Sip Ha, regardless of gender, who stated that even if presented with the option to study: as long as the price of coffee is good and their coffee land is in good shape, they wish to keep on farming. The problem is precisely the price they get for their coffee, the size of their coffee farms and the quality of their harvest.

Various buyers and middlemen come to purchase the villagers' coffee, and they sell to whoever gives them a high price. In 2014, the girls' families sold one kilo of Catimor red beans for 4,000 kip; for Robusta they got 3,000 kip. If they dried the cherry and went to a nearby processing centre to hull the parchment skin, they got 14,000 kip for Robusta, and 16,000 kip for Catimor. Their average production size for Robusta was 3 tons and for Catimor 2 tons. All coffee companies buy Catimor in

this area. Dao Heuang buys more *café khan*, which is cheaper, but also some Catimor. The girls pointed out that whenever they have a lot of coffee, they prefer selling to Dao Heuang “because their scale is good... there is no cheating”. Last year, however, a villager reported (for reasons unspecified) that Dao Heuang and other intermediaries were only buying red cherries, which yielded lower incomes.

In addition to price fluctuations and inventions by middlemen, there are other challenges these youngsters are facing that make farming in the future unlikely. Among these is that land is becoming scarcer. Since there remains a lot of unregistered land in the village, the companies are taking whichever plots are not registered. According to Khone:

Sometimes we do not even know what belongs to which *borisat*, we just know that a lot has already become part of their plantations, and I think this will continue. Some of our families do have land certificates, but for the young ones is difficult to have registered land.¹⁹

Despite of this, young peoples’ views on and attitudes towards the companies’ presence were diverse and inconsistent. Some mentioned that while they regretted the way most concessions happened in the first place (their parents being deprived of the land they were supposed to receive), it was generally good to have them around, if not as employers, as essential buyers: “Some years the price offered is not good, but if there would be no *borisat* in the area, it would be very hard to sell our coffee because most of us sell it here in the village”. Others thought that it was good to see more traffic and outside people with the arrival of the companies because some families in the village had seized the opportunity to open restaurants and sell food for them –just like Khone would do, if he cannot go back to study. Yet, they also attributed increased incidences of theft to the arrival of foreign workers whom did not respect the locals and their customs. While some stressed that companies had made new (soil) roads, making it easier for them to go to their farms and to more easily transport wood (some illegally logged), others have had problems with such roads’ access: “Our family farm is on the way to Tín Nghia’s plantation, but after 4 pm they close a gate that blocks the road and we cannot pass through any longer”. Many boys positively noted that Outspan had given some sport equipment, as well as other support to the village. Girls, however, were indifferent for the donated equipment had been for football, which none of them played, and the support given had allegedly been for an elementary school, which none of them would attend for they had come of age.

The only thing in common among all respondents was their negative opinion of the main village chief’s undertakings with regards to the companies:

Khang: We don’t really know for sure if companies help or not because we think the main naiban (the first village chief) keeps some money for him. He does not really care for the people in the village; he only cares for himself and his family.

Vilay: All we see is that he does not work, but his house is bigger now and more beautiful (made of concrete).

Other farming challenges relate to their lack of knowledge to combat coffee plant diseases and

¹⁹ If a couple gets married and receives land from their parents, they would need to get a new certificate for the land, which is costly. Normally they do not do it, the land remains registered under the parents. Parents also claim to prefer it this way as to preempt conflict over land in case of separation or divorce: If a daughter gets married and receives some uncultivated land from her parents, and then she gets divorced, they should split the land between the ex-husband and the ex-wife. To avoid this and other types of conflict, land is usually registered under their parents.

the increasingly cold weather. Youngsters in Lak Sip Ha would like to increase their technical skills to have more and better coffee harvests. Last year, some Lao and Thai people from the Agriculture Faculty came to train them on how to make an organic medicine to prevent coffee bugs. This training, however, was targeted at their parents or heads of households and very few young people or young couples attended. Further, almost no household applied the knowledge for they had already purchased chemicals from peddlers or companies' intermediaries. It was widely observed that many villagers are turning to the use of chemicals to grow coffee. The results were ambiguous as some families saw good yields overtime and others did not. Although there was no clear indication on which method was better, the girls considered that organic farming was harder because it took more time and efforts. "If our Catimor fields can yield more in less time, it is better for us".

4 Discussion/Conclusion

The previous section should not be taken as an exercise to see how much good or bad land concessions have done for young peoples. Rather, it has been an exercise to see how it is that young people themselves experience overall agrarian change in their daily lives. The narratives and images presented above offer an intimate look into such universe. What can be abstracted from these stories? How do they add to our understanding of agrarian transitions and the way land-related interventions unfold in the ground? Some commonalities and contrasts across protagonists' accounts are discussed here with the purpose of signalling what could be key features of lived and wanted experiences in agrarian and youth transitions in Laos. Given the very personal and localised nature of the ethnographies presented, generalisations are minimally attempted.

A major commonality among all of them is that land concessions are both understood as impossibilities to farming livelihoods but also as sources of income-generating opportunities *on-site*. Contrary to initial assumptions to see most village youth on a frenzy to go to the cities to achieve lifestyles of modernity, as presented in the literature (Rigg, 1998; Mills, 1999, Silvey, 2000; Derks, 2008), it was found that for many the village is still the centre of their lives. Some migrate for temporary jobs but they come back and prefer to be back in their villages, where they seek out to fulfil certain consumption 'wants'. Since their families play an explicit or tacit role in decisions of land distribution and sharing of output with regards to family farming (which the wide majority still practice in encroached systems), it is not surprising that youngsters seek out to perform some level of autonomy through whichever income-generating activities they can find in the village or in the vicinity. Whereas youngsters in Paksong prioritise their family farms and would take jobs at the coffee plantations as a last resort, in Bachiang villages, jobs at the rubber plantations are sought after, regardless of low salaries and exploitative conditions, because they are the major *on-site* alternative. Ironically, the localised nature of the concessions has added an employment option for those youngsters who would rather stay in their village. This, however, does not exclude the possibility of an increasing diversification of localities (out-migration) in the future, given that land enclosures have not come to a halt, and current conditions of employment cannot possibly sustain local livelihoods in the long-term.

Secondly, with some notable exceptions that are related to more years spent in formal education, youngsters expressed that farming is still an occupation they envisage in the future, if not out of ideal choice (like a job in the government, which for most is out of reach), out of knowing they have been brought as farmers and most lack other skills. In the particular case of Paksong, coffee is considered by youngsters a good business. They are however experiencing challenges that increasingly call for more targeted youth trainings on agriculture and/or diversification into other generating income activities. In Bachiang, a diversification into non-farm income activities, preferably on-site, was widely expressed. When faced with limitations to this, they are caught up by both the burdens and the

prospects of making money at the plantations or elsewhere. Regarding rural areas in Eastern Burundi, White and Berckmoes have found that young people cope with limitations through “non-farm income-generating activities not to replace, but to complement and enable farming” (2013: 5). This finding is to some extent true for youngsters in Laos, but mixed with the idea that cash at the plantations and through other jobs offers the possibility to consume and perform certain lifestyles of youth identity faster and more autonomously than doing so through family farming.

Notwithstanding the substantial level of land loss and other valuable assets for local livelihoods, young people generally think of their lives as better off now. All of them are very aware that work at the plantations is not been up to their expectations, and in the case of Paksong, it is the least preferred option for the young ones whose households still hold coffee farms. Why then are they said to be better off? All of the stories presented above point at the latent autonomy these youngsters get when receiving their own salaries. While indeed working for their own family farms do not require inspection of working hours/days nor rendering an expected (instructed) outcome, having a salary has led them to some financial autonomy –as they can decide how much money they will keep for themselves and what they will do with it. For some youngsters, especially daughters and some eldest sons, this autonomy might be constrained due to structural conditions of poverty and other social norms, which make them feel responsible for their parents and/or younger siblings. Yet, in most cases, having a salary has meant that they can satisfy some of their personal desires, which are frequently short-term and mostly associated to the acquisition of consumer goods. Performances of autonomy are played out in a social setting where interactions with other peers inform and influence their consumption choices. This has resulted in a lifestyle where certain symbols and items of modernity are placed at the top of the ‘wanting list’, such as motorbikes and mobile phones. Comparatively speaking, daughters usually give more of their salaries to their root families, and on a more frequent basis, than sons do.

To conclude, we can attest to an agrarian change that is unfolding and is being experienced inasmuch “in continuities as in sharp ruptures with the past” (Hirsch, 2012: 121; Rigg, 2005; White and Berckmoes, 2014). Despite a substantial reduction in farmland for the protagonists above, especially in Bachiang villages, we can still see an active engagement of young people in agriculture, including traditional forms and norms of engaging with nature, with the family and with the community (the village). Although there are certain moral obligations that compel young women to take on more responsibilities vis-à-vis their root households than men do through salaried work, it is safe to conclude that in general, traditional norms coexist with and/or accommodate with novel occurrences. Two of these are youth interpretations of what entails being ‘modern’, ‘better’, ‘beautiful’ and the lifestyles built around the acquisition of cash. Yet, in the context of acute asset loss, negotiations of positions within households seem to be limited, and especially so for married women, as young married couples in the visited villages either stay under and are dependent on the bride parental household for a longer time or, if established as a separate household, are very likely to be the ‘new poor’. This blurred intersection between old and new supports scholarly claims that the modernity project is not a mere transfer of epistemologies, methodologies and technologies from one active source to a passive recipient: it can be appropriated, re-constructed and even demanded from below (Li, 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Hall, 2013).

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