



# Agrarian change and land: Migration and labour

## *Extended synopsis*

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**May 2018**

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### **Overview**

Land governance in the Mekong region operates in a context of rapid agrarian and demographic change. Migration has long been a key issue in land acquisition and governance in the region, but it has switched substantially - though not entirely - away from a mainly frontier-oriented movement of people in search of new agricultural land toward urban-destined movement in search of non-agricultural work opportunities. There is now a major cross-border movement of labour from rural parts of the region, largely - but not exclusively - to Thailand. In most parts of the Mekong Region the rural population continues to grow in absolute terms, even as it declines on a relative basis, but more slowly and with less exclusive employment in farming. Land pressures, dispossession and the growth of a rural-derived proletariat raises questions regarding the number and quality of jobs available, both in the cities and on land given over to industrial agriculture, plantations and other uses.

### **Key trends and dynamics**

To consider linkages between migration and land tenure (in)security requires a multi-sited and multi-dimensional approach. As economies in the Mekong region deepen their level of marketisation, facilitated by improved communication and transport linkages, a traditionally agrarian population has been placed in greater proximity to regional processes of urbanisation and the forces of a globalising trade system (Markussen et al. 2013; Scheidel et al. 2014; United Nations Capital

Development Fund 2010). At the household level, this shift has witnessed a diversification of employment strategies, frequently operating at multiple locations. The entry into a wage economy encourages non-farm activities, which bring a higher and more regular income than from farming alone (Mao et al. 2008; Dien et al. 2011).

Land is integral to the process of commodification and diversification arising from the entry into dynamic national and regional markets. In parallel with changes for rural livelihoods, the post-1990s return of plantation farming marks a shift from smallholding toward agribusiness (Byerlee 2014). Whether through a growing presence of non-food products, such as rubber and palm oil, or conversion for industrial and urban infrastructure, changes in land use are impacting national concerns on food security (Hirsch, Mellac & Scurrah 2016; Scheidel et al. 2014). This can have a mixed impact on smallholders. On the one hand, land loss may occur through large-scale acquisitions; on the other hand, new plantations may provide a source of wage labour to a rural or migrant population (Byerlee 2014; Kenney-Lazar 2012). As an example to the exclusionary effect of agribusiness, Barney notes how plantation development in an area already impacted by an upstream hydropower project on the Hinboun River, Lao PDR, has disrupted local land rights systems and displaced villages (Barney 2007). Gorman reflects more generally on how the intensification of land use in Vietnam has created pressure in excluding access to water (Gorman 2014). Meanwhile, rising land prices can marginalise smallholders, who may not possess the means to profit from the marketization of land (Pilgrim et al. 2012).

A common source of debate on migration motivations is framed around the question of whether people move as a result of migrant agency or structural influences. Much of the literature relating to land use change and rights speaks of the imposition of wider forces upon livelihood decisions within migrant families. At its most severe, conflict can cause internal or regional displacements, such as for one quarter of the Lao population during the Second Indochina War, 1964-73 (Hirsch & Scurrah 2015). Human trafficking takes advantage of vulnerabilities to attract or force migrants into the sex trade or fishing industry (Chantavanich et al. 2013). Increasingly severe climate-related events are likely to be a strong factor in the future, both for rural smallholders and urban dwellers. Meanwhile, population dynamics themselves may instigate migrant decisions, such as demographic growth in Cambodia leading to movements not only to urban centres but also between rural areas (Diepart 2015).

Much of the present 'land-grabbing' narrative encompasses a capture of land that results in the displacement of incumbent populations. Whether through elite capture or cronyism, the monopolisation of land by the powerful and privileged has resulted in land loss, with out-migration a frequent livelihood outcome for those affected (All Arakan Students and Youths Congress et al. 2009; Pilgrim et al. 2012). The role of the state is prominent here. At its most influential, state policy has enforced the movement of huge population numbers within national boundaries.

Collectivisation in the 1975-79 Democratic Kampuchea regime witnessed the extensive relocation of millions to collective farms (Scurrah & Hirsch 2015). The entry into global markets has seen state policy embrace population displacements, whether to support an agrarian transition to cash crops in Vietnam (Markussen et al. 2013), or to address rural poverty in the movement from Lao upland to lowland areas (Bird 2007). In the latter case, a policy supported by international agencies has not necessarily benefitted migrants due to the poor quality of new land, and an inapplicability of acquired local knowledge to its new spatial context. A growing concern now involves processes of

urbanisation, where residents may be relocated to make way for new commercial, industrial or infrastructural developments (Scurrah & Hirsch 2015). This is matched by extensive land use change in peri-urban areas, such as in the development of That Luang Marsh in Vientiane (Hirsch & Scurrah 2015).

There is also space for human agency to impose upon migratory practices. Much movement operates along undocumented lines, as migrants follow pioneers or brokers around states or across borders (Cambodia Development Resource Institute 2010; WorldBank et al. 2014). This often acts counter to policy (Diepart 2015), with the state wishing to control or restrict such movements. However, migrant decisions may be informed by shifts in other fields, such as land governance. Indeed, much rural policy that encourages the modernisation and commercialisation of agricultural practices acts against smallholder needs, thereby resulting in adapted livelihood strategies into potentially non-farm urban work (Markussen et al. 2011; Scheidel et al. 2013). Insecure land rights in rural areas act as a catalyst towards this diversification (Chankrajang 2012). Meanwhile, government-regulated compensation packages often undervalue land loss and diversification needs (Phuc et al. 2014). Changing location may prove one of the only options for a civil society passive against state forces.

A transformation of labour practices, including diversification and multi-local livelihoods, can have a detrimental effect upon farming productivity in various ways. Some studies highlight a surplus labour, or lack of skills for participation in cash crop farming (Liu 2012; Hung et al. 2007), while others reveal labour shortages during peak-season needs (Enlightened Myanmar Research 2013; Mao et al. 2008). Such seemingly contradictory occurrences demand close contextualised scrutiny of human movements. It is true that certain migratory trends are highlighted by some studies. Research papers suggest that migrants are often young, male, moving temporarily, to urban areas, and predominantly for purposes of education or employment (AIPP et al. 2015; Barney 2012; CRUMP 2012; Markussen et al. 2013; Portilla 2015; Tong et al. 2011; World Bank et al. 2014). Yet there is also much variety, which should deter the analyst from oversimplification. As a counter to generalised trends, there exists an emerging body of research offering alternative narratives on migration practices around the region. For example, there is growing evidence for extensive rural to rural migration within Cambodia (Diepart 2015; Diepart et al. 2014). The former source also notes a growing number of international female migrants, taking up employment in domestic labour abroad. In terms of motivations for migrant strategies, a series of pushes can be noted beyond issues of education and employment, such as concerning environmental pressures, conflict, or land insecurity. Understanding the decisions and strategies accompanying migration practices by necessity involves a pluralistic outlook, incorporating differing scales of time (permanent, temporary, circular, seasonal), space (internal, cross-border, regional, international), and motivation.

Just as the mechanics of migratory practices are broad, so the range of outcomes is both complex and hard to place into singular trends. As a diversified household strategy, the sending home of remittances covers much attention in migration literature, with disputing claims as to its long-term ability to redistribute wealth and alleviate poverty. Increased pressures on access to land pushes many families into full or partial relocation (United Nations Capital Development Fund 2010). The influence of migration may see cities struggling to provide the land and services necessary to support a burgeoning population, while an aging rural population lags behind. In some cases, the environment is impacted upon. For example, resettlement programmes, from high density areas to

mountainous zones in Vietnam, has increased deforestation (Thuy et al. 2012). Some may achieve a successful livelihood transformation. Yet the poorest may be the last to gain any benefits (Bui 2009).

### Key actors and interests

The transition of **governments** in Southeast Asia to market-based economic policies has witnessed a plethora of policies aimed towards agrarian transformation, modernisation and economic growth. These may not always work to the benefit of the workforce, such as in an overemphasis on rice production in Vietnam (Markussen et al. 2011). Policy considerations also extend to issues of migration. For example, the neoliberal context of Cambodian state land distribution has influenced many movements of the population (Diepart & Dupuis 2014). When it comes to migration policy itself, governments are often in a quandary. On the one hand, facilitation can contribute towards an agrarian transition, allowing for migrant labour to respond to demand in the industrial and service sectors. This can tie in either with pro-migration policies to promote labour mobility and reduce poverty, or minimal regulation to allow informal migration to flourish. For example, the Cambodian government has a less extensive migration policy in the belief that human movements support growth in the country, geared towards a growing workforce in urban areas and the reorganization of land into larger farms (Diepart et al. 2014). On the other hand, state actors may wish for strict controls to limit movement. This policy tension is most keenly felt in Thailand. While migrants are often essential to construction and agricultural industries, fears about the constant flow of undocumented workers are resulting in (rather unsuccessful) attempts to closely regulate movements through a series of bilateral MOUs (Chantavanich et al. 2013).

**Private sector** demands for labour influence mobility strategies, whether acting as a pull into areas with emerging industries, agribusiness or urban development, or a push out of areas where extractive industries may be monopolising land use and marginalising local livelihoods (Barney 2007). The private sector will also react to mobility patterns, be it in areas of population increase, or in the emergence of brokers and companies organizing these movements.

**Civil society**, namely participants from society as whole, has an enormous impact on migration practices through the agency of individuals, households, and community networks. This may follow or weave in between legislative lines. There is a tendency towards diversified household livelihood strategies in terms of employment modes that may also be multi-local. Labour routes in one direction may be mirrored by a pathway for remittances in the other. This becomes an important line of wealth transfer from the urban to the rural poor, even if the success of this transfer is disputed. Although migrant practitioners have traditionally been young males, gender roles are shifting as more women migrate. However, as well as instigators of migration, marginalised groups supported by civil society organisations may be strongly impacted upon by the mobility of others. The rise of different cash crop booms around the region has seen ethnic groups in peripheral areas inundated by incomers, the result being a marginalisation of traditional agricultural practices, including restricted access to land.

### Key contestations and debates

While a longstanding rural development objective has been to keep people on the land, away from urban slums, current patterns of agrarian change involve substantial voluntary movement out of agriculture, leading to critique of overly subsistence farming-oriented agricultural support programs. There is a generational gap emerging in the region where younger household members identify

opportunities in urban non-farming employment. Often with the support of their elders they are venturing away from agricultural occupations, leaving behind a vulnerable aging farming population, an unproductive use of land, and a temptation to sell that land for short-term financial benefits. At the same time, modernist state programs to turn land into capital and farmers into wage labour are controversial and often predicated on unrealistic assumptions about the labour absorption capacity of the industrial sector. Policy aims to centralise a labour force in urban areas may not even be followed, as workers follow crop booms to peripheral rural areas (Cole et al. 2015).

Cross-border migration is a subject of ongoing debate, particularly concerning the illegal or semi-legal status of millions of workers in several Mekong countries. This debate may show concern for illegal trafficking or poor conditions for workers, support improved recognition of migrant rights, or frown upon the illegitimate status of those crossing national borders. In this and other labour concerns, debate is often ethnically charged. With the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community, the issue of freedom of movement is a pertinent one, although for the time being it appears that migration policy remains under the remit of national or bilateral policy. To develop effective policy is particularly problematic when it remains difficult to capture a true overview of movements. National statistics may represent permanent migrations enshrined in changes of official residence, but they often fail to acknowledge either temporary, seasonal or circular movements (Cole et al. 2015). In this sense, a qualitative approach to studies is needed to help understand migration practices and their motivations, and how these relate to agrarian transformation (Barney 2012).

A further contestation concerns the direction of migration and labour policy, and who it should benefit. The governance of migration rarely matches the needs of migrants, and can hinder the potential contribution they can make to economic, social and political development in the region (Chantavanich et al. 2013). Conversely, studies show how migrants are often more vulnerable than other social groups, whether moving through their own agency or forcibly relocated (Kim 2011; Markussen et al. 2013). Household (such as marital) relationships may become stressed (Locke et al. 2014), with the impacts on gender relations and the increasing movement of women a particularly under-researched area. Managing migrants and harnessing the economic benefits they can bring, while supporting and protecting their rights, proves a complex puzzle for policy-makers (Cambodia Development Resource Institute 2010).

### **Key differences and commonalities among CLMV countries**

The modernist path of development has effected an agrarian transition in Mekong countries, with significant shifts of labour towards industrial and service sectors. At the household level, families are adopting a diversified livelihood strategy, involving a younger generation seeking non-farming employment. In some cases, this will be influenced by increasing land scarcity, as plots become split under demographic growth (Diepart 2015). All countries in the region have seen extensive internal migration. A commonality certainly sees movement towards urban centres. These can have knock on migratory effects. For example, as residents of north-eastern Thailand move to Bangkok seeking new employment opportunities, a labour market gap in the northeast is subsequently filled by Lao migrants crossing the border (Rungmanee 2014). There is also increasing evidence supporting rural to rural migration (Diepart 2015; Scurrah & Hirsch 2015). This may result from perceived land abundance in upland areas, or attraction towards new crop booms, as witnessed in Cambodia and Vietnam (Hall et al. 2011). An outcome may be exclusionary effects on access to land for existing residents, often including local ethnic minority groups (Gironde & Peeters 2015).

While there is consistent evidence of labour movements and migratory practices throughout the region, the particular historical-political contexts of particular countries have also bred variation. Some countries, such as Vietnam, have been more controlling of internal movements through strict residency policy, while others, such as Thailand and Cambodia, have perceived the benefits of greater flexibility for its citizens to contribute towards national development. State-controlled movements have been prevalent in countries during periods of socialist rule, namely Cambodia, Vietnam and Lao PDR. Population movements in these times might follow an anti-urban approach to agricultural collectivisation. However, there have also been community relocations, such as in Laos, aiming to bring populations away from inaccessible peripheral areas, into a new role as state subjects. As Mekong lands increasingly embrace globalised market economies, labour is encouraged to occupy urban areas. In the case of Myanmar, conflict-related displacements have dominated a period of military rule (Scurrah et al. 2015), and as the country now opens up, issues of land conflict are now emerging as populations are repatriated.

### **Key links and interactions across borders and across scale**

There are multiple forms of migration stretching over variations on motivation, temporal and spatial forms, means, and characteristics of migrants. There is complexity over these different scales and so one must be careful to embrace this variety whilst also looking for underlying trends. Therefore, sometimes internal migration may be more common than international as has been the case in Vietnam (Markussen et al. 2013). Across national borders, Thailand acts as a significant regional recipient of migrants, absorbing labour from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia (Cole et al. 2015), and offering a variety of employment options to often unskilled labour including construction and agriculture. This includes a large number of undocumented migrants across porous borders, despite attempts at state control (All Arakan Students and Youths Congress et al. 2009). Other Southeast countries such as Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia also take in significant numbers of the regional population (Chantavanich et al. 2013), although migrant opportunities may be found across the globe. Cross-border investments also impact heavily upon migration practices, as land is acquired for industrial or agri-business practices. This can result in labour both in and out of investment areas, with multiple knock on effects including increasing landlessness (Boutry et al. 2017).

### **Key reform issues and strategic openings**

- Policies of farm consolidation and mechanisation that follow rather than force movement of labour out of agriculture. This would accept that household agency can work to the benefit of market transitions in a country.
- Labour protection in the mainly low-paid occupations available to those forced off their land, where migrants often end up as one of the most vulnerable groups in a community
- Value-adding through commodity-chain approach to rural development
- Employment effects assessment of new land-based investments where local affected populations are not given diligent consideration and consultation
- SME programs geared to rural employment as a means to enhance options for diversification beyond agriculture without necessarily having to migrate
- Agricultural models that offer smallholders the opportunity for sustainability and productivity
- Migrant support services in destination areas
- Extending the role of the ASEAN Economic Community for movement and employment rights around the region

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