# Marginalised people's land rights and access: ethnic minorities, the poor and women

## *Extended synopsis*

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**June 2021**

## Overview

The poor, ethnic minorities and women in particular suffer marginalisation that is exacerbated by circumscribed access to land and insecurity of tenure. Ethnic minority land use practices, notably shifting cultivation, are criminalised, while citizenship issues and outright discrimination and ethnic chauvinism have excluded or displaced minorities from access to resources as majority farmers have increasingly availed themselves of land and other resources since upland margins have become more accessible. In some cases, security-oriented programs have distanced ethnic minority communities from land and other resources that are the basis of their livelihoods. Women have seen customary rights in land weakened by formalisation that privileges officially designated heads of households, who are usually male. Decisions and meetings often mainly involve men, and land use planning can neglect land-based resources that are primarily in women's work domains.

## Key trends and dynamics

The concept of marginalisation brings together other key themes to specify the negative impacts of land relations on certain groups of people around the Mekong region. The term 'marginalised' can be defined as representing the treatment of a person or a group as insignificant or peripheral. There are three important relations to highlight here. Firstly, marginalisation is a process rather than an

antecedent condition. Secondly, one becomes marginalised from something, and in this case marginalisation primarily involves access to, control of, or use of land. Thirdly, the marginalised are placed in relation to others who do not suffer the same tribulations. For this latter point, it is possible to apply multiple scales, such as highlighting individuals within a household or a community, or a significant social sub-group or ethnic minority within a particular nation-state. It could be argued that the Mekong region itself is marginalised within global trade and power relations, caught up in power struggles between large capitalist forces such as the USA and China. However, the larger the scale of reference, the greater the risk that inequalities within go unqualified.

Although processes of marginalisation take place in specific localised ways, it is important to reflect on the bigger picture of economic transformation in the Mekong region. At one level, it is important to take a historical perspective in order to view the marginalising effect of land policies over the long term. This includes colonial-era law drafted in support of plantation economies, certain aspects of which are retained in present-day statutory law. Moving towards recent economic policy, when considering access to and control of land for smallholders and the rural poor, the marketisation of agriculture, with the introduction of 'boom crops' has a strong impact when unaccompanied by pro-poor policies (Lamb et al. 2015). Neoliberalism encourages well-connected national elites to take control of markets and resources that bolsters their land-based wealth at the expense of the poor (Springer 2011). This is clearly seen in the advent of crony capitalism in Myanmar (Global Witness 2015; Woods 2011).

A point of focus for research on marginalising practices highlights large-scale land investments that are discriminatory to local land users, particularly those who make a living outside of state-supported market arenas that have become the priority of developmentalist regimes. In Cambodia, Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) have led to the clearing of farmland and forest under use by indigenous peoples, undermining community resource management practices (Bues 2011). They have also affected the ability of indigenous groups to register themselves under collective land titling, while most concession labour is given to in-migrants (Prachvuthy 2011). Similarly, concessions in Lao PDR have enclosed space, shutting it off to communities who were previously reliant on variety of resources in the designated zone (Baird 2011). In Myanmar, Gittleman and Brown (2014) assert that nearly 1,000 families will be displaced to make way for Thilawa Special Economic Zone, and that the process of this relocation fails to meet international guidelines.

There are certain social sub-groups who can be highlighted as being on the receiving end of marginalising processes. However, it is important to clarify that each sub-group should not be assumed to carry a singular identity, and that disparity will be found within. Firstly, large-scale land development can marginalise smallholders who already may be poorly served by statutory law on tenure security. Drbohlav and Hejkrlik (2018) highlight a case from Cambodia where 1,400 fishing families were relocated to make way for a land concession in the Botum Sakor National Park. The study shows that the livelihoods of those relocated has worsened, with employment issues, poor infrastructure at the relocation site, and issues over access to health and education services. Nguyen, Westen and Zoomers (2014) show how the acquisition of land for infrastructure development in peri-urban areas of central Vietnam takes little account of the wishes of local farming households whose land is taken.

Ethnic minorities frequently suffer from the exploitation of land for new investment ventures. For example, there is evidence of multiple land grabs from the Ta'ang minority in Shan State, Myanmar, in order to serve military needs such as housing, training, and income generation through hydropower, oil and gas pipelines (Ta'ang Student and Youth Organization 2011). There is much attention brought to the plight of indigenous communities in Ratanakiri, Cambodia, who have lost their land to rubber plantations operated by the Vietnamese company HAGL (Work 2016). In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, indigenous sea nomads in Southern Thailand have suffered from land dispossession to make way for tourism developments (Neef et al. 2018). However, as a counterpoint Mellac (2011) notes that customary practices for Tai-speaking groups in Northern Vietnam have endured during periods of collectivisation and then individualised market-driven land use rights. In this way, ethnic groups do display the solidarity and power to ride out the potential negative impacts from outside pressures.

Despite legal declarations of equality, patriarchal practices in Mekong countries favour men who monopolise control of land as heads of households (see also the 'Gender and land' key theme for further details). They frequently maintain control of land through titling programmes. In Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia, women and girls are becoming marginalised as a consequence of emerging capitalist relations, with reduced autonomy and agency including the recognition of their land rights (Mi Young Park and Maffii 2017). However, there are actions to let women's voices be heard. In Myanmar, a coalition of over 100 organisations lobbied for the inclusion of women in discussions over National Land Use Policy (NLUP) and helped bring them to the table in the peace process (Faxon 2017; Faxon, Furlong, and Phyu 2015). The urban poor also suffer from insecure land tenure while residing in informal housing, leaving them open to the threat of forced eviction (Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee 2009; Chi Mgbako et al. 2010). Bugalski and Pred (2010) note how a land titling programme in Phnom Penh excluded certain informal communities, thereby exacerbating inequalities (see key theme on 'Urban land governance' for further information).

There are various ways in which marginalisation is felt by affected communities. Most clearly in relation to land is dispossession (see key theme on 'Land dispossession/land grabbing'). Engvall and Kokko (2007) make a statistical link between land tenure security and poverty in Cambodia, where a proposed land reform package could result in a 16% fall in poverty incidence for landowning rural households and a 30% fall for the landless. A report from Myanmar looks at rural debt, and how its emergence through entry into marketised agriculture can result in distress sales of land (Kloeppinger-todd and Sandar 2013). Marginalisation from access to land can also impact upon food security for smallholder farmers, where the emergence of cash cropping takes precedence over production for local consumption (Land Core Group 2010; Rammohan and Pritchard 2014). A further impact is cultural, particularly considering that the capitalisation of land frequently ignores other important meanings to its users. By isolating access, the very cultural identity of users can be threatened, where land operates as a key identifier.

As well as the direct impacts of marginalisation, there are several intersecting ways in which marginalisation of the poor, ethnic minorities and women tie in with other themes. For example, a variety of environmental issues can tie into marginalisation from land (see also key theme on 'Land and the environment: pollution, deforestation, climate change, conservation zoning'). Conservation is often prioritised against the needs of those living in forest areas, without considering that there could be programmes that are mutually beneficial to both. Indeed, ethnic minorities have been

singled out as a being the cause of forest destruction, such as through the derogatory terming of "slash-and-burn" practices (Ayuttacorn 2019; Ganjanapan 1998; Hares 2009). However, such groups may equally be the victims from the degradation of land, water and forest resources, to which they are not necessarily responsible (Neef et al. 2006). In Vietnam, the devolution of forestland allocation carries a risk of leaving out the poorest of local communities due to the monopolising influence of local power dynamics (Sikor and Nguyen 2007).

Another intersecting issue involves migration, which may contribute to or result from marginalisation processes (see also key theme on 'Agrarian change and land: Migration and labour'). In Cambodia, migration into or between rural areas is threatening the customary lands of local, particularly indigenous, land users (Ironside 2003). In Vietnam, migration into the Central Highlands for coffee production has pushed local ethnic minorities further into forest margins, with a resulting threat of deforestation (Meyfroidt, Vu Tan Phuong, and Hoang Viet Anh 2013). There are also examples of forced migration, such as through long periods of conflict in Myanmar. Indeed, any lasting peace agreement in this country must address the case of IDPs (Internally Displaced Peoples) and other refugees who have fled their land.

While much literature focuses on the emergence of marginalising dynamics in land relations through the Mekong region, there are also examples of attempts to counter such forces. Frequently this involves community participation in a project, such as in participatory land use planning. Archer (2012) looks at a participatory urban slum upgrading project in Bangkok, which provides improved tenure security, albeit with fears of a debt burden for residents who are involved. Bao Huy (2006) explores pro-poor provisions in Vietnam for community forest management, where the challenges are in limited capacity to implement plans rather than any deliberate means to exclude the poor.

Finally, as a conceptual framing device for processes of marginalisation, the 2011 book "*Powers of Exclusion*" by Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tania Murray Li examines the processes by which land relations are being transformed in Southeast Asia, and who is being excluded from access to land rights. Four 'powers of exclusion' are observed, namely regulation, the market, force and legitimation. This analysis can be used to highlight impacts at community level, as well as national developmental trends. Significantly, the double-edged sword of exclusion can be noted. On the one hand, an ability to bound your land and exclude others can produce security for the owner or user. On the other hand, this process can isolate or shut out individuals or communities with potential to devastate their livelihoods.

## Key actors, interests

**State**

The state plays a vital role when providing national land-related legislation that may be either pro-actively inclusive to all user groups or have the potential to marginalise some by favouring the interests of others. With the instigation of neo-liberal economic policies around the region over the last twenty years, there is a fear that latter scenario prevails by favouring the private sector and elites over local land users. In Myanmar, the Transnational Institute highlights bias in the draft National Land Use Policy (NLUP) that could marginalise smallholder farmers and customary land use rights (Transnational Institute 2014). The 2018 revision of the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management (VFV) Law and 2020 revision of the Farmland Law have been criticised for potentially

criminalising anyone cultivating land without the necessary user certificate, with vague references to customary land tenure insufficient to protect those farming under local rules. The challenge is for state actors to develop policy frames that can attract investment to the inclusion of existing user groups who are in a position to give consent to ventures and share in the benefits.

**Civil Society**

Perceived marginalisation can lead to strong responses by civil society. Despite the threat of a state crackdown in Vietnam, protests do occur, most recently and publicly in the Dong Tam dispute where a land seizure for a military-owned telecommunications company led to a deadly clash between villagers and police. Marginalised community groups often see no other means but to take up forms of resistance, be they overt or subtle forms of disruption (see also key theme on 'Dispute resolution and access to justice'). For example, an ethnic minority Khmu community in Northern Lao PDR has employed various forms of resistance against a Chinese-owned rubber concession using sabotage, refusal to work at the rubber plantation, and complaints through legal and state institutions (McAllister 2015). Civil society groups often adopt innovative means in their responses to marginalisation processes, using international networks to highlight their plight. Groups such as AIPP (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact) and IMPECT (Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association) have been instrumental in bringing together community alliances. The response to processes of marginalisation can also have an important impact upon the very identity of affected groups. There has been a reassertion of Kuy identity (the largest indigenous group in Cambodia), taking an active role to promote a cultural heritage and defend land rights (Swift 2013). Migrant Dara-ang women in northern Thailand are changing practices (in this case to organic farming and off-farm activities) in order to legitimise their economic activities and distance themselves from connection to forest encroachment (Ayuttacorn 2019).

**Inter-Governmental Organisations**

The role of IGOs in relation to local land users and the poor has shifted over time. By intention, the marketisation of land was hoped to carry positive outcomes in providing a source of revenue. However, there has been criticism of government aid agencies and inter-governmental institutions that places markets above rights in the desire to capitalise land, not fully incorporating secure access to and use of land for poor communities (Hutchison 2008). In the last ten years, this discussion has become more nuanced, with project literature and international guidelines carrying a specified focus on the rights for local land users, whether through formalised titling or the recognition of customary rights. In an attempt to encourage market development, but without marginalisation, many international donors are promoting initiatives such as responsible investment.

**Private Sector**

Domestic and foreign private investors seek out land for capital-generating ventures, and there are numerous reports of cases where state agencies take advantage of the insecure or unrecognised tenure of local land users to provide that land to private corporations or well-connected individuals (examples can be found in Kenney-Lazar and Mark 2021; Po and Heng 2019). Many cases underline the explicit support of state and international actors in the provision of this land, and even where compensation and/or relocation is given due attention, they nevertheless result in further marginalisation, with dispossessed groups shut out of benefits deriving from the added value in the land development (for the example of the Laos-China railway project see Suhardiman et al. 2021).

## Key contestations and debates

Land titling programmes have been criticised for potentially marginalising women, but in some cases (e.g., Lao PDR) there are more women's names on title deeds than men's. Nevertheless, there are often discrepancies between customary practice and official registration with regard to gender. For example, many customary inheritance practices in Thailand focus on matrilineal structures of kinship (Ingalls et al. 2018). This is lost in a theoretically gender-blind formal titling program. Further, there is a risk that land ownership becomes monopolised by men who predominantly take the role of the head of household. This latter issue is particularly felt in Vietnam, where women continue to be marginalised in formal household-held land use registration certificates (Menon, Rodgers, and Kennedy 2013). There is thus considerable debate over the gender implications of land formalisation.

There are other social groups who may become marginalised through titling programmes. For example, Cambodia Development Resource Institute (2007) have highlighted a need to incorporate concerted pro-poor policies into such schemes. Yet the debate remains as to the effectiveness of formalising land ownership and use. The most famous proponent of formalisation is the Peruvian economist Hernan De Soto. He proposed that formalising land activates the one capital possessed by the rural poor, namely land as natural capital, thereby allowing the possibility of participation in markets and improving their socio-economic status (De Soto 2000). Hirsch (2011) highlights how titling campaigns promote smallholder security. Yet he also presents examples supporting the counterargument that formalisation may in fact weaken security and exacerbate inequalities. It is also possible that the enforcement of land categories can be used to delegitimise local claims. Over the last twenty years, concessions have been allocated by state governments around the region, dispossessing local users since their presence on land is not recognised under statutory law. Ferguson (2014) observes that land grabs in Myanmar have been facilitated firstly by the formal classification of waste land, later adapted to the category of Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land.

Ethnic minorities suffer disproportionate insecurity in land tenure, but the reasons for such insecurity are embedded in wider societal discrimination, the status of lands and land use practices commonly associated with minorities. As well as increased economic risks, Guttal (2006) argues that such processes of marginalisation ignore the inherent socio-cultural status of land, a historical memory for people. Taking this away threatens the very identity of such groups.

The nuances involved in how marginalisation occurs, and who is affected, are complex. As a result, simplified representations of marginalisation based on ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status are thus subject to challenge.

## Key differences and commonalities among Mekong countries

In general terms, cases of marginalisation throughout the region carry common features. Although national legal and policy systems may vary, women, ethnic minorities, and the poorest of society frequently suffer similar struggles. In the case of land, they fail to have their rights recognised, or lose access altogether. An epoch of neoliberal economics has exacerbated rather than alleviated inequalities in the Mekong. One contrast is in the use of the term "indigenous" (Baird 2013). While relatively unused in Thailand and Lao PDR, Cambodia has set up legislation engaging land rights for indigenous peoples. Sub-decree 83 from 2009 allows registered indigenous communities eligibility

for communal land titles, even though practical application of the regulation has proved cumbersome (Milne 2013). There are also contrasts between large-scale land grabbing in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, on the one hand, and quieter yet no less significant drivers of inequality in access to land for smallholders in Thailand (Hirsch 2019).

## Key links and interactions across borders and across scales

In the same way that marginalisation acts as a cross-cutting issue to other key themes, so it links to a variety of cross-border issues. For example, marginalisation also results in the cross-border movement of people, who have been dispossessed from their land, suffer from the impacts of environmental degradation, or are fleeing wider conflicts in their country of origin. Processes of marginalisation are often connected to cross-border investment that supplants local claims to land use control and use. The Thai company Mitr Phol, amongst other companies, has been instrumental in taking concessions in Cambodia for the purpose of sugar cane production, leading to the dispossession of local communities from their land (Equitable Cambodia and Inclusive Development International 2013; Sherchan 2015). However, the reactions to this initial cross-border interaction have shown similar features. A cross-border network of communities, NGOs and CSOs have brought the case to the attention of sugar retailers in Europe, using their collective reach and strength. In 2020 a lawsuit was heard in Thai courts, the first time a case was brought by non-Thai plaintiffs against a Thai company for actions outside the country.

With an increasing complexity of scales involved in the processes leading to and impacts of marginalisation, responses are frequently taking account of a regional perspective. FAO has developed the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, as a framework that can be applied at a multi-country level (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2012). The Mekong Region Land Governance project intervenes on topics such as customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment. It takes the donor perspective that these are regional issues and cannot be addressed solely at the national level.

## Key reform issues and strategic openings

- Recognition of ethnic minority land-based livelihood practices in establishing tenure rights based on existing land use
- Support for indigenous and other ethnic minority claims to land and farming practices thereon
- Application of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for ethnic minorities for investment projects potentially engaging their land
- Appraisal of investment projects with specific reference to impacts on land tenure security for women and ethnic minorities
- Shared benefits for land users with investors, including return of land in a sound condition on the conclusion of leases
- Legal support for contract farming laying out the conditions for responsible investment and sustainable land use
- Legal recognition of women's tenure over household land

- Inclusion of women in relevant public meetings and decisions affecting land use and tenure
- Access to services, including land tenure security, for the urban poor

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