



Land degradation in the Lao PDR: Discourses and policy

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ABSTRACT

While there is an important body of research on environmental discourses and policy in Southeast Asia, the situation in the Lao PDR remains understudied. This paper builds on debates related to environmental change and knowledge production and examines the socio-political construction of the current mainstream discourse on land degradation in Laos. It highlights that, despite significant uncertainties as regard the extent and severity of the issue, land degradation in the uplands is represented by the Laotian authorities and many of their development partners as a major and imminent threat to the development of the country. The paper also examines the way this perspective is translated into policies specifically aimed at resolving the upland issue and proposes an alternative reading of this process where mainstream discourse and associated policy appear partly shaped by the subjectivities and political economic projects of Laos' policy-makers. Finally, drawing on the case of Laos, the paper provides a critical reflection on conventional approaches to assessing socio-environmental issues and defining policy interventions.

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Land degradation: facts and fictions

According to the Global Assessment of the Status of Human-induced Land Degradation (GLASOD), 65% of the world's land resources are degraded to some extent (Oldeman et al., 1991). The most recent sequel of GLASOD, the Assessment of the Status of Human-induced Land Degradation in South and Southeast Asia, states that in Southeast Asia virtually all land is degraded with agriculture and deforestation as the two major causative factors (Van Lynden and Oldeman, 1997). Drawing upon these two studies, the UNEP states that "land degradation problems [in Southeast Asia] are directly related to land-use practices, particularly agricultural expansion and intensification" (UNEP, 2002, p. 75) and the FAO considers that all the land resources of Laos are degraded with 84% of land at least moderately degraded (FAO, 2000).

Despite these authoritative sources, the exact extent, severity and causes of land degradation remain vigorously disputed. Many scholars argue that large scale assessments of land degradation lack appropriate methodologies to deal with the complexity of the issue. Land degradation is indeed strongly scale-sensitive and has multiple spatial and temporal dimensions depending on the biophysical, economic and cultural context in which it is defined (Fresco and Kroonenberg, 1992; Brookfield, 1999; Warren, 2002). Therefore,

measurements made at a particular scale may be contradicted by other measurements at different scales (Gray, 1999). In fact, while they may have some value as international references, macro-scale environmental assessments can also contribute to produce simplistic models which discount the complexity of socio-environmental interactions and/or provide a biased vision of land degradation issues. For instance, often misled by aggregate, macro-scale data, much of the early literature related to poverty-environment interactions posited a 'downward spiral' of poverty and environmental degradation (Scherr, 2000). In this neo-Malthusian model, population growth, limited access to land and lack of resources for conservation investments drive rural poor people to intensify their pressure on the environment. The resulting environmental degradation further limits natural resources availability and increases poverty.

One of the most famous examples of this kind of simplistic representations relates to what has come to be known as the 'Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation' (Ives and Messerli, 1989). Appearing during the 1970s (e.g. Eckholm, 1976; World Bank, 1979), the Theory described increased sedimentation and flooding in the Ganges and Brahmaputra lowlands as the direct consequences of the Nepalese uplands' extensive deforestation. Deforestation was presumed to result from rapid growth of the poor upland populations largely dependent on forest resources for their subsistence. It was then assumed that cleared land, steep slopes and heavy rainfall were causing increased runoff and soil erosion, resulting in landslides and catastrophic sediment discharge and floods in the lowlands.

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Fifteen years later, a number of empirical studies had discredited the thesis, highlighting that upland dwellers had a different perception of land degradation and different theories on the causality linkages, that rates of deforestation and erosion were not as serious as supposed, and that many upland farmers had developed effective conservation measures (e.g. Thompson et al., 1986; Ives and Messerli, 1989; Metz, 1991). Since then, many micro-scale and longitudinal studies have reiterated similar points in different contexts (e.g. Tiffen and Mortimore, 1994; Tiffen et al., 1994; Forsyth, 1996; Templeton and Scherr, 1999; Mazzucato and Niemeijer, 2001; Ravnborg, 2003). Clearly, none of the micro-scale studies mentioned here deny that land degradation processes such as those described in the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation correspond in part to an empirical reality. However, they indicate that, depending on their scales and methods of observation, assessments can reach different conclusions regarding the causes and extent of land degradation. Perhaps more importantly, they indicate that the inclusion of different actors and viewpoints in the debate often leads to contradictory assessments. Hence, they highlight the way certain empirical observations are used to support environmental narratives and legitimate particular political interventions (Guthman, 1997).

According to Forsyth (2005), two main bodies of work can be identified in the literature analysing the construction of environmental narratives. Influenced by the Cultural Theory perspective, a number of scholars have focused on the role played by social structures in shaping environmental discourse (e.g. Thompson et al., 1986, 1990). For instance, challenging the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation, Thompson et al. (1986) highlighted a number of different, sometimes conflicting environmental discourses which, they argued, are the reflections of different social groups (e.g. state agents, upland farmers, NGO workers) and their different worldviews. Although gathering actors in 'socio-cultural boxes' may be viewed as reductionist, the approach proves valuable for gaining insights into the links between human organization and political behaviour. For instance, even if some micro-scale studies suggest that the abovementioned 'downward spiral' model cannot be applied universally,¹ the latter still represents an important frame of reference for many policy actors. This is particularly true among international organizations where the temptation to link poverty and environmental degradation is recurrent (e.g. WCED, 1987; Durning, 1989; World Bank, 1992, 2006; UNEP, 1995; Dasgupta et al., 2005). To some extent, however, the popularity of the simple and easily generalisable 'downward spiral' model may reflect as much the attempts of land degradation specialists to 'theorize' human-environment interactions (e.g. Fabricius et al., 2007) as the large scale planner's standpoint of international organizations. In any case, it certainly fits rather well with the latter's macro, uniform approaches to alleviating poverty and environmental degradation (Forsyth et al., 1998).

Taking a different perspective, other scholars have focused on the role of discourse in modelling biased visions of past environmental history which, in turn, influence research, policy-making and development practices (e.g. Fairhead and Leach, 1995; Leach and Mearns, 1996; Bassett and Zuéli, 2000; Leach and Fairhead, 2000). For instance, looking at the deforestation issue in West Africa, Fairhead and Leach (1995) highlighted the persistence of a 'catastrophist' narrative conveyed through authoritative international environmental assessments. Structured by accounts from the colonial period and assumptions regarding the past existence

of a regional socio-environmental equilibrium (i.e. where West African populations and their 'traditional' lifestyles integrated harmoniously with an 'original climax vegetation' of primary forests), this discourse represents the region as having experienced dramatic forest loss during the last century as a consequence of population growth, social dysfunction and changing land use practices. Accordingly, it advocates strong conservation policy and state interventionism. Yet, as pointed out by the same authors, this representation of West African landscapes does not exactly concur with empirical evidence. In many instances, local land uses appear rather different and rates of deforestation lower than what is described in the 'catastrophist' narrative which, in addition, tends to overlook long-term, climate-induced dynamics of transition between savanna and closed forest.

By misrepresenting complex causality linkages and/or understating local experience, such discursive simplifications or falsifications not only limit our understanding of the socio-environmental interactions, they can also have important implications in terms of policy. For instance, a conclusion of the West African narrative challenged by Fairhead and Leach (1995) is that, if local populations are unable to preserve their environment, the responsibility for managing natural resources must be transferred to – or, at least, shared with – external actors such as state agencies, international organizations or NGOs (see also Bassett and Zuéli, 2000; Goldman, 2001). In other words, protection of the 'public interest' and reduction of local actors' control over their environment often go hand in hand.

Hence, as argued by Guthman, "the facts about environmental deterioration [can] become subordinate to the broader debates on the politics of resource use" (1997, p. 66, original emphasis). For instance, we may observe situations where powerful actors attempt to strengthen or expand their political influence by being both producers and beneficiaries of a particular environmental discourse. In this regard, Adger et al. (2001) highlight the role of international organizations in, concurrently, producing assessments of so-called global environmental problems, advocating global environmental management as a solution and supporting/supervising international agreements and regulations. By defining the problems and suggesting technocratic solutions in which they play an essential role, international organizations are legitimizing their own existence and actions, even if the suggested "solutions do not necessarily reflect ecological realities of the human utilization of the environment" (Adger et al., 2001, p. 709). More generally, the production of environmental knowledge can be a means for some actors to 'infiltrate' political spaces usually dominated by others. Hence, from a redefinition of the environmental conditions emerge new ecological rationalities and new solutions to environmental 'problems' which, in turn, require new or restructured institutions, new regulatory regimes and, accordingly, a re-organization of land and natural resource management. Through this process, local socio-environmental interactions may be radically transformed.

Building on a review of official documents, national statistics, project reports and academic literature, this paper examines the mainstream environmental discourse in the Lao PDR, its policy outcomes and political implications. While environmental conservation is a core objective of national development policy (e.g. GoL, 1993, 2000, 2003), so far only a few studies have provided an analysis of the justificatory discourse developed by the Laotian authorities and their development partners. According to these studies, a key narrative in the official discourse represents shifting cultivation – widely practised in the uplands of the country – as a primary cause of deforestation (e.g. Ireson and Ireson, 1991; Seidenberg et al., 2003; Fujita, 2004; Ducourtieux et al., 2005). Further, as suggested by Aubertin (2003), shifting cultivation prac-

¹ Just as the findings of micro-scale studies cannot be interpreted as universal models and/or in isolation from their specific socioeconomic and ecological context (see World Bank, 1995).

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