
No more frontiers to cross: Life of Mekong people in the plantation era

Welcome to the Mekong region!

Sharing a linguistic heritage, the same ancient word is still used across the region, particularly in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, to describe this place as “suvarnabhumi”, a golden land. With tremendous natural resources from their rivers, forests and lands, people of the Mekong were seen as more than wealthy, as most of the people live by their capacity to work together with nature. While rivers and forests are places to hunt, fish and gather, the land is gold in itself, producing rice, a variety of crops and providing a home. While in other parts of the world, people have found the need to keep crossing “new frontiers”, trying to push beyond the current limits, to find a better life, to live off a better land. Except when forcibly displaced, the Mekong peoples have rarely had a history of moving away because they have their own golden land. That may be the reason explaining why local people cannot understand the arrival of eager investors that rush into the area to exploit their land to make their own wealth to take back home.

Private companies are aiming to take over 180,000 hectares in Laos and over 800,000 hectares of land in Cambodia. Some of those companies are local, but most are international. The governments of the lower Mekong countries award concessions to companies whose main aim is to grab the largest possible piece of land, and later on to introduce large-scale plantations. The first time the plantation may fail, but this doesn't matter, as long as they own the large piece of land along the main road, paying very low land taxes, and having plenty of time to try planting again.

Two of the biggest threats for the Mekong's peoples and resources – large-scale plantations and hydropower dams – share many common characteristics, including those related to the role of the private sector, the lack of clear policies for making the process transparent and accountable and lack of people's participation. However, large-scale plantations have pushed ahead over the past 10- 15 years and as a result many people have lost their land, even before they knew if they had any legal right over the land at all. The promotion of those schemes has made the gap between people and policy makers wider, and people still have no chance to make their own voices heard in decisions about their future on their own land. Taking the land away from people means taking away their rice, their crops and their families' food security. This can turn out to be a disaster for the countries in many senses, if an urgent reconsideration of these policies is not achieved in time.

As all the Mekong countries – Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam – are presently providing soils for large scale plantations including rubber, eucalyptus, jatropha and palm oil, at the same time investors from within the region are also playing a power game over the less strong countries. Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese companies and their state enterprises are now rushing in to push beyond their frontiers to satisfy their own industrial needs in neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Laos.

Over the past decade, the struggle to monitor and campaign on plantation issues in the region has had little success. However, the emergence of the land network and their campaign on land

concessions in Cambodia, for instance, has resulted in increased awareness within society as a whole. In spite of that, plantation proponents keep advertising large-scale plantations using endless and ever more complicated reasons, ranging from 'shifting cultivation stabilization' and 'poverty reduction' 20 years ago, to plantations now aimed at carbon credits and biofuel production. Throughout the years, the reasons given to the local people have kept changing, but something that has not changed is that people of the Mekong countries have continued to be pushed to the frontiers of their own land.

In November 2006, a statement of unity came out from a Mekong Regional Conference on Tree Plantations, held in Kratie province, Cambodia where people from five Mekong countries shared their experiences and the lessons they had learned on the issue of industrial tree plantations and their impacts on local peoples' livelihoods. The people stated that *"Contrary to government claims that plantations contribute to national economic development and poverty alleviation, plantations have increased poverty by displacing entire communities, destroying crucial livelihood resources and preventing the access of communities to natural resources"*. Their conclusion was that *"In all cases the only way to create change has been through peoples' struggles. Struggle does not mean violence; it means the different ways that local people adopt to secure and defend their rights"*.

In order to avoid having to move away and to change their lives, people in the Mekong region now need to turn around and state clearly to the plantation proponents that there are no more new frontiers for the companies to cross. Instead, the people wish to remain and regain their lives in their own land that they have been using for generations. That is to say, they wish to stay in their "Suvannabhumi", their golden land.

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