

article

## Coffee, mines and dams: conflicts over land in the Bolaven Plateau, southern Lao PDR

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### Abstract

During the last decades, neoliberal economic reforms aiming at facilitating trade and cross-boundary investment have encouraged transnational and national economic actors to search for 'empty' land to grow export crops, to mine, or to develop hydroelectric dams. Mainland Southeast Asia is one of the regions where such investment has been taking place as it contains resource-hungry countries (Thailand and in particular neighbouring China), and countries with 'empty' land and the willingness to use such land to foster economic growth (Laos, Cambodia and Burma). This beset the question as to what happens to the people who inhabit the land that is supposed to be 'empty', and the relationship between the different land uses that takes over that 'empty' land. This paper describes the land conflicts in one area in southern Laos, the Bolaven Plateau, where national and international capital backing large-scale coffee plantation, bauxite mining and dam construction is displacing smallholding coffee farmers – the 'traditional' land users – within a political environment of poorly enforced property rights and endemic corruption. We describe how the smallholding coffee farmers are relocated to make way for the new economic activities supported by considerable amounts of foreign capital, and how the land grabbing results in lower standards of living for the smallholding coffee farmers, with few benefits to the country as a whole.

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