

Master's-level training on land at Chiang Mai University

Reflections from the first cohort, 2017-19



From left to right:
Ms Maw Thoe Myar,
Mr Nyein Han Tun,
Ms Chau My Duyen

Since 2017, the International Master's program in Social Sciences (Development Studies) at Chiang Mai University has included a focus on land relations. This reflects a revitalized interest in land and its governance in the region involving academics, practitioners, activists and researchers. Through the focus, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), who have instigated the program at Chiang Mai University, provides training to develop a high standard of knowledge and research skills for a new generation of land practitioners.

The first cohort of three students started in 2017. Ms Maw Thoe Myar and Mr Nyein Han Tun (both Myanmar), and Ms Chau My Duyen (Vietnam) received scholarships funded by MRLG (Mekong Region Land Governance project), with technical assistance provided by the Mekong Land Research Forum at Chiang Mai University. Following a conceptual and theoretical grounding in first year course modules, the second year involved field research towards a Master's thesis. This brief looks at the achievements of the three students, who reflect on their experiences following the Master's program, consider their aims for the future, and describe their thesis research. It is hoped that the brief will inform and inspire new students to join the program or seek equivalent schooling, thereby contributing to the training of land practitioners in the Mekong region.

For further information please visit the following websites:

- RCSD: <https://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th/home/>
- Mekong Land Research Forum: <http://www.mekonglandforum.org/>
- MRLG: <https://www.mrlg.org/>



CHAU MY DUYEN

In 2013, Ms Chau My Duyen graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Rural Development from Can Tho University. Following a period working in the Mekong Delta Development Research Institute, Can Tho University, she desired to develop her knowledge base. Chiang Mai University was deemed the best destination to take up this journey, known for its focus in development studies through the social sciences, and training in research techniques. With the focus on land relations aligning to her own interests, she applied for the two-year course and scholarship.

Experiences of the program

During the two years at Chiang Mai University, I had a chance to learn from top Southeast Asian researchers and experts in the field of Social Science. The study helped me to expand my knowledge and opened my eyes to exploring social issues through many different perspectives. The focus on land relations allowed me to look at its linkages to development strategies, and various economic, social, and environmental factors within and between countries of the Mekong region. In particular, I improved my critical thinking towards land relations, understanding the rationale behind actions of each country. In its content, the program provided diverse reading materials on concepts and case studies, while offering field trips for students to measure academic theories on the ground. For me, this approach is the best way for students to improve themselves, and it will be very useful for my future career. Moreover, studying in Chiang Mai University also offered opportunities for professional networking, raising potential for future collaborations around the region. The program fitted perfectly with my background study, my life experiences, my stage of personal development, and my passion.

The future

After completing the Master's degree at Chiang Mai University, I have returned to the position of researcher at the Mekong Delta Development Research Institute, Can Tho University. Currently, I'm preparing to participate in a new project looking at land in relation to climate change and economic development planning in the coastal provinces of the Mekong Delta. The knowledge obtained from the Master's program can be directly applied to this project. Moreover, in maintaining a passion for long-term development in an academic career, I would like to undertake a Ph.D. degree in 2020, focusing further on natural resource governance and policy.



Presenting research at an international conference



Thesis defence at Chiang Mai University



With colleagues at the Mekong Delta Development Research Institute, Can Tho University



PFES project sign in Vien An Dong commune

Chau My Duyen – Master’s thesis topic

Payment for Forest Environmental Services (PFES) and Forestland Governance: A Case Study of Integrated Shrimp-Mangrove Farming in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

Payment for Forest Ecosystem (sometimes Environmental) Services (PFES) represents a potential approach to improve natural resource management together with biodiversity conservation using mainly market-oriented mechanisms. In 2008, Vietnam established PFES within its national policy. Seeing the potential to generate and increase local incomes, it became the first country in Southeast Asia to pass a national law that promotes PFES (Decree No.99 in 2010). This study examined the design and implementation processes of PFES in Vien An Dong Commune, Ca Mau province, at the most southerly point of Vietnam, in order to understand how Forestland Allocation policy (FLA) influences PFES. This was the first province in the Mekong Delta to apply the policy in forest management. Data collected from field interviews and participant observation was conducted and analysed to look into the power relations of different actors involved, how practices develop for different groups, and the impact upon property rights.

Five groups of social actors were identified for their involvement in the PFES process. These were: local government (Provincial, District, and Commune People’s

Committees), government agencies (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Forestry and Nhung Mien Forest Management Board), private companies (Minh Phu Company), farmers and NGOs (SNV). Two group of actors here are particularly significant in terms of their power relations. Firstly, Minh Phu Seafood Corporation is the leading seafood company in Ca Mau province. They have taken the role of environmental service buyer in the PFES project, controlling the details of benefit-sharing. Meanwhile, the farmers of Vien An Dong commune are the forestland recipients who farm shrimp within allocated mangrove forests. They are seen as powerless actors, since the rate of PFES and method of payment have been decided by the company.

The PFES policy in Vien An Dong (Decision 111) was designed and operationalised based on the different stakeholders involved and existing ownership regulations through FLA. However, as a result of the policy, property relations among these stakeholders have changed, in particular with the poor becoming excluded from the system of benefit-sharing. Indeed, Minh Phu company controls who can or cannot be involved in the project. Lastly, some farmers have benefitted from the PFES project by inserting their knowledge of agricultural and environmental conditions, backed up through social relations and capital. However, the availability of capital to invest with the project has proven integral to success and so has led to an increased differentiation between rich and poor within the community.



Interviewing official from the Department of Forestry

MAW THOE MYAR

Ms. Maw Thoe Myar is an ethnic Karenni, from Kayah (Karenni) State, Myanmar. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Computer Science from Computer University (Loikaw), Kayah State. During her undergraduate studies, she also operated as an activist with civil society and youth organizations in social work and development. Using these experiences, she continued her studies for a Diploma in Community Leadership and Social Studies (CLASS). In 2016-2017, she worked for Weaving Bonds Across Borders (WBAB) based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This journey installed an eagerness to apply for Master's training at Chiang Mai University, and she was successfully accepted to study the program of Social Sciences (Development Studies).

Experiences of the program

I was thankful to receive a full scholarship for the Master's Degree program from the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG). During the study, I had a chance to follow in-depth class-based courses for one year and then thesis research for another year. During the course work, I followed Development theories, Social Science Theories, Ethnic Studies, Regionalization, Land Relations in Southeast Asia, Research Methodology, the Thesis Seminar and the Reading Class. These modules helped me understand theories and concepts in order to frame contexts not only for Myanmar but also other Southeast Asia countries. The modules also helped me not only improve my reading skills but also enhanced critical and analytical skills such as through the writing of literature reviews. Moreover, I have gained knowledge on research methodology to support me when conducting research and writing a master's thesis. Additionally, the program provided field experiences when visiting ethnic villages around Chiang Mai. During my studies I participated as a field researcher for the RCSD-UN FAO project "Migration and women's land tenure rights and security in the Greater Mekong Sub-region".

The future

My aim is to work as a researcher after finishing my master's degree, particularly in land related issues. As Myanmar is now in a transition period, such issues are significant and serious, closely connecting to ongoing peace processes as clarified during study research. Therefore, my passion is to contribute to progress in land related issues, especially in rural ethnic areas, and to facilitate equitable rights of access to land as well as the application of associated human rights. Additionally, given the chance, I hope to continue my education to a higher professional level, thereby enhancing opportunities for my future career.



Defence of thesis proposal,
Chiang Mai University



Field trip to Akha village, Thailand



Attending international conference
to present research paper

Maw Thoe Myar – Master’s thesis topic

The Impact of Myanmar’s Political Transition on IDP Access to Land and Human Security in Karenni State

The research looks at the rights to access land for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) during the transition towards peace in Karenni State, Myanmar. Karenni State (also known as Kayah State) is situated in the eastern part of Myanmar and is the smallest state in the country. It has suffered one of the longest civil wars in a fight for political freedom and self-determination. Conflict between Karenni armed groups and the Tatmadaw has caused mass displacement and forced relocations for many Karenni villagers. The rationale behind forced relocations was the Tatmadaw’s “four cuts” counter-insurgency tactics, which aimed to cut off the insurgent’s access to food, finance, intelligence and fighting personnel. Villagers therefore had to abandon their ancestral lands, property and way of life to move to new designated localities. This has resulted in the villagers lacking food security, health facilities, education, electricity and other infrastructure. The Tatmadaw forced Karenni young men to serve in the military and provide hard manual labour without remuneration. Furthermore, many elders, children and infants in relocation sites suffered and died from malaria, skin infections and other deadly diseases. Under such inhumane conditions, thousands of Karenni villagers fled to the jungle, and some crossed the border to Thailand.

Since 2010, Myanmar has embraced a political transition towards democracy with free and fair elections, the release of political prisoners, the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission, the abolition of media censorship, freedom of expression and freedom of movement. Peacebuilding processes through bilateral agreements have engaged the Myanmar government with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). Nationwide Ceasefire Agreements (NCAs) have been signed with ten EAOs, even if conflicts continue with other groups. In 2012, the EAO



Interview in Daw Klaw Le village

Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) signed a bilateral agreement under U Thein Sein’s administration but is yet to agree to an NCA. The ongoing peace-building process seems to bring hope to ending long-term civil war in Karenni State.

Due to these conditions, many Karenni IDPs have voluntarily resettled and returned to their original villages. The research explores whether IDP resettlement and return during the political transition has brought human security and in particular access to land. Two IDPs villages (Daw So Shay village and Daw Klaw Le village) act as case studies to investigate the process of voluntarily resettlement and re-access to their original land, analysing the implications on livelihood security. This involved ethnographic field research over one and a half months using in-depth interviews, the compilation of life stories, focus group discussions, and participant observation. 24 key informants included local residents, ethnic leaders, government officials and civil society organizations.

The research discovered that the peace process is not reflected in Karenni State, due to: a prevailing lack of trust between the EAOs, government and the Tatmadaw; a lack of implementation of bilateral agreements; and a lack of capacities for peace negotiators trying to break the deadlock in the talks. Although the peace process brings hope to IDPs that they may access their original lands, returnees still have encountered many problems, such as finding this land confiscated by the Tatmadaw with no compensation made available. The case of Daw So Shay village demonstrates a series of resulting impacts on human security including security for housing, food, household economy, culture and society. What is more, returning IDPs have been sued and imprisoned by the Tatmadaw for trespassing on their own lands. In Daw Klaw Le village, IDPs have achieved return and resettlement during the peace process. However, new legislation further challenges their rights, such as the recent revision to the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law, potentially criminalizing them as occupants of unregistered land. Hence, the state actors dominate the agenda of peace process and access to land, failing to bring human security to Karenni State.



Resettlement housing in Daw So Shay village

STEPHEN NYEIN HAN TUN

Stephen Nyein Han Tun is from the indigenous Ta'ang (Palaung) group, situated in the highlands of Northern Shan State. In 2011, he received a Master of Divinity in Biblical Studies in Yangon, with a specialisation in ancient languages (Hebrew and Greek). In 2015, he studied foundational linguistics at Payap University, Thailand. Working in the field of sociolinguistics for five years, he witnessed the insecurities and human rights abuses facing the Ta'ang indigenous/ethnic group, and how they have been excluded from Myanmar state development programs. Desiring to become a human rights defender, Stephen finally received the chance to study at the Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

Experiences of the program

The chance to study in the MA Social Science (Development Studies) program was a dream come true, offering a pathway to address my concerns in academic ways regarding the China BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), the land dispossession movement and armed conflicts impacting upon the Ta'ang people. I accessed many benefits from the Master's studies. The fundamental notions of social science have enlightened my life, especially in the way they help conceptualise and understand critical issues. Through classes, academic seminars and international conferences, I can better address environmental, social and political issues arising from the BRI and other infrastructure developments through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Through my studies, I received valuable opportunities to gain practical experiences in the field and within academia. Firstly, I could volunteer as the main advisor for the Ta'ang Land, Resource and Natural Environment policy project. Further, I assisted professors during the Capacity Building Workshop at Mandalay University, a project led by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University.

The future

I am interested in applying for a Ph.D. in a Social Science Program in order to deepen a focus on BRI's transnational and political ecology contexts involving China, Myanmar and Thailand. In the meantime, I am working as organisational lead at the Indigenous Tea Land Research Network and Centre, Northern Shan State. However, my main priority is to continue working with the Ta'ang Land and Natural Environmental Conservation Group, advising on land policy development and land/forest management methodology. My purpose is to make sure that land policy can be developed to protect both the human and land rights of the people and the natural environment. I aim to encourage and educate the young Ta'ang generation in the value of academic knowledge. As well as this volunteer position, I aim to gain further professional experience working either at academic, human/land rights, or land research institutions.



With members of the Ta'ang community



A day with the books!



University presentation

Stephen Nyein Han Tun - Master's thesis topic

Ta'ang Tea Farmers and Customary Land Dispossession in the Context of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

This research involves a case study of a gas and oil pipelines project in Northern Shan State. This project started in 2008 under the Thein Sein government, and now lies within the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which is part of China's One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI). The research looks at the impacts of the project on the customary land tenure and livelihoods of ethnic Ta'ang tea farmers. It used critical ethnographic research methods, employing the concepts of accumulation by dispossession, customary land tenure, and sustainable livelihoods. Sixty tea farmers, local authorities (both party and armed groups) and members of civic groups were interviewed.

CMEC projects focus on capital accumulation and resource exploitation, the Shwe Gas and Oil Pipeline producing energy for the global market. This has caused marginalisation and livelihood insecurity for local tea farmers through the dispossession of their lands, maintained under customary tenure, by Tatmadaw-assisted acquisition. In this process, the frameworks and policies of State land dispossession have effectively legalised land grabbing. The research found that CMEC project developers came to the affected areas accompanied by the local Tatmadaw officials. According to interviews for the study, land acquisition occurred without an adequate process to gain informed consent, or the equal inclusion of affected parties in discussions and negotiations. Even where compensation was given, was this deemed inadequate by those receiving it.

The affected Ta'ang tea farmers demanded that the CMEC project respect their traditional land tenure system. Nevertheless, their tea and paddy farming had become uncultivable through project waste (stones and sand), which

blocked the local stream, thus preventing access to water and fishing. Moreover, conflict emerging from the project reduced tea and rice production, with tea plantations and forestlands at risk from landmines and military attack. In particular, this places a threat of abuses upon local women, whether at work or travelling. The situation further exacerbates the traditional exclusion of Ta'ang women from accessing land rights. As a result, Ta'ang tea farmers and civic groups insist upon the enactment of legislation that honours customary land tenure and protects the tea farmers' rights, their land and the natural environment in the area.

The research testifies to the critical roles of powerful actors in land acquisition for CMEC projects. This includes the Myanmar military and its local alliances who reciprocate socio-economic and political benefits. The Tatmadaw officials claimed that they have the responsibility to provide security for the Chinese gas and oil pipelines project rather than to the local people because the Chinese projects had been negotiated with top Tatmadaw leaders. The local Ta'ang political party, meanwhile, insisted they had been given no role or authority to control and manage Chinese projects, having been excluded from negotiations. This became the root of clashes with Tatmadaw soldiers, as the Ta'ang ethnic armed group pledged they would protect the local people and their land, even though the group held no negative attitude towards Chinese investment in the Ta'ang region.

This research only targets CMEC projects and their impacts on the customary land tenure and livelihood security of local tea farmers. There is much potential for further research, looking into topics of environmental impacts, gender perspectives, and coping strategies for Ta'ang tea farmers. It would also be interesting to make comparative studies with other ethnic groups such as the Kachin, Shan, and Chinese to obtain diverse perspectives regarding CMEC gas and oil pipelines projects



Conducting an interview for thesis research



With members of the Ta'ang tea farming community