



Aspirations undone: hydropower and the (re) shaping of livelihood pathways in Northern Laos

Diana Suhardiman¹ · Jonathan Rigg²

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Abstract

This paper looks at how local livelihoods and to a certain extent their transitions are embedded in, and in thrall to, power relations at higher levels. Placing the (re)shaping of livelihood pathways within the context of top-down hydropower planning, it shows how the latter predetermines farm households' current farming strategies and future livelihood pathways. Taking two villages along the Mekong River, both of which are to be impacted by the planned Pak Beng hydropower dam in Pak Beng district, Oudomxay province, the paper illustrates how the pathways that rural livelihoods are taking in northern Laos are being shaped by decisions and processes embedded in national and regional exigencies. We argue that top-down approaches in hydropower planning, as manifested in the current institutional vacuum to formally deal with resettlement and compensation issues at the village level result in village authorities' and potentially affected villagers' inability to strategically convey and negotiate their views and concerns. Moreover, we reveal how it is the *specter of change* which drives livelihood adaptation, not change itself, thus illustrating how the defined compensation rules and procedures (re)shape farm households' farming strategies and future livelihood pathways even prior to the construction of the hydropower dam.

Keywords Hydropower planning · Compensation · Resettlement · Farming strategies · Livelihood pathways · Laos

Abbreviations

DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
DEMO	District Energy and Mines Office
DoNRE	District Natural Resources and Environment
EdL	Electricite du Laos
EGDP	Ethnic group development plan
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
EMMP	Environmental management and monitoring plan
GoL	Government of Laos
KHIDRI	Kunming Hydropower Investigation Design and Research Institute
MEM	Ministry of energy and mines
NTFP	Non-timber forest product
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office

PEMO	Provincial Energy and Mines Office
PoNRE	Provincial natural resources and environment
PRCC	Provincial Resettlement and Compensation Committee
RAP	Resettlement action plan
SIA	Social impact assessment
SMMP	Social management and monitoring plan

Introduction

Over recent decades, Laos has experienced rapid economic growth and will graduate—on current trajectories—from its status of a Least Developed country in 2024. This growth has been achieved through a combination of regional integration, foreign investment, and the sustained exploitation of the country's rich natural resource base. Hydropower development has played a key role in supporting this effort, and the National Socio-Economic Development Strategy (2016–2020) places hydropower development on a par with mining and agricultural plantations in meeting the country's modernization ambitions. Reflecting the top-down decision-making structures and approaches that inform Laos' national development project, decision-making in hydropower

✉ Diana Suhardiman
d.suhardiman@cgiar.org

Jonathan Rigg
jonathan.rigg@bristol.ac.uk

¹ International Water Management Institute, Southeast Asia Regional Office, P. O. Box 4199, Vientiane, Lao PDR

² School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1SS, UK

development is characteristically limited to relevant government agencies and private sector actors, with community and local (provincial, district and village) governments coming into the picture only during the project implementation stage (Baird et al. 2015; Manorum et al. 2017; Shoemaker and Robichaud 2019). It is widely acknowledged that communities and local government are indispensable to effective and sensitive hydropower planning and yet their roles and involvement are often limited to *ex post facto* discussions on such issues as resettlement and compensation (Katus et al. 2016).

This paper looks at top-down hydropower planning approaches and how they shape farm households' current farming strategies and transform future livelihood pathways. Taking two villages along the Mekong River, both of which will be impacted by the planned Pak Beng hydropower dam, in Pak Beng district, Oudomxay province, we illustrate how the company and Provincial Resettlement and Compensation Committee (PRCC) deal with resettlement and compensation issues. As we make clear, this process is taken forward with little or no involvement from village authorities and local communities, or individual villagers. We show how village authorities and villagers are often left without any guidance and information that might inform their views and support their negotiations. This arises due to an institutional vacuum at the village level, preventing resettlement and compensation issues from even being surfaced let alone meaningfully addressed. Moreover, the paper shows how compensation rules and procedures defined by the company and approved by the PRCC have become decisive factors in transforming but mostly sedimenting *future* livelihood pathways, which have come into play even prior to the completion of the dam.

Farming strategies and the livelihoods of which they are a part had, in the study sites, increasingly become outcomes of socio-political processes taking place within the context of hydropower development and influenced by top-down hydropower planning approaches. Hydropower planning was translated into the company's full authority not only to define compensation rules and procedures to fit its interests, but also to oblige farm households to follow these rules and procedures, regardless of how they affected farm households' livelihood options. For example, with formal and legal back up from the PRCC, the company was in a position to withhold information about the compensation valuation and rate, thus leaving no room for soon to be affected farm households to negotiate or start any discussion on the matter. Moreover, the company was empowered to instruct farm households to stop crop cultivation or postpone their cultivation plan (e.g. fruit trees planting) for an indefinite time, thus limiting the company's compensation obligations by preventing the accumulation of farm households' assets even when the dam's construction was some years off. In

effect, villagers' assets and futures were traded-off against the company's assets and future. Local livelihoods were in thrall to the dam; the dam to Laos' development strategy; and the development strategy to the country's ambition to transition from Least Developed Country status.

In addition to our interest in engaging with broader debates concerning livelihoods and livelihood transition, the paper also contributes to current debates over top-down hydropower development planning. First, it brings to light how such an approach to planning creates an institutional vacuum at the village level with respect to resettlement and compensation (Suhardiman et al. 2015; Manorum et al. 2017). While some have brought to light the politics underlying the lack of meaningful participation (Yong 2020) leading to structural injustice in Mekong hydropower development (Blake and Barney, 2018), others have highlighted the important role played by private sector actors as ad-hoc decision makers in hydropower project formulation and implementation (Middleton et al. 2009; Katus et al. 2016). Building on these studies, the paper argues that resettlement and compensation at the village level is a key institutional gap in hydropower decision making. While earlier studies have brought to light the issues of top-down hydropower planning and the limited role that local communities play in resettlement and compensation, our paper extends the line of analysis by unpacking the institutional set up, processes, and dynamics that create, sustain and reproduce existing power relations between the company and local communities. We illustrate how village heads were unable to convey affected farm households' views and concerns because they lacked any formal roles and responsibilities in issues pertaining to resettlement and compensation. Institutionally, they were not even formally incorporated as part of the PRCC. That villagers and lower levels of government were omitted from such decision making is not altogether surprising when it comes to strategic, national projects such as hydropower dams. Moreover, the fact that the company could direct households' farming strategies in line with the defined compensation rules and procedures, even prior to the signing of the power purchase agreement, signifies not only their central position as ad-hoc decision makers in hydropower decision making, it also shows the company's ability to impose and enforce, without accountability, the defined compensation rules with local communities.

But, and second—and this connects our case study with broader livelihoods debates—we identify in this a more insidious process of 'future-shaping'. The compensation rules and procedures have become central in the transformation of farm households' farming strategies and their envisioned livelihood pathways. Certain farming activities were rendered more or less reliable, risky, or profitable. For example, following the company's assessment of farm households' assets from housing stock to farmlands,

the company instructed individual farm households to halt planting new fruit or teak trees, because the company would not compensate for such newly planted trees. In this context, farm households focused more on livestock raising to generate additional income. Some households also transitioned from farming activities altogether, to become—for instance—local traders, as such livelihood activities were less dependent on farmland. While this brings to light farm households' diverse farming strategies to cope with the planned hydropower dam project, it also illustrates how their livelihood decisions and therefore envisioned livelihood pathways are informed and transformed by non-local actors (De Haan and Zoomers 2005).

In the following sections we discuss earlier studies on livelihood pathways, the dynamics and temporal dimensions of livelihood making, before moving to our research methodology. After that, we provide background information on the Pak Beng hydropower project, before unpacking the compensation rules and procedures (re)shaping farm households' farming strategies and livelihood pathways. We conclude that farm households' livelihoods were linked with their (in)ability to convey, discuss and negotiate their development needs and aspirations throughout the overall process of hydropower decision making, and more particularly with regard to consultations on resettlement and compensation.

Livelihood making, making livelihoods

Livelihoods adapt as populations seek to get by under conditions of transformation. While traditional livelihoods may have evolved into a state with some degree of stasis, increasingly it is recognized that they are not sustainable in the context of contemporary threats, pressures and opportunities: livelihoods must change, with past livelihoods failing to provide an adequate analogue for the future. Wishing to ascribe agency to ordinary people, it often assumed that this process of accelerating adaptation lies within the grasp of households and individuals: that they have the power to shape livelihoods to ends that suit their needs. Robert Chambers, who has been at the forefront of this effort, terms this 'the paradigm of people' (Chambers 2010, p. 43),¹ placing people front-and-center not only in terms of where our scholarly attention should be focused but also where change is situated. This desire to place the focus for (and of) change on ordinary people is infused with a degree of wish fulfillment—a desire to avoid victim-making. Some scholars (e.g. De Haan 2012) have seen this, however, as a key shortcoming of the livelihoods approach more broadly: a tendency to overlook and underplay the degree to which local livelihoods

are embedded in, and in thrall to, power relations at higher levels. As De Haan and Zoomers write, while "*people do make their own livelihoods*" this is "*not necessarily under conditions of their own choosing*" (De Haan and Zoomers 2005, p. 43). Work on livelihood pathways or trajectories (Sakdapolrak 2014; Vicol et al. 2019) has highlighted the importance of exposing the dynamics and temporal dimensions in livelihood making, as distinct from making a livelihood (Scoones 1999, 2009).

It is these issues that we seek to illuminate in 'Aspirations undone', and we do so in two principal ways. First, we seek to show how the pathways that rural livelihoods are taking in northern Laos are being shaped by decisions and processes embedded in national and regional exigencies. Local people are, if anything, impediments to these efforts and local livelihood change is deeply implicated in—and tied to—these higher-level matters. Second, we take this one step further to reveal how it is the *specter of change* which drives livelihood adaptation, not change itself. Before we turn to show how these matters are sedimented in the villages and fields of northern Laos, it is necessary to link this with discussions on the social and environmental impacts of hydropower development in the country.

Scholars have discussed and extensively analyzed the social and environmental impacts of hydropower development in Laos, ranging from loss of fisheries, agricultural land and communal land for livestock grazing (Baran et al. 2006; Baird 2009; Molle et al. 2009; Sivongxay et al. 2017), loss of other livelihood assets in relation to resettlement (Baird et al. 2015), to the disruption of natural flow regimes and environmental degradation including significant biodiversity loss (Kummu and Sarkkula 2008). Studies have also highlighted the tendency towards top-down hydropower planning and implementation in the Mekong region in general and in Laos in particular (Molle et al. 2009; Grumbine and Xu 2011; Shoemaker and Robichaud 2019).

In this paper we argue that farming systems analysis is key to designing compensation rules and procedures that enable affected farm households to adapt and transition their livelihoods (Flora 1998; Bounthong et al. 2004; Dovie et al. 2005; Suhardiman et al. 2016). To understand how farm households can, and do, (re)shape their farming strategies and livelihood options in the context of hydropower development it is necessary to focus on adaptive capacities and incapacities. This goes beyond widely employed sustainable livelihood approaches (Chambers 1997; Small 2007). Some scholars (Ellis 2000; Krantz 2001; Hussein 2002) have shown how existing livelihood assets can be substituted with other types of assets, thus partially supporting the current thinking that changes in livelihood assets do not necessarily undermine livelihood outcomes, if rural households can rely on other types of assets to support creative adaptation strategies. Nevertheless, central in the analysis of

¹ See also Chambers (1983, 1997).

livelihood asset substitution is the question of whether or not rural households have access to a sufficiently wide range of livelihood options. This acknowledges that some individuals and households either lack the expertise and technical skills to take forward alternate livelihood strategies, or face quite considerable social and political barriers that are not easily or quickly circumvented.

We suggest that farm households' ability to successfully adapt and transition their livelihoods depends on the composition of their livelihood assets before and after resettlement and compensation, how they (re)shape their (new) farming strategies based on these assets, and the challenges and opportunities they foresee (Bui and Schreinemachers 2011; Bui et al. 2013). What we particularly focus on in this paper, drawing on discussions with villagers in the two affected settlements, is how compensation rules and procedures have the effect of driving livelihood transition prospectively, ahead of any on-the-ground changes. Companies used the latitude they were afforded by the central authorities to, in effect, gain control not only of the dam-as-infrastructure but also of current and future livelihoods of villagers in the dam site.

Research Methodology

We conducted an in-depth case study research (Burawoy 1991; Yin 1994) from February to November 2020, looking at hydropower decision making processes surrounding the Pak Beng hydropower dam project. We focused on three elements: (1) how local communities and farm households viewed the planned hydropower project and how these views (re)shaped their farming strategies; (2) how these strategies are closely interlinked with the defined compensation rules and procedures as well as the bargaining power (or the lack thereof) of villagers; and (3) what this reveals about the current institutional gaps in hydropower decision making in general and at the village level in particular.

We selected two villages, Khamkong village and Thongngam village,² located respectively downstream and upstream of the planned dam site. While Khamkong village will be impacted by the dam project in terms of reduced land access due to floods and droughts following extreme flow regime change caused by the dam operation, Thongngam village will be resettled entirely following the dam construction. Figure 1 gives an overview of the Pak Beng dam site and the location of our two case study villages.

To understand how local community and farm households viewed the planned hydropower project, and how the latter might change livelihood options and farming strategies, the first author conducted a series of focus group discussions,

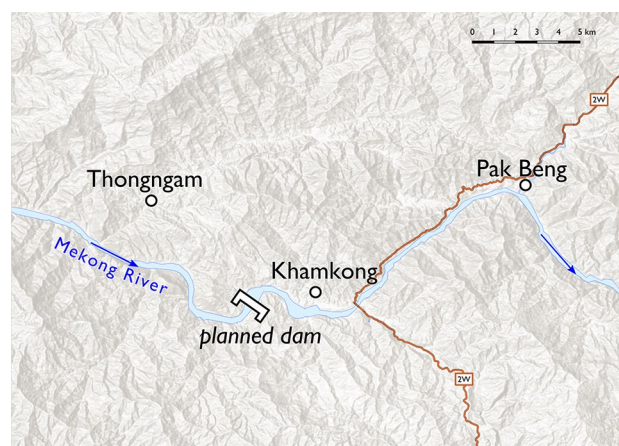


Fig. 1 Thongngam and Khamkong villages location in the vicinity of Pak Beng town and the planned dam site. Source: Author's compilation

followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected farm households in each of the two selected villages. The first round of focus group discussions was carried out in February 2020. This included focus group discussions with village elders, members of the village committee, women's union, men's and women's groups, and the youth group from both villages. These focus group discussions were later complemented with in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals belonging to these committees and groups all with a view to better understand the history of the village, main sources of livelihood, and farm households' various livelihood supporting activities. In November 2020, a second round of focus group discussions were conducted. This included a series of discussions with farm households who rely on upland cultivation, lowland paddy field farming, fishing, livestock raising, artisanal mining, and local trading, or some combination of these activities. Finally, we undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected farm households in Khamkong ($n=24$) and Thongngam ($n=19$).

Placing this primary data in the wider context of water governance and hydropower decision making in Laos, we link our field data with policy and institutional analysis of hydropower decision making at the national level, while focusing on policies and legal frameworks in relation to hydropower development and those pertaining to compensation and grievance mechanisms in particular. The first author also conducted a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with officials from the District and Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO and PAFO), as well as officials from the Provincial Energy and Mines Office (PEMO), as the lead agency of the PRCC. These interviews were focused on how the PRCC functions, and how it works together with the company in ensuring technical support for asset measurement and compensation payment calculation.

² Both village names are pseudonyms.

The Pak Beng hydropower project

Mekong hydropower is developing rapidly while relying on private sector financing (Middleton et al. 2009). Presented as a key means to promote economic growth, reduce poverty, while also supporting regional economic integration through power export for industrialization (ADB 2009; Molle et al. 2009), hydropower development is occurring at a rapid pace throughout the different countries of mainland South-east Asia (Geheb and Suhardiman 2019). More specifically, the ADB's regional power plan estimates that hydropower development will increase Laos' export revenue, enable Cambodia to develop its power sector and support Thailand and Vietnam to diversify their energy sources and meet their energy demands up to 2025 (ADB 2009). At present, there are 78 dams already commissioned in the Mekong River Basin, with 33 dams under construction, 89 proposed or planned dams, in addition to those that are already under operation (WLE 2018). Most of these dams are in Laos, with twelve planned to be built on the Mekong mainstream.³

Laos embarked on its first hydropower dam project on the mainstem of the Mekong river with the commissioning of the Xayabury dam in April 2011. The Xayabury dam entered its first year of operation in early 2020. Next to the Xayabury dam, Laos has proposed a series of five hydropower dam projects to be built on the Mekong's mainstream: Pak Beng, Pak Lay, Luang Prabang, Sanakham, and Don Sahong. The construction of these mainstream dams will significantly impact national and regional fish migration, change the river's flow regime entirely, affect the river's biodiversity, and force local communities living along the river to transition and adapt their livelihoods (Baran et al. 2006; Kummur and Sarkkula 2008; Baird 2009; Baird et al. 2015).

Planned as one of these mainstream Mekong projects, the Pak Beng hydropower dam will have power generation capacity of 912 MW, with most electricity (90%) being exported to Thailand and the remaining 10% designated to Electricite du Laos (EdL). The dam construction will affect 26 villages across the three provinces of Oudomxay, Bokeo, and Xayabury, incorporating 923 households and 4,726 people (Power China 2015). The Government of Laos (GoL) and China Datang International Power Generation Company (hereafter the company) signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the Pak Beng hydropower dam project in August 2007, though construction has been significantly delayed due to a lack of clarity regarding the power purchase agreement. Nonetheless, Datang has signed a project

development agreement with the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) and prepared various studies and reports: a Social Impact Assessment (SIA), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Environmental Management and Monitoring Plan (EMMP), Social Management and Monitoring Plan (SMMP), Resettlement Action Plan (RAP), and Ethnic Group Development Plan (EGDP) (Power China 2015). Kunming Hydropower Investigation Design and Research Institute (KHIDRI) was assigned by Datang to prepare and conduct all these necessary studies.

Compensation rules and procedures (re) shaping farm households' farming strategies and envisioned livelihood pathways

To understand how and in what ways compensation rules and procedures were altering and transforming livelihoods now and in the future it is necessary to provide some background information of the two villages, and a description and discussion of the procedures as defined by the company and approved by the PRCC. This reveals the institutional vacuum that lay at the core of issue we explore and makes understandable the emerging livelihood pathways in Khamkong and Thongngam villages.

Khamkong and Thongngam villages

Khamkong village is located 11 km from Pak Beng town, bordering Xayabury and Bokeo provinces. There are 132 households in the village, with a total population of 687 people, comprising a mixed of Lao-Tai (113 households) and Khmu (19 households) ethnic groups. The latter resettled voluntarily in the village because, coming from neighboring but comparatively isolated Khmu villages in the area, they wanted to have better access to schools, roads and markets. Unlike the original Lao-Tai farm households in the village, Khmu farm households came to the village only in early 1990s. Consequently, as most agricultural land had already been taken and used by the original Lao-Tai settlers, the Khmu could only gain access to agricultural land by purchasing it from Lao-Tai farm households. In practice, however, the Khmu lacked the financial means to do this, and continued working as farm and non-farm laborers, renting land from other Lao-Tai villagers, and continuing to work the upland rice fields of their old village.⁴

³ These dams are Pak Beng, Luang Prabang, Xayabury, Pak Lay, Sanakham, Pak Chom, Ban Koum, Lat Sua, Don Sahong, Thakho (both located at Lao territory above Khone falls), Stung Treng and Sambor (both located at Cambodia territory below Khone falls).

⁴ For discussions on upland cultivation in Laos and how it is often entangled with internal resettlement see Cole and Rigg (2019), Baird and Shoemaker (2007), Lestrelin and Giordano (2007), Evrard and Goudineau (2004).

Villagers' livelihood options ranged from upland rice, lowland paddy, vegetable gardens (on the riverbanks), cash crop cultivation (e.g. job's tears, maize), livestock (e.g. pigs, goats, buffaloes, poultry), fishing, and non-farming activities (e.g. local trading). Next to farming activities, most farm households also engaged in artisanal gold mining. Villagers had access to communal forest to collect Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) (e.g. bamboos, broom grass). Following the plan to construct the Pak Beng hydropower dam, one residential plot (0.045 hectare), one lowland paddy field (0.6 hectare), 173 vegetable garden plots (total of 15.2 hectares), 3 fishponds (total of 0.01 hectare) were identified as likely to be impacted. Most Khmu households were not identified as likely to be affected by the dam project in terms of actual land loss, because their upland paddy fields were located quite far away from the village.

Thongngam village was established in 1764, though formally the village was only incorporated into the country's administrative system in 1978, following independence in 1975. The village is 40 km upstream from Pak Beng town and classified as a 'poor' village, without access to road and electricity. It comprises 80 farm households, with 60 Lao-Tai households and 20 Khmu households. Khmu farm households started to join the village in 2010, as growing numbers were voluntarily resettled from nearby Khmu villages, thus affording better access to schools and boat transportation. As in Khamkong village, farm households' livelihood options ranged from upland cultivation (rice, maize, job's tears), lowland paddy cultivation, livestock raising, fishing, and artisanal mining, with a small number of households ($n = 9$) also working as local traders. Next to their agricultural land, villagers had access to 46.5 ha of communal forest for the collection of NTFPs including local food ingredients (e.g. mushrooms, vegetables, herbs). Following the plan to construct the Pak Beng hydropower dam, 79 residential plots (total of 1.7 hectares), 171 agricultural plots (mainly lowland paddy, total of 40.7 hectares), and 3 fishponds (total of 0.03 hectares) were identified as at risk of inundation. Villagers' upland fields were not expected to be directly impacted by the planned hydropower project. However, when resettled to a new location approximately 5 km up the mountain slope from the current village location, they might lose these fields. To address this loss, asset registration and assessment were conducted by the company based on the number of industrial and cash-crop trees present in the upland fields (namely, 9318 industrial trees and 5201 cash crop trees).

Compensation rules and procedures

Following the signing of the MoU between the GoL and Datang, the signing of the project development agreement between Datang and the MEM, and the completion of technical, socio-environmental assessment studies by KHIDRI,

the Provincial Resettlement and Compensation Committee (PRCC) was set up in November 2016. The committee is responsible to lead the overall process of resettlement and compensation, including reviewing the compensation rates, rules and procedures proposed by the company, conducting asset registration and measurement, and carrying out actual resettlement and compensation payment. In Oudomxay province, the committee was led by the Provincial Governor and coordinated by the Provincial Energy and Mines Office (PEMO) as the lead implementing agency and supported by Provincial Home Affairs (PMA), Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), and Provincial Natural Resources and Environment (PoNRE). At the district level, the PRCC is equipped with a Secretariat led by the Head of the District, coordinated by District Energy and Mines Office (DEMO) and supported by District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and District Natural Resources and Environment (DoNRE). Working together with the company, DoNRE assessed and measured the extent of the farmland (upland fields, lowland paddy fields, home gardens) and residential land impacted by the dam project. In a similar manner, DAFO assessed the estimated impacts in terms of agricultural production (crop production and livestock).

Initial data collection of how the planned hydropower dam project would impact farm households and local communities living in the 26 villages along the Mekong River started in 2013 and was later followed up with road construction to the planned dam site in 2015 and actual measurement of the impacted farmland and other assets in August 2019. During that time, the company, PRCC together with district authority working for the PRCC Secretariat visited Khamkong and Thongngam villages to explain the hydropower project and how the dam's construction would lead to the inundation of the farmers' lands. At the village meeting, the PRCC asked the village head to contact each farm household who would suffer land loss, both farmland and residential land (the latter in Thongngam). These households were then requested to accompany the company and district authority to conduct measurement of the land and ensure that it did not overlap with the land of neighboring farmers.

While some farm households knew they would lose their farmland, many were unaware until they were informed directly by the district authority and received a handwritten note, stating their names, the land size, number of trees on that land (if relevant), and other assets (if any), and their coded village name. The company handed out these notes to each affected farm household and asked them to add their fingerprints to indicate that they have agreed on the assessed assets to be compensated, despite the fact that none of these affected farm households had seen the company's assessment note. As a householder in Thongngam village put it: *The company and district authority measures everything and takes a lot of pictures of our house and other assets*

(e.g. chicken house, vegetable home garden), but they never informed us about how they will put it in the assessment report, how they will calculate the compensation value, and when they will inform us about the compensation rate (interview with a farm households in Thongngam village, November 2020).

The company also informed the (to be) affected farm households to keep the note in a safe place until the company returned to the village to pay the compensation. In Khamkong, villagers had experienced the way the company dealt with the compensation payments for the road construction to the planned dam site, which was started and completed in 2015. One villager, whose upland field was affected by the new road: *The company and district authority never informed villagers about the compensation rate until the day of the road construction activities. This way, [meant that] we have no other choice than to agree despite the fact that we think that the compensation rate paid by the company is too low* (interview with farm household in Khamkong village, November 2020). Fearing that they would face the same situation with regard to the loss of their farmlands, many farm households in Khamkong asked both the company and district authority about the compensation rate they would receive this time. The response they received was that no decision has been made and the final compensation rate would need to be decided at inter-provincial level, to ensure the same standard compensation rate was applied across affected villages in different districts and provinces. In Thongngam village, some farm households asked the company and district authority to account for how they planned to value farm households' assets during the village meeting, but they received no explanation.

The company instructed the affected farm households that they were not supposed to make any changes or adjustments to the assessed assets. For houses, this meant not investing in upgrading and repairing anything and for farmland, not planting any new trees. For upland cultivation, households were instructed to stop cultivation because the company was not willing to compensate farmers for their lost harvest, in case dam construction started before farmers could harvest their crops. In November 2020, most farm households were uncertain whether and when—the company might return. Some wished to plant new trees but felt unable to do so because the company might return before they could be harvested, losing all their investment. Some did not even dare take the risk to cultivate their upland fields for the same reason.

These actions—or inactions—on the part of farm households illustrate how the company's compensation rules and procedures have affected decision-making even prior to the dam construction. The company defined the compensation rule and procedures to fit their interests and preferences, without any regard to how they impact farm households'

livelihoods. At one level we should not be surprised: it reflects the power asymmetries between the company and villagers. But it is in the ways that these power asymmetries are manifested on the ground that we begin to see their effects. The way, for example, that information regarding compensation valuation and assessment processes is shielded from view and only made visible when it is too late for villagers to respond and negotiate. As one respondent in Khamkong village put it: *Affected farm households do not have any starting point to agree or disagree and voice their opinions and thoughts on the compensation rate and valuation system because the company and provincial resettlement and compensation committee hold this most important information for themselves* (interview with farm household in Khamkong village, November 2020). Consultation is cursory and one-way. Further, compensation rules and procedures shape the future in the company's interests. By leaving the question of timing opaque, and paradoxically, the future becomes clear. The risk of loss makes investment—of time and money—unattractive, and the future of these lands and the livelihoods they underpin are thus rendered concrete.

Village level institutional vacuum in hydropower decision making

While the PRCC and its Secretariat at district level have been set up to review, support and facilitate the company in implementing the project in general and in relation to resettlement and compensation in particular, at village level, village heads and other village leaders and elders lack any formal roles and responsibilities to guide and support farm households on matters pertaining to resettlement and compensation. For example, in Thongngam and Khamkong villages the company and district authority visited the settlements, instructing the village head to inform the affected households to go to their farmlands and await the company so that measurements could be conducted. Once completed, these data (both the total estimated land loss and its distribution among households) were not shared with the village head, nor with impacted households. Indeed, this secrecy extended to all information about compensation rates.

In response, village heads sought to gather information about the compensation package from personal discussions with the district authority. In Thongngam village, the village head managed to ascertain that the company first assessed the value of the existing house, subtracting this from the amount of money the company intended to spend building a new house in the resettlement village, adding the remainder as part of the compensation package. In Khamkong village, the village head managed to discover that the company initially intended to apply a compensation rate of LAK2500/m² compensation rate for villagers' upland fields, but then later more than halved this figure to LAK1000/m². In practice,

however, very few farm households even had access to this level of information because both village heads never publicly shared it during village meetings or other gatherings. The head of Khamkong village explained: *When I receive any information from district authority on compensation rate and package, it is not clear as to whether I can share this information with others or keep it for myself* (interview with village head in Khamkong village, November 2020).

By retaining control over information in this way, the company and PRCC have, in effect, created a wider veil of secrecy driven by a fear of what revealing such data might lead to. Just as the village heads felt unable to share information with villagers, so villagers were inhibited in conveying their concerns to their village head. Most issues pertaining to village matters, from access to upland rice fields to inter-household conflicts, did come under the purview of the village head and were regular topics of discussion, with the village head playing the role of the intermediary, settling disputes and easing tensions. But because the village head had no formal role in resettlement and compensation this meant they were regarded as not having the authority to represent the village to the company and the PRCC, or the company and the PRCC to the village. This enabled negotiations to be undertaken with individual households, rather than with the community, watering down households' ability to share their views and concerns formally and collectively. In both villages, the majority of farm households we interviewed were in agreement that the village head had been squeezed out, adopting a rather passive role in discussions: *While I am sure that the village head is also aware about our concerns with regard to the compensation rate that the company will apply, most probably he will not convey these concerns to district and provincial resettlement and compensation committee, as he hardly ever spoke out in any of the formal meetings at the village level either* (interview with farm household in Khamkong village, November 2020).

This institutional gap resulted in village heads' and villagers' inability to strategically convey and negotiate their views and concerns. It also scattered and weakened villagers' collective ability to represent and defend their rights to proper compensation. Lacking any institutional structure to address resettlement and compensation at the village level, households were left to negotiate these matters alone. One of the deputy village heads in Thongngam explained: *While the village head is assigned the task of informing villagers and mobilizing resettlement later, he is neither part of the PRCC or its Secretariat at district level* (interview with deputy village head in Thongngam village, November 2020). The head becomes the unwitting and then the unwilling agent of the state and the company, carrying out their instructions and orders, rather than conveying and representing affected farm households' views and concerns. A respondent from Thongngam said: *From observing during the formal village*

meeting, the village head's role is limited to carrying out specific tasks assigned by the district data management team and the company, such as calling affected farm households to a village meeting and scheduling their individual visit with the company to conduct the actual field measurement. The village head is not supposed to ask question on what will happen next or consult with the affected households about anything (interview with farm household in Thongngam, November 2020).

Farm households' views, strategies and envisioned livelihood pathways

In this final section we are interested in exploring how what villagers know and do not know influence their livelihood decisions and therefore shape livelihood pathways into the future.

As noted, many farm households in Khamkong stood to lose their upland fields following the construction of the hydropower dam. In response to this future threat, some had already begun to transition to livestock raising, reducing their dependency on cropping. An interviewee in Khamkong village told us: *After I lose most of my upland fields to the hydropower dam construction, I will focus on livestock raising as my main livelihood activity and source of income. Unlike rice and cash crop cultivation, I can let my cattle and buffaloes graze in the communal forest land, while keeping my pigs in my home garden* (interview with farm household in Khamkong village, November 2020). This shift towards livestock raising is shaped by compensation rules: investment in land is wasted investment because it is a spatially fixed asset; livestock, however, are a moveable asset. A farmer from the same village said: *I was really looking forward to getting started with pineapple and mango trees cultivation, but the district authority advised me to not do this, following the company's assessment of my soon to be inundated farmland. Hence, I decided to focus on livestock raising instead* (interview with farm household in Khamkong village, November 2020).

Some farm households even went so far as to stop cultivating rice and cash crops in their uplands because they did not want to take the risk of losing their harvest when the company returned to take the land. A Thongngam villager said: *In the past, I used to grow maize for sale and also to feed it to my livestock. Since August 2019, however, I have stopped cultivating maize or rice in my upland fields because the company has already assessed and instructed me to not cultivate anything. In case my crop is not ready for harvest, the company would still take the land and not compensate me for my lost harvest. Hence, at the moment, I cannot rely on my maize production to feed my livestock* (interview with farm household in Thongngam village, November 2020).

These individual, micro-level decisions are reworking livelihoods in three important ways. First, they are shifting efforts into moveable assets given the uncertainties that exist in villagers' minds. This uncertainty, of course, links back to the last section: the unknowns that arise from the 'consultative' approach taken by the government and authorities. Spatially fixed assets are at risk of being doubly under-compensated. Undercompensated in terms of the value of what was there at the point of assessment; and undercompensated a second time for any investment made since the original assessment. Livestock, however, can be flexibly deployed in light of both the timing and extent of dispossession. The second change is, in effect, a forced moved out of subsistence production. Fields previously cultivated to food crops were being taken out of cultivation, forcing farmers to look for ways of generating income to make up for the widening subsistence shortfall. And third, and this is a point we return to in the conclusion, future livelihood pathways were being anticipated by effects that were not yet visible.

While some farm households were thinking of purchasing new farmland elsewhere, many were pessimistic that they would be able to find good, suitable farmland nearby. A Khamkong farmer explained: *Ideally, purchasing a new upland/lowland paddy field elsewhere will be the best option. In practice, however, I do not know as to whether the compensation payment will be sufficient to purchase new farmland elsewhere. Also, even when I have sufficient money to do so, the nearby fields will probably be already occupied* (interview with a farmer in Thongngam, November 2020). With a farming future curtailed, households who were already working as local traders or artisanal miners or ran grocery stores, saw building up these activities as the most logical way to adjust their livelihoods in the face of the current and future change.

Thongngam villagers in particular were reluctant to continue cultivating their upland rice and cash crop fields following resettlement: they would be just too distant from the new village. The problem, however, was they do not know anything about the compensation package. They therefore adopted a safety-first strategy of continuing to cultivate their upland fields, though not fully, just to make sure that they could always reclaim their fields back if necessary: *After we move to the new resettled village, I will still come back to my upland fields in the old village. This way, I will make sure I continue my claims on the land and that farmers from neighboring villages will not claim it instead* (interview with farm household in Thongngam, November 2020). While villagers' upland fields will not be flooded, the assumption that they will always be able to return to 'their' upland fields cannot be taken for granted. This is because the existing land use rights system does not allow them to do so if there are other wishing to cultivate the land. Farmers are, in effect, procedurally caught out in both places. In the new village

because compensation procedures have left them in the dark over whether they can continue to farm; and on their old lands by land tenure procedures that make long established use claims hard to maintain. In view of these uncertainties, farm households' ability to diversify, while also balancing farm and non-farm activities, is key for a successful livelihood transition (Suhardiman et al. 2016).

Farm households' capacity to diversify depends on their skills as well as access to resources (e.g. land, labor, capital). Khmu farm households in Khamkong will not be directly affected by the hydropower dam construction as their land is not slated to be lost. Khmu farm households in Thongngam, on the other hand, will face far more challenges if they are to adapt and transition their livelihoods following resettlement. To begin with, as recent settlers they have fewer assets.⁵ Second, they tend to be more dependent on upland cultivation for their livelihoods as compare to the Lao-Tai farm households; the non-farming element in Khmu livelihood portfolios is much less than among the Lao-Tai. Apart from some artisanal mining, Khmu farm households in Thongngam do not own grocery stores, hardly undertake any local trading activities, and do not own or run boating services like their Lao-Tai neighbors. Combining these two things, Khmu farm households will find it harder to transition towards livelihood pathways that can absorb the effects of a diminished farming base and where non-farming activities will take on greater significance in the mix. Unlike their Lao-Tai neighbors, the Khmu will have to adjust their livelihoods with less monetary compensation and little experience.

Aspirations undone: contingent livelihood making in the uplands of Laos

We opened this paper reflecting on some broader debates in the study of livelihoods, notably the need to balance the desire to give local people a voice and an agency which is often lacking in structural analyses of agrarian change with due attention to the realities of—and the limitations arising from—their place in the world.

The paper shows how emerging farm households' livelihoods were linked with their (in)ability to convey, discuss and negotiate their development needs and aspirations in relation to resettlement and compensation rules and procedures as defined and demarcated by the company and approved by the provincial resettlement and compensation committee. Households' farming strategies were thus entangled with national hydropower decision making, bringing the national into the sphere of the local and, in the process,

⁵ See also Kuire et al (2016) on migrant farmers' disadvantaged position in relation to original inhabitants in Ghana.

collapsing scales. Power asymmetries in hydropower decision making were materialized in highly localized village-level settings where discussion on compensation valuation, rules and procedures, in effect, never took place. Consequently, the livelihood pathways emerging in the field sites became the sheer political embodiment of households' limitations. The fact that poor, rural households lack power, such as these in Khamkong and Thongngam villages, is commonplace; what we find, however, is that putative avenues to communicate their needs and aspirations are curtailed. When farm households took the decision to keep cultivating their upland fields in their original sites this was an example of impelled, rather than creative adaptation. It reflected less farm households' ability to prosper in the face of change, grasping opportunities as and when they appeared, than a narrowing of options amidst emerging livelihood distress.

The company is accountable to the state, not to the affected households. There is little incentive to ask questions that prioritize the interests of villagers: 'How can resettlement policies ensure a just outcome that sustains livelihoods and improves development prospects for affected villagers?'. Approaches to resettlement and compensation largely overlooked issues of justice and sustainable rural futures. Rhetorically, how can it be otherwise if villagers, even village leaders, were left out of the loop, and in the dark? Instead, echoing the experience in other contexts, the process was 'rendered technical' (Li 2007; High 2009), with resettlement and compensation tied to dam development, power generation and national economic growth, not to local livelihoods either now or in the future.

This sets the context for the livelihood pathways that were (or appeared to be) emerging in the field sites. These combined continuing to farm old fields in what will become distant sites; agitating to maintain access to those fields; emphasizing livestock over cropping as farmers moved their 'assets' (and deployed their labor) into forms that were less at risk given expected developments; and privileging, when possible, non-farm activities over farm-based activities. To be sure, these can be painted as creative livelihood responses to emerging conditions in Pak Beng. But it is important to recognize how it came to this, through what processes. As we outline, the futures—and the aspirations—of our respondents have been undone by the mechanisms put in place ostensibly to secure their futures.

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Diana Suhardiman has over 15 years experiences in natural resources governance with particular focus on water governance in Southeast and South Asia. She is currently a Senior Researcher at the International Water Management Institute, Southeast Asia Regional Office, based in Vientiane, Lao PDR. Her research focuses on the political economy and political ecology of natural resource governance, in particular at the intersection of land, water, food and energy. Her research contests the predominantly a-political approach to economic development as means to benefit the greater common goods, and the way transfer of knowledge and technology is framed merely as technical, managerial issues.

Jonathan Rigg is a professor of human geography in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol. He has been working on agrarian change in Asia for almost 40 years and on questions of transition in the Lao PDR since 1990. His research interests include livelihood transformations, migration and mobility, and local impacts and manifestations of environmental change. Jonathan is the author of *Rural development in Southeast Asia: dispossession, accumulation and persistence* (Cambridge University Press) and *More than rural: textures of Thailand's agrarian transformation* (Hawaii University Press).

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