



Deliverable 5.3:

# **Macro-Micro Dialogue Studies (WP5 Identity)**

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# **Assessing the Micro-Macro Dimension of Integration/Disintegration Processes:**

## **The Case of Tin Mining in Laos**

By Oliver Tappe

### Introduction

A skinny miner emerges from a narrow hole dug in the ground in a remote valley in Laos, climbing a rickety bamboo ladder with buckets filled with rocks including tin ore. His wife and daughter take the buckets and clean the ore from dirt to reduce the overall weight – crucial for receiving a good price for the ore. This genuine family business of Lao artisanal and small-scale miners (ASM) takes place in direct vicinity of the roaring excavators belonging to a Chinese-run mining concession. The large-scale mining (LSM) enterprise tolerates local ASM activities under the condition that miners sell their product to the company, thus taking advantage of an informal workforce.

Tin mining in the Nam Phathaen valley of Khammouane province (central Laos) is characterized by a precarious co-existence of ASM and LSM. It is the product of a long history of local peasant-miner livelihoods, the emergence of industrial mining under French colonial rule, and the more recent foreign investments in resource rich Lao PDR by countries like China, Vietnam and Thailand. Investigating local labour relations and livelihoods in this specific context of tin mining requires the combination of local perspectives with perspectives at the macro level such as the nation-state, regional and global economic dynamics, as well as historical depth.

This working paper which responds to the CRISEA project's challenge of combining macro and micro perspectives in doing research on the competing integration and disintegration processes in Southeast Asia, wants to shed light on how macro perspectives contribute to the understanding of micro contexts as much as regional macro studies benefit from dedicated inquiries at a micro level. After assessing this challenge in the framework of WP4 projects on questions of local and regional identification processes, the sections below will focus on the case study of the tin mines of the Nam Phathaen valley shifting perspectives and scales.

### Exploring the micro-macro dimension

A macro viewpoint usually privileges the study of larger political and social processes (stability and change), or a historical *longue durée* perspective. When we shift scale towards

the micro level, we focus on individual subjectivities and interactions, contesting (local) political actors, local sociocultural assemblages and microhistories. Zooming in and out between these two poles of scientific inquiry enables our transdisciplinary research cluster to understand large-scale patterns and trends as well as local sociocultural dynamics and individual agency.

The micro-macro problem dates back to the early days of social analysis at the beginning of the 20th century. Sociology has never ceased to negotiate different micro and macro approaches (Layder 2006; Turner 2016). While social anthropology used to be naturally linked to local micro contexts – often pitted against the macro perspective of the political sciences – more recent trends of multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and multi-scalar ethnography (Xiang 2013) take a wider range of scales into analytical account. In a similar way, new approaches in the historical sciences discuss global questions from micro-historical case studies (De Vito and Gerritsen 2018).

The micro-macro dichotomy is often linked to analytical pairings such as individual versus society or agency versus structure (Alexander et al. 1987). Even if these categories are certainly relevant for some WP4 projects, our general concern with the micro-macro dimension mainly stems from questions of scale – from the local to the national and the transregional (e.g. ASEAN) perspective, and eventually to a global one. The projects are united by a common interest in how identification processes are mutually shaped by individual aspirations, local social dynamics, larger (trans-)national political configurations as well as economic and religious entanglements, and finally the forces of globalization.

Therefore, most WP4 Identity projects align different angles and perspectives in new innovative ways. A constant dialogue with the political and economic macro studies of other WP continues to inform the larger epistemological goals of WP4. For example, an anthropological analysis of socioeconomic change in a remote mining community in upland Laos (as discussed in the Lao case study) gains from a macro-oriented political economy approach towards Chinese investment politics (as studied by Dominik Mierzejewski 2018; cf. Hofman and Ho 2012) or studies on ASEAN trade linkages. Cross-disciplinary exchange is certainly key to the success of WP4 projects within the CRISEA framework.

The projects in WP4 demonstrate intellectual openness and creativity and explore new perspectives on relevant issues in SEA through zooming in and out between specific localized phenomena and transregional and even global dynamics. This ambitious approach requires combining empirical rigour with epistemological flexibility – thinking beyond disciplinary and epistemological boundaries.

There are three ways in which the macro-micro angle has been explored in WP4: 1) National-Local (spatial): How do local cases engage with different political and ideological regimes, national policies, and powerful entities from the center? 2) Historical-Momentary

(temporal): Are studies interested in the *longue durée*? Or are they more specific instances in history? If so, how do they relate to each other? 3) Theory-Case (methodological): While most WP4 projects focus on the micro level, some are relating to grand theories as well.

#### Micro-macro in practice: Approaches in selected WP4 projects

As Working Papers 1 and 2 have illustrated, the topics and transversal themes of WP4 address questions of identity from different angles, including shifting micro-macro approaches. Most projects are grounded in sociology, anthropology and (micro-)history, and adopt an explicit local perspective, focusing on relations and interactions, emerging and changing identities, and the different actors involved. And yet, these approaches are embedded in larger political, economic and sociocultural structures and dynamics.

Besides questions of scale, for example local vs. national level, the transboundary aspects of many of the research questions at stake call for more nuanced micro-macro approaches. The Southeast Asian or ASEAN based analytic framework is certainly an important issue, too. In addition, many projects also connect with global perspectives, including the history of colonialism or the recent Chinese transregional Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI).

Projects in this WP ask how local cultural identifications interact with larger political or religious dynamics on national and transnational levels. These complex interplays are explored from the analytic vantage points of generation, transnationalism and violence. Employing an oscillating micro-macro perspective may contribute to capture the particularities and ambiguities of questions of identity in Southeast Asia.

Transnationalism is certainly one relevant aspect of the micro-macro dimension in WP4 projects. Prasit Lepreecha's project on transnational indigenism in Southeast Asia calls attention to the fate of small indigenous groups caught in the crossfire of competing nationalisms and the effects of global capitalism, including the economic expansion of resource-hungry China. Studying Filipino Christian missionaries in Thailand, Jayeel Cornelio and Erron Medina contribute to the understanding of global Christianity in the Global South and explore new facets of transnational migration and related imaginaries in Southeast Asia.

Other projects are dedicated to linking cultural micro phenomena with emerging transnational identities such as 'Malay', as investigated by Jan van der Putten and Alan Darmawan in their study of local art festivals in Malaysia and Indonesia. Janina Pawelz shows how martial arts groups in Timor Leste link specific cultural identities to wider social and political entanglements, shaping a new sense of belonging. Such projects shed light on processes of cultural identification and political mobilization.

Danny Wong Tze Ken discusses how Hakka identity in Malaysia shifted from a broad category of being Chinese to smaller subdivisions identified by their dialects. He identifies a shift from a 'Chinese' macro category to dialect groups and localized identities that are exemplary for many multi-ethnic societies in Southeast Asia. This includes changing relations to China and Chinese nationalism which arguably shaped the experience of generations of Hakka in Malaysia. Thus, a historical macro perspective is crucial for understanding Chinese dialect groups in Southeast Asian countries.

A historical macro-perspective is also key for understanding contemporary ethnic identification processes and conflicts. Historical migration patterns, war and the colonial regime are factors to understand present-day (state) violence as in the case of the link between violence and Buddhist and Muslim identification processes in the Bengal-Burma (Bangladesh-Myanmar) borderlands studied by Jacques Leider. In a similar vein, Natasha Pairedeau investigates the ethnogenesis of a lesser known group, the Kula of Cambodia, with their legacy of colonial gem mining contexts.

The Rohingya case links up with other (micro-)historical investigations of violence in Southeast Asia – projects that use their case studies to find answers to larger theoretical questions. Volker Grabowsky asks if the high share of disenfranchised youth might explain the mass violence under the Khmer Rouge, and makes this specific Cambodian experience a test case for macro-historical questions of demography and violence. Andrew Hardy and Dao The Duc use their study of an incident of inter-ethnic conflict to address a related theoretical question about mass violence in the context of the decolonisation of Vietnam.

As this brief overview on micro-macro dimensions in WP4 projects illustrates, shifting scales opens up new horizons of understanding past and present social and political dynamics in Southeast Asia. In the following, I will demonstrate this approach with the example of Lao tin mining.

#### Case study: Tin mining in Laos

Mining is a key economic sector for GDP growth in Lao PDR which is essentially resource driven (Menon and Warr 2013). Gold reserves, for instance, attracted the attention of generations of entrepreneurs since colonial times, when Laos gained renown as an 'oriental Klondyke' (Renaud 1930). In the 1990s, the World Bank identified mining as fundamental for socioeconomic development and revenue generation. Until today, the mining sector generates important state revenues and attracts a large share of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) – especially from the economic regional powerhouses China, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Lao Ministry of Energy and Mines estimates that there are more than 150 mineral deposits in the country, including gold, copper, tin, iron, bauxite, lignite, and potash (Mottet

2013; Barney 2018). Besides the two big industrial copper and gold mining areas in Sepon (Savannakhet province) and Xaysomboun province, a great number of smaller mining areas punctuate the Lao uplands. The tin mines of the Nam Phathaen valley in Khammouane province are a case in point.

As already indicated, artisanal and small-scale mining co-exists with large-scale mining in various, sometimes precarious ways. Today an estimated 15% of the villages in Laos consider artisanal and small-scale mining as a component of their subsistence strategies. This allegedly 'traditional' practice, however, witnesses new dynamics and challenges such as increasing mechanization, transnational dynamics and resulting legal ambiguities. In the Nam Phathaen valley, located 60 km away from the provincial capital of Thakhaek, the proximity to the Thai border and a history of Vietnamese migration are two factors that shape local ASM settings.

Nam Phathaen valley, an important local mining area, became one of the first sites of industrialization – fuelled by Vietnamese labour migration – under French colonial rule in Laos (1893–1954) and remained an important source of revenue for the fledgling Lao nation state after independence in 1954. French engineers remained in charge before Russians took over after the communist revolution of 1975 (Mouscadet 2013; Lahiri-Dutt 2014). For many years, a Lao-North Korean joint venture continued to operate the old colonial mines. Today, the valley is scattered with a dozen Chinese- and Vietnamese-run mining concessions, while the main export route reaches Thailand across the Mekong River. While ASEAN integration fosters transnational trade and migration, the legacy of the Chinese Go-Out policy and recent BRI links with legal reforms in Lao PDR to attract foreign investment.

The historical vicissitudes of colonialism, socialism and recent globalization tendencies in Laos notwithstanding, the Nam Phathaen valley population (approx. 12,000 people) displays a strong local peasant-miner identity (see as well Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Lahiri-Dutt et al. 2014). ASM in the Nam Phathaen valley includes mining with simple tools in abandoned mines or running concessions, as well as panning in the rivers. About 95% of the working-age population practice ASM which accounts for an estimated 70% of household incomes. Local livelihoods are witnessing a vicious cycle of land degradation and other negative impacts of mining, and an increased dependence on mining activities.

The “Tin mining in Laos” CRISEA project investigates tin mining from two perspectives: 1) a diachronic approach focusing on historical labour relations including the significant Vietnamese worker migration which has shaped the labour-intensive sectors of the Lao economy until the present day; and 2) a synchronic approach which explores the current co-existence of ASM and LSM and the related tensions and contradictions at different scales (local, national, global). Shifting between multiple micro-macro perspectives is essential for this research.

The project combines historical and anthropological research methods in a *longue durée* perspective on labour relations and livelihoods over several generations. While research in the French colonial archives sheds light on the emergence of industrial labour and corresponding migration dynamics, anthropological field research in the mining communities addresses the question of how the precarious relationship between ASM and LSM shapes the everyday life of the local population. In both components of the project, Vietnamese labour mobility is important with regard to geopolitical aspects, regional economic integration, demography and local identity. One goal of the project is to understand local and migrant workers' everyday experiences, and their embeddedness in regional sociopolitical contexts, dependencies, and identification processes.

In the following sections, labour relations, mining governance, and local livelihoods will be discussed. The study of their micro-macro dimensions contributes to a thorough understanding of resource extraction in this specific Southeast Asian context.

### Historical patterns of labour and migration

By taking global capitalism as a vantage point, and by mirroring present tendencies (e.g. BRI) with colonial economic dynamics, this study aims to reveal historical parallels regarding contested natural resources and transregional dynamics of labour and migration. In the case of the tin mines of central Laos, French commercial interests certainly fostered rapid economic development and, in consequence, transformations of local lifeworlds through new socioeconomic configurations including Vietnamese immigration.

Towards the end of the 19th century, French administrators noted the mining activities of local peasants in Khammouane and started exploring the alluvial tin reserves of the Nam Phathaen valley. As the case in the much larger tin reserves on the Malay peninsula (Ross 2014), tin was in high demand as component of bronze used for Buddha statues. In precolonial Laos, tin was an important tributary gift and tax, sent by local Lao rulers to the court of Bangkok (Grossin 1933: 64). Given the increasing significance of tin for the European and North American industrialization (e.g. for alloys used in railway construction), the tin reserves of the Nam Phathaen valley became attractive for the commercial interests of the French colonial administration.

However, lack of equipment and labour as well as high transport costs to and from the remote upland valley prevented profitable business. Colonial reports bear witness about the delays of exploitation and the challenges for the engineers, while still insisting on the bright prospect of mining in Laos (Mouscadet 2013). Only in the 1920s, when the *Société d'Etudes et d'Exploitations Minières de l'Indochine* (SEEMI) successfully started exploring

and exploiting, the Lao tin mining economy saw a real boom, due not least to increased labour import from Vietnam.

For decades, tin mining was one of the few export-oriented industries in Laos. New roads improved the transport across the mountains towards the Vietnamese coast avoiding trade via Bangkok. More importantly, the French imported thousands of Vietnamese workers, the so-called *coolies*, from impoverished regions of coastal Vietnam. While labour demand on the rubber plantations in Cochinchina was met by thousands of North-Vietnamese contract workers, the Lao mines faced a mix of attempts of local seasonal labour recruitment and a combination of state-organized and spontaneous labour migration from Vietnam (Delamarre 1931; Tappe 2019). The local Lao peasantry preferred seasonal artisanal mining and largely resisted all-year labour recruitment.

Vietnamese migration resulted in massive demographic changes in the Mekong River towns such as Thakhaek, where the Vietnamese constituted 85% of the urban population, the highest percentage of Vietnamese among all Lao towns (Pietrantonio 1957: 230; see as well Ivarsson 2008 and Goscha 2012). Even if most Vietnamese fled across the Mekong River in 1946 (following the re-establishment of French colonial rule after WWII) or 1975 (after the communist revolution in Laos), the Vietnamese community has remained a strong element in Thakhaek, and many families are of mixed Lao-Vietnamese origin. New generations of Vietnamese labour migrants still dominate the labour-intensive sectors of the Lao economy.

The historical significance of Vietnamese labour organization in Laos cannot be underestimated. During the economic downturn in the 1930s, salaries were reduced by 20% and many workers returned to Vietnam. Reports of terrible working conditions made it into the colonial press, and labour unrest gained momentum. Indeed, the tin mines of Khammouane witnessed the very first organized labour struggle in Laos, under the direction of Vietnamese workers and communist agitators (Gunn 1990). Vietnamese migration was certainly a key factor for the emergence of an anticolonial movement in Laos.

When many members of the Vietnamese community in Laos escaped to Thailand after the French reconquest in 1946, they formed part of the already existing Vietnamese community in Nakhon Phanom on the opposite bank of the Mekong. A regional, cross-border perspective is necessary, for a thorough understanding of the Vietnamese diaspora in Laos and Thailand. Vathana Pholsena has dedicated her WP2 CRISEA project to this question, within the framework of a transregional Cold War history of SEA and includes a historical macro perspective on Vietnamese migration in SEA, too. .

## Labour relations in tin mining today

As already indicated, a large part of the Vietnamese community in Laos moved to Thailand after the communist takeover. Yet the Vietnamese remain a prominent part of the population of Khammouane, especially in the urban centre of Thakhaek. Today they face new challenges. Still taking advantage of economic opportunities and longstanding ethnic networks that link the Vietnamese coast with the Lao and Thai cities along the Mekong River, they often live and work under precarious conditions. Lacking legal security in Laos, they depend on the goodwill of their employers and local authorities (Baird *et al.* 2018; Tappe 2019). Working semi-legally on a 30-day tourist visa, they are used to cross the bridge between Thakhaek (Laos) and Nakhon Phanom (Thailand) for monthly 'visa runs' – a practice now complicated by Thai authorities. Thus, cases of visa overstay and corresponding insecurity are increasing among the Vietnamese migrant community.

In the mines, Vietnamese labourers earn less than the official minimum wage in Laos (1,200,000 Kip). Given the extreme poverty in some regions of Vietnam and the favourable exchange rate of the Vietnam Dong to the Lao Kip, working in Laos remains an opportunity for impoverished and mobile parts of the Vietnamese population. Due to better roads and efficient communication networks cultivated by Lao-Vietnamese middlemen, seasonal work migration to Laos is convenient for both employers and employees. Therefore, a transregional perspective is key to understanding labour relations in mining and other labour-intensive economic sectors of past and present Laos.

While Vietnamese (and Chinese) companies apparently find it more efficient to recruit migrant labour, local Lao seem to prefer freelance artisanal mining to employment under contract. Low salaries and hard working conditions make formal jobs in the mining sector less attractive. Since the job skills of the Lao miner-peasants are considered insufficient for better-paid jobs (e.g. engineer), the Lao rarely obtain regular work contracts. Accordingly, ASM miners lack even the little work security that Vietnamese formal workers have.

Unskilled workers earn hardly more than the minimum wage of 1.2 Million Kip (around 120 Euro) in the mines while skilled workers, such as excavator operators and mechanics, can earn up to 3 Million Kip. Regrettably, hardly any local Lao can get one of these well-paid jobs due to lack of skills and the preference of Chinese and Vietnamese companies for their countrymen. Unskilled labour is also often done by migrants because Lao artisanal miners can earn more than the minimum wage in ASM and disapprove direct employment with long hours of hard work in the mines. Young Lao rather prefer to accept precarious working conditions in neighbouring Thailand. Remittances are an important factor for household incomes.

More than 90% of the working population in the Nam Phathaen valley is active in freelance artisanal and small-scale mining, either in closed mines or operating concessions. Artisanal mining may generate up to 200 Euro per month depending on the amount of ore and its tin concentration. On bad days it may be half of that and without the small benefits such as insurance which direct employment provides. Artisanal miners enter the pits without protective gear and other means of work security. Accidents occur very often but health risks are exempt from the equation when people talk about income opportunities. Another negative factor is the general legal insecurity.

### Problems of Lao mining legislation

Tin mining in the Nam Phathaen valley is regulated by the Ministry of Energy and Mines, primarily through the Law on Minerals (2017). The Ministry is responsible for approvals and oversight of prospecting, exploration, mining, and closure phases. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment is responsible for approving Environmental and Social Impact Assessments, providing Environmental Compliance Certificates, and routine monitoring for compliance according to the Law on Environmental Protection throughout construction, operations and closure (Earth Systems and BGR 2019).

The Ministry of Planning and Investment is arguably one of the most influential ministries in Lao PDR and enjoys considerable decisional power regarding foreign investment and the distribution of concessions. Poor communication is a major problem in Laos as well as competition between ministries and different administrative levels of the respective ministries (national, provincial, district). So what might appear neat and clear at the national level, looks completely different at the district or village level (cf. Lu and Schoenweger 2019; Keovilignavong 2019). This hints at a general problem in Lao PDR: a disjuncture between national and local planning processes as in the case of land governance and land use across scales (Suhardiman, Keovilignavong and Kenney-Lazar 2019).

Amendments to the Law on Investment Promotion may even contradict regulations for environmental compliance and mining management. A recent advisory report (Earth Systems and BGR 2019) notes a lack of commitment to the enforcement of core legislation throughout the approval process, exploration, and mining from the responsible ministries and their provincial and district counterparts. Moreover, District and Provincial authorities are highly dependent on financing from mine operations to conduct monitoring. Not surprisingly, only limited funding is provided. Obviously, local ASM communities are caught in the crossfire of competing and contradicting legal regulations on different and arguably disparate scales.

What exactly counts as ASM remains an ongoing debate. The Law on Minerals (2017) clearly distinguishes between artisanal mining and small-scale mining. Artisanal mining mainly means panning for alluvial gold and tin, practiced by using „primitive tools, mechanized equipment with fewer than five horse power and no more than ten laborers” It is considered as a communal, non-permanent operation, „and shall not be regarded as a business“. Throughout Laos we find villages holding customary rights to practice artisanal mining while others operate in a legal grey zone (Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Barney 2018; Moretti and Garrett 2018; Keovilignavong 2019).

For small-scale mining, the law appears more complicate. Small-scale mining includes „digging, drilling, blasting, and sorting of mineral from the surface, underground and under water where it is not appropriate for industrial mining within an area not to exceed ten hectares”. Again, this mining activity is only permitted „for Lao entities” such as village communities or single households. They are entitled to obtain official permissions and legal rights to do small-scale mining. And yet, larger mining concessions granted to foreign companies are often superimposed on such communal rights.

The specificities of ASM in the Law on Minerals make it also difficult to legally reckon recent trends of mechanization and intensification in ASM and the rise of domestic and foreign small-to-medium-scale mining activities that escape such categorizations. Many mining operations in Laos outside the relatively well monitored LSM, thus navigate in legally ambiguous waters. Increased mechanization, migration and other, unintended effects of mining development entail a variegated pattern of ASM which poses considerable challenges for effective legislation and governance, as Keith Barney (2019) has pointed out.

Legal challenges for mining governance remain despite more robust legislation emerging over the last decade covering management plan requirements, obligations to protect environmental and social receptors and the health and safety of employees and households in proximity to operations. Most notably, many of the LSM operations have been approved prior to the refinement of applicable legislation and ignore their obligations or are just not aware of them (Earth Systems and BGR 2019).

In fact the large part of the mining concessions in the valley were granted before most of the afore-mentioned regulations were introduced, or during the process. In consequence, there is a number of legal community or family run artisanal mining operations which found themselves on concession grounds or, rather, investors realized that there were already legal mining activities, even if only small scale, operating at the local level. Although artisanal mining within a concession is de facto illegal, exploiting a concession without land titles is legally ambiguous. What looks orderly at the macro level of ministerial planning is more complex on the ground, the whole process yielding unexpected, contingent results depending on mining sites.

While this is certainly a problem for locals, foreign investors face also bureaucratic obstacles and annoyances. As discussed by Juliet Lu and Oliver Schönweger (2019) in a recent study on agricultural concessions in Laos, Chinese investors complain a lot about all these legal complexities and contradictions. At the first macro glance everything seems to correspond with legal frameworks they know from China, still they underestimate the bargaining power of stakeholders at provincial and district levels who have their own agenda and sometimes subvert national regulations.

The interaction of artisanal miners and mining companies is certainly complex; it can be conflictual or mutually beneficial. While many mining enterprises tolerate ASM activities on concession grounds to take advantage of local informal labour or in recognition of local customary rights, others try to remove ASM from their concessions – largely unsuccessfully due to the many access points and after-hours mining. However, such concessions were sometimes granted without the required consultations at district or village level. According to the Law on Minerals, concessions granted without considering village boundaries or existing land titles are de facto illegal. Thus, the companies also find themselves in a state of semi-legality and are reluctant to provoke local resentment and unnecessary attention on higher levels.

Zooming between the macro level of contradictory national legislations and international investment politics and the implementation at the micro level thus reveals considerable tensions. According to informants one Chinese company was frustrated when it learned after the concession was granted, that it overlapped with village land on which the local community held official legal mining rights, according to the Law on Minerals. After some negotiations with village and district authorities, they came to the agreement that the villagers could practice ASM on concession grounds as long as they sell the ore at a fixed price to the company itself. They were also allowed to use the company's processing facilities. Still the mere presence of villages limits the operation of the concession and certainly reduces the profit of the company. Developments at the micro level might also affect plans envisaged at a macro level.

#### Precarious local livelihoods in ASM communities and environmental degradation

For the villagers, the situation is ambivalent because although they sometimes have some wiggle room to negotiate traditional mining rights, they still bear all the risks. In Ban Boneng, a tin mining area since colonial times, a group of villagers, including women and children, used an old shaker table owned by a Chinese company to process the ore. Proper work security (hard hats, ear protection, security boots etc.) was largely absent. For this

specific informal workforce, the foreign mining companies deny any responsibility and thus operate beyond Lao labour legislation or basically any law.

Lao mining legislation largely ignores these aspects and offers no protection. Companies can deny any responsibility for accidents that occur on their mining sites (for example landslides). They are also not held accountable for pollution even if the law calls for sustainability and post-closure rehabilitation. This is so far hardly ever enforced, leaving vast stretches of degraded land and reduced agricultural options. Therefore, villagers carry the risks of mining opportunities, often ignorant of laws that can protect them. Local communities suffer a lot from land degradation, pollution, noise, and other side effects of mining.

According to a recent study (Earth Systems and BGR 2019), tin mining has a negative impact on the environment and local land use. For example, arable land is either minimized by open mining pits, dumps and other mining facilities, or affected from pollution; deforestation entails the reduced availability of non-timber forest products and timber forest products for community harvest; water pollution threatens local fishery, livestock and drinking water reserves. The absence of proper planning, controls, and rehabilitation, in both ASM and LSM tin mining practices certainly contributes to local precarity. Moreover, the fact that the local villagers have to buy fish, rice and drinking water (unlike the average Lao village community), puts the income opportunities of mining in a different light (not to mention the general health risks).

As Keith Barney (2019: 354–7) notes, the recent decade has witnessed another environmentally detrimental development: Medium-scale mechanized mining that operates with backhoe excavators, pump dredges and sluices blurs the boundaries between LSM and ASM as fixed in the Law on Minerals. This emerging field draws in workers, operators and investors from China and Vietnam who negotiate permissions with local authorities, usually without any governmental control or monitoring. Local villagers lease farmland to those mining operators for some easy money but then see their land being irreparably damaged. This development and an increased, uncontrolled use of chemicals has been identified in ASM contexts throughout Laos (cf. Keovilignavong 2019) including the Nam Phathaen valley.

## Conclusion

Life worlds in the Nam Phathaen valley are shaped by uncertainty and precarity, and an ambivalent sense of place. Local identity is both sustained and disrupted by mining activities. The preceding sections have demonstrated how different macro levels such as national legislation, transnational migration and investment politics, and global economic dynamics may shape a local/micro mining context. In the case of Laos, oscillating between a variety of

micro-macro dimensions is key to understanding past and present social and economic configurations.

The general discussion of micro-macro issues in WP4 projects underscores questions of historical labour relations, governance and local subsistence in Lao mining from different micro-macro angles. From colonial economic policies to present FDI flows, local communities in Laos have long witnessed the impact of global capitalism. This macro-perspective of a Lao 'resource frontier' which is open to accumulation processes and exploitation, however, must be complemented with micro-studies that reveal the variegated outcomes of and obstacles to capitalist enclosure. While the French struggled with friction of terrain and the shortage of labour, today Chinese investors complain about ambiguous legal frameworks and costly negotiations on district and village level.

Shifting between different analytic scales conveys an understanding of capitalist relations and market integration and resulting local economic and sociocultural transformations in past and present Laos. For CRISEA projects, the challenge is to explore how local dynamics affect developments on larger scales: from triggering transnational migration which calls for transregional political responses, to protest movements and environmental problems to be addressed on transnational and even global levels.

Investigating the micro-macro dimension implies the question about how to zoom in and out between a local micro-study and a broader regional or even global context. What happens at the national or global level has effects on the ground, while arguably local economic and political dynamics can also yield effects on larger scales. That said, this should not be understood as an argument for an academic division of labour between, for example, anthropological micro and the macro perspectives of political scientists. Rather, interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration is essential to bringing the research framework to fruition – together zooming in and out, aiming to understand local life worlds in the context of larger regional and global economic and political dynamics.

Two of those dynamics are the ASEAN integration and the Chinese BRI. For a historically informed anthropologist, the collaboration with, for example, political scientists and economists, is crucial for understanding these changing institutional environments that leave their imprint on the local level at different degrees. In turn, micro-historical and anthropological findings may help the macro-specialists to assess the actual impact of decisions and dynamics on transregional levels for the different communities in the countries of Southeast Asia. Exploring the micro-macro dimension of local mining in Laos benefits from the macro-studies of other disciplines while the approaches and results of the present study may offer new ideas to other researchers.

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