CROSS-BORDER RUBBER PRODUCTION IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA
Creating a Spatial Division between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam
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Cross-border rubber production in mainland Southeast Asia
Creating a spatial division between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam

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ABSTRACT.— Since the increase in the natural rubber prices, the rubber sector has shown a new vigor for the past ten years. In the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia, this sector has been partly responsible for profound socio-economical transformations. The rubber sector provides an opportunity to understand how hierarchy reinforcement operates in these highlands, split between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Going back to the production industries in those three countries, we will see that there is nothing new about the ongoing power relationships in this region. In fact, from the introduction of rubber trees in colonial plantations to the current land concessions, the rubber tree crop has not only been arranged into productive area and networks but has also become a national industry.

AGRICULTURE, CAMBODIA, MACRO REGIONAL INTEGRATION, R.D.P LAO, SOUTHEAST ASIA, VIETNAM

RÉSUMÉ.— L’hévéaculture transfrontalière en Asie du Sud-Est continentale. La construction d’une division spatiale du travail entre Cambodge, Laos et Viêt-nam — Avec l’augmentation des prix du caoutchouc naturel ces dix dernières années, le secteur de l’hévéaculture connaît une nouvelle vigueur. Dans les plateaux méridionaux d’Asie du Sud-Est continentale, cette activité contribue à de profondes transformations socio-économiques clivant les territoires. En prenant l’exemple de l’hévéaculture, cet article a pour objectif de comprendre comment se joue le renforcement d’une hiérarchie dans cette région divisée entre Viêt-nam, Laos et Cambodge. En retraçant l’histoire des filières productives de ces trois pays, on montre que les relations de domination qui s’organisent ne sont pas nouvelles. En effet, de l’introduction de l’arbre en plantations coloniales jusqu’aux concessions économiques actuelles, l’hévéa s’est tout autant structuré en bassins et réseaux productifs qu’en filières nationales.

AGRICULTURE, ASIE DU SUD-EST, CAMBODGE, HÉvéA, INTEgRATION MACRO-RÉgIONALE, LAOS, VIÉT-NAM

Like most major perennial cash crops, rubber came to the highlands by sea: after a long journey from the Americas to the shores of the Dutch islands, Hevea brasiliensis was successfully introduced in 1897 in Thu Dau Mot, the capital of the present province of Binh Duong, located at a distance of roughly 30 kilometers north-west of Ho Chi Minh City (Naud, 1930). Taking this centrality of colonial rubber plantation as our starting point, this article explores contemporary transformations in the production sector on the southern highlands of mainland Southeast Asia, that is, the southern portion of the Annamite Cordillera, which shapes the borders between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It will study the
changes to the spatial structures of an economic activity and apprehend how these national productive zones interact with each other and help in forming vast hierarchized territories. It will be shown that far from being new, this hierarchy among territories has been in place for a long time and is changing rapidly. The regional economic cooperation projects of the early 2000s reactivated a connection between these productive spaces and by doing so, helped to strengthen hierarchies between the three countries.

The spread of rubber plantations in the territories of the Southernmost highlands of mainland Southeast Asia, perpetuates the regional history of extension of the pioneering fronts. These zones of perennial agricultural progress (and often of loss of forest land), which were first colonial and subsequently national, are subject to rationales that tend to interconnect them without really merging them. These dynamics of regional integration give rise to hybrid cross-border territories, which are highly dependent on their national contexts and at the same time, structured around the interface represented by the political boundary (Taillard, 2004). By doing so, the study of rubber production makes it possible to throw light on the phenomenon of agrarian neo-colonialism (land grabbing or large-scale acquisition of land, according to the connotation given to the phenomenon).

In the first part, we will show the importance of the large-scale plantations throughout the recent history of the three countries by emphasizing the hierarchies drawn between the various territories. Whether the large-scale plantations are colonial, socialist or even capitalist, their form and objectives have not really changed, with the consequence that the farmer communities are left by the wayside. In the second part, the current evolutions will be presented via the growth triangle Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam where rubber production took on a significant role and which further develops the synergies between the different areas of production zones.

**Primacy of large-scale plantations**

**Progressive spread of rubber**

The success of colonial rubber production is mainly due to demand leading to sudden and steep rise in prices (early and late 1910s and 1920s) as well as several local advantages such as easily accessible land for the colonists, a community of cheap workforce available close at hand, an advantageous currency, the strong presence of active farmers and appropriate soils (Boucheret, 2008). Located close to Saigon, the grey and red lands, according to Yves Henry’s nomenclature (1931), help partly in defining what is called here the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia. Starting from the central point of Cochin China and with the importation of know-how and plant material from Malaysia (Brocheux, 2009), it spread spatially towards Cambodia along the Vung Tau-Ho Chi Minh-City-Kampong Cham axis. In 1920, while around Saigon, there were already 139 plantations over 26,000 ha of farmland, in Cambodia, only the very first large plantation, Chup, was created (Naud, 1930). Seventeen years later, the gap had still not been eliminated: “the rubber plantations covered 98,168 hectares in Cochin China, 27,266 in Cambodia, 1678 in Annam, 33 in Laos and 1 hectare only in Tonkin” (Boucheret, 2008, p. 383).

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1. This paper is the outcome of field research carried out as part of a program of inter-university scientific cooperation supported by Agence universitaire de la francophonie (Francophone University Agency) from 2010 to 2012 and the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KfPE). The original results of this research were issued at IRASEC (Fortunel, Gironde, 2014).

2. Ta Thi Thuy, in his book Les Concessions agricoles françaises au Tonkin de 1884 à 1918 (2009), does not mention the presence of rubber production. Kaspar Humi indicates, without further explanation, that, in the 1930s, a few areas around Paksé were cultivated, but not for commercial use (Humi, 2008).
Despite the historical ups and downs, this hierarchy between territories remained the same until the mid-2000s. At the national level, in terms of area and productivity, Vietnam towers above its two neighbors and even tends to take an increasingly important position in Southeast Asia in the light of the decrease in the Malaysian production area. Retrospectively, it is noted that the productive rubber plantation areas of the 19th and the 21st centuries are not fundamentally different in this part of the Indochinese peninsula: the dyad Binh Phuoc-Kambong Cham continues to represent the core of the productive zone framed by the national highways connecting Phnom Penh to Saigon.

However, as can be observed in figure 1, the rubber tree has spread beyond its initial area: a State plantation was created in Northeast Cambodia in mid-1960s at Banlung, which became the starting point of the current pioneering front at Ratanakiri (Gironde, Fortunel, 2014); in Vietnam, areas further north such as Tay Nguyen would never attain more than 5% of the total area of the country, essentially at Dak Lak which would later be supplanted by Gia Lai-Kontum in late 1980s (General Statistical Office, 1992), In Laos, the cultivated area remained marginal until the early 2000s (less than 500 ha). Apart from the spatial framework chosen here, let us nevertheless mention the spread of the rubber tree, via other sources, in Thailand and Chinese Yunnan (Li, Fox, 2012).
At the centre, the large-scale plantation

Regional rubber production is characterized by a highly polarized sector despite the administrative boundaries. The political territory is adapted to its economic rationale and not the contrary: the boundaries are changed in accordance with the plantations\(^5\) and the managers settled in Saigon see “the Cambodian plantations as extensions of the Cochin China’s industry” (Slocomb, 2007, p. 18). Nothing is more logical for the Indochinese Union, which connects Cambodia’s protectorate economically to neighboring Cochin China.

Saigon concentrated its main resources such as financial means (banks providing capitals), agronomic resources (until 1953, when a research institute was created at Kampong Cham, the only center devoted to rubber production was located in Ong Yem, the former province of Song Bé: Brocheux, 2009),\(^6\) command centers (in 1930, apart from the Kratié plantation, all the plantations in Kampong Cham were managed by companies established in Saigon (Slocomb, 2007, p. 18) and in particular, the manpower (coolies from Tonkin) came to Saigon and then got recruited. It is true that perennial crops such as rubber require high initial and recurring investments: apart from the waiting period of roughly six years, the harvest and then the processing of latex into rubber require heavy industrial structures that make it possible to recover the costs.

While latex essentially goes from the “Far-eastern pearl”, most of it comes back and is then dispatched far away notably in the direction of the French mainland. The present-day Ho Chi Minh City has always been a dominant commercial hub on the regional scale but in new forms. For the majority of formal or informal Cambodian production, it is the arrival point by land route (preferred to other solutions such as Sihanoukville: Chamnan, 2012). Production in south Laos is highly influenced by Vietnam and to a lesser extent by Thailand (see the following part): the local actors mention that they do not have a direct link with international trade and count on their investing and processing neighbors to ensure the sale of latex (Hicks et al., 2009). On the whole, South Laos rubber and in part, Khmer rubber (in value, 58% of Khmer latex was exported to Vietnam in 2011),\(^7\) associated with the local production, supply the processing plants of the major industrial areas and reinforce Vietnam, which exports 90% of its national production (Hicks et al., 2009) in the context of a particularly profitable price.

Rubber production was also central from the political perspective. Thus, when the military retreat of the French colonists started in the mid-1950s, the major plantations often continued to function with the same personnel and managers right up to the turning point of the 1970s. While the change of political regime did not have a major influence on the financial objective of the rubber tree, the plantations would help in shifting the political lines of the two countries. In fact, the difficult living and working conditions of the coolies (Slocomb, 2007; Brocheux, 2009; Panthou, 2013) as well as the nationalist movements at the time tended to turn the plantations into places of protest against the established capitalist order. The communist “brothers” would find enough grounds to fight it out with the dominant political forces. Pol Pot and Hun Sen, for example, would use this to climb up the political ladder: one, as an elected representative of the tappers\(^8\) and the other as a militant during his youth. Territorially, these plantations offered strategic anchoring points\(^9\) between the grooves in the Ho Chi Minh trail and the capitals to be conquered. These were later targeted by some of the American bombing and were subsequently affected by civilian evacuation whatever the border.

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5. Example given by Margaret Slocomb of shifting of the Cochin China-Khm er border at the request of a planter concerned about the symmetry of his plantation (Slocomb, 2007).

6. Let us nevertheless recall that during the course of their development, the major large-scale plantations created their own skills by getting wood gardens, nurseries and associated technicians.

7. By definition, the latex transported informally between Cambodia and Vietnam does not appear in this value.

8. Workers for making a cut in the tree bark in order to extract the latex.

9. The plantation Chup situated in Kampong Cham employed up to 10,000 permanent workers (Amicale des planteurs d’hévéas, 2006).
Structural reforms of the economies

The year 1975 is memorable on several accounts: the water level in the areas in production in Vietnam reached its lowest point while in Cambodia, the long decline of nationalized rubber production continued. It was also the beginning of the massacres perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge (Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in particular) in the plantations of Kampong Cham (De Nike et al., 2000)(fig. 2). These two States, which embraced communism, nevertheless retained the primacy of large-scale plantations. Despite the similarity of their situations, there is a divergence in the sectors observed: under the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea, latex continued to be extracted but the rubber trees were neglected and the skills were dispersed and even lost for a long time; in Vietnam, the plantations, that had become, in this case, State farms, promoted agricultural colonization fronts (the “new economic zones”) which opened up new perspectives of development by training generations of workers who subsequently became independent planters.

The “satellization” of Cambodia by Vietnam from 1979 to 1989 (St John, 2006, p. 68) enabled the transposition of the latter’s methods to Cambodia. In keeping with the model of the time, the plantations were nationalized and placed under the General Directorate of Rubber Plantations (GDRP), which still exists; the fact that most were...
operated and managed by the Vietnamese helped feed strong resentment (Slocomb, 2003). More generally, the Soviet bloc’s cooperation with the Vietnamese experts (Gottesman, 2003, p. 153-154) could not prevent the fact that, on the whole, Cambodian rubber production had deteriorated.

At the same time, Vietnam started its economic “revival” (the Doi M oi policy of 1985)\(^\text{10}\) and applied it to its neighbor but without the same consequences: while on the Vietnamese side, between 1976 and 1990, the area increased by 159%, on the side of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, the replacement of the trees (aged 30 to 70 years), which was nonetheless necessary, was not prioritized (Chamnan et al., 2012). Once the Vietnamese withdrawal was completed, a new economic policy was embraced in 1991. In Laos, the “new economic mechanism”, which was made official in 1996, wished to see producers turn to new commercial crops without getting tools meant to structure the new rubber production sector. For all that, even today, Laos does not have an ad hoc institution, which contributes to its dependence.

The three countries opened up to the market, reformed their economies (including rubber production) for greater efficiency, but with methods that were markedly different. Cambodia, which converted quite brutally to the market economy (Pilotta, 2008), gave priority to privatizing State plantations and opening up real estate to foreign investors. Vietnam did not liquidate its collectivization but transformed the farms into companies by reinforcing sector-wise national coordination which is today called the Vietnam Rubber Group\(^\text{11}\). Thus, if one of them organized and used the market, the other gave up its property, which amounts, in some way, to the privatization of resources. The latter option was, in many respects, the one also chosen by Laos, which opted for the development of its sector via private investments which were, essentially, handed out in the north to the Chinese, in the centre and the south to the Thais and in the south to the Vietnamese.

While large-scale plantations are still present, they are no longer the only ones active in the sectors. Small planters have emerged as a tool for the liberalization policy. The three countries had difficulties for a long time in promoting the farmer communities effectively: trusting families, unlocking the commercial sectors, allowing credit, understanding that the farmers can be as effective as large-scale plantations – these are elements that had to be accepted. If today the three countries are compared to other countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines or even India where farmer plantations amount to roughly 90% of the cultivated area, there is still a long way to go; but the situations are evolving rapidly: in Vietnam and Cambodia, roughly 45% of the plantations are controlled by farmers (Hicks et al., 2009; Chamnan et al., 2012) while in Laos it is estimated that there is only 23% of land under the control of individual farmers (Nhoybouakong et al., 2009). Even then, the conditions are markedly different in the three countries: in Vietnam as in Cambodia, the family plantations are independent and developed classically around large-scale plantations. The two States and the supporting organizations (Agence française du développement notably) encouraged families, in late 1990s, to adopt rubber production, and were thus instrumental in the emergence of “professional” planters (Rigg, 2005). Recently, in North Vietnam and mainly in Laos, the planters became associated with the private companies through contracts distributing the production factors among the partners (“2+3”, “1+4” for example\(^\text{12}\)).

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10. Between 1976 and 1990, the rubber crop area in Vietnam increased by 123,000 ha (Hicks et al., 2009) while in Cambodia during the same period, it increased by 45,000 ha only.
11. Vietnamese rubber sector group at the national level includes more than 97 State-owned companies, 28 private companies and 30 processing factories in the whole country.
12. The farmers provide the land and work (2), the company provides the technology, the capital and the marketing (3); in the 1+4, one of the farmer factors is contributed by the company (4).
Interconnected productive zones

The era is no longer one of political confrontations. Economic cooperation has become necessary. That said, do the weakening of political boundaries and the extension of economic territories benefit uniformly the States as is argued by the institutions? Is it true that “Vietnam, while prohibiting itself from using Cambodia and Laos as buffer States or as first steps to the Tây tien of Indochinese communism, can also use these two countries as an economic lung” (Quang, 2000, p. 396)?

Extending Vietnamese influence via the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle

In order to implement regional alliances, a new structure is developed. The Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle is part of the regional integration movement (Taillard, 2004), and represents a sub-group of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), which is itself a part of the ASEAN and its Free Trade Area (AFTA). The proposal for the Triangle came from Vietnam in 199913, the year corresponding to the time when the countries of former Indochina completed their entry into the ASEAN and to the 10th anniversary of the first Thai initiative to reinforce its regional strength around the Bath Economic Zone (1988). Since 2003, Thailand has developed its influence around quadrupartite cooperation (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia; Arrewady-Chao Phraya-Mékong Economic Cooperation Strategy, ACMECS) with which Vietnam has become associated.

It was thus at the time when Thai cooperation took shape that Vietnam, for its part, finalized its project by formalizing the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam GTA (Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Growth Triangle Area or CLVDT Cambodia Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle), on 30th November, 2004 at Vientiane, and thus competed with Thailand in terms of influence exercised on the two neighbors (Taillard, 2009). The Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle includes 13 provinces (fig. 3) as against only 7 initially14.

In order to achieve its objectives, Vietnam would spare no efforts on the one hand with Laos by renewing and reinforcing relations built since 1977 with the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and on the other hand, with Cambodia with whom the disputes were greater in number, especially pertaining to the border issue15. It is thus in a more serene atmosphere that the interconnections between the three countries were reinforced. In addition to the border economic areas created in 1998 (Moc Bai and Lao Bao; Development analysis network, 2005), in 2006, in accordance with the ASEAN agreements, ordinary visas between Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians, as well as other countries, were gradually phased out, which facilitates movement. The following year, Vietnam removed import taxes for 40 unprocessed agricultural products (including latex) coming from Laos and Cambodia (Baumüller, 2008, p. 19)16.

The Triangle’s strategy does not merely indicate the necessity to promote exchanges; it also distributes the roles. While it can be legitimately expected that the nature and the direction of relations are evenly distributed among the three actors, a review of the plans shows Vietnam at the centre of the tripartite relations. Apart from the fact that the plan curiously forgets Cambodia’s access to the sea and its exchanges with Laos, a particular spatial division of labor can now be seen. For example, the direction of the exchanges can be described thus: the Cambodian provinces export common consumption goods and raw material (Strung Streng coffee, pepper, rubber) via Vietnamese ports; as for the Laotian provinces, they export forest products and

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13. Three preparatory summits were organized successively in October 1999 (Vientiane), January 2002 (Hô Chi Minh City) and July 2004 (Siem Reap).
14. The names of the seven initial provinces are underlined in figure 3. Initially concentrated in the area of the three frontiers, the Triangle increased in size centrifugally.
15. In November 2001, the two States organized regular “meetings on the development and cooperation of the Cambodia-Vietnam border provinces”, the first of these was held in September 2004, a month after the official foundation of the Triangle. Since then, the meets are held every two years. More recently, in 2008, the junction point of the three frontiers was finally fixed (Amer, 2010).
16. On the Cambodian side, the planters will be all the more tempted to sell their production on the Vietnamese border as it is easier to avoid export tax than on the sea routes (Ports of Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville) (Chamnan et al., 2012).
Sekong coffee and finally, the Vietnamese provinces gave priority to the establishment of markets in cities and at the borders as well as improving access to trade in remote areas (CLVD, 2010). As a result, Laos and Cambodia provide resources that Vietnam is responsible for transporting and marketing.

This spatial division of labor is implemented thanks to provincial cooperation developed since a long time ago. In fact, the Friendship and Cooperation treaties of 1977 (Laos-Vietnam) and 1979 (Cambodia and Vietnam for a period of 25 years: Wim, 2009; Slocomb, 2003) have led to provincial twinning to promote political, military, and economic exchanges, etc. This twinning, carried out since the early 1980s (Slocomb, 2003; St John, 2006, p. 67) and meant to consolidate “fraternal” relations between the countries, are however denounced by several authors who throw light on the fact that reciprocal assistance is only a form of “Vietnamization” of the neighboring territory, or more or less represents a strategy maintaining the uneven exchanges between the countries to the benefit of Vietnam.

The Triangle has turned these twinnings into a particularly useful tool. A “provincial coordination” sub-group, which was formed in 2009, helps to establish “Friendship associations” of Vietnamese provinces with their Laotian and Khmer neighbors. Between 2010 and 2011 alone, one could observe the establishment of “Friendship associations” between Dak Lak and Mondulkiri, Dak Nong and Mondulkiri (Nhan Dan, 2010), Binh Phuoc and Tay Ninh with Kampong Cham, Kon Tum and Attopeu, An Giang and

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17. In 1997, a treaty between Cambodia and Laos was signed.
18. This practice of twinning provinces was also observed between Thailand and Laos in 2001 in the case of tourism (St John, 2006, p. 167).
19. For Cambodia, see, for example, Quang, 1987; Quang, 2000; Pich, Fortier, 2009. Siphal Mey (2010) gives the list of twin provinces between Cambodia and Vietnam at that time.
Champasak, Gia Lai and Preah Vihear, etc. Even though this list is not exhaustive, it says a lot about the way in which Vietnam prioritizes proximity relations, which strengthen bilateral agreements negotiated between the governments. It is in this context of partnerships that the activities were concretely extended beyond the border: for example, in July 2011, during a field study at Kampong Cham, a representative of a Vietnamese cashew nut company explained to us how, because of the Triangle cooperation, he received support from local agricultural awareness departments in order to organize public meetings and incite producers to work for him, in the presumed hope of buying the production at a good price. In agricultural matters, the entire discourse is based on a recurrent syllogism: While it is true that food self-sufficiency is important for the people (with respect to rural poverty that is particularly high in the area), the natural conditions are not optimal either (droughts and lack of irrigation systems, mountainous areas), let us then use our advantages (soil quality, improving road infrastructure) in order to encourage export-related cash crops on a large scale. The model put forward is that “of major successes due to the establishment of a production focused on cash crops” (CLVDT, 2004, p. 27), so as to link the industrial and agricultural sectors, as is done by the Vietnamese provinces, to supply the world market. The drafters regarded these major successes as opposed to the cultivation modes of small-sized, dispersed, self-sufficient families [that use] old techniques and have poor quality and efficiency” (CLVDT, 2010, p. 24-25). The agricultural model thus presented in a caricatural manner makes it possible to justify a priori and a posteriori the policy of land concession. The latter has a two-fold use as is explained by a Thai investor in Laos (Pongvuthitham, Pratruangkrai, 2012), since they do not compete from the real estate perspective with the family planters of his country while benefitting from the low salaries of their neighbors.

**Land concessions, a new latex eldorado**

This globally significant phenomenon represents an important step in the matter of agricultural policy for this part of Southeast Asia: while the State has often taken many initiatives since independence (migration, agricultural colonization), nevertheless, to highly varying degrees, it must be concluded that it is the private sector which “occupies” the terrain today and leads economic development projects. Henceforth, the State merely follows rural dynamics.

In the early 1990s, the World Bank supported land certification policies, considering that the establishment of a real estate market would ensure better resource allocation. In 1989, Vietnam passed a land law, which released its stranglehold on land use, which was expanded and improved in 1993 and then again in 2003 (Mellac et al., 2010). In Laos and in Cambodia too, land laws were passed in 1989 and subsequently formalized (in 1992 in Cambodia, in 1997 in Laos) so as to better define the rights of family agriculture and consequently enable its consolidation. In addition to this clarification, which is ultimately beneficial to the farmers concerned, the two States provide the possibility for allocating land to foreigners, whether it is individuals or companies. Thus by acknowledging the entry of the States in the globalization of the exchanges and opening out to markets, these new legal provisions and their various amendments (2001, then 2005 in Cambodia, 2003, then 2007 in Laos) open the way for land concessions meant essentially to promote agriculture. In the form of long-term leases (upto 99 years), these concessions have per-hectare prices ranging between 2 and 30 US dollars per hectare, which are beyond the reach of local farmers (Perera, 2011).
Vietnam can thus benefit fully, along with other countries, from these favorable situations (facilitated trade, better infrastructures, organized cooperation). The Vietnamese press, which can hardly be expected to underestimate such accomplishments, indicates that by the end of 2011, 28,000 ha in Laos and 41,000 ha in Cambodia are devoted to rubber production by national businessmen (Tran Manh, 2012). As a response to land grabbing accusations directed at them, they have developed a well-rehearsed discourse: the contracts are in accordance with the legislation in force, the host country receives considerable investments (electrical, road, health infrastructure that they would perhaps not be able to ensure themselves), their land is cultivated (assuming that it was not so before) and sometimes, these businessmen contribute to industrialization via processing factories.

Generally speaking, the figures pertaining to rubber production in land concessions in Laos as in Cambodia are sometimes ambiguous: between the announcement of the plan, the area acquired, then actually cultivated and the various activities deployed on the same lot, the values vary significantly. In Laos, rubber production occupies the second position after the mining sector in terms of investment: in 2011, it represented 130,000 ha, that is, 13% of the primary sector and 42% of the forest sector. Vietnam takes the lion’s share with roughly 60,000 ha, that is 46% of the rubber crop area in concessions of the country with an average of 1400 ha per project. China and Thailand have approximately the same areas of rubber plantations with less than 20,000 ha, that is, 10% and 27% respectively of their total area in Laos as concessions (Schönweger et al., 2012). Locally, the situation is sometimes more concentrated: for example, in Sekong, 98% of the concessions are attributed to four companies with Vietnamese capital (RRDTC, 2009).

In Cambodia, the data processed by the team of Open Development Cambodia provide some information on these concessions: out of 1300000 ha for which authorizations were issued, rubber production represents 35%. The concessions which are meant for it (only or with other activities) are held by Cambodians (16%), Vietnamese (15%-75000 ha), Chinese (10%) and then Malaysians (4%) mainly. Thailand is essentially present with respect to sugarcane in the Northwestern part of the country. The Cambodian provinces of the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle alone represent 63% of the land concessions meant for rubber production (that is, 305,000 ha). But if these figures are compared to those for concessions that are actually planted (66,000 ha in 2011: Chamnan et al., 2012) the distance which separates the reality from the projections can be measured.

Whatever be the case, the agricultural concessions are not responsible for all the problems even if sometimes they contribute to them; they appear in societies where land inequalities have increased greatly and where land becomes a means for getting rich quick in urban and peri-urban areas (via the transformation of agricultural areas into land for housing, for example) as well as a good investment leverage in more remote rural areas. It is precisely in these areas that the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle plays an active role by facilitating the establishment of land concessions that precipitate and exacerbate conflicts.

More generally speaking, there is a long history of social tensions revolving around the land issue since late 1990s. The change from land exclusively administered by the State to a private appropriation is not easy despite the efforts made by local and international organizations to initiate and follow the process. It is thus at the
moment when we wish to redesign the national land regimes mainly for the peasant community that the major neighboring groups cash in on the redistribution of Laotian and Khmer land. It has been seen that most of the efficiency of Vietnamese implantation in these two countries rests on the joint mobilization of two resources: on the one hand, the capacity for investment in the framework of economic and political cooperation, and on the other hand, the opening up of land availability.

**Conclusion**

The Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Triangle is becoming the core of the region’s rubber production: the 13 provinces represented 45% of the rubber production of the three countries in 2008-2009. Consequently, thanks to the considerable increase in area under concessions, the center of gravity of this activity has been shifted northwards, along that indispensable border which makes it possible to play with the gradient between Vietnam on one hand and Cambodia-Laos on the other. In the north as in the south, these production zones complement one another, one taking over from the other and thus helping to renew productive cycles (Ruf, 2013) as much within the States as at their interface. Consequently, this cross-border rubber production increases opportunities while renewing the model of large-scale plantation.

More generally speaking, behind the logic of economic calculations which is put forward to justify the extension of the area of rubber production, a policy practicing hierarchization and exclusion is implemented. In fact, far from making “underdevelopment” disappear, the extension of rubber production such as it is carried out in the major part of the highlands helps to organize the schedule so efficiently that it appears to be natural. While theoretically each can have access to “development” as long as one wants it (some by conceding their land and their labor force, the others by investing) peasant communities are included in dynamics that lead to their dispossession (Baird, 2010). The model of private large-scale plantation, which is favored, organizes the disappearance of social and economic alternatives by constituting territorial enclaves. In these territories, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, deagrarianization is taking place, as has been analyzed by Jonathan Rigg; the link with the land is not the unique means of subsistence anymore (Rigg, 2005), but the farmers must have the choice. Whether they belong to ethnic minorities or to majority groups, the most fragile farmer communities seem to have no other option but to get connected (through productive or salary contracts) to the companies benefitting today from an open space.
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