

Local agency in development, market, and forest conservation interventions in lao PDRs northern uplands

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Abstrak

ABSTRAK

Themes of inclusion, empowerment, and participation are recurrent in development discourse and interventions, implying enablement of agency on the part of communities and individuals to inform and influence how policies that affect them are enacted. This article aims to contribute to debates on participation in rural development and environmental conservation, by applying a structure-agency lens to examine experiences of marginal farm households in three distinct systems of resource allocation in Lao PDRs northern uplands-in other words, three institutional or (in)formal structures. These comprise livelihood development and poverty reduction projects, maize contract farming, and a national protected area. Drawing on qualitative data from focus group discussions and household surveys, the article explores the degree to which farmers may shape their engagement with the different systems, and ways in which agency may be enabled or disabled by this engagement. Our findings show that although some development interventions provide consultative channels for expressing needs, these are often within limited options set from afar. The market-based maize system, while in some ways agency-enabling, also entailed narrow choices and heavy dependence on external actors. The direct regulation of the protected area system meanwhile risked separating policy decisions from existing local knowledge. Our analytical approach moves beyond notions of agency commonly focused on decision-making and/or resistance, and instead revisits the structure-agency dichotomy to build a nuanced understanding of peoples lived experiences of interventions. This allows for fresh perspectives on the everyday enablement or disablement of agency, aiming to support policy that is better grounded in local realities.