

Pacific Geographies

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The struggle over Lao PDR's forests
New opportunities for improved forest governance?

Vietnam
Energy for Red Dao minority in Ca Lo

North Korea
Will I be brain-washed?

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EDITORIAL

Dear readers,

the present issue of *Pacific Geographies* discusses various topics. The first two articles are dealing with the mountainous remote regions of Southeast Asia. The APSA-member Sebastian Koch highlights recent positive developments in terms of forest governance in Lao PDR, especially since the implementation of processes and mechanisms such as REDD+ and FLEGT after the new government took over in early 2016. Mathias Faust from the NGO "Electricians Without Borders" introduces about a rural electrification project for the Red Dao minority in Ca Lo, Vietnam.

This issue also contains a travel report about a country which some label as the most evil place on earth. The author prefers to stay anonymous. As you might have followed the news, only a few weeks ago, Otto Warmbier, the 22-year-old University of Virginia student was released from a North Korean prison after spending 17 months in captivity and more than a year in a coma. He died only a week after returning home. He had travelled from Beijing to Pyongyang with a tour group and was arrested at Pyongyang International Airport upon his departure. Otto Warmbier had to go on trial where he confessed to stealing a propaganda poster and was sentenced to 15 years of hard labour.

The APSA member Britta Schmitz, a regular contributor to our journal, did accomplish another excellent book review. This time, she had a closer look at "Totenkranz", the third crime novel dealing with Hanoi-based special agent Ly and written by the Hamburg-based author Nora Luttmer.

Last but not least, we would like you to know that our journal has received a new web design based on a state-of-the-art content management system. Please have a look at: www.pacific-geographies.org. We sincerely hope you like it and that you also enjoy this new issue of *Pacific Geographies*.

The managing editors, Michael Waibel & Matthias Kowasch

Pacific Geographies

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The PG provides an interdisciplinary platform for an academic discussion of social, cultural, environmental, political and economic issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

In order to uphold scientific standards, the PG is implementing a peer-review process. Articles marked as „scientific papers“ have been peer-reviewed by two external reviewers. Articles marked as „research notes“ have been peer-reviewed by one external reviewer and a member of the editorial board. All other articles have been reviewed by the editorial board.

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The Association for Pacific Studies (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Pazifische Studien e.V., APSA) was founded in 1987 at the Department of Geography of the University of Technology in Aachen. Activities include workshops, conferences, public lectures and poster exhibitions. The book series *PAZIFIK FORUM* was initiated in 1990. In 1992, it was complemented by the journal *PACIFIC GEOGRAPHIES*.

The APSA sees itself as one of the largest scientific networks in Germany for academics and practitioners with an interest in the Asia-Pacific region as well as academic exchange.

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COVER PICTURE

Village consultation meeting in Ban
Houaythoum, Lao PRD

© Sebastian Koch 2015



The struggle over Lao PDR's forests: New opportunities for improved forest governance?

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Abstract: The forests of Lao PDR have dramatically diminished in recent decades. The main drivers of deforestation are changes in land use with forests being converted to agriculture, hydropower, mining and plantations. The main drivers of degradation are legal and illegal logging, especially salvage logging and pioneering shifting cultivation. Underlying drivers are poverty, weak governance and corruption, poor law enforcement and limited capacities as well as unclear, often contradictory legislation and the international demand for timber, rubber, food, electricity and minerals. The situation regarding forest governance, however, seems to slightly improve starting in early 2016. After years of little or no progress in terms of REDD+ the country prepared a proposal to receive performance-based payments which has been accepted into the FCPF Carbon Fund. Lao PDR also entered into the EU-FLEGT negotiations. A new government, which has been in office since early 2016, is increasingly trying to combat illegal logging and timber exports.

Keywords: Forest Governance, Lao PDR, Deforestation, REDD+, FLEGT

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Deforestation and forest degradation have led to a reduction of the natural forest areas in Lao PDR over the past few decades. Increased greenhouse gas emissions, a general loss of biodiversity, increasing scarcity of timber and non-timber forest products and a reduction of environmental services from the forest areas are among the numerous consequences (e.g. Lestrelin et al. 2013, Saunders 2014). Moreover, the declining forest resources affect the lives of many of the poorest populations in the rural areas, especially among ethnic minorities, for whom the forests are a cornerstone of their livelihood (Higashi 2015). While Lao PDR still has some of the highest forest cover on the Southeast Asian mainland with 46.7% (see table 1; MAF 2015), the forests have nevertheless diminished dramatically from an estimated 70% of the overall land surface in the mid-1960s.

However, there are contrasting trends in terms of forest cover. This paper presents three different data sources and briefly explains different methodologies for assessing forest cover rates. Official statistics as well as the FAO Forest Resources Assessment show a forest cover increase since the early 2000s (MAF 2015; FAO 2014) whereas Global Forest Watch still report a decreasing trend in terms of forest cover. A look into the details reveals that the increasing forest cover is mainly due to regenerating vegetation which is under the Lao forest definition counted as forest and primary forest areas are continuously decreasing. After shedding some light into the different data sources and methodologies in reporting forest cover, the discussions on drivers of deforestation and forest degradation will be presented. The interplay of direct drivers and underlying forces is complex and a comprehensive analysis of drivers, underlying forces and detailed spatially explicit quantifications to specific drivers are lacking. Finally, the paper will outline the most recent developments in the forest sector of Lao PDR with a new government that took office in early 2016 increasingly trying to combat illegal logging and working to reform the forest sector.



Source: Sebastian Koch 2014.

Figure 1: Deforestation in Ban Khangkao, Houameuang district

State of the forest

Lao PDR has recently gained international attention for its efforts to increase forest cover, as reported by the Forest Inventory and Planning Division under the Department of Forestry as well as the latest published FAO Forest Resources Assessment (MAF 2015; FAO 2014). According to the Forest Cover Assessment 2015 (MAF 2015), forest cover increased between 2010 and 2015 by 1.3% annually. The current trend of increasing forest cover and decreasing potential forest is explained by regeneration of fallows to forest. Official statistics, however, also reveal a significant decline in forest quality. Dense forest with a canopy cover of over 70% decreased from 29.1% to 8.3% of total forest area, while open forest (<40% canopy cover) increased from 16.3% to 28.9%. At the same time,

large contiguous forest areas (>1.000 ha) decreased from 88% to 52% of total forest area, while smaller forest areas (<100 ha) rose from 4.5% to 30.2% (MAF 2005a).

After the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975, forest resources were seen as ‘green gold’ (*Kham Khieow*) and became the new government’s main source of revenue generation. In 1986, the Lao government introduced market-economy reforms, called ‘New Thinking’ (*Chintanakhon Mai*) or ‘New Economic Mechanism’ aiming to encourage the private sector, thus shifting from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. As a result, the rich forests of Lao PDR diminished dramatically without generating substantial revenues for the country with an estimated net deforestation rate of approx. 2%

per year during the 1990s due to fiscal mismanagement and widespread corruption (IUCN 2000). In 1989 the Prime Minister KAISONE PHOMVIHANE decided to rethink the forest policy of the country during its first National Forest Conference and the subsequently issued Decree 66 on a ‘Tropical Forest Action Plan’ outlined steps to be taken in order to achieve a forest cover of 70% (Phengospha 2015). Forest types were classified into different categories and later on different land use classifications were adopted in addition to the forest types. Since then the Department of Forestry (DoF) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) differentiates between current forest and potential forest where the former refers to forests that meet the definition of 20% canopy cover and a DBH of 10 cm on a minimum area of 0.5 ha. Potential forest includes regenerating vegetation not yet matching the criteria of current forest. In 2015 the potential forest area including bamboo and un-stocked areas used for shifting cultivation covered an area of 38.2% of the country (see table 1; MAF 2015). Lao policies that were promulgated since the 1990s, such as the one to eradicate shifting cultivation or the land allocation program aimed, amongst others, to increase forest

Table 1: National forest cover assessment 2015 (MAF 2015)

North	Current forest	Potential forest
Proportion 2010 (%)	33.9	57.1
Proportion 2015 (%)	39.9	53.0
South	Current forest	Potential forest
Proportion 2010 (%)	47.2	34.3
Proportion 2015 (%)	55.5	22.4
Central	Current forest	Potential forest
Proportion 2010 (%)	42.7	41.2
Proportion 2015 (%)	48.8	32.3
Lao PDR	Current forest	Potential forest
Proportion 2010 (%)	40.2	46.0
Proportion 2015 (%)	46.7	38.2

About: REDD+

REDD+ stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the + includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. It is an international effort led under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The basic idea is to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, as well as means to leverage this, thus offering an incentive to developing countries to reduce emissions from deforestation forest degradation including the sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. REDD+ is implemented in three phases, starting with REDD+ Readiness, then the implementation of REDD+ strategies, and leading eventually to the flow of results-based payments for national actions that reduce emissions in the forest sector. REDD received substantial attention from the UNFCCC – and the attending community – at COP13 in 2007 as part of the "Bali Action Plan". The extension REDD+ included sustainable management of forests, conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. In Cancun (COP16) in 2010, the Cancun Agreements requested participating countries to develop: i) a national strategy or action plan; ii) a national forest reference emission level and/or forest reference level; iii) a robust and transparent national forest monitoring system for REDD+ activities, and iv) a system for providing information on how REDD+ safeguards (to avoid negative social and environmental outcomes) are being addressed and adhered to.

The 19th Conference of the Parties (COP19) held in Warsaw in November 2013 saw a number of decisions adopted. This produced the 'Warsaw Framework for REDD+'; a package of decisions, which along with those adopted at previous COPs completes the 'REDD+ Rulebook' and gives guidance for the full implementation of REDD+. REDD+ is part of the Paris Agreement and specifically mentioned in paragraph 5.

cover to 70%. However, such policies reduced access for upland cultivation and swidden farmers and consequently food production and food security (Kenney-Lazar 2016) which has not been discussed widely within the government.

In addition to government-led national forest and forest cover assessments, there are also international organizations and other institutions assessing forest cover, for example for the purpose of international comparison applying other methodologies, definitions and resources. The Global Forest Resources Assessment by the United Nations Food and Agriculture

Organization (FAO), applying the FAO forest definition of 10% tree canopy cover, shows a forest area in Lao PDR in 2015 of 18.8 million hectares and thus 81.3% of Laos' total land area (see table 2; FAO, 2015). The assessment reports an annual forest area loss of 0.7% between 1990 and 2000 and then forest area increases of 0.8% (2000-2010) and 1% (2010-2015), respectively. Right after the publication of the FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment Lao PDR received attention as one of the top ten countries in terms of annual forest area gain between 2010 and 2015 (FAO 2015). However, the Lao Country Report of the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2015

shows a steady decrease in primary forest area from 1990 to 2015 (see table 2). In addition, the report mentions that 27% of forest areas in Lao PDR experienced significant reductions in canopy cover between 2000 and 2012. From a methodological perspective it needs to be understood that the 2015 FAO FRA forest area figure is based on linear extrapolation of the trend between 2002 and 2010 and, therefore, shows an upward trend to 2015.

Another source of information regarding forest cover, forest trends and deforestation is Global Forest Watch (GFW). It is an open-source web-application based on Landsat satellite images. GFW is a partner-

Source: Sebastian Koch 2014.



Figure 2: Sanam of Ban Khangkao

Table 2: Forest area change Lao PDR (FAO 2014)

Category / Forest area in ha	1990	2000	2005	2010	2015
Primary forest	1,592,000	1,438,000	1,358,520	1,276,130	1,193,730
Naturally regenerated forest	16,049,500	15,068,430	15,484,280	16,469,430	17,454,570
Planted forest	2,500	18,780	26,910	70,010	113,110
Total	17,644,900	16,525,990	16,869,710	17,815,570	18,761,410

ship of the World Resources Institute (WRI) in close collaboration with the University of Maryland and others. According to GFW geospatial analysis, total tree cover in Lao PDR declined at a rate between 39,000 ha and 230,000 ha per year between 2001 and 2014 with an increasing trend (see Figure 3, Global Forest Watch 2016). Although ‘tree cover’ does not equate ‘forest cover’, the results reveal that deforestation and forest degradation remain to be a serious issue in Lao PDR.

This section has outlined different approaches to capture forest cover/tree cover and subsequently forest or tree cover loss show different figures and contrasting trends. Differences in methodologies, definitions, completeness and inclusion of data from field verifications inevitably led to entirely inconsistent results between GFW and the FAO FRA (Holmgren 2015). Lao PDR’s Department of Forestry is currently finalizing its wall-to-wall land cover map for 2015 and revising the one for 2010 applying another

methodology than the Forest Cover Assessments and probably resulting in different figures.

Drivers of Deforestation and Forest Degradation

Deforestation and forest degradation in Laos are not yet very well understood quantitatively and spatially. Forest clearing for agribusiness, whether by companies under concessions or by smallholders under either contract farming systems or subsistence agriculture is substantially different from forest clearing for hydropower, road constructions or other infrastructure development. Each has not only its own social causes and characteristics, but its own land clearance patterns. No efforts have yet been made to measure the relative contribution to forest loss of any of these on a national level. Although there are several studies that attempt to shed light on the issue, there are significant problems with the lack of causal relationships between claims and evidence presented.

Thomas et al. (2010) has a mapping section and a qualitative section that elaborates about drivers, however, without actually making a connection between the drivers and the geospatial information available. Hence, Lestrelin et al. (2013) and Thomas et al. (2010) as the most accurate analyses of national-level drivers of deforestation report that the main direct drivers of deforestation are concessions and contract farms converting forests either into agricultural areas (large-scale agribusinesses) or industrial tree plantations as well as mining and hydropower projects converting forest land into other land use. The main drivers of forest degradation are ‘pioneering shifting cultivation’ to expand agricultural areas as well as legal and illegal logging. Underlying drivers of both deforestation and forest degradation are poverty, weak governance which includes corruption, poor law enforcement and limited capacities as well as unclear or often contradictory legislation and the international demand for timber,

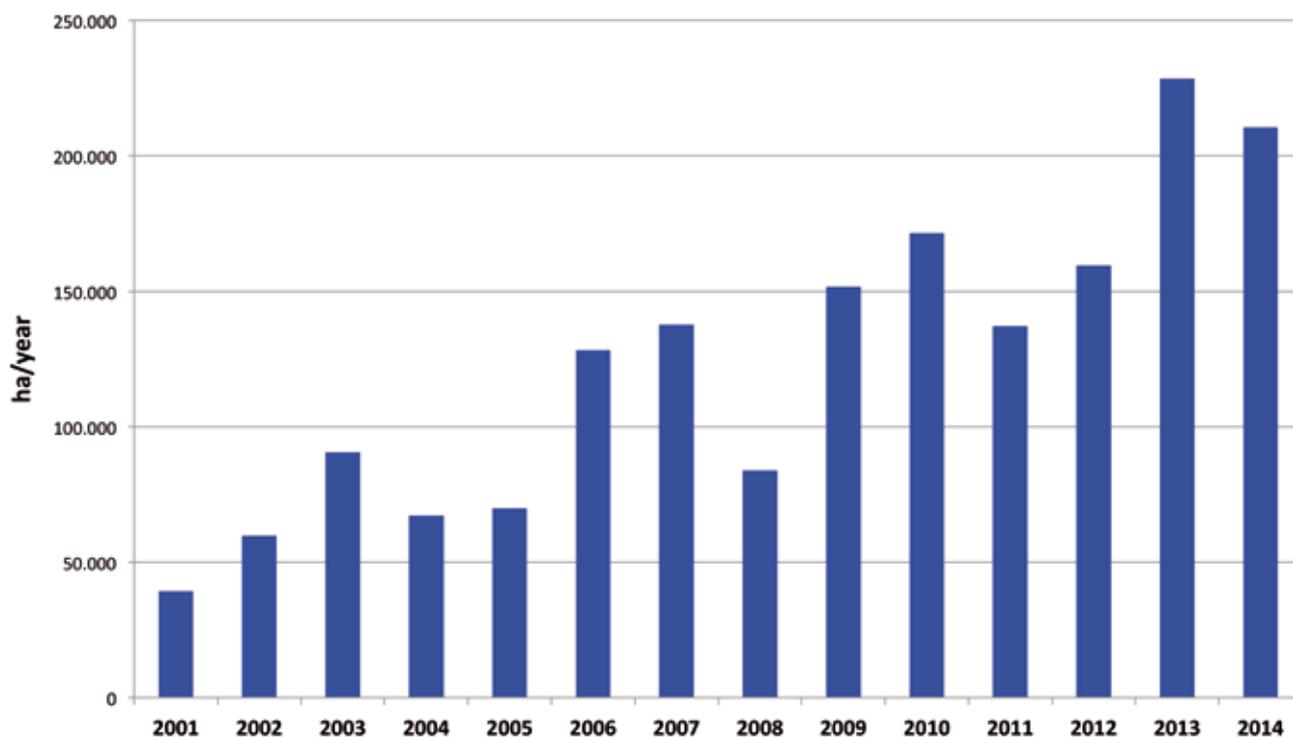


Figure 3: Tree cover loss in Lao PDR (Global Forest Watch 2016)

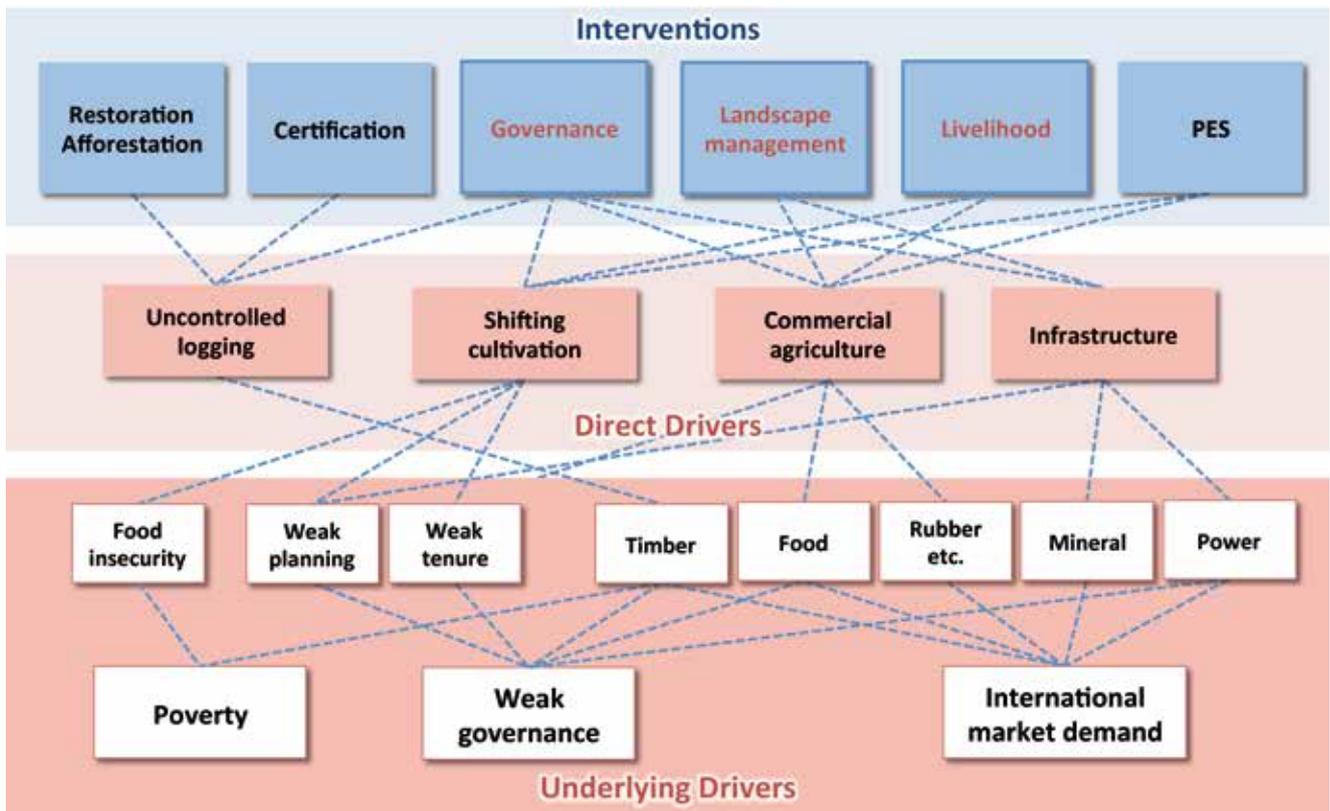


Figure 4: Direct and underlying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation and possible interventions (ER-PIN Lao PDR, 2015)

rubber, food, electricity and minerals. Figure 4 shows several main drivers of both deforestation and forest degradation and the complex interplay among these direct and underlying drivers that ultimately results in forest loss and degradation, as well as proposed interventions to address the drivers as outlined in the Lao PDR Emission Reductions Program Idea Note (ER-PIN Lao PDR 2015). However, and in consequence of a lack of quantitative and spatial understanding of national-level deforestation and forest degradation, the currently existing reports and analyses are unable to go beyond narratives to clearly map out causation.

Most of the deforestation but also degradation is linked to hydro-power development, mining, road construction and industrial tree plantations – mainly rubber – or agricultural plantations such as bananas. Timber extraction linked to such infrastructure development projects and establishments of plantations is a booming industry and the main source of all timber harvested in Laos. At least 1.1 million hectares of land have been allocated to concessions for infrastructure projects or agribusiness. According to a leaked report (Smirnov 2015) which analyzed

international leakage in four southern provinces, logging is taking place outside the designated concessions areas (making it illegal) at a tremendous rates due to a lack of enforcement and systematic corruption, often backed by high level politicians. Nearly all logs are transported across the border to Vietnam or China for further processing (EIA 2011, EIA 2012, Smirnov 2015). Immediately after the leaked report was published, the Department of Forest Inspection disclaimed figures reported as being untrue (Vientiane Times, October 30th 2015). Laos exported timber to China worth 1 billion USD in 2014 alone, where the export value was reported as representing just 8% of the value of imported timber declared by the importing country (Smirnov 2015). The most recent study from the UK-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA 2016) explains the high value of timber exported to China with a high percentage of these exports consisting of valuable rosewood species (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*) which are harvested and exported illegally since it is protected under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Compared to the early 2000s, Vietnam

has also dramatically increased timber imports from Laos, reaching a value of over 459 million USD in 2013. Although the Government of Lao (GoL) issued several Prime Minister's Orders and Decrees during the 2000s to ban the export of sawn timber and round wood, it was still possible to get exception letters which were issued for 98% of all timber exports from Laos in 2014 (Smirnov 2015). Besides this, the Lao military still plays a role in logging, backed by a decree to establish a 15 km military buffer zone along all international borders and, hence, often inside national protected areas where many of the remaining valuable trees can still be found (Dwyer et al. 2016). Saunders (2014) estimated that bribes and other unauthorized payments account for up to 40% of logging companies' overheads.

Shifting cultivation as practiced by the majority of the rural population, which accounts for approx. 70% of the total population, also plays a major role as a driver of deforestation and forest degradation. This rotational land use system is generally regarded as a sustainable form of land use that does not necessarily lead to deforestation unless land scarcity forces farmers to clear new land in forest areas (AIPP 2014). Traditional shifting cultivation

practices based on rotation and longer fallow periods of seven to twelve years allow recovery of soil productivity, however, recent practices have adopted shorter fallow periods, sometimes of less than three years. The pressure on land comes from population growth, which is about 2% nationally, combined with the shift in rural livelihoods from subsistence based agriculture to more market-based commercial agriculture – such as corn and other cash-crops – driven by demand from neighboring countries. The expansion of agricultural land is referred to as ‘pioneering shifting cultivation’ where encroachment occurs in forest areas often without returning to the original plots (Higashi 2015). Slash-and-burn practice leads also to additional deforestation and degradation due to uncontrolled forest fires, which not only pose a threat to forest land but also adjacent land use activities. Pioneering shifting cultivation has led to degradation and a mosaic of cropland and fallow land, especially in the northern provinces of Lao PDR (MAF 2005b, Lestrelin et al. 2013, FCPF 2014, Vongvisouk et al. 2014).

Recent developments in the Lao forestry sector

Several high-level documents such as the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020), the



Source: Sebastian Koch 2014.

Figure 5: Village forest management discussions

National Forest Strategy to the Year 2020 and the (Intended) Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) include the commitment to increase forest cover to 70% by 2020 through sustainable forest management as well as reforestation and afforestation measures. The 8th NSEDP specifically mentions the implementation of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanism (see Info Box) as a priority activity to mitigate climate change since most of Lao PDR’s emissions are

from the land use change and forestry sector with 83%. REDD+ and Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) are mentioned as key international mechanisms to contribute to the emission reduction commitments of Lao PDR in its (I)NDC. However, the Government of Lao PDR needs to take serious action to address the direct and underlying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation in order to reach their forest and climate change related targets. International initiatives such as the EU-FLEGT process

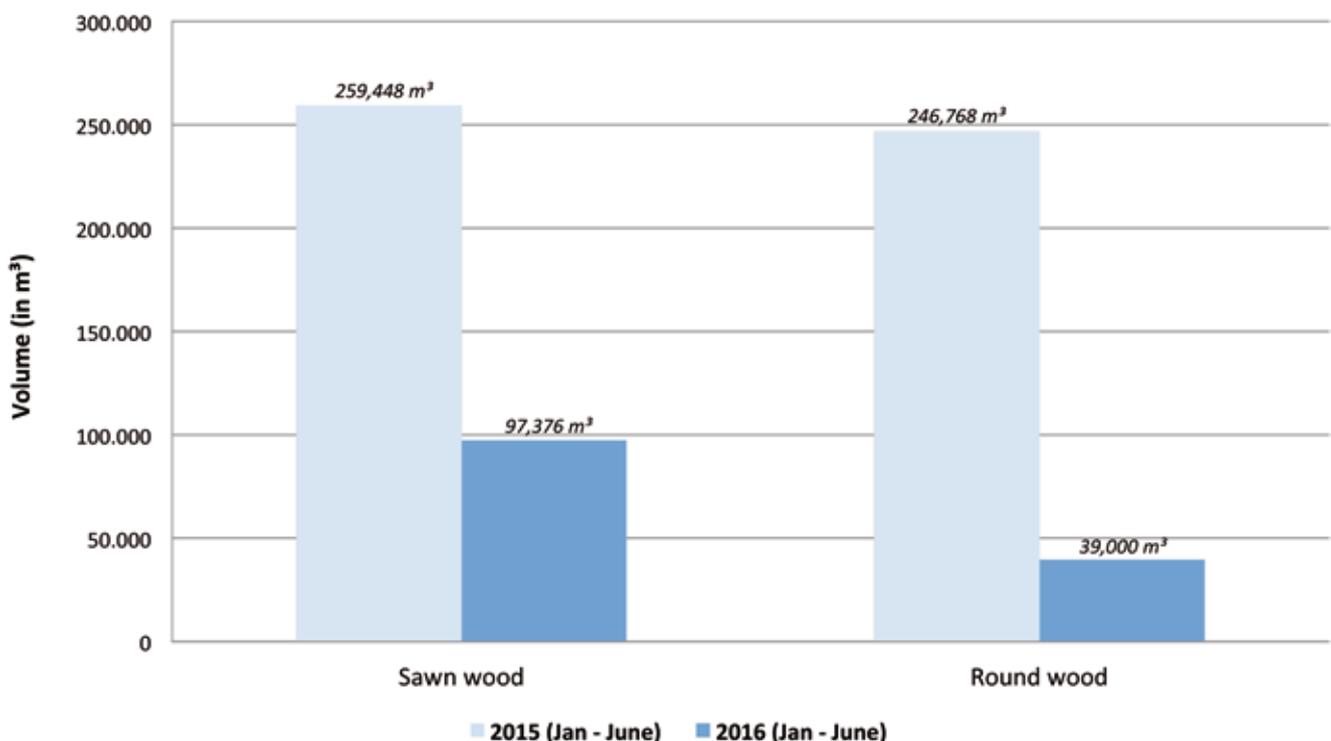


Figure 6: Analysis of Vietnamese customs data on sawn and round wood imports (Forest Trends, August 2016)



Figure 7: Timber truck in Xieng Khouang province

(see text box below) or the REDD+ mechanism, which – after a decade of negotiations – is finally enshrined in the Paris Agreement (article 5), could support Lao PDR in achieving their targets in terms of sustainable forest management and forestry related climate change mitigation. Laos' Department of Forestry perceives REDD+ as a key process that contributes to halt forest loss and destruction of national resources, mitigation of climate change and poverty alleviation. With the official acceptance of Lao PDR's Emission Reductions Program Idea Note (ER-PIN) into the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) Carbon Fund Pipeline in early 2016, managed under the World Bank, there is a high motivation among Lao stakeholders within the Department of Forestry but also outside to successfully implement REDD+. In September 2016 the GoL signed the 'Letter of Intent' with the World Bank. The acceptance paves the way to receiving REDD+

performance-based payments. The Emission Reductions Program area covers more than 35% of the national territory and accounted for 45% of all deforestation and degradation in term of area. The total emission reductions and removals performance is expected to be approx. 10 million tCO₂e within 7 years (ER-PIN Lao PDR). After several years of low progress/or standstill regarding REDD+ (Vongviouk et al. 2016, Dwyer & Ingalls 2015), Lao PDR has now the chance to get access to performance-based payments for emission reductions. However, in order to receive performance-based payments, the institutional framework conditions have to be established and proposed interventions need to be implemented.

In 2015, Laos's development of an ER-PIN helped channel effort into revitalizing REDD+. The REDD+ Task Force began to meet again, and the Chairmanship of the National REDD+ Task Force was elevated to the level of the Vice-Minister. In February

2016 a decision was issued to officially establish six REDD+ Technical Working Groups (Safeguards, MRV/REL, Benefit Sharing and Distribution, Legal Framework, Land Use and Land Tenure, and Implementation of Mitigation Activities). Each TWG has prepared Terms of Reference (TOR), which were approved in 2016. It was also in 2016 that the first two of the six Carbon Fund provinces officially established Provincial REDD+ Task Forces and Provincial REDD+ Offices with their own TORs. In April 2016, the new Government decided to reorganize some ministerial mandates, so now all responsibility for forest management has been returned from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Until early 2018 Lao PDR has to develop a full Emission Reductions Program Document (ER-PD) that includes for each of the six selected Northern provinces (Houaphan, Luang Prabang,

About: FLEGT

The European Union (EU) adopted its Action Plan on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) in 2003. The scheme promotes good governance in the forestry sector around the world, with the aim of reducing illegal logging and strengthening sustainable forestry at the national level. It is designed to prevent imports into the EU of illegal timber and wood-based products.

Although other countries have set up similar mechanisms (for example U.S. Lacey Act, Australia Illegal Logging Prohibition Act), the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) aims for a high standard of in-country engagement to improve forest governance based on a timber legality definition, a timber legality assurance system, and a multi-stakeholder process. It defines inter alia what constitutes legally produced timber, how to control the supply chain and how to verify legally sourced timber. Throughout the FLEGT process the civil society involvement plays a crucial role.



Source: Sebastian Koch 2015.

Figure 8: Village forest management planning Ban Lou

Oudomxay, Sayabouri, Bokeo and Luang Namtha) under the Carbon Fund a 'Provincial REDD+ Action Plan (PRAP)' which outlines mitigation activities to be implemented, expected emission reductions and the agencies in charge for implementation. Commitment to work on improving forest governance, a backbone of Laos' REDD+ strategy, was also confirmed through the recent commitment by the Prime Minister to enter into negotiation with the EU on FLEGT VPA (Voluntary Partnership Agreement).

The former administration already tried to better regulate the expansion of concessions in the mining and industrial plantations sector in 2012. Prime Minister's Order No. 13/PM 2012 regarding suspension of consideration and approval for new investment projects related to mining exploitation and surveying, rubber and eucalyptus plantations prohibits the approval of some concessions and by association the removal of timber from those areas. However, hydro-power projects and plantations for other species continue to be approved, hence there is an incomplete ban on the conversion of forest land, and this continues to be a source of timber from natural forests (DOFI & DOF 2015, Dwyer & Ingalls 2015). Since the first logging ban in the early 2000s, the Lao government has repeatedly tried to stop illegal logging and the export of unprocessed timber. The

last initiative to do so in August 2015 (Notice of Government Office, No. 1360/GO) has – like other initiatives – been implemented with only limited effectiveness. With Prime Minister Decree 31 of 2013, the GoL temporarily banned the harvesting of timber from National Production Forest Areas (PFAs). However, commercial logging in Production Forest Areas is not regarded as a major driver of deforestation due to the absence of marketable tree species of minimum harvestable diameter (Lestrelin et al. 2013).

The situation in terms of forest governance, however, seems to have slightly improved starting in early 2016. The new government, which took office in the beginning of 2016, is increasingly trying to combat illegal logging and timber exports. In May 2016, Prime Minister THONGLOUN SISOULITH issued an order (No. 15), according to which only finished wood products may be exported and the export of round and sawn timber as well as semi-finished products are prohibited without exception. Although there have been some decrees issued before to ban the export of unprocessed timber, it seems that there is higher commitment to actually implement the new decree. In addition, project developers and construction companies are prohibited from using any timber harvesting in infrastructure development projects in order to prevent the current practice that companies are paid through the

longstanding practice of bartering timber quotas (Anonymous 2000; MAF 2005b). Also, both the moratoria on concessions and timber harvesting in Production Forests have been extended. A Task Force has been established to enforce the instruction. Members of the Task Force have started the implementation of the instruction in the provinces which are considered as hotspots for illegal timber harvesting and trading such as Savannakhet, Khammoune, Attapeu, Bolikhamsay, Saravane and Sekong. Various government representatives at sub-national level have lost their positions or are being removed, for example the heads of several border crossings as well as district governors. Over the last few months, the new government has been addressing the issue of illegal logging through the media, more proactively and openly. In a newspaper article (Vientiane Times, June 6th 2016) it was suggested that the public can play the role of watchdogs in order to uncover illegal logging. The article also stated that "the government needs to make use of social media as a campaigning tool by creating a Facebook page where citizens can report suspected illegal activities and public officials can use this information for their investigation." In fact, Prime Minister THONGLOUN SISOULITH has called to post relevant information on his Facebook page, which is happening intensively. The reasons why the



Figure 9: Village guide at Nam Neun ecotourism site

government is now more proactive and committed to preventing illegal logging and in enforcing the existing regulations are pressure to collect tax revenues, pressure from the society through social media but also the recognition that timber resources are limited.

The latest government measures seem to have had an impact. Figure 6 shows that round wood exports to Vietnam fell by 84% in the first six months of 2016 (compared to the first six months of 2015); for sawn timber, the decline was 62.5% (Forest Trends 2016). The first reports of the established Task Force to investigate the enforcement of PM No 15 also show that in Attapeu province contrary to the statutory requirements, auctions have not taken place for more than 80% of the recorded logs, and therefore, the state has not been able to record any corresponding revenues from logging fees. At the same time, timber stocks at log landing 2 within Laos have increased to approx. 350,000 m³. Although the moratorium closes loopholes that have allowed for continued timber smuggling, there are still doubts whether the order will be properly implemented in the long run, as logging for major infrastructure was backed by family relations to the former leadership (RFA 2016a/b). The demand for timber from neighboring countries is a key driver of deforesta-

tion and forest degradation in Laos. If the Lao authorities are able to stop this demand in the long term, this would be a decisive step towards the preservation of natural forests in Lao PDR.

Conclusion

The paper highlights recent positive developments in terms of forest governance in Lao PDR, especially since the new government took over in early 2016. International processes and mechanisms such as REDD+ and FLEGT address similar governance challenges within the forest sector. Both are currently under implementation in Lao PDR. The FLEGT VPA is considered as an important instrument for REDD+ and, therefore, identified as one of the major policies, actions, and measures (PAMs) of the Lao PDR Emission Reductions Program under the FCPF Carbon Fund. Both FLEGT and REDD+ could make use of the current positive movements in terms of improved forest governance as important measures in order to improve the overall policy development process, transparency, accountability, land and forest tenure rights – which have not yet been secured – and safeguarding forest resources for local livelihoods.

As outlined by Dwyer and Ingalls (2015), REDD+ should not just take the ‘low hanging fruits’, it also needs to address the bigger drivers of

de-forestation and forest degradation, hence, not only addressing shifting cultivation but also drivers such as infrastructure development, and industrial tree and agricultural plantations. In terms of illegal logging as a main driver of forest degradation, the FLEGT VPA process could play a major role in clarifying legality and finally reducing the incidence of illegal logging.

In the course of the next two to three years, however, it remains to be seen whether the GoL takes serious actions to reduce deforestation and forest degradation and combat illegal logging. Will the recent measures and efforts just be short-term politicking and a drop in the bucket or will the GoL continue to effectively address all drivers of deforestation and forest degradation and not just blame shifting cultivators as the villains?

In terms of REDD+ and the Emission Reductions Program under the FCPF Carbon Fund, the country has to develop a functioning Measurement, Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) system, a REDD+ Strategy and a detailed ER-PD, a Benefit-Sharing and Distribution System as well as a Safeguards Information System (SIS) in order to receive performance-based payments. Another key measure is the establishment of a national system to ensure the legality of the timber

(Timber Legality Assurance System / TLAS) as the core of the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA). All of this needs to be done in the next two years. Although Lao PDR is affectionately referred to as—“Please Don’t Rush” it’s time now to move on and take advantage of the momentum to improve forest governance and protect and sustainably manage the remaining forest resources. Hence, Lao PDR should be interpreted as “Please Do Run” for the sake of the country’s remaining forests.

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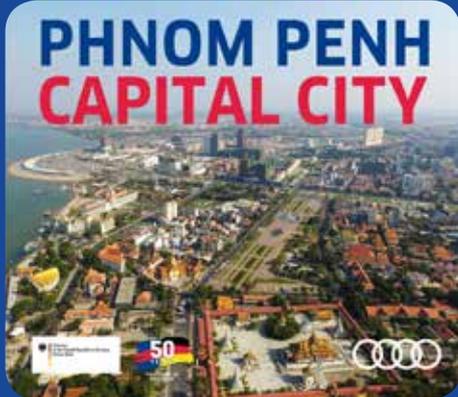
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"Light for Ca Lo"

Energy for Red Dao Minority in Ca Lo/Vietnam

Mathias Faust

In June 2016, two members of the German branch of Electricians Without Borders (*Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.*) travelled to the remote village of Ca Lo in Northern Vietnam. Their goal was to set up a small electricity grid, powered by solar panels, so the local people would have access to sustainable energy and thus sustainable growth. There, they encountered very helpful people, good food and amazing landscapes. But first things first...

The local situation

The Red Dao is one of nine ethnic minorities living in Northern Vietnam. Their village is set amidst karst rock mountains. Known for its water permeability, leading to beautiful cave formations, a karst rock landscape makes for harsh living conditions as it is not practical for agriculture and water consuming life in general.

The Organization DECEN (*Cao Bang Community Development Center*) was established to improve the lives of the Red Dao by undertaking initiatives for sustainable tourism and attracting foreign aid organizations. Tran Van Tri is DECEN's founder and chairman and focuses his efforts on developing the local infrastructure and increasing the trade of traditional products for the regional minorities.

For this worthy cause we joined Mr. Tri, his entity and the Red Dao, by set-

ting up an energy system in one of their villages. After an evaluation process, the very remote Ca Lo was selected by *Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.* because of its isolation from the thoroughfares and public power supply.

Thanks to constant and successful communication between the two organizations, our project leader, Peter Althoff, planned an energy system with solar panels and a local grid. To maximize the local added value, we decided to purchase all materials and services from local companies.

The local impact

Environmental protection is critical for the solutions *Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.* shares. For the project in Ca Lo we manage to reduce a lot of climate-damaging greenhouse gases by bringing in a solar power solution that will only

use renewable energies and succeed in meeting primary energy needs of the local people. The development phase where fossil fuels are transformed into electrical energy can be almost entirely skipped in this village.

Solar power is well suited for remote villages. First, after an initial investment, it generates electricity at a very low cost because no additional fuel is needed. Second, since solar panels have no moving parts, the maintenance is simple and low cost. Yet the returns for the local community are immense, for example:

- With a reliable electricity supply the possibilities for economic development grow: local products could be processed into more valuable products like soy beans to tofu, which generates a bigger income for households.



Figure 1: PV-Installation at Ca Lo Village

Source of all photos: Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.



Figure 2: Team and local partners of our PV-Project (f.l.t.r.): Mr. Chảo Văn Sáng (village head), M.Sc. Tom Kwakman (EoG project manager), Mr. Chảo A Sấn (Ca Lo village party secretary), Mr. Tran Van Tri (chairman of DECEN), Dipl.-Ing. Peter Althoff (EoG senior project manager), Mr. Quan Văn Hùng (chairman of Khanh Xuan commune)

- It has a beneficial impact on health: an electric mill could replace the local kerosene fueled maize mill, which generates lots of in-house emissions; a refrigerator makes the storage of food and medication easier.
- With electricity, technologies like radio and television, can connect the inhabitants to the rest of the world.
- Neighboring villages could see the benefits of electricity and install solar power, too.

Also the environmental protection is

critical for Elektriiker ohne Grenzen e.V. Because of this project in Ca Lo we manage to reduce lots of climate-damaging greenhouse gases. What is more: we only use renewable energies and succeed in meeting primary energy needs of the local people. The development phase where fossil fuels are transformed into electrical energy can be skipped in this village almost completely.

The local implementation

After landing in Hanoi, our first stop was Cao Bang, the province capital. Thanks to Mr. Tri, who drove

us around and helped with the practicalities. His translating skills were decisive to the success of our project. In Cao Bang we purchased long-life LED light bulbs and - to our surprise - LED light bulbs with integrated batteries. These were invented to provide light in unstable grids but they could also be used as flashlights – a very useful feature in areas without “street” lights.

Our next destination was Bao Lac where we closed a deal with the national energy company EVN. Mr. Tri facilitated the communication with the provider EVN (Vietnam Electri-



Figure 3: Transportation of a switchboard (207 kg)



Figure 4: Assistance from local community

Fact-sheet:

- Mountain village Ca Lo: 2150 m above-normal
- 22° 58' 49.52" N / 105° 48' 22.29" E
- 30 houses - about 170 residents
- water supply: several cisterns because of the karst rock
- 40 Solar Panels - 12 kg each
- 2 Inverter 5000VA / 4000W
- 2 switchboards - 207 kg each
- 700 m copper cable - weight: more than 800 kg
- 16 truck batteries - 12V-200Ah - 68 kg each
- only place for a phone call: ascent and descent with the amount of 2 hours - aprox. 2,550m above-normal
- final costs: approx. 23.000 €, only funded by donations

city Group) has something of a reputation for not being easy to work with however we found the local staff to be obliging and supportive of our project. We also had the advantage that the project leader, Peter Althoff, is appreciated by EVN as he had built one of the regional power plant

It was important that our project support local markets so we bought 700 m cable locally and hired three local electricians for one day, who ran the cable and did some in-house installations in Ca Lo one week later. Other necessary equipment, such as 5 metal poles, were purchased and welded at a small metalworking shop in Bao Lac.

Our journey to Ca Lo was an adventurous ride - our land rover had to make it's way up a narrow hiking path, but finally at the top we were rewarded with the astonishing beauty of the mountainous landscape in Northern Vietnam. The village children were already waiting for our arrival and you could tell from their faces how unusual it was for them to see non-Vietnamese people. After a welcome ceremony, we explored the area for the right place to put up the solar panels. Because of the steep terrain,

it would be necessary to build a flat terrace out of slate rock. We thought it would take two days to accomplish this but the young people of the village were incredibly skillful and completed the task in one afternoon. So we used the second day to explore the area and also searched for a spot where we could get cell reception. This took us on a one hour climb to the top of a mountain. Later, we were informed that the truck wouldn't be able to climb up the hiking path to the village and all the equipment had to be carried the 14km up the mountain on foot. This would have been an immense obstacle were it not for the village chief who gathered his citizens and the next day five 5metre tall iron poles, 16 truck batteries (each weighing 60 kg), 40 solar panels, 700m cable and half a ton of cement were carried up the path by manpower. Thanks to this extraordinary effort, it was possible to start the construction immediately. Over the next 4 days, the villagers, the construction worker from the solar panel company, the electricians of EVN and our team worked together and overcame obstacles like digging holes in stone and fixing broken poles. Two days ahead of schedule, the solar panel system with the local grid was ready for operation and the first light bulbs lit up in Ca Lo.

Our efforts also participate in improving the circumstances of education in Ca Lo by bringing electricity to the small village school. Now lessons can also take place through the dark winter months.

The local transition

It was very important for us not to repeat the mistakes made by others in development work who wished to transfer an energy system to people in need. Therefore, we had to think about designing a plan which considered the years after the set up, so no resources and donations would be wasted. For this project, apart from providing accurate instructions in how to deal with the energy system in various situations, we implemented a local payment system. Each household connected to the grid has to pay a small amount per annum to the village chief, who will collect the money for buying new batteries and other maintenance duties. All of this will be supervised by DECEN. With this plan we tried to maximize the sustainability of the project and hope that the people of Ca Lo could benefit from this technology as long as possible. And hopefully one day they can sustain themselves with clean and reliable energy with their own resources and help and inspire others in the transition to clean energy based economy.

And the transition has already taken place in Ca Lo. Students from the Hanoi University of Technology have come to inspect the off-grid solar system. Furthermore, they trained two villagers to maintain the plant, ensuring the longevity of this project.

This experience is an example of how the volunteer work of *Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.* leads to a sustainable development in societies who suffers from energy poverty.

About Elektriker ohne Grenzen e.V.

The German department of Electricians Without Borders originated from the French sister organization "électriciens sans frontières" and was founded in Karlsruhe in June 2012. Starting with 11 founding members, the organization now counts 40 members and is still growing.



Its goal is to enable the local people in developing countries to have access to energy supply and thus to sustainable development. Our work is entirely funded by donations and all members work voluntarily.

Website: www.elektriker-ohne-grenzen.de

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ElektrikerOhneGrenzen

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Will I be brainwashed? Holiday in North Korea

Anonymous*



An unusual destination for holidays: North Korea. As one of the most isolated countries in the world it is mostly in the press for its provocative activity or mass events. There is no free journalism in North Korea. Journalists from other countries are not allowed to enter North Korea, except when invited or have a special agreement. If tourists (and journalists) do have the chance to visit North Korea, they are accompanied by North Korean guides who give them a selected (favourable) picture of the country. However, there are disturbing reports including pictures taken surreptitiously that show aspects of real life which are visibly different from what tourists have been shown. These were the reasons that instigated my desire to take a first-hand-impresions trip to North Korea in 2015.

Because it is impossible for foreigners to travel alone through the country, nor even to go for a walk through the city, it is necessary to go through a tour operator to book a visit. Among the diverse tour operators offering individual and group tours to DPRK, the common feature they have is the obligation to work together with the tourism agency of DPRK, which supplies qualified guides for the tour. Visitors are always accompanied by tour guides who provide a positive story about the country and prohibit taking pictures which might contradict the story.

After selecting a tour operator, one of the first things I learned chatting with him was that within North Korea the country must be referred to as the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This name, he explained, is an expression of the desire to be reunified in the future with the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

My tour began at the Beijing airport with a flight to Pyongyang. There I was joined by other travelers. Our group was made up of people from different countries. During the flight, we watched a classical dancing show. There were no other in-flight entertainment options. The crew served us a horrible, dry "burger" with a quite good beer.

On arrival at Pyongyang airport we had to show all printed matter we brought with us because it is forbidden to bring in books about DPRK or China. After this procedure, our tour

guides, a man, a woman, an assistant and the bus driver, welcomed us and brought us to the bus, which would be our second home over the next days.

It is also possible to enter the country by train (except for Americans who are only allowed to take the plane). However, the trip from Beijing is quite a long trip of around 20 hours. Our first stop was the Pyongyang train station to pick up the rest of our group, including the man from the tour operator agency who always joins his groups. We had to wait a little for the train because there still seem to be problems due to the last time change in August 2015, when Kim Jung-Il decided to give DPRK its own time zone.

Because of the delay at the train station, our program started with din-



Figure 1: Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang, serving as the mausoleum for Kim Il-sung, the founder and eternal president of North Korea, and for his son and successor Kim Jong-il



Figure 2: Pyongyang, Changjon Street

ner in a restaurant. It was not what I would call a cosy restaurant. We arrived at a dark, unlit building, and went up to the first floor to an unheated room with stark lighting and some tables and chairs. Here I should mention that the temperatures in winter are similar to those in Germany. We were the only guests and therefore we asked ourselves if the “theater” was about to begin. For dinner we were served Hot Pot (a heated bowl containing some vegetables in hot water, meat and fish to cook in it) and beer again. Our local tour guides sat separately so we could not talk to them. After dinner we were checked into our hotel Yanggakdo. The hotel had some mysterious features like the absence in the lift of a button to the fifth floor (perhaps that is where the staff have their offices) and we

wondered if there are hidden cameras and microphones in the rooms. The lobby was impressive in contrast to the poor floors but the rooms quite comfortable. The tour guides also slept in the hotel and we were told that we were not allowed to leave the hotel on our own. Our room was on the upper floor with a great view about the city. When we arrived it was already dark outside and just a few buildings had lights. When we opened the window (yes, it was possible to open it normally) it was quiet, no noise from traffic or anything else. In the basement of the hotel there was a recreational area with swimming pool, bowling and a shop. I decided to go swimming. Maybe a chance to get in contact with other guests using the pool, but it didn't happen. 15 minutes in the swimming pool cost 4€, inclu-

ding looks of disapproval for my bikini, even though I asked before if it is ok to wear it. The heating system of the swimming pool seemed to be very simple so while swimming the warm and cold water take turns switching on because there was no water circulation. So the first evening ended with mixed feelings and a lot of potential for better experiences.

The program for the next three days was full and the guides were really intent on keeping to the time schedule so we quickly got used to their military-like intonation (“Shall we go on?” was a statement and not a question). We had to follow the rules and always ask permission before taking pictures. It was forbidden to take pictures of people who were working or in movement, as it should taken into consideration that this is a culture where people want to look at the cameras and smile. It was also forbidden to take pictures of the landscape while traveling on the bus. When we stopped we were shown what we could take pictures of. Forbidden were: ruins of houses, people walking along the street. The impressive monuments should be photographed just as a whole - not in details. There were also other rules: Do not soil or fold a picture of the leader on the newspaper, always bow in front of a monument ... we were reminded of the rules every time before we got out of the bus. The probability is high that when leaving the country the cameras will be inspected and any unacceptable pictures deleted.

The typical procedure was that as we rode along in our bright green tourists bus the guides told us something about the surroundings. We would stop at a monument, be given some instructions, get off the bus, visit the monument, get back on again and continue to the next stop. There was no opportunity for a walk through the city and anyway it was not allowed.

The first day we started with the **Kumsusan Palace of the Sun** (see fig. 1), where President Kim Il Sung and Chairman Kim Jong Il lie in state. Originally it was the Kumsusan Assembly Hall and the working place of President Kim Il Sung. But after his sudden death in 1994 it became the Kumsusan Memorial Palace and was opened to the public in 2012.

For the locals, the memorial palace is a very special, or even holy, place where they go in formal attire. This



Figure 3: Pyongyang, view from hotel (forbidden picture)

was mandatory for us, too. The procedure to enter the palace is similar to the procedure at European airports: it is required to take off your jacket and check your bag into a locker. Cameras, USB-sticks, etc. are not allowed. Afterwards we were scanned and walked across brushes to clean our shoes. We were given a guided tour through the huge palace and started with Kim Il Sung. We passed through an air-blowing gate, entered a dark room with his embalmed body and were given instructions on how to follow the customary ritual: go in a row of four people to the end of the body and bow, then to the left side and bow, then directly to the right side and bow, then go out. There were several groups of locals too, and it was disconcerting to see them crying while they bowed in front of the dead leader - all of them. It seemed to be a duty. Next we went into a room with hundreds of medals the leader had received from other countries. The third room contained souvenirs which honored the work of the leader. We repeated this procedure with Kim Jong Il. Then we visited the huge and impressive outside area and took some pictures.

After that we drove to the **Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery** on Mt. Taesong. Inaugurated in 1975, the cemetery is situated on a hill with view over the capital. It is the site where revolutionary martyrs had fallen in fights for freedom and independence of the country. The graves of their remains are lined with huge monuments and there is also national music playing. On the way there and back we saw many pedestrians and cyclists. There are hardly any people who own a private car. Because of the rain during the last days, water accumulated on the street under a bridge which we had to pass. It was prohibited to take a picture of the scene, because it shows kind of a mistake and that something is wrong.

Our program continued with the most famous "attraction": **The Statues of the Great Generalissimos** on Mansu Hill, which are two bronze statues of the leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. In the last years the statues changed from time to time the facial expressions and clothes. After bowing in front of the statues visitors were allowed to take pictures of the statues, but as a whole. Pictures of just a part of the statues would be an



Figure 4: Statues of the Great Leaders

affront. The visit was, like at the other places we'd been to so far, accompanied by national music which came out of small speaker boxes around the place.

The next stop on the itinerary was for souvenir shopping at the **foreign bookstore**. Here we could buy political books, cooking books, city guides, audio CDs and more things in different languages. Unfortunately, our tour did not include a visit to a supermarket or department store, though some tours do offer that possibility. And there are some stores where you can pay with foreign currency however your change will be given in US Dollars as tourists cannot get change in Korean People's Won, the local currency.

The foreign bookstore is close to the Kim Il Sung Square, the cen-

tral square in Pyongyang, and is best known as the square where the parades take place. It was built in 1954 and faces the river Taedong and the Juche Tower. On the ground, we could see many white dots in lines used as guides to help form straight lines during parades. And of course the pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il reminded us where we were.

The Juche Tower, erected in 1982, stands at 170 metres tall and is capped with an iconic, 20 metre high glowing red flame. The Tower is a symbol for the Juche Ideology the locals follow. We took an elevator to the rooftop terrace and again enjoyed a great view over Pyongyang. Afterwards we had lunch at the restaurant at the upper floor in our hotel. Of course, we were the only guests. While the beer was again very good the food was only ok.



Figure 5: Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery on Mt. Taesong



Figure 6: The Monument to Party Founding was unveiled in 1995

In Mangyongdae, some kilometers from Pyongyang, in the **Native House of President Kim Il Sung** is where the President was born on the 15th April in 1912. The Juche ideology has its own calendar and year Juche 1 corresponds to the birth date of Kim Il Sung. All dates in DPRK are given specifying both Christian and Juche era years. We visited the original house, which has the features of a traditional farmhouse. The guides never got tired of pointing out that the President came from a humble family.

Nearby there is also a theme park but it was closed for the season. North Koreans interviewed in documentaries about the theme park say they are grateful for this gift from their leader.

A highlight of the tour was the me-

tro ride. The metro is one of the deepest in the world. For locals one ride costs the equivalent of Euro 4 cents. The metro was full of people despite being a Sunday afternoon. We were not sure if it would have been crowded like this without our visit as per the rumors of “show” crowds. Some of the metro stations are very splendid with statues of the leader and mural art. Newspapers are hung in display cases for people to read while waiting on the quai. National music is played both in the stations and in the trains. The metro trains are old German trains from Berlin which have been repainted, but the scratches in the windows are still in German. The ride in the metro was one of the rare possibilities to be among the locals, but we were unable to engage with them.



Figure 7: The Arch of Triumph was built in 1982

We visited more monuments like the Arch de Triumph and the Monument to Party Founding. The **Arch de Triumph** was built in 1982 and is 60 meters tall. It honors the return of President Kim Il Sung in 1945 after the national liberation. The **Monument to Party Founding** was unveiled in 1995, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Worker’s Party of Korea. With its 50 meters tall symbols of hammer, sickle and brush it was very impressive.

Another highlight was the visit of **Kaesong**, a city close to the border to South Korea and the DMZ. While visiting the border, we were accompanied by a soldier and were given a short introduction before going to the place where a house stands half on North Korean and half on South Korean territory. On both sides were soldiers kept an eye on each other.

We spent one night in Kaesong, staying in a traditional hotel with wooden lodges and were told that this is a touristic attraction. The city center of Kaesong has some traditional houses, this was the first and only possibility to go for a short walk of about 10 minutes before we had to get on the bus again. As in every city we visited on this trip we saw a lot of pictures and monuments of the leaders. Adventurous people in our group had dog soup for lunch.

On the ride between Pyongyang and Kaesong we could see something of the country. There were very few cars on the highway; we saw more pedestrians than cars. We took a break at a lonesome motorway rest stop, a restaurant that was built on a bridge straddling the motorway. During our 30-minute pause, we were the only people there and only saw two other cars driving along the street. Along the rural roads we could sometimes see simple houses and people walking on the street or riding on simple bicycles. In the evening, when the sunset, there were barely any lights on and it was more a ride through the darkness.

On the way back to Pyongyang we entered the city by Thongil Street where the **Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification** stands since 2001. It represents the people’s will to achieve the national reunification between North and South Korea in the future. The two women in the monuments represent the two parts of the country.

Next stop was at the **Grand People’s**

Study House which is a library for books, media and locals can also attend the courses of foreign languages. Spanning 100,000 square meters it is an impressive 10-storey-building and visitors are welcomed by a marble statue of the leader in the entrance hall. In spite of the low temperatures outside the building was not heated and we saw people writing an English exam while wearing their winter coats. The contradiction was striking because on the one hand the Study House was a valuable place with a lot of learning resources but on the other hand it was apparent that little attention had been given to what we might consider as being an adequate learning environment. It was very cold inside and the technical features were very basic (not enough lighting in the reading rooms and no photocopiers). I asked one of the tour guides about the education system and he told me that children are sent to school when they are six years old. After twelve years they could study at the university. There are several universities in Pyongyang. On the first sights this seems to be similar with the education systems in Europe, but it remained unclear if everybody is given access to study at university.

Our last item on the agenda was the **Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum**. Outside we could see a lot of war material like bombs, parts of planes as well as a battleship. Taking pictures while visiting inside the building was prohibited. The national history of war was presented from the North Korean perspective and was illustrated with recreated historic sites.

We finished the tour with dinner at a barbecue restaurant where we met other tourists, besides those in our hotel, for the first time. The next day one part of the group flew back to Beijing, one part took the train and one part extended their excursion. At the airport, our cameras were not inspected by the security, though a man from our who left by train told me later that they inspected the pictures on the cameras of those who took the train.

Conclusion

Having visited some parts of DPRK, our impression of the country and the way of living there was very much based on the selected information gi-



Figure 8: Motorway

ven by our tour guides. We could ask them everything, but it did not mean that we got an answer every time. We were perplexed by the locals seeming lack of interest in us, foreign visitors. In DPRK they produce their own movies and TV program and have their own mobile network. It is likely for this that when quizzed our guide about pop culture references he didn't know any of those we named. The intensity of the leader cult is stunning. According to documentaries about the DPRK, locals would never say a critical word against the leader even though his shortcomings are obvious for us tourists. It would seem that they are, understandably, afraid of punishment



Figure 10: Monument to the three charters for national reunification

and probably they would not be able to compare theirs with other political systems. As I mentioned, the unheated buildings and low power was remarkable. The air smelled like coal. But we in our hotel we had heated rooms and every comfort we would have had in hotels of our countries, too.



Figure 9: Entrance area, Grand Study Hall

In the cities we visited we saw every 30 meters someone raking leaves; perhaps just a job to keep people busy? The lonely traffic policemen at the crossroads didn't have much to do as traffic was similar to that on a Sunday in a small German town. Or the woman in the motorway service who is waiting for guests, these sights seemed strange to us.

The tense atmosphere never relaxed, even during the fun moments singing karaoke with our tour guides on the bus. Everyone we came across, including the guides and the locals in the hotels, were always reserved, making it seem like we were part of a staged performance.



Figure 11: Propaganda poster, Kaesong

It is still quite surreal how isolated people are living there. Overall it was an interesting experience and I plan to travel again to DPRK in a few years as I am interested in pursuing the development of this country. Our tour operator told us that life in DPRK has changed in the last years, but very slowly.

***The author prefers to stay anonymous, because she would like to travel back to North Korea in the future.**

Book review

"Totenkranz"

Who would have thought Hanoi could be such a good setting for a film noir?

Britta Schmitz

End of January in Hanoi: the Tet-festival – Vietnam's New Year's celebration – has brought a pause to the usual hustle and bustle in the city. People have left the capital and returned to their home villages. Even the police headquarters is deserted. This is the only reason why political commissar Hung calls criminal detective Pham Van Ly, who had been suspended from duty 10 months before. An old woman was found dead on a construction site. Only a few hours later a Chinese real estate investor dies from what looks like food poisoning. What first seem to be unrelated incidents turn out to be a series of murders with the killer leaving a track of mysterious funeral wreaths. Ly jumps at the chance for this case as he sees it as the only way to get his suspension lifted. His investigations lead quickly into the corruption and nepotism related to Vietnam's real estate market. And while the grumpy detective with a taste for Thang Long cigarettes and beer is solving the case, the reader travels into the dark side of Vietnamese society with its corrupt officials, poor farmers and ruthless property sharks from China.

Film noir – or in this case roman noir – was the first thing that came to mind here. Hanoi, with its maze of old town alleys, its corruption and the hardly covered-up prostitution, in my opinion, is a very good setting for a "noir story." In this novel it is a dark, cold and often colorless Hanoi we are drawn into, not the exotic tourist destination which some might expect. Readers looking for some kind of feel-good book should better stay away from Detective Ly.

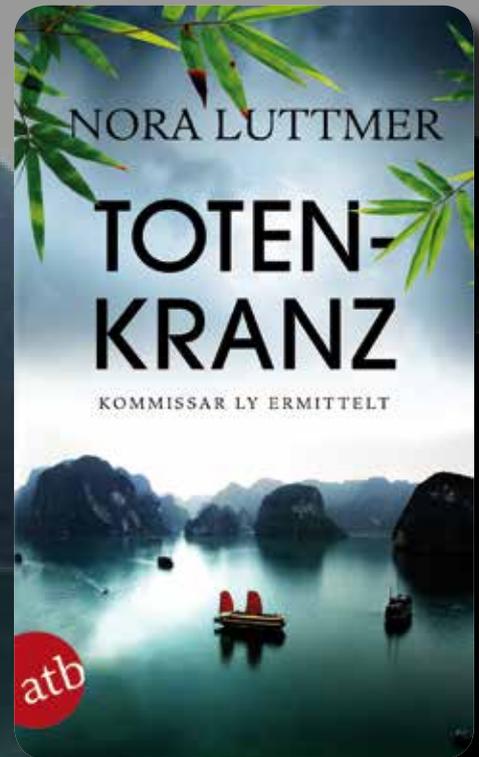
"Roman noir" is a subgenre of crime literature. Noir fiction mostly takes place in urban settings, usually rather

seedy corners of large cities. The protagonists are often described as alienated, anti-social loners with a pessimistic worldview. The crime in noir fiction is rooted in the social circumstances, the protagonist does not save the world and there is no happy end after the crime is solved.

Detective Ly is quite the anti-hero. Ly has been recently suspended from his job because he bought some forbidden tiger bone paste for his mother – clearly the sort of thing a higher ranking official with a good political network would have easily gotten away with. Now he is slowly losing control

over his life. It is a patriarchal world order he lives in. However, this order begins to crumble when his wife Thuy decides to take the fate of the family into her own hands and prepares to move to Singapore – without Ly. This hits the detective hard and adds to his existential angst. In Ly's world a man has to work, to provide for and protect his family and Ly is just about to fail in all three aspects. So, it would appear that Ly is the weak one. He is surrounded by stronger women: His wife Thuy, who takes her life into her own hands, his mother, being the matriarch of the house, his capable assistant Lan, and last but not least his daughter Huong, who understands the family dynamics much better than him. Lacking quite a bit of emotional intelligence, he is not able to show his emotions or to reach out; making it impossible to cope with the situation at home. His last resort is to solve the new series of murders and to get back into his job.

The author created with Detective Ly a deeply troubled figure, struggling to find his way in a time of social and economic transition, trying to follow his own moral compass and failing at times. The creation of such a character seems to be evident with regards to Vietnam's current transformation. After all, the noir genre and



Source: © André Lützen.

its anti-heroes also became popular in the Western world in times of major social transformations and increasing urbanization.

The question is: How Vietnamese is Detective Ly after all? The author Nora Luttmer studied Southeast Asian Studies, speaks Vietnamese and knows Vietnam well from many stays there. However, in the end she is not Vietnamese. Within the Detective Ly novels she assumes the perspective of a middle-aged Vietnamese man. This works, in my opinion, mainly because she is writing for a Western audience. Nevertheless, there are certain cultural experiences, which a foreign author will never be able to transmit. But we should not forget that this is an inherent problem which many authors face when writing from the perspective of the opposite gender or creating a protagonist with a different cultural background. This is why Donna Leon's Commissario Brunetti novels will probably never be translated into Italian even if they are bestsellers in so many other European countries. Unfortunately there don't seem to be many Vietnamese crime novels translated into

English or German. It would be nice to see what a fictional Vietnamese detective written by an actual Vietnamese author would be like.

As a European reader with some experience of Asia, I find that Luttmer's story and characters are believable. Luttmer got the idea for parts of the story from a real case of land theft and property speculation in Northern Vietnam. With a realistic plot "Totenkranz" works very well as a story and surprises towards the end with an unexpected twist. The characters are not overly complex, but they are credible. What's more, on top of an entertaining mystery the reader can also learn a lot about people's everyday life in Vietnam. Luttmer's vivid descriptions of Hanoi's markets, streets, cookshops or bia hois reveal her journalistic background and eye for detail. She takes the reader even deeper into the lives of average Vietnamese people when she portrays the cramped housing situation of Ly's family or when she describes the Vietnamese belief in ghosts and spirits.

This is already Luttmer's third Detective Ly novel after "Schwarze

Schiffe" and "Der letzte Tiger". Together with "Hanoi Hospital" by David Frogier de Ponlevoy (see my book review in "Pacific Geographies issue#46) this might be the beginning of a Vietnam-wave in the German crime fiction market. Readers of "Hanoi Hospital" can gain deep insights into the lives of Hanoians from all social classes, thus getting a much broader view into the Vietnamese soul. David Frogier de Ponlevoy has a truly an extensive knowledge about Vietnam and the Vietnamese culture. Indeed, his book at times is overloaded with facts. Nora Luttmer's "Totenkranz", on the other hand, has a gripping story and will also interest readers with little knowledge about Vietnam just looking for a good mystery novel.

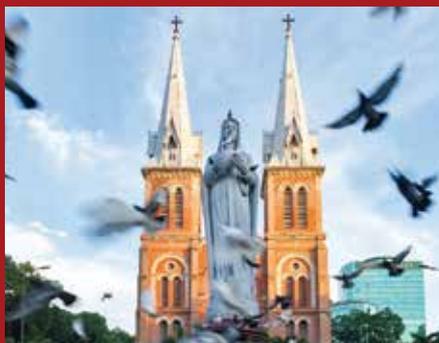
"Totenkranz" is a solid reading pleasure and I can recommend it to all fans of mystery stories or friends of Vietnam - provided they read German.

Bibliographic information

Luttmer, Nora: *Totenkranz*. Publishing House: Aufbau Verlag, Berlin, ISBN: 978-3-7466-3161-5. Currently only available in a German edition

Britta Schmitz [schmitzbritta@gmx.de] travels frequently and always with a crime novel in her luggage. She also knows Asia quite well with a Master in Modern China Studies and more than 10 years of living, studying and working in China and Vietnam.

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Excerpt from greeting of the Director of Goethe-Institut Vietnam, Dr. Almuth Meyer-Zollitsch:

Welcome to Ho Chi Minh City, the vibrant economic metropolis and biggest city of Vietnam, which recently emerged as the country's first mega city. Now, Ho Chi Minh City stands head to head with other mega cities such as New Delhi, São Paulo or Mexico City.

This book invites the reader on a journey through the familiar and lesser-known aspects of this fascinating city to witness its vibrancy and dynamism. Allow yourself to be taken by endless stream of traffic, which while chaotic, barrels forward, just like the city of Ho Chi Minh itself.

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