

## Rubber planting in Laos: local approaches to new challenges

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Svenja Haberecht

**Rubber Planting in Laos:  
Local Approaches to New Challenges**

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# **Rubber Planting in Laos:**

## **Local Approaches to New Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

*Svenja Haberecht*

A steadily growing demand for **natural resources**, especially in so-called Newly Industrialized Countries (NIC), implies far-reaching changes taking place within the global field of development cooperation and increasingly challenges regional power balances. This is especially true for the relationship between Laos, labeled as a Least Developed Country (LDC), and its economically and politically powerful neighbor China. Since the late 1990s, when China began taking a more active role in Laos, Chinese investment and aid to Laos has skyrocketed. At this point, Chinese companies are involved in all sectors of the Laotian economy, from hydropower and mining to agriculture and services. **Rubber plantations** form a considerable part of this investment, especially in the northern parts of Laos where several Chinese companies are implementing rubber planting projects. Of the \$26 million USD China has invested in northwestern Laos, \$20 million USD has been invested exclusively in rubber. Exports from Laos to China are expected to increase mainly due to rubber, with both countries seeking to increase trade profits to at least \$1 billion USD over the next few years (Asia Sentinel Consulting, August 2, 2008). This “rubber boom” (Shi 2008) has strongly reshaped the economy and social life in Laos. But is Laos ready for such a fundamental change?

This paper analyzes the changes and **local dynamics** set in motion due to expanding Chinese investment in the rubber sector in the remote area of North Laos. Therefore it takes a closer look at a **rubber project** currently being implemented in Muang<sup>2</sup> Mai by a Chinese rubber company. The analysis focuses on the unintended consequences of development projects such as rubber planting, and then evaluates the farmers’ resistance strategies to these consequences.

### Methodological Background

In order to analyze the rubber project in Muang Mai, I adopt Norman Long’s approach of the ‘interface analysis’ (Long 2001) which provides an opportunity to look at development processes from a multi-dimensional **actor-oriented perspective**. An actor-oriented approach

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extract of my diploma thesis (Haberecht 2009) which I submitted at the University of Bielefeld, Germany in May 2009. It is also available at: [http://lad.nafri.org.la/show\\_record.php?mfn=2046](http://lad.nafri.org.la/show_record.php?mfn=2046)

<sup>2</sup> Lao for 'district'.

is based on the recognition that even under similar conditions social life is made up of various social and cultural configurations. Accordingly, it contradicts structural models that explain social change and development as resulting from external forces - interventions by the state or international bodies. Long argues that the various local actors are perceived as either beneficiaries of national or international aid programs, or as passive victims of politico-economic interventions. Structural models neglect the fact that under certain circumstances “less powerful” actors can “make their voices heard” and thereby change the course of events (Long 2001: 12). To understand social change, a dynamic approach is necessary in order to underline the mutual interplay between **internal and external factors** and to recognize the central role of **human agency** and consciousness. Long postulates that structural models encapsulate the lives of the people thereby reducing their autonomy, whereas an actor-oriented approach places the social actors and their agency first (2001: 11). It attempts to analyze the **social processes** in which heterogeneity is produced and reproduced, manifested and modified, instead of just looking at the structural outcomes of these processes.

The ‘development projects’ most sociologists or anthropologists (Olivier de Sardan 2005, Long 2001, Mosse 2005) refer to are projects implemented in ‘developing countries’ by international development agencies and NGOs from member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). This study analyzes a different kind of project: a **rubber project** being implemented by a private Chinese company in a district in North Laos. The rubber project is also situated in a ‘target area’ for a German NGO (*Welthungerhilfe*) and its *rural development project*. Consequently, there are several different kinds of social actors directly or indirectly involved in the rubber project: The national government authorities, the provincial and district authorities, the Chinese rubber company staff, the villagers, the *Welthungerhilfe* project staff, and so-called ‘hinterland’ actors.

Understanding the rubber project as an **arena**, this study analyzes the interface situations which occur due to the introduction of rubber planting in the villages in the Mai district. The concept of **social interfaces** (Long 2001) provides the framework for the analysis of the conflicts that arise during the implementation of the rubber project. The focus is on the social processes and the interactions between individual social actors. Nevertheless, it also takes into account the influence of institutional, cultural, socio-economic, and political patterns that make up the social field.

In this paper I emphasize the *agency* of the farmers; i.e. the strategies they adopt in light of the conflicts that arise due to the implementation of the rubber project. Most studies on contract farming and rural development in Laos portray the Laotian population as unobtrusive

and obedient to governmental directives. On the contrary, I take the view that the recognition and appropriate analysis of 'peasant resistance' requires taking another look at common concepts of resistance.

Several studies have elucidated forms of resistance "from below". Chatterjee (2006), in "The Politics of the Governed," describes the **politics of resistance** which stem from marginal population groups in West Bengal that mobilize and develop into what he calls a "political society." In Muang Mai, however, an organized moral community that would think of itself as a "single family" (as do the settlers of a rail colony in Kolkata; see Chatterjee 2006: 57) is hardly observable. Rather, what can be observed are simple acts of opposition and more everyday forms of resistance. In line with Scott and his study on "Weapons of the Weak" (1985) I argue that the majority of peasant resistance practices are still widely overlooked since they do not meet the criteria commonly required for 'real' resistance methods, namely the collectivity and organization of revolutionary movements. Accordingly, I apply Scott's approach to my analysis on peasant resistance in Laos.

The research was carried out during a **three-month stay in Muang Mai**, a district within the northernmost province Phongsaly in the North of Laos, from January to April 2008. It was integrated into an internship at *Welthungerhilfe*, the German NGO carrying out an *integrated rural development project* in the Mai district. The empirical data stems from qualitative research in eight villages<sup>3</sup> in the rubber planting area, combining semi-structured focused interviews and group discussions, participatory observations, visits of rubber plantations, and subsequent ethnographic conversations with various stakeholders. During the research and writing process, I considered the 'Grounded Theory'<sup>4</sup> as an appropriate conception from which to establish the connection between theory and empiricism. In Alasuutari's words, I applied an approach that "instead of hypothesis-listing in the beginning, proceeds by pointing out mysteries and by gradually developing questions and answers" (Alasuutari 1995) during the research and writing process.

In the present paper I elaborate on the **local dynamics** set in motion by Chinese investments in rubber development in the North of Laos. I start off with a brief introduction of the socio-political situation of Laos and the government's national development directives from 2006 to 2010. Next, I describe the background of the rubber project in Muang Mai. The analysis of the rubber project then focuses on the **conflicts** that occur and are exacerbated in the villages

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<sup>3</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the informants the names of the villages (Lao: ban) have been replaced by numbers from one to eight (Ban One, Ban Two ... Ban Eight.).

<sup>4</sup> For further information on the 'Grounded Theory' see Strauss, Anselm L.: Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung: Datenanalyse und Theoriebildung in der empirischen und soziologischen Forschung, Wilhelm Fink Verlag GmbH & Co.KG, München 1994

due to the rubber project such as the problems associated with a lack of cultivatable land and food security. Finally, I analyze the **strategies** the villagers develop during the implementation process of the rubber project. The paper concludes with a discussion of forms of **peasant resistance** in Laos.

## Development Politics in Laos

With a per capita income of \$460 USD (2005), Laos is categorized as one of the fifty *Least Developed Countries* (LDC) in the world. While being a country rich in natural resources such as water, fertile soils and forests, plus being surrounded by dynamically developing neighboring countries, Laos, however, has for the most part been cut off from the economic development of Southeast Asia (see Haberecht 2009:21ff.; Lao People's Democratic Republic 2003: 29; Neudorfer 2007; UNDP 2008, ).

Since the end of the Cold War, the Laotian government has changed its course and has aspired to lead Laos from a LDC to the central point of transit in the region. With these goals in mind, the government has been promoting **rubber planting** as a key strategy to alleviate poverty and boost the national economy through foreign investment (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2006). In essence, the rapid expansion of rubber plantations instituted by Chinese investors in northern Laos reflects the extensive **socio-economic change** that the country is currently undergoing: The transformation from subsistence production based on rice cultivation to market production based on contract farming with (foreign) private investors.

The specific feature of the Laotian situation is its combination of a **market economy and socialist politics**. While the country's leaders foresee a complete change in economic, social and cultural matters, the political sphere has so far remained lodged in socialism. Thus, the rapid economic transformation is taking place in a political climate characterized by top-down measures of a one-party rule and weak civil society structures. On one hand, the Laotian government formulates large-scale investment contracts with foreign companies, and on the other hand, it hesitates to allocate land titles, to provide credit for small holders, or even to register civic organizations. Critics argue that the unregulated nature of the Laotian system enables a few "unscrupulous officials and businessmen" (Asia Sentinel Consulting, August 2, 2008: 3) to accumulate wealth at the expense of local communities and the environment. Altogether, the intended course of development causes great controversy in Laos and poses major challenges for the Laotian population, policymakers and development practitioners.

## The Rubber Project in Muang Mai

The province of Phongsaly consists of 613 villages with 26,000 households. With only ten people per kilometer, Phongsaly is the most sparsely populated region in Laos. It has very limited infrastructure and meager means for socio-economic development. From 1976 to 2000, the population almost doubled from 99,000 to 174,000 people. Rice is the staple food and is cultivated on rain-fed farmland. In all of Phongsaly, only 200 hectares can be irrigated (Welthungerhilfe 2007b).

One of Phongsaly's seven districts is Muang Mai. The World Food Programme categorizes the district as extremely poor and vulnerable. Altogether, 88 villages with a total of 4,600 families are located in Muang Mai. The total population consists of 23,000 people (Welthungerhilfe 2007b). The majority of them are **subsistence farmers** who depend heavily on shifting cultivation and the utilization of forest products. According to the Welthungerhilfe project report, in some areas there is a high proportion of environmental degradation such as deterioration of watersheds and deforestation. Slash-and-burn farming, animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, wet-land and dry-land rice cultivation, and livestock cultivation do not guarantee an adequate provision of basic supplies from agricultural production. The increase of forest clearing for logging and the dependence on non-sustainable dry-land rice cultivation on the steep mountainsides only exacerbate the situation. Welthungerhilfe notes that the food situation is precarious: More and more often, significant seasonal rice deficits as well as other nourishments deficits (e.g. non-timber forest products) of up to six months are occurring (Welthungerhilfe 2007b). The Mai district belongs to the remote rural areas that the government's development plans (see Lao People's Democratic Republic 2006) target. The aim is to eliminate shifting cultivation by 2010 and to shift from subsistence to commercial production with a concentration on agricultural exports. Hence, rubber planting is promoted as a suitable substitute for rice cultivation.

Officially, the whole rubber planting enterprise began with the signing of a **contract** (see Haberecht 2009: annex) between the Mai District Authority and the Thien Loui Ye Company Ltd. from Sipsongphanna in Yunnan, China. The project area affects 15 villages and 1,117 people. The total area designated for the planting is 7,000 hectares and has to be completed within five years. The contract complies with the '**2+3**' **contract farming model** which the government promotes and is most commonly seen in northern Laos (at least on paper, cf. Shi

2008). According to the model, the villagers' inputs are land and labor (2 factors) while the company provides inputs (capital, seedlings, fertilizers and equipment), technical advice, and access to markets (3 factors). However, there are frequently more than just two parties involved in contract farming in Laos.

In the following, I will describe the conflicts which emerged and show what **social and environmental consequences** the rubber project implementation in Muang Mai had. By analyzing the implementation process of a concrete contract farming project, I intend to illustrate how development directives (formulated at the national government level) and resulting investment projects (negotiated between province authorities and foreign investors) actually manifest themselves at the **local level**. The analysis shows how different actors at village level (villagers, district authorities, rubber company staff, Welthungerhilfe project staff, and other 'hinterland actors') clash with respect to different interests and hence negotiate and thereby influence the implementation process and its outcomes time and again.

## Challenges with Rubber Planting

The rubber project is more than just another livelihood option for the villagers. Rather, its implementation requires significant changes concerning the farmers' entire lifeworlds. Rubber planting has deep ties to issues such as land management, agricultural cultivation, environmental conservation, and animal husbandry. Thus, it challenges the farmers' former practices in these areas and puts their autonomy and food security at risk.

The inherent challenges found within the rubber project have a number of wider ramifications for the villagers' future. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on the different actors' interests, the specific challenges they face due to the project implementation, as well as the strategies they develop to cope with the situation.

## Conflicts over Land Use

The issue of land allocation for rubber plantations most clearly demonstrates the contradictory interests present to the different actors. Land tenure is a sensitive issue in Laos. Most farmers in Muang Mai (as elsewhere in Laos) do not have land title certificates; thus their land use is based on little more than customary use. In most villages in Muang Mai, Land Use Planning (LUP) has been carried out by the district authorities in years past. Accordingly, the areas surrounding each village have been divided into protection and conservation forests, production and use forests, and agricultural land use areas. In practice, the villagers do not



always stick to these land use plans but instead develop their own **land management practices** according to the emerging needs. As the subsistence farmers depend heavily on cultivation areas and different types of forests, conflicts with land management are closely interwoven with issues such as environmental damage, deforestation, and a lack of cultivation areas to ensure food security. With the rubber project, a new dimension is added to the situations and, as shown in the following, the former land use practices are strongly challenged.

Empirical data<sup>5</sup> shows that in 2007 most farmers in the rubber area planted rubber on fallow land formerly used for upland rice cultivation. But this data also reveals an upward trend in the cutting down of **protected forests** for rubber plantations. The district authority's guidelines stating that rubber planting is to be done only on fallow land have not been kept, resulting from varying situations.

In *Ban*<sup>6</sup> *Three*, the deputy *Naiban*<sup>7</sup> plants rubber mainly on secondary forest land. However, "a little bit" of rubber is already planted in protected forests, he states. He further explains: "Our village does not have enough areas for rice cultivation. The rubber plantations are former rice cultivation areas. The *Naiban* and I have to go to the neighboring village to ask for areas for rubber planting and rice cultivation. My rubber area is in another village, I bought the land from them."

*Ban Five* does not have a land use plan yet because the whole village relocated from higher in the mountains to its current site. According to the *Naiban*, the company staff told them that they can also plant rubber in the protected forest but he himself refuses to let this happen. "We plant along the road the company constructed, but not in the forest. We still want to use the forest's wood for houses, sheds and firewood."

The *Naiban* of *Ban Six* states that until recently, they planted rubber and rice wherever they found suitable land. "Yes, also in the protected forest," he affirms. Land Use Planning has been carried out in the village; however, the farmers still plant "everywhere." The *Naiban* explains: "First, we made rules about protected forest areas, cultivation areas and so forth, but other villages used the areas anyhow, so we do it as well."

The *Naiban* of *Ban Seven* states: "In the past, rubber was not allowed to be planted next to the road. Now the Chinese company says it is permitted. If a village plants

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<sup>5</sup> All citations in the following stem from field notes which I took during interviews with farmers in the eight villages analyzed in Muang Mai during February and April 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Lao for 'village'.

<sup>7</sup> Lao for 'village headman'.

more than 300 hectares the company constructs a road.” Asked about cultivation areas, he explains: “We still have a lot of areas for rice cultivation, but maybe we also have to plant in protected forests once all other areas are planted.”

In *Ban Eight*, the *Naiban* refuses to cut protected forest or watershed forest. “That’s nonsense. If they plant in protected forests, then what good is Land Use Planning anyway?”

Indeed, the empirical material reveals that in several villages LUP is understood merely as a formal procedure rather than an obligatory directive. As illustrated, in some cases villagers consciously ignore the LUP as it has proven to be more of a hindrance than an advantage for them. Others refuse to follow the company’s instructions to cut down protected forests for rubber plantations as they profit in other ways from the wood. However, in villages where LUP has not been carried out, the tendency to plant in protected forests is more likely. Both *Ban Seven* and *Ban Five* relocated their villages and therefore do not have a land use plan. Notably, both *Naibans* state that the company also told them to plant rubber in protected forests. This leaves one to speculate on whether or not the company has consciously recommended this practice only where legal requirements are lacking. In some villages, LUP does exist but the farmers cannot maintain these obligations anymore as areas for agriculture are decreasing and they simply cannot find other viable farming areas.

Altogether, the overall **shortage of viable land** in Muang Mai is a main reason for the conflicts over land allocation for rubber plantations. As illustrated, some villages in Muang Mai have an excess of land, allowing other farmers from other financially strong villages to plant rubber on their land. But those farmers who already face a shortage of cultivation areas and who do not have paddy fields face even more restrictions. Due to the rubber project, they have to use parts of their rice cultivation fields for rubber trees. Where fallow land and secondary forests do not suffice, there is a tendency to cut down protected forest land for rubber plantations. Farmers who plant more rubber over the next few years will face an even more serious shortage of land for rice cultivation.

The lack of cultivatable land is a common problem throughout Laos. The national government attributes this to the practice of shifting cultivation (which it considers primitive, unproductive, and resulting in deforestation), and intends to tackle the problem by eliminating shifting cultivation by 2010 (cf. Lao People’s Democratic Republic 2006). Hence, it defines the change from subsistence production (based on shifting cultivation) to commercial production (based on tree plantations) as a major development target for the rural regions. Just as the national development directives define commercial production as a substitute for

shifting cultivation, the provincial government in Phongsaly projects a complete shift from rice cultivation to rubber plantations for the villages involved in the rubber project. However, the district officials recognize that the rubber project exacerbates the problem of land shortage and thus they intend to considerably reduce the areas for rubber plantations.

The Welthungerhilfe project staff is also concerned about the consequences the rubber project has on land management in the district. Altogether, the conflicts between the two projects result from their opposing courses of development: While the Welthungerhilfe project defines lowland rice cultivation on irrigated paddy fields as an alternative to upland shifting cultivation, the rubber project causes a complete shift away from rice cultivation and subsistence farming to commercial production. Thus, the two projects, implemented in the same villages, try to recruit farmers for two divergent ways of life. A frustrating factor for the villagers is that they are not actually free to make this important decision.

The farmers in Muang Mai have for centuries practiced slash-and-burn farming for the cultivation of rice, their staple food. Now they are ordered to turn away from subsistence production and participate in a market economy by planting rubber trees. Apparently, the farmers were not and are not aware of the government's intentions for a complete shift. They know about the policy to stop shifting cultivation and they have a substantial role in the rubber project with the Chinese company. However, they perceive rubber planting as an additional component to their livelihoods that has to be integrated into the ongoing farming system rather than viewing it as their future trade.

Accordingly, Alton et al. in their Para Rubber Study argue that "dependency on a single crop is counter to traditional mechanisms of most ethnic groups in Laos of spreading risks through diversification of enterprises. Additionally these monocultures contribute to the loss of indigenous knowledge of natural resource management" (2005: 71).

### **Food Security at Risk**

In addition to the decrease in forested land for non-timber forest products (NTFP; such as fruits, nuts, vegetables, medical plants) and the dwindling land possibilities for rice cultivation, the villagers' food security is at risk due to the tendency to plant rubber as a **monoculture**. The possibility of intercropping the rubber plantations with cash crops was one option. Agricultural experts throughout Laos widely promote intercropping (see also NAFRI 2005, Volume 2, Alton et al., 2005, NAFRI 2006). Intercropping has positive effects on soil fertility and it also reduces the risks of yield and price fluctuations. Furthermore, for rubber

plantations it is particularly advantageous to intercrop with cash crops because cash crops bring in a regular income, thereby bridging the time gap from planting until the rubber sap can be harvested (which takes seven to eight years).

Most of the farmers plant rice in between the rubber seedlings in the first year, but afterwards the rubber grows as a monoculture. The villagers in question are neither informed about the possibilities of intercropping nor do they receive assistance with crop cultivation. On the contrary, most farmers I talked to mentioned that the rubber company has placed restrictions on intercropping. Many village headmen state that they are only allowed to intercrop with maize - no other cash crops or trees - because the company is afraid other plants would compete with the rubber trees (*Ban Five, Ban Six, Ban Seven, and Ban Eight*). Accordingly, some farmers plant maize as animal feed. In some villages the farmers state that they are allowed to intercrop with chili, sesame and beans, but the farmers either do not have enough time due to other tasks (*Ban Four*) or the soil is not suitable for these specific crops (also including galangal). The company has told the farmers that with introduction of intercropping practices, rubber yields would decrease. None of the villagers mention soybeans or peanuts which are named as suitable cash crops in the 'district paper' (see annex). Only after a specific inquiry did the *Naiban* of *Ban Seven* explain that the district recommended soybeans and peanuts, but that the soil is not suitable.

All the villagers who were directly asked about intercropping reported that the rubber company had not made any offers for other cash crops. Quite to the contrary, the rubber company staff apparently forbids intercropping because they are afraid that rubber trees and cash crops would compete with each other. Alternatively, the company offers to provide some villagers (e.g. *Ban Seven*) with rice for eight years - basically until the rubber can be harvested. Later they would have to pay the rice back in rubber sap. The villagers are aware that this arrangement would make them highly dependent on the company and state that they do not want to take the offer - unless they have no alternative.

The rhetoric of the 'district paper' on cash crops conveys the fact that the local authority would like an overall movement from subsistence to market-oriented production (as outlined above). This objective poses a great challenge for the farmers, especially during this transitional phase. The farmers have to bridge a time gap of up to eight years from the time the rubber is planted until the time when the trees can be tapped. In the worst case scenario, this would mean eight years in which they have no income and not enough time, labor, and land for other cash crop or subsistence cultivation.

The district paper's recommendations instruct the farmers to plant cash crops in order to receive an income that enables them to buy rice at market price during the rubber tree growing period. Once the trees can be harvested, the yield is assumed to be high enough to ensure enough income to get by without personal paddy fields. But the fact that the rubber company simply offers rice to the farmers shows that cash crop production for income is not promoted as a viable alternative. Moreover, the 'district paper' also says that "the soil does not have enough nutrients for cash crops" (Art.2) and thereby contradicts its own initial plan to promote cash crop cultivation. An important question is how much of the long awaited income from rubber sap would remain with the villagers anyway, once tools, rice, and other costs of production would be paid back in rubber sap.

Besides rice and cash crops, NTFP are of considerable importance to the villagers' food security. As rubber planting expands into forests and grasslands, it is predicted that the relatively poorer families depending on NTFP for food and household income will have even fewer options to ensure food security in the near future. Thus, instead of contributing to poverty eradication (as the government promotes) rubber planting as implemented within the rubber project in Muang Mai may indeed even exacerbate the precarious food situation.

### **Livestock in Conflict with Rubber**

In its current phase of implementation (area selection and planting), there is an apparent conflict between rubber plantations and the grasslands needed for buffalo that has very far-reaching consequences on the current village life. Livestock plays an important role in maintaining the livelihoods of the farmers in Muang Mai (and elsewhere in rural Laos). Poorer farmers in particular see livestock as an important means of poverty reduction. For the farmers in Muang Mai, cattle and buffalo are important sources of income in times of a weak rice harvest. Moreover, the buffalo is a status symbol in the villages. It is striking that, among the villages, those with a greater number of buffalos are those who are better off in many respects. Hence, cattle and buffalo are important for the villagers both in economic and cultural respects. The rubber project brings along with it a drastic change regarding animal husbandry.

The rubber contract forbids the farmers to raise their animals (cows, buffalos, goats, horses, and others) in the rubber planting areas (Art.6). If a rubber tree is destroyed by an animal, the farmer has to pay a considerable amount for the damage, namely \$5 for a one-year-old plant, \$10 for a two-year-old plant and \$5 more for each year the rubber tree has grown. In its paper the district authority reports that animals are not allowed to have access to rubber plantations.

The paper instructs the village headman and the villagers to “ensure appropriate planning for their animal husbandry.”

The research shows that the villagers do not receive any advice on how to set up an appropriate animal husbandry system within the context of rubber planting. In the past, livestock versus cultivating area conflicts appeared as well, but they were reconciled between the villagers themselves. When the animals would wander into rice cultivation areas in the highlands and destroyed or ate rice, the rice farmer and the cattle owner jointly negotiated a solution, the *Naiban* of *Ban Four* reports. Usually, those farmers who had fenced in their fields got a higher compensation, he explains. According to him, problems only occurred if the animal owner could not be identified; in that case, the rice farmer had to bear the costs of the damage himself.

However, since the start of the rubber project, the farmers are more and more concerned about their cattle and the potential for damage caused by the cattle on the rubber plantations. During the interviews they even asked me whether I could give them advice on how to do animal husbandry in the context of rubber planting. Some farmers have brought their buffaloes to other villages that have not planted rubber because they do not have any grasslands left for them (*Ban Two*, *Ban Four*). Other villages have already sold all of their herds of cattle. A farmer in *Ban Five* reports:

“Earlier we had 50 cows. The Chinese company told us that we have to sell our animals. If a family does not sell their animals and the animals eat the rubber, the family has to pay a lot of money. We do not have a choice in the matter. Now it is getting worse for us because we have already spent the cash.”

Those villages that still have their buffaloes or cows are thinking about selling them because they either are not able to put up a fence (because of roads or a lack of materials) or do not have enough manpower left to maintain the buffalo herds. Others are still able to separate their rubber area from other land, but in the future might not have enough grassland left due to the expansion of rubber plantations. The buffalo-rubber conflict is a serious issue in all the villages studied. Several problems arise if the buffaloes are sold. The *Naiban* of *Ban Six* outlines the triple role buffaloes play in the farmers’ livelihood: (1) working animals on the paddy fields, (2) a source of income and, (3) producers of fertilizer for the paddy fields.

The issue is clearer against the backdrop of the district policy regarding animal husbandry and agricultural areas. “This is not a new problem,” the deputy head of the district authority explains in an interview. Over the last twenty years, buffaloes have been raised in several villages without any regulations. Now the district authority wants to limit buffalo husbandry

to business purposes only and plans to set up specific ‘buffalo zones.’ “Some villages have wide grasslands and all villagers invest in buffalo husbandry for their profession. In these villages we don’t want to plant rubber anymore. In other villages we want to set up ‘cash crop zones.’ No buffaloes should be raised in those villages. Crop cultivation clashes with buffalo husbandry.”

The idea of different zones for different forms of production resembles the national government’s ‘master plan for northern development’ which is at present in formation in Laos’ capital city Vientiane. It receives input from the highest provincial officials of nine provinces in the North of Laos. The plan provides for the establishment of key areas for industrial development in the northern regions including hydropower, export, trade, tourism, mining, agriculture, and forestry for processing purposes (Vientiane Times, July 3, 2008). Furthermore, the plan defines which regions shall concentrate on which businesses: “Luang Prabang province will be the economic hub of the north, with Xayaboury designated as a rice-producing province to supply the rest of the Northern provinces. Oudomxay province will focus on producing vegetable crops and beef, while Xieng Khuang province will undertake animal breeding” (ibid.). What the district officials have in mind for Muang Mai seems to be a smaller version of the national directive for the whole of North Laos.

Remarkably, the villagers do not seem to be aware of the local authority's intended changes. As in the case of rubber planting, the zoning plans are made without involving the villagers in the decision-making process. The *Naiban* of *Ban Six* states, for example, that he would prefer a concentration on livestock rather than on rubber planting. The buffaloes and cattle are of high value for the villagers and they complain about the serious disadvantages related to the loss of their cattle and buffalo.

### **Hindrances to Private Rubber Planting**

Private rubber planting is perceived as a favored alternative to planting rubber under contract. However, the autonomy associated with private planting is only feasible for a handful of farmers. Individual relationships and networks play a major role both in extending local knowledge and in gaining subject-specific knowledge. Important actors that help to foster and create these connections are ‘hinterland’ actors. These are relatives and friends from China or other provinces in Laos who have experience in rubber planting both as a personal investment and with a company. They remain important sources of information for the farmers in Muang Mai and provide them with both material inputs and information.

According to the ‘district paper,’ those families who have enough capital are also permitted to plant rubber apart from the company, but may not plant in the area under the company's control. Those who had already been planting rubber *before* as a personal investment in the selected area nevertheless have to now cooperate with the company. In this case, the company compensates the farmers with 8000 Kip (approx. \$1 USD) per plant. The contract not only defines the terms for the selected ‘rubber area,’ but also for the areas outside the project areas that will be planted with rubber. The farmers growing rubber as a personal investment have to sell the yields from their own trees to the company as well. These regulations cause indignation among the farmers.

Throughout the villages, and for certain actors, there is a significant range of possibilities for gaining knowledge vis-à-vis relationships with other actors. The exchange of experiences among the ‘rubber villages’ in the Mai district differs as well. Some villagers (mostly the *Naibans*) have pre-established communication lines with other villages and exchange knowledge and experiences, and use these lines to also collectively coordinate resistance against the rubber project. Other villagers state that they do not communicate on the topic of rubber with farmers from other villages at all. Some villagers also gain knowledge of rubber planting from other districts in Phongsaly province.

According to the deputy *Naiban* of *Ban Three*, his relatives from China had told him of their struggles (regarding profit share) with the company and the contractual obligations. Consequently, he decided to plant rubber on his own. He states that he knows of rubber experts in Luang Namtha who will provide him with information about rubber planting. The case of *Ban Three* very clearly shows the conflicts that arise at the interface between private rubber planters and the rubber company:

“We got the order to plant rubber,” states the deputy *Naiban* of *Ban Three*. “There has been a meeting in Muang Mai. The district authority and the rubber company wanted to know who plants rubber privately. Those farmers do not have to plant any more rubber with the company. I did not go there because our village does not want to participate. I would rather plant rubber privately but the district head said I have to plant with the company.” The deputy *Naiban* has enough income and the necessary information to plant on his own. Last year he planted 800 rubber trees and wants to plant more than thousand trees this year. He bought the seedlings from Oudomxay for 12.000 Kip per plant, he states. “If I have to cooperate with the rubber company, I want my money back.” He reports that he had to sign a contract for the whole village after a village meeting had taken place. “We are all discontent with the contract. But



there is no alternative.” According to him, the contract defines a profit share of 80:20 but later the company said it was 60:40. He does not know why and sees no opportunity to verify this because the Chinese took the contract with them. However, the contract is not as relevant for him: “I am not worried about the signature. I will do as I wish anyway.”

Although his room for maneuver is wide compared to other farmers I talked to, he is still subject to restrictions from the local authority. He had to sign the contract even though he and other farmers in *Ban Three* dislike the agreements stated therein. He has to cooperate with the company even though he has already planted rubber privately. But he is also willing to mount resistance and enter into negotiations about the compensation paid for the seedlings. *Ban Three* is one of the wealthier villages; however, socio-economic differences clearly exist in the village. Some farmers have no income, depend solely on upland rice cultivation, and suffer from a lack of cultivatable land and a subsequent rice shortage. Consequently, they have fewer options, less room for maneuver, and less negotiating power.

On the whole, it is apparent that the challenges that arise from the rubber project implementation differ considerably between the villages and the individual farmers. The more connections a farmer has, the better his or her access to potentially valuable knowledge and thus the wider his or her room for maneuver. The farmers with more capital have more options in planting rubber as a personal investment. Relationships and networks with other farmers and actors involved in rubber planting are additional advantages. Farmers with more income also have better access to knowledge as they can travel to gather information about rubber planting in other provinces and draw comparisons (e.g. *Ban Two*, *Ban Three*, *Ban Six*). But since the rubber company started its business in the area, the situation has changed for the worse, even for the more privileged villagers.

Currently those farmers who plant rubber privately are forced to cooperate with the company. According to the primary contract, the provincial authority grants the company the “right[s] to monopolize in investment on plantation, buying, and processing of rubber in the areas stipulated” (Art.13). Above all, the ‘district paper’ declares that even those farmers who plant rubber on their own *beyond* the project area have to sell their yields to the *Thien Loui Ye Company Ltd.* Therefore, the farmers are deprived of a significant alternative to contract farming. Altogether, the instructions attached to the rubber project have a tendency to lead the villagers from autonomous subsistence farming to dependent competition in the commercial production arena.

## Villagers' Strategies Related to the Rubber Project

The farmers in the rubber project area develop different strategies to cope with the challenges that result from the Chinese company's introduction of the rubber project. In the following, some of these strategies are analyzed with regards to the villagers' lifeworlds, their social networks, and their agency.

### **Learning by Doing**

The villagers in the rubber area in Muang Mai do not express doubts about their insufficient level of technical knowledge of rubber planting. They are used to planning things on short notice and are not concerned about issues that are still some years away. In contrast to rice cultivation, rubber planting is a long-term initiative: It takes seven to eight years for a rubber tree to grow to a point where it is economical to harvest the sap. Consequently, rubber is not an interesting option, especially for older people without children, the *Naiban* of *Ban Six* explains. Most of the farmers in the district are more concerned with present issues and address questions about future tapping, marketing, or tree share with indifference or speculation.

In *Ban Two*, the farmers are not sure who will do the tapping once the trees produce rubber sap. The *Naiban*, who plants rubber privately, does not yet know to whom he will sell the latex. In *Ban Five* and *Ban Eight*, the *Naibans* postulate that they will learn how to tap from the company. "I don't know yet. Maybe the Chinese technicians will show us how it works when the time comes" (*Naiban* of *Ban Eight*). The *Naiban* of *Ban Four* assumes that the Chinese technicians from the company will do the tapping themselves. The deputy *Naiban* of *Ban Three* who plants rubber privately states: "I don't know much about rubber, but I want to learn about it in the next few years." He plans to get advice from rubber experts in Luang Namtha (Laos). "They do the tapping once, then I will learn it and be able to do it myself."

This strategy is understandable regarding the lifeworlds of the villagers. Most of the villagers have only attended school for two years and their agrarian-oriented lifestyle encourages them to rely on practical knowledge gained through life experiences. Many of the agricultural practices are passed on from generation to generation. They also gain knowledge by keeping an eye on other farmers, friends, and relatives, especially with regards to new ventures. They take notice of other farmers' activities, ventures, successes, and failures and make decisions accordingly. In doing so, they develop extensive know-how that helps them to deal with

varying challenges in their specific environment. Therefore, relationships with other farmers are a crucial source of knowledge for the villagers in Muang Mai.

### **Pressure and Hope**

In some villages, the farmers express their sentiments towards rubber either as a passive reaction to pressure from the local authority or as a hope that rubber will improve their lives. Often, it is a mix of both.

In *Ban One*, the villagers who were questioned responded with a quite passive attitude towards the transition from slash-and-burn to contract farming. “We do not know how to continue without shifting cultivation. We have no idea, it depends on the government,” the *Naiban* says. With regards to rubber planting he states that each family has to plant rubber or else must pay a fine of 800.000 Kip (approx. \$10 USD) to the head of the district authority.

The *Naiban* of *Ban Four* declares: “I have no information about rubber. If I do not plant rubber, the area will be allocated to another village for rubber. I plant because otherwise I lose the area. I hope that rubber will improve my future life.” Asked about what would happen if some families refused to plant, he states: “All families want to plant rubber for their future, there are no conflicts.”

In *Ban Seven* the answer to this question is clear: “Bor dei.” – “That is impossible.” The village has its own technician responsible for rubber. He receives 600.000 Kip (approx. \$73 USD) annually from the company and five percent of profits from each hectare of rubber. Additionally, he receives a \$100 USD premium for being diligent - he and another family planted 700 and 1000 rubber trees, respectively. However, knowledge about rubber is limited in *Ban Seven* as well: “Chinese technicians come to the village bi-monthly. They say rubber is good. I don’t know much about it. I cannot say whether rubber is good or bad, but in China I saw that many farmers have rubber and a lot of money,” the *Naiban* reports.

*Ban Five* has already held five village meetings about rubber planting. However, the farmers’ discussion was limited to talking about the five instructions from the ‘district paper’ (see annex) and further information was not presented. When asked about the villagers’ opinion towards rubber, a villager states: “I don’t know whether the *Naiban* has asked about that.” His answer shows that he may not have a personal opinion on the matter, and instead leaves the opinion making to a third party. Notably, he is a member of the village authority whose responsibility is to “control and create unity.”

## Unity and Resistance

'Unity' is not only part of the state's maxim<sup>8</sup>, but actually a key word frequently mentioned throughout Laos. The German Welthungerhilfe project manager states that *unity* and *consensus* are crucial aspects of the villagers' idea of peaceful coexistence. Indeed, I could observe situations in which this element of a cultural identity was reproduced on a local level, both in rhetoric and social action.

On one hand, the principle of 'unity' is likely to explain the fact that no family refused to plant rubber in *Ban Four* and in many other villages. Meetings are held until a consensus is reached and in cases of doubt, individual interests are subordinate to the common good. Moreover, villagers refer directly to 'eka pab' (Lao equivalent of 'unity') in their statements about rubber. The deputy *Naiban* of *Ban Six*, for example, explains that the *lack* of unity is a main reason for his critique of rubber planting. He has a relatively wide network of social relations with other farmers and has the possibility to travel around, gather information, and draw comparisons on rubber planting in other districts. Consequently, he criticizes the absence of a standard format for contracts with rubber companies. Contract agreements such as profit sharing can differ considerably between the provinces and between individual companies within one province, he explains. Furthermore, he reports that farmers in other districts have the option of choosing between several companies and contract conditions. Dissatisfaction arises from the lack of options in the Mai district where the whole area is controlled by only one company.

The deputy village head also criticizes the district's 'ordered recommendation.' According to the district paper, he is not allowed to sell the area already planted with rubber. Normally, he says, it is permitted to do this but parts of the area already belong to the government. And in Muang Mai there are no alternatives to the existing company's conditions. "This is against the human rights," he concludes.

As a result, *Ban Six* and seven other villages in the Mai district assembled to consider filing a complaint to the government. Members of the respective villages comprise an informal group of farmers who meet occasionally at the market or elsewhere to resolve problems and discuss strategies related to rubber planting. "If the Chinese company's power increases and we see no other alternative, then we will complain," states the deputy village headman. In his opinion, it is possible to challenge the district's order and to renegotiate the five instructions with the local authority. In 2007, he planted 300 rubber trees and in the coming year he has

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<sup>8</sup> The Laotian maxim reads: 'Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity' (Kotte and Siebert 2002:14).

made plans to plant another four hectares. “If the district authority’s policy suits me, I will plant rubber. If not, I might plant stylo as pig feed.”

### **Skepticism and Avoidance**

The Naiban of *Ban Two* issues a clear statement about rubber planting: “Yes, we do plant rubber, but as our own investment. The rubber company asked us to plant with them as well, but we don’t want to. We don’t want to be dependent on China.”

The actual situation in the village, however, is not as clear. In a subsequent interview the *Naiban* explains that there are seven families in the village that plant rubber, three of whom do so with the company. Another five families started planting with the company this year. But they plant only “a little bit, because they are not sure whether they really want to,” the *Naiban* states. The privately planted rubber trees grow on a tract of land outside the company’s ‘rubber area’ which was formerly a fruit garden. “I have planted over one hundred rubber trees already. This year I will not plant more, maybe next year. We are waiting to see whether or not the contract agreements will be renegotiated and improved,” the *Naiban* explains. “We are not sure whether we can really earn a lot of money with rubber.”

Skepticism is expressed more explicitly in *Ban Two* than in other villages and the villagers’ background in decision-making seems to be more developed due to easier access to information. Moreover, pressure exerted from the district side seems to be less of an issue in *Ban Two*.

The following interview excerpt illustrates the perceptions of and strategies against the local authority’s influence [I=Interviewer; N=Naiban]:

I Have any district authorities been here to discuss rubber planting?

N Yes, lots of officials have come here already and have talked about rubber. But we don’t want to plant rubber.

I We heard from other villages that if they don’t plant rubber, they will lose the land.

N Yes, if we don’t plant, the land is gone. It’s the same here. That’s why we plant only a little bit as a trial.

I Farmers from other villages told us that they have to pay a fine of 800.000 Kip if they don’t plant rubber.

N We didn’t hear about a fine.

- I Did you get the district paper with the instructions?
- N We have not read any district paper.
- I Was there any pressure to plant rubber?
- N Chinese technicians from the company have made an appointment with us twice already. But I don't want to, so I went to work on the fields. Now they don't come anymore.

The *Naiban* has tried to avoid contact with the company staff as much as possible, even from the outset. Thus, he dodges a potentially difficult situation in which conflicting interests might clash. By avoiding contact he therefore defies the authorities' and the company's control. Where it is unavoidable to disregard company or governmental instructions, the *Naiban* fulfills their requests with a minimum of effort on his part. Instead of planting the whole area with rubber, the farmers in *Ban Two* plant only enough to comply with regulations. Formally, they fulfill the contract agreements, but the interests of the district and the company are not actually met.

The strategy of avoidance is often adopted by farmers in the context of rubber planting. Several *Naibans* stated that they first attended the meetings on rubber which were held in the district capital, but later refused to go there as they did not agree with the contractual conditions and thus did not want to participate in the venture at all.

It is apparent that there have been and continue to be many ways for the farmers to respond to certain circumstances within the rubber project. The next section analyzes these different forms of agency and discusses them in the context of peasant resistance.

## Peasant Resistance in Laos

As my empirical data shows, the farmers' attitudes towards the rubber project in Muang Mai differ; however, skepticism due to a lack of experience and information about rubber is observable in all villages. As the study reveals, the villagers' notions of development are based on the principle of independence. According to my interviews, most villagers are not content with the profit share of the rubber project and would rather plant rubber privately. Several villagers state that they plant rubber either as a reaction to pressure from district authorities or because of the fear of losing their land. Others refuse to take part in the rubber project and subsequently mount acts of resistance. As subsistence farmers, they are not used to working with another party and sharing their yields. The villagers' self-perception is that of

“**rice farmers**”; thus, they can not imagine how they would survive without shifting cultivation. In order to diffuse risks, the farmers’ livelihoods are diverse: slash-and-burn farming, animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, wet-land and dry-land rice cultivation, and livestock breeding are important sources of income. Their notions of development are based on slight improvements within their actual situation; they seldom wish for an overall change. Appropriately, they name things like better infrastructure (roads and electricity), more land for cultivation, and better access to knowledge and markets as wishes for their future. While many farmers consider rubber planting to be a viable addition to their livelihoods, most of the farmers I talked to cannot imagine it as their sole business, especially a business mounted in cooperation with a company. Accordingly, many farmers perceive the rubber project as a threat to their independence rather than a means for development.

In his report about industrial tree plantations, Lang (2006) also mentions the hope of independence which resonates with farmers from other countries as well. The author cites a Cambodian villager: “We want development. We want projects such as health centers and schools. But we don’t want development that turns us to labourers. We want development that we have control of.” (Lang 2006: 27). Studies about foreign investment contracts often deal with **protest movements ‘from below.’** Most studies, however, do not mention local protests against the course of development in Laos. Lang references Thailand, where protests against industrial tree plantations over the years have developed into individual farmer-established networks such as “Forum of the Poor” which collectively put pressure on the government (Lang 2006:25). The WWF study (WWF et al. 2008) discusses the opposition to Chinese investment interests in other Southeast Asian countries. The authors state: “Where a civil society is emerging, people have begun to voice opposition to Chinese investment interests [...]. In Laos, where there are no formal civil society institutions, there has so far been no public outcry against the influx of Chinese immigrants who accompany investments. However, public concern over the proposed construction of a Chinatown satellite city in Vientiane has been widely documented in various newspapers, newswires and listserves.” (WWF et al. 2008: 2).

Seemingly, the majority of the rural Laotian population is perceived as unobtrusive and obedient to governmental instructions. In contrast, my findings from Muang Mai show that certain forms of resistance do emerge at the local level. These forms, however, are hard to grasp with common analytical concepts of resistance “from below” (on a grassroots level). Chatterjee (2006) distinguishes between *civic community* and *political society* and attributes the capability to “affect the implementation of governmental activities in their favor” (p.67)

only to the latter.

“The rural poor who mobilize to claim the benefits of various governmental programs do not do so as members of civil society. (...) They must, therefore, succeed in mobilizing population groups to produce a local political consensus that can effectively work against the distribution of power in a society as a whole” (p.66).

Such organized forms of resistance “from below” (within a “political society,” Chatterjee 2006) might not exist in Laos (yet). However, I argue that less organized **everyday forms of resistance** do exist and can be effective means of asserting peasant views. In accordance with Scott and his study on “Weapons of the Weak” (1985), I take the view that the recognition and appropriate analysis of ‘peasant resistance’ (as I observed in Muang Mai) requires a re-examination of common concepts of resistance. Peasant forms of resistance are still widely overlooked as they do not meet the criteria that have commonly been required for ‘real’ resistance, namely the collectivity and organization of revolutionary movements (see Scott 1985: 292).

”What is missing from this perspective, I believe, is the simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Or, better stated, such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal. Even when the option did exist, it is not clear that the same objectives might not also be pursued by other stratagems. Most subordinated classes are, after all, far less interested in changing the larger structures of the state and the law than in what Hobsbawm has appropriately called ‘working the system... to their minimal disadvantage.’ Formal, organized political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia; to look for peasant politics in this realm is to look largely in vain. It is also-not incidentally-the first step toward concluding that the peasantry is a political nullity unless organized and led by outsiders.” (Scott 1985: xv)

Thus, Scott (albeit against the background of the Marxist debate about class struggles) calls for an understanding of resistance that takes into account (1) the “subtle mixture of outward compliance and tentative resistance”, (2) the revolutionary potential of individual actions, and (3) the material basis of ideological struggles (Scott 1985: 293). According to these three criteria, the forms of resistance I observed in the villages of Muang Mai will be discussed.

### **Resistance Disguised as Conformity**



The first criterion arises from the social and political background in which the majority of peasant resistance occurs. In a social environment which is characterized by power imbalances and coercion, peasant resistance is unlikely to be expressed overtly, but rather is disguised as conformity.

”For many forms of peasant resistance, we have every reason to expect that actors will remain mute about their intentions. Their safety may depend on silence and anonymity; the kind of resistance itself may depend for its effectiveness on the appearance of conformity; their intentions may be so embedded in the peasant subculture *and* in the routine, taken-for-granted struggle to provide for the subsistence and survival of the household as to remain inarticulate. The fish do not talk about the water.” (Scott 1985: 301)

The majority of the villagers in Muang Mai stated in interviews that they followed the instructions related to the rubber project. However, at the same time, most of them criticized the project or expressed skepticism at the very least. Moreover, some farmers have even adopted strategies which allow them to officially comply with the regulations, but without actually meeting the other parties' interests - and interestingly, they communicated these strategies in the interviews. For instance, instead of planting the whole area with rubber, the farmers in *Ban Two* reported that they planted only a little bit to comply with the regulations. Thereby, in Hobsbawm's words, they are 'working the system to their minimal disadvantage' (Scott 1985: 301).

### **Individual and Collective Actions**

The second criterion refers to the importance of individual actions for a broader understanding of peasant resistance. As shown, the farmers in Muang Mai conceive and implement specific strategies to address their discontentment with the rubber project. Some farmers "hide" in their fields to avoid contact with company staff and district authorities, others stay away from rubber meetings in the district capital, and still others enter into negotiations with company staff. All these acts are individually motivated and unorganized; however, in sum, they present a clear expression of resistance against the rubber project.

”When such acts are rare and isolated, they are of little interest; but when they become a consistent pattern (even though un-coordinated, let alone organized) we are dealing with resistance. The intrinsic nature and, in one sense, ‘beauty’ of much peasant resistance is that it often confers immediate and concrete advantages, while at the

same time denying resources to the appropriating classes, and that it requires little or no manifest organization.” (Scott 1985: 296)

In addition to the multiplicity of individual acts of resistance, there is also an indication of a semi-coordinated, collective resistance in Muang Mai. Farmers from eight villages recently created an informal group which meets occasionally at the market or elsewhere to exchange problems and discuss strategies related to rubber planting. The distinctive feature of the group is its flexibility which makes it difficult for authorities to find and control it. Another characteristic is its persistence; the group intends to argue about the imposed directives with the authorities until they modify them. The *Naiban* of *Ban Two* concludes: “If the Chinese company’s power increases and we see no other alternative, then we will turn to the national government.”

”Being a class of ‘low classlessness’ scattered in small communities and generally lacking the institutional means to act collectively, it is likely to employ those means of resistance that are local and require little coordination.[...] What is lacking in terms of central coordination may be compensated for by flexibility and persistence. These forms of resistance will win no set-piece battles, but they are admirably adapted to long-run campaigns of attention.” (Scott 1985: 297f.)

### **Material and Ideological Motivation**

The third criterion deals with the relation between material and ideological struggles of peasants. According to Scott (1985),

"[it] is impossible, of course, to divorce the material basis of the struggle from the struggle over values - the ideological struggle. To resist a claim or an appropriation is to resist, as well, the justification and rationale behind that particular claim. In Sedake [a village in Kedah state, Malaysia, where Scott carried out his fieldwork, A.N.], this ideological resistance is generally kept from public view, but it forms a vital part of the normative subculture among the poor." (p.297)

The same is true for the acts of resistance observed in the villages of Muang Mai. In some cases villagers consciously ignore the land use planning, as it has proven to be more of a hindrance than a help for them. On one hand, this action can be explained by a simple material interest; on the other hand, it demonstrates a clear breach of the national land allocation directive and thereby undermines the government's authority. A similar observable connection exists between material and ideological motivations in the case of farmers refusing

to follow the company's instructions to cut down protected forests for rubber plantations because they have other uses for the wood. In this regard, Scott notes that "it is precisely the fusion of self-interest and resistance that is the vital force animating the resistance of peasants and proletarians" (Scott 1985: 295).

In other cases in Muang Mai, ideological motives are more apparent. The deputy *Naiban* of *Ban Six*, for example, explains that the lack of unity ('*ekha pab*') among rubber projects in different districts is one of his chief complaints about rubber planting. As previously noted, his dissatisfaction originates with the lack of options regarding rubber planting in the Mai district. If planting directives were the same in all districts he could live with it, the deputy *Naiban* explains. But since farmers in other districts have the option to choose between several companies and various contract conditions, he feels that the farmers in Muang Mai are being treated unfairly. In Muang Mai there are no alternatives to the one rubber company's conditions and the villagers are deprived of alternatives to contract farming. "This is against the human rights," he concludes.

All aspects considered I come to the conclusion that the farmers in Muang Mai – unlike outside sources report (for example WWF et al. 2008) – indeed offer resistance against the ongoing course of development dictated by the government. Due to the political climate, criticism against national directives is not expressed overtly, and is at best hidden - if it exists at all - in institutional structures. I argue that this is all the more reason to take into account these heterogeneous and semi-coordinated acts of resistance. After all, the multitude of single acts of resistance (forbearance, avoidance, or opposition) signals a strong reluctance to the imposed changes.

Finally, I agree with Scott's reasoning that understanding resistance solely in terms of collective, principled and revolutionary acts means ignoring the peasant's agency and, in the end, provides no more than an assessment of the degree of repression prevailing in the respective location.

"More than one peasantry has been brutally reduced from open, radical political activity at one moment to stubborn and sporadic acts of petty resistance at the next. If we allow ourselves to call only the former 'resistance', we simply allow the structure of domination to define for us what is resistance and what is not resistance." (Scott 1985: 299)

## Conclusion

This paper has expounded upon the ‘rubber project’ in Muang Mai from an actor-oriented perspective. The focus of the analysis centered on the standpoint of the actors involved in implementation at the district and village level.

In Muang Mai the forces motivating the rubber project do not leave much room for maneuver or bargaining power for the villagers. In many respects, the rubber project is a nebulous venture. The project arena is characterized by a multitude of actors with ambiguous perceptions and conflicting interests. The actors differ regarding knowledge, power, and room for maneuver. The analysis elucidated the conflicts related to the rubber project implementation as well as the strategies the farmers develop to guard their interests. It showed that the farmers are not just passive victims of the imposed changes, but find their own ways of dealing with the situation. As the interface analysis revealed, the **farmers’ agency** comes to the forefront through multiple acts of resistance - individual or collective, heterogeneous or semi-coordinated, material or ideological in nature. According to their lifeworlds, the farmers adopt strategies of avoidance, forbearance, hidden opposition, and open criticism against the rubber project.

Considering the socio-economic realities and the characteristics of farmers’ resistance in Muang Mai (and throughout Laos), the pivotal question is not whether or not the rubber project succeeds or fails in terms of predefined outcomes, but rather how the various actors in the project arena, especially the farmers, influence the course of events and thereby change the pre-existing state of rubber development.

In Muang Mai, initial perceptions have indeed changed. Meanwhile, reluctance to engage in the rubber project is not anymore limited to just the farmers. District authorities backed away from their initial enthusiasm and have brought forward an amendment to the provincial authority that would reduce the rubber plantation area defined in the contract by half. The provincial authorities, in turn, also slightly changed course and negotiated some regulations in favor of the villagers (see Haberecht 2009: 65). The Welthungerhilfe project facilitated communication through regular meetings of the district authorities, company staff, Welthungerhilfe staff, and farmers.

Rubber planting is neither good nor bad in and of itself. If implemented in a sound way it has the potential to improve the livelihoods of many Laotian people. The same is true for the Chinese course of development in Laos. Chinese aid and economic assistance may give many Laotians the opportunity to participate in a market economy and to engage in a new, promising source of livelihood. But it needs to comply with the social environment in which it is introduced. The present study confirmed that social and economic changes cannot be

coerced. Laotian farmers, contrary to popular belief, have the means of showing resistance in order to increase their room for maneuver. Consequently, I argue that the villagers' agency has to be taken much more into account in the planning and implementation process of development and investment projects such as the rubber planting project in Muang Mai. Ignoring the farmers' means of creativity and agency is a first step towards reducing them to passive victims dependent on outsiders' guidance.

In Muang Mai, the different actors recognized that the current direction of rubber development does not completely satisfy anyone's needs. *Welthungerhilfe* staff, district authorities, rubber company staff, and farmers have entered into negotiations about the future course of rubber planting and development. After all that has been said about the rubber project, open communication is definitely a step in the right direction.

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