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# Small-scale land acquisitions, large-scale implications: Exploring the case of Chinese banana investments in Northern Laos

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ABSTRACT

The scholarly debate around 'global land grabbing' is advancing theoretically, methodologically and empirically. This study contributes to these ongoing efforts by investigating a set of 'small-scale land acquisitions' in the context of a recent boom in banana plantation investments in Luang Namtha Province, Laos. In relation to the actors, scales and processes involved, the banana acquisitions differ from the state-granted large-scale land acquisitions dominating the literature on 'land grabbing' in Laos. Starting from the experience of a rural village in Laos, where two Chinese banana investors leased land on six-year contracts in 2010, we trace the strategies employed by the investors to gain access to the land, the experience of the villagers in the process and the outcome of the acquisitions in terms of land use change. The findings reveal how the investors established networks of local middlemen who facilitate negotiations over land directly at the village level, thus enabling them to circumvent any formal involvement of government authorities. The informal acquisition process also ensured a rapid and successful implementation of the plantations with consequent land use change, including the destruction of field structures, plot borders and irrigation systems, as well as erosion and heavy chemical input. Drawing upon the literature on 'powers of exclusion' and 'control grabbing', the paper argues that despite the apparent small-scale and short-term nature of these leases, the forceful acquisition strategies pursued by the investors coupled with the rapid land use conversion and associated cultivation practices results in strong and longer-term alienation of land from the local communities involved. This implies the need to take these more informal forms of land acquisitions into account when designing policies to address the negative implications of land grabbing in Laos and elsewhere.



## 1. Introduction

The first media reports on 'transnational land deals' or 'large-scale land acquisitions' by investors in developing countries surfaced around 2007 (GRAIN, 2008). Since then, critical concerns about justice and local rights to land have been raised in relation to the phenomenon now widely referred to as 'global land grabbing' (e.g. Behrman et al., 2012; Danial and Mittal, 2009; De Schutter, 2011; Li, 2011; Margulis et al., 2013; Oxfam, 2011; White et al., 2012). A multitude of studies have provided valuable knowledge on the empirics of land grabbing, as well as its socio-economic and environmental impacts at the global, regional and local level (e.g. Anseeuw et al., 2012; Borras et al., 2011; Deininger et al., 2010; GRAIN et al., 2014; Nolte, 2014; Suhardiman et al., 2015; Thondhlana, 2015; Zoomers, 2010). A central focus in this research – as well as in media and activist circles – has been the processes and mechanisms of *large-scale* and *long-term* land acquisitions by 'powerful' foreign private and public investors in so-called 'weak states'. Indeed, the dominance of this focus has resulted in the production of what Baird (2014b) labels the '*global land grab meta-narrative*'. This narrative is underpinned by definitions of land grabbing adopted in, for example, global and regional inventories that often only include land deals above a certain size, generally 200 ha (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Anseeuw et al., 2013) or 1000 ha (Borras et al., 2012b; Cotula et al., 2009), as well as studies predominantly focusing on formal acquisitions, purchases and concessions with a duration of at least 30-50-99 years (e.g. Antonelli et al., 2015; GRAIN et al., 2014; Nolte, 2014). However, studies have begun to challenge this focus (e.g. Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013; Edelman and León, 2013; Locher and Sulle, 2014). By contextualising 'land grabbing' in ways that reveal the complexity of

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the processes and dynamics involved in contemporary transnational land acquisitions such studies have contributed to moving land grabbing research forward and demonstrated "*the importance of not fetishising particular global trends when examining local circumstances*" in ways that might "*result in other less dominant but extremely important circumstances receiving insufficient consideration*" (Baird, 2014b).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to these ongoing efforts. As part of a larger research project exploring the implications of telecoupled land use change (Eakin et al., 2014; Friis et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2013), the paper investigates a set of 'small-scale land acquisitions' in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos). Through an in-depth analysis of the processes and dynamics of these acquisitions, we aim to challenge the preoccupation with large-scale and long-term land acquisitions that dominates the discussions of land grabbing in the Laotian context. Within the broader land grabbing debate, Laos has been identified as a hotspot for the type of large-scale and long-term land acquisitions that feed into the meta-narrative of global land grabbing (Cotula et al., 2009; Deininger et al., 2010; GRAIN, 2008). Portrayed as a rich natural resource frontier with abundant 'idle' or 'marginal' land and a 'weak' regulatory context, Laos has been described as an attractive target country for 'powerful' foreign investors (Baird, 2014a; Barney, 2009; Fold and Hirsch, 2009). At the same time, the Government of Laos (GoL) has actively sought foreign direct investments in natural resources and has granted vast tracts of land to domestic, regional and international investors in the past decades under the umbrella of the national strategy for '*Turning land into capital*' (Dwyer, 2007; Schönweger et al., 2012; Schönweger and Üllenberg, 2009). While the majority of leases and concessions are relatively small, often less than five hectares, the large-scale state-granted land concessions above 1000 ha have by far attracted the most attention. Indeed, this is unsurprising since these constitute 89 percent of the total amount of land granted and have proven to have severe land loss and detrimental socio-economic and environmental implications (Schönweger et al., 2012).

However, recent studies show how the land grabbing meta-narrative in the Laotian context overlooks important processes and impacts of large-scale foreign land acquisitions and land alienation in general (Baird, 2011; Friis et al., 2016; Gironde et al., 2015; Gironde and Portilla, 2015; Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Schönweger and Messerli, 2015; Suhardiman et al., 2015). For example, Kenney-Lazar (2015) contests the 'weaknesses' of the Lao state vis-à-vis investors by demonstrating the importance of state power and legitimacy for the successful implementation of investment projects. Similarly, McAllister (2015) illustrates the scope of local agency in land acquisition processes by demonstrating how farmers' acts of '*everyday forms of resistance*' can obstruct the implementation of large-scale plantations. Emerging evidence at an aggregated level also attests to an increasing discrepancy between the numbers of hectares formally conceded at the central state level and the actual amount of land taken into use by investors (Hett et al., 2015; Messerli et al., 2015; Schönweger and Messerli, 2015).

While these efforts have substantially deepened the understanding of large-scale 'land grabbing' in Laos, more subtle forms of land acquisitions in the form of smaller land leases have hitherto received much less attention, hindering important insights into the full range of processes leading to contemporary land loss among local people. There is thus a need for in-depth analysis of the particularities of such land leases. Using the experience of Ban Sirimoon, a small rural village in Muang Long district, Luang Namtha province, we explore how two companies led by Chinese investors successfully leased around 35 and 46 ha of land in 2010 from the villagers on six-year contracts, and examine the implications of the plantations for land use and land control in the villages. This analysis demonstrates that although the actors involved, the spatial and temporal scale of the acquisitions and the implementation processes differ from the land grabbing meta-narrative, the actual land use change and the perceived implications of this change in the village amount to a de facto 'land grab'.

The paper begins by presenting recent theoretical discussions within the land grabbing literature followed by a brief introduction to the local setting and the methodology. The results subsequently detail the boom in banana plantations in Muang Long district, the land acquisition strategies adopted by the investors in Ban Sirimoon and the land use change following the rapid implementation of the plantations. Based on the notion of 'control grabbing' (Borras et al., 2012a) and the 'powers of exclusion' framework (Hall et al., 2011), we then discuss the wider land grabbing implications of these small-scale and short-term acquisitions. Finally, the paper is rounded of by a conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

The lack of any widely accepted definition of the term 'land grabbing' has been a key challenge in the scholarly debate around the increase in transnational land acquisitions worldwide since 2008 (Cotula, 2012; Edelman, 2013; Oya, 2013; Teklemariam et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the bulk of research and discussion have focused on large-scale and long-term land acquisitions by foreign investors in the developing world. 'Land grabbing' has therefore largely come to be associated with a particular type of near permanent contractual enclosures of large tracts of land from (poor) local users. However, as the academic discussions of 'global land grabbing' move beyond what Edelman et al. (2013) label its initial '*making sense period*', scholars have called for critical theoretical, methodological and empirical engagement with the phenomenon (Borras et al., 2012b; Edelman et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Scoones et al., 2013; White et al., 2012). Such efforts have emphasised how the preoccupation with 'powerful' foreign actors, the 'permanency' and spatial scale of acquisitions have resulted in a lack of appreciation for the complex relations between the scales, actors and processes in contemporary land grabbing dynamics. Consequently, more recent studies have examined the complexity of land grabbing in various contexts by focusing on the distribution of power and agency between local and foreign investors, smallholders, middlemen and state authorities (Beban and Gorman, 2015; Borras and Franco, 2013; Smalley and Corbera, 2012; Sud, 2014), as well as between foreign investors, state authorities and domestic elites (Baird, 2014b; Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013). It has been shown that such relations not only depend on the scale but also on the social, political and historical contexts in which any specific deal takes place (Dwyer, 2014; Edelman and León, 2013). Adding to this complexity, the purpose of the investment and for farmland acquisitions the 'nature of the crop' have been shown to influence actors' ability to engage in or contest land grabbing. For example, Hall (2011) draws upon the literature of Southeast Asian crop booms to illustrate how crop characteristics including biophysical, labour and technical requirements mediate the capacity of different actors to gain access to and control over land, as well as influencing the actual outcome of a particular land acquisition. A further 'critique' of the attention to large-scale acquisitions has been raised by studies critically examining the relation between the extent and outcomes of land acquisitions (Borras et al., 2012b; Edelman et al., 2013). Such studies have shown that the amount of land involved in acquisitions does not necessarily correspond to actual dispossession and/or social and environmental conflicts on site (e.g. Becker, 2013; Kandel, 2015). Furthermore, the discrepancies between the hectares of acquired land reported in inventories and media reports, and the 'on the ground' implementation of land acquisitions have been widely documented (Edelman, 2013;

Smalley and Corbera, 2012). This discrepancy has been attributed to the grossly overstated availability of so-called 'unused' land in many target countries (Exner et al., 2015), deviations between stated and real investment objectives or abilities by investors (McCarthy et al., 2012), as well as an over-reporting of acquired land areas by media sources, for example (Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013).

These advancements in the understanding of contemporary land grabbing have put the initial '*fetishisation of the hectare*' (Edelman, 2013) and fixation on 'permanency' under pressure. Some scholars have thus argued that the wide range of processes resulting in land alienation and changing land control today is perhaps better understood through the concept of 'control grabbing' (Borras et al., 2012a; Margulis et al., 2013; Peluso and Lund, 2011). For instance, Borras et al. (2012a) propose that "*land grabbing is essentially 'control grabbing': grabbing the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control*" (p. 850). This concept adds a number of important aspects to the discussion of land grabbing. First, it emphasises that a 'land grab' does not necessitate a complete and permanent dispossession or enclosure of land from local users (Borras et al., 2012b; White et al., 2012); rather, control grabbing alludes to the *practices* that establish, consolidate and/or deny access to land for some period of time (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). This makes it possible to shift focus from spatial and temporal scale as well as foreign versus domestic actors to the actual social, political, ecological and historical setting enabling particular land alienations. Second, it introduces the notion that all forms of land access and control ultimately imply some degree of exclusivity. As such, a land grab is first and foremost possible when an actor can claim the exclusive rights to use a particular piece of land in a particular way. Exclusivity, in this sense, is not necessarily a matter of outright purchase or full enclosure, but is determined by highly diverse claims to the right to control the use of a particular plot of land. Whereas the broader land grabbing narrative often operates with a distinction between land acquisitions by 'economic' and 'extra-economic' means – where the former implies 'voluntary' market transfers and purchases and the latter that some degree of illegitimacy, force or 'theft' is involved (Hall, 2013), Hall et al. (2011) have theorised how gaining access to land can be a far more complex process. Understanding how land is "grabbed" in a particular case requires attention to an actor's ability to use a combination of four 'powers of exclusion' to grab control, i.e. regulation (the use of rules and policies employed by states and other powerful groups defining for what and by whom land can be used), force (the use of violence or threats of violence to establish and maintain control over land), legitimation (the use of normative or principled arguments concerning how, by who and for what land is allocated or used) and market powers (the way that price of land and/or inputs for farming provides opportunities or barriers for people to access and use land) (Hall et al., 2011). The 'powers of exclusion' framework thus captures the negotiated aspect in any kind of land acquisitions and highlights how the distinction between land grabs and land sales, leases, concessions and contract farming arrangements is often blurred in reality. In the broader discussions about agrarian futures and large-scale versus small-scale farming (i.e. Peters, 2013; White et al., 2012), the framework opens up for engaging with all types of capitalisation of agriculture and commodification of land, regardless of the size or shape, in order to assess exclusionary and potentially detrimental effects.

These insights illustrate how analyses of (trans)national land acquisitions leading to land alienation from local people must pay attention to the particularities of local contexts, as well as the diversity of actors with varied and often complex agendas shaping acquisitions. By building upon the conceptualisation of 'control grabbing' and 'powers of exclusion', it becomes possible to address a much wider range of 'land grabbing' processes than large-scale land acquisitions via long-term concessions. Instead, these notions allow us to analyse land grabbing as a process essentially concerning the right to exclude and control the use of land regardless of the size of the plot involved. In this light, we analyse the dynamics of the banana plantations that have rapidly increased in Muang Long district since 2008. A central argument is that despite being small-scale and short-term, these acquisitions in fact constitute land grabs.

## 3. The local setting

### 3.1. Land management policies and concession implementation in Laos

Since the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975, the GoL has carried out far-reaching land use planning and land zoning policies to gain control over the country's vast geographical area (236,800 $km^2$) and dispersed ethnically diverse population (Lestrelin et al., 2012). In Laos, all land is by constitution under the authority of the state and although the 2003 Land Law distinguishes between state and private land, most of the country's territory remains categorised as 'state land' (Ducourtieux et al., 2005; Schönweger and Üllenberg, 2009). Since the late 1990s several donor sponsored land reforms have however introduced land titles for residential land in urban areas and permanent or temporary certificates of use rights in rural areas (Lestrelin et al., 2012). The policies aimed at controlling and zoning land for specific uses are influenced by the national goals for agricultural- and natural resource-based economic development, in which granting state land leases and concessions for land and forest resources to private investors have become a cornerstone. The various land management efforts in Laos build upon an officially applied distinction between the uplands and lowlands, which favours the settled agricultural activities of lowland populations over the traditional shifting cultivation practices of upland minority populations (Lestrelin, 2010; Lund, 2011). Land use planning, land reforms and the internal resettlement of upland populations to the lowlands have thus been used as tools to promote 'desirable' lowland agriculture, while stabilising or eradicating the 'undesirable' shifting cultivation (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008; Lestrelin et al., 2012; Vandergeest, 2003). However, as argued by Barney (2009), such land zoning, as well as the resettlement of populations, has also facilitated a '*freeing up of land and forest resources*' (p. 153) that can be granted to private investors through state land leases and concessions. Coupled with the natural resource-driven growth strategy, these land management policies have led to a rapid and to some extent uncontrolled increase in land leases and concessions granted at all government levels in Laos. In order to gain more control over the concession granting process, the GoL – in collaboration with several foreign donor partners – carried out an inventory of all leases granted between 2007 and 2010. Building upon this inventory data, Messerli et al. (2015) explore the implementation processes of large-scale land acquisitions, showing how foreign investors with strong relations to domestic elites have been able to overrule land governance mechanisms and the interest of local actors in the acquisition processes. However, less forceful modes of acquisition are recently beginning to emerge, mainly because increasing land scarcity, competition between investors and growing experience in dealing with land acquisitions among local actors are compelling investors to engage in more bottom-up strategies to accessing land. Although these more inclusive processes provide some scope for policy interventions ensuring a better consultation of local populations, for example, the negative consequences of the concessions already in place prompt Messerli et al. (2015) to suggest that future land policies should aim to

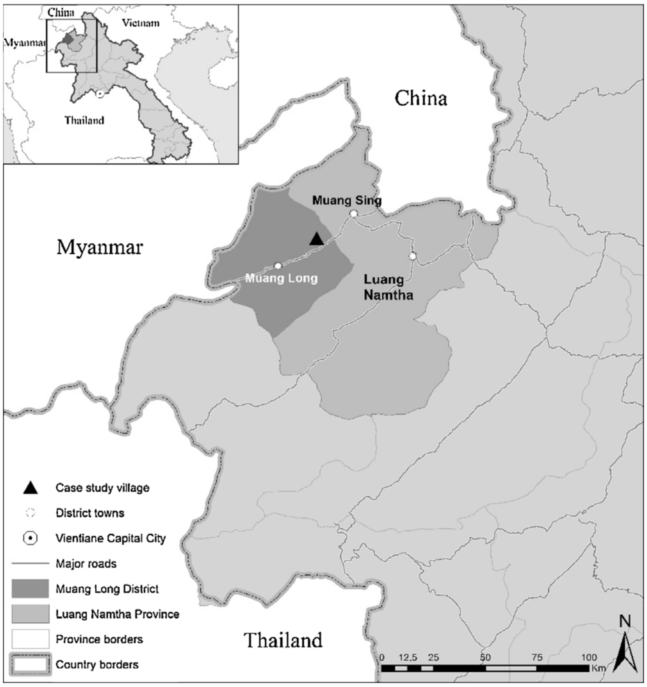


**Fig. 1.** Map of Muang Long in Luang Namtha Province.

go beyond regulating or preventing land acquisitions per se, and rather focus on "*policies relevant to conflict resolution, labour issues, and outmigration as new drivers of poverty*" (Messerli et al., 2015). Suhardiman et al. (2015) similarly argue that new land management policies should take into account differentiated and hidden livelihood effects of land acquisitions.

### *3.2. Rapid agricultural change in Northern Laos*

In Luang Namtha province, the field site for this study (see Fig. 1), there has been an extensive agricultural transformation and commercialisation over the past 15–20 years, strongly influenced by the province's close proximity to China. Political and economic reforms in both Laos and China – including a transformation from a planned to socialist market economy in the late-1980s, the reopening of the regional borders in the mid-1990s and a general improvement of road infrastructures – have deepened the formal integration and regionalisation of the economy in the border region (Fox et al., 2009; Rigg, 2006; Thongmanivong et al., 2009). Moreover, close ethnic and kinship relations across the border have enabled informal economic interactions (Lagerqvist, 2013). Rubber was, for example, introduced in the early-1990s by smallholders with cross-border family relations and is now a dominant cash-crop (Sturgeon, 2013). Subsequently, small Chinese companies and individual traders have promoted a range of cash-crops for export in loose contractual arrangements or by establishing a market for various crops. With the expansion of cash-crop production, the competition for and pressure on land are rising, especially in the fertile lower-lying valley areas traditionally used for paddy rice production.

### *3.3. Ban Sirimoon, Muang Long District*

Muang Long district, one of five districts in Luang Namtha Province, is among the poorest and least developed districts in Laos (pers. comm. Provincial Agricultural and Forest Officer, Luang Namtha, 28.04.2014). The landscape is characterised by a rugged mountainous terrain and narrow river valleys, with the Mekong River forming the district's north-western border with Myanmar and the main district road connecting the district centre with Muang Sing – a main trading town and gateway to China – in the east (Lagerqvist, 2013; see map Fig. 1). The case study village Ban Sirimoon is located approximately 30 km east of Muang Long town on the main road to Muang Sing town. The majority of the village's 66 households (323 people in August 2014) are *Doi Samtao* people, a very small ethnic minority group; however, as Buddhists, they share many cultural traits with the larger group of *Tai Lue* people living in the area. Although the main language in the village is the Samtao language, the majority of the villagers also speak fluent Tai Lue. The village territory includes a narrow strip of lowland in the Nam Ma River valley, as well as the hills on both sides of the valley. Ban Sirimoon was subject to the GoL's Land Use Planning and Land Allocation programme in 2001, and the majority of households received temporary use certificates for both upland and lowland fields. The villagers are primarily engaged in subsistence rice production with many households combining lowland paddy rice production and rotational shifting cultivation of upland rice. However, a development from subsistence- to market-oriented livelihood strategies has taken place in recent years, prompted by the introduction of a range of cash-crops by small Lao and Chinese traders, including maize, cassava, rubber, pumpkin and sugarcane. In 2010, the agricultural change accelerated as the villagers started leasing land to two Chinese banana investors.

## 4. Methodology

This paper emerged out of a larger research project exploring the dynamics of distal flows and drivers of local land use change, now often referred to as telecoupling (i.e. socioeconomic and environmental linkages between distant human-environment systems) (Friis and Nielsen, 2014; Friis et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2014). Within this context, the paper addresses one significant aspect of such distal linkages, namely foreign investments in land and agricultural intensification. In particular, we address the questions of how investors gain access to land and what the perceived implications of land acquisitions are among villagers in the case study site.

The study draws upon data from ethnographic field research carried out in Muang Long district and Luang Namtha province in April-May and August-December 2014 as well as June 2015. Table 1 presents the main methods used, their quantitative density and the key themes covered. For this paper, participant observation carried out throughout the fieldwork, enabled building up a rapport with the villagers to gain insights into their daily activities and create trust for discussions of sensitive topics. Furthermore, background information about household composition, general livelihood characteristics and land use activities was gained through a household questionnaire survey with heads of households and/or their wives, randomly sampled from a list of all village households. The questionnaire also provided insights into household experience and participation in the banana plantation development. Focus group and semi-structured interviews were subsequently used to explore emerging themes in greater depth and both group participants and individual interviewees were selected to cover different gender, age and economic conditions. Informal conversations enabled by the long-term stay in the village supplemented the insights gained through formal interviews. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out repeatedly at the five government departments[1] involved in agricultural invest-

[1] The Agricultural and Forestry Department; the Department of Environment and Natural Resources; the Department of Planning and Investment; the Department of Trade and Industry; and the Department of Social Welfare and Labour.

**Table 1**
Synthesis of methods used, themes covered, data acquisition time and quantitative density.

| Method | Informants | Themes covered | Data acquisition time | Place | Quantitative density |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant observation | | Daily life<br>Agricultural strategies and livelihood activities<br>Food security, income and expenses<br>Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities<br>Banana plantation development<br>Labour arrangements in plantations | August to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Ban Sirimoon | Continuous residence in the village |
| Informal interviews | Village authorities<br>Farmers | Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities<br>Cash-crop developments<br>Banana plantation development | April to May 2014<br>August to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Long District<br>Ban Sirimoon | Continuously |
| Semi-structured interviews | Banana middlemen<br>Land brokers | Role in relation to banana plantation development<br>Land survey process<br>Implementation process<br>Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities<br>General impact of banana | August to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Ban Sirimoon | 12 interviews |
| | Government officials at senior level | Role in relation to banana plantation development<br>Land survey process<br>Implementation process<br>Relationship with banana investors<br>General impact of banana | April to May 2014<br>August to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Luang Namtha Province<br>Long District | 27 interviews |
| | Banana investors<br>Plantation managers | Objectives for investment in banana in Laos<br>Land survey process<br>Implementation process<br>Relationship with villagers and GoL departments<br>Banana plantation management<br>General impact of banana | November to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Long District | 10 interviews (8 with investors and 2 with plantation managers) |
| | Villagers | Agricultural strategies and livelihood activities<br>Involvement and development of cash-crop production<br>Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities | June 2015 | Ban Sirimoon | 12 interviews with 17 villagers (incl. two small groups) |
| Household questionnaire survey | Head of households and their wives | Household composition<br>Agricultural strategies and livelihood activities<br>Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities<br>Banana plantation involvement | September to November 2014 | Ban Sirimoon | 48 out of 66 households interviewed<br>Random sample based on list of households in village |
| Focus group discussions | Villagers | Agricultural strategies and livelihood activities<br>Involvement and development of cash-crop production<br>Perception of change to agricultural and livelihood opportunities<br>Banana plantation involvement | September to December 2014<br>June 2015 | Ban Sirimoon | 12 groups<br>3 to 8 participants<br>Differentiated according to age, gender and main agricultural activities |

ments at the district and provincial level, and in the latter part of the fieldwork in 2014, semi-structured interviews were conducted with banana investors, banana plantation managers, middlemen and land brokers operating in the case study village and Muang Long district in general. These semi-structured interviews provide the primary source of data on the implementation of the plantations. In June 2015, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with villagers and middlemen to follow up on specific themes. All interviews were conducted in Lao, Tai Lue or Chinese languages with the assistance of a translator and they were digitally recorded. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated into English before being coded using QSR Nvivo software. The subsequent analysis is therefore predominantly based on qualitative interview data and observations. Direct quotes used in the analysis have been corrected grammatically for readability and all names of informants and companies have been changed to ensure anonymity.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. The boom in banana plantations

Commercial banana plantations started surfacing in Muang Long district around 2008, when small-scale Chinese investors began renting land and planting bananas for export to China. According to investors and government officers, the growing demand for fresh fruit in China was the main driver for the expansion. The availability of relatively cheap and good quality lands in Laos with access to irrigation water coupled with favourable climatic conditions was also highlighted and contrasted to the situation in many banana producing regions of China that are experiencing increasing problems with land degradation and the 'Panama disease' (Ordonez et al., 2015), as well as severe typhoon risk. Plantation managers explained that a banana plant is generally productive for three seasons of ten to fourteen months, after which they need to be replanted. However, several investors noted that due to the good land quality, the banana plants can be productive for up to five growing-seasons, if managed properly.

#### 5.1.1. The Muang Long banana investment scene

As of November 2014, the Muang Long District Agricultural and Forestry Office (DAFO) had thirteen legally registered banana investment companies on record, holding between 16.63 ha and 269.83 ha, in leases ranging from less than 1 ha to 61.87 ha. A total of 820.75 ha of banana plantation was officially registered at the district. The investors include Chinese businessmen or small companies with long-term trade experience in the area, Chinese joint ventures or joint ventures between Chinese and Lao businessmen (often relatives), Chinese farmers or individual investors with banana cultivation experience in China, as well as one large-scale agro-business investor. Some of these investors have lived and done business in Laos for several years, while others are married to Lao women and have gone into joint ventures with their fathers- and/or brothers-in-law. Others again enter Laos on temporary visas and border-passes, and do not take up residency in Laos. Instead, they rely on hired Chinese plantation managers – often with banana cultivation experience in China – to oversee the daily management and cultivation. Several of the interviewed banana investors and plantation managers complained about the bureaucracy and expensive fees involved in obtaining work-permissions for the daily managers. According to the DAFO, three of the legally registered companies act as intermediaries for other investors, who remain unregistered and often absents from the plantation sites despite being the de facto plantation owners. The total number of banana investors operating in the district is thus unknown. From interviews with villagers, middlemen and investors, as well as government officers, the investors negotiate for access to land directly at village level, without initial involvement of the government authorities until after finalising the contract. In some cases, investors pay deposits for the land and start implementing the plantations before applying for permissions.

Due to the cultivation requirements, the investors target the accessible and fertile lowland areas used for paddy rice production. As a result, there has been a rapid conversion of paddy fields to banana plantations throughout Muang Long district, as well as in neighbouring Muang Sing district. Since Luang Namtha province is appointed a strategic rice producing region for Northern Laos, the paddy to banana conversion has caused substantial discontent at the Provincial Government, leading the Provincial Governor to issue a province-wide ban on new banana plantations on paddy land in 2011. However, several district officers stressed that the informal negotiation strategies employed by the investors coupled with the farmers' economic incentive to lease out the land makes it very difficult to control the plantation development. Problems with corruption and patron-client relationships between several investors and high-ranking district officials were also indicated.

### 5.2. Investor strategies for acquiring access to land

In late 2010, Ban Sirimoon was targeted by two banana investment companies. Both companies are legally registered with the district authorities, although they represent two different investor types. Based on the accounts of villagers, local middlemen and plantation managers, the following sections explore the actors and strategies involved in the land acquisition processes adopted by the two companies, the contractual arrangements and the villagers' experiences with the process.

#### 5.2.1. The LFA Company

The LFA Company (henceforth the LFA) is a joint venture company owned by five Chinese shareholders of mixed ethnicity including Han, Yao, Tai Lue and Akha. Mr. Ye – a Han Chinese shareholder with many years of banana cultivation experience in China and Burma – explained that the company's ethnic composition gave them a great advantage regarding language and cultural understanding when negotiating for land in the region.

The Tai Lue Chinese shareholder Mr. Peng, was in charge of surveying the case study area and used his personal relations from many years of watermelon cultivation in the area to engage local middlemen. Mr. Peng first hired a well-connected local businessman and Tai Lue village *naiban*,[2] Mr. Kham, to find suitable land and establish contact to village gatekeepers. In Ban Sirimoon, Mr. Kham approached his long-time 'comrade' and member of the village authority, Mr. Mai, hiring him as a village land broker. Mr. Mai was in charge of contacting households with land in the targeted area and explained in an interview how he used his intimate knowledge of the village to target the right households and encourage them to lease their land to the LFA:

"*I began to do land survey including the na*[3] *land without water. I told the landholders that we should grant the na to the Chinese investor [. . .] because otherwise we will not be able to plant anything because there will be no water [when the plantation is established]*" (Interview, Mr. Mai, 11.11.14).

Mr. Mai secured the land of nine households in the village and was paid a fee of 800,000 LAK (1 USD ≈ 8,031 LAK[4]). Subsequently, the LFA started clearing the land. However, some households remained reluctant to join the contract and the LFA hired Mr. Thon, who worked as a day-to-day labourer for the company in the land clearing process, to convince the remaining households to join the contract:

"*I did not force or lie or influence them to grant land to the banana investor, I just approached them and mentioned the real reason [why they should lease out the land] and tried to help them to analyse the future potential problem which they will face if they keep land for own cultivation because their land is located on the same plot as the banana field*" (Interview, Mr. Thon, 09.11.14).

Mr. Thon was successful in securing the remaining hectares of land and received a fee of 400,000LAK. Thirteen households thus leased their land to the LFA in Ban Sirimoon, while adjacent land farmed by neighbouring villages was also secured and the according to the plantation manager the LFA plantation totals 35 ha.

In February 2015, the LFA plantation was bought by another joint venture of Chinese investors, who were expanding their banana investments into Laos to take advantage of the good land and water conditions. The sale was negotiated directly between the investors with no involvement of the district or village authorities and while the new joint venture had taken over the contract with the villagers, they continued to rely on the LFA's legal registration and investment permission.

#### 5.2.2. The XG Company

The second company – the XG Company (henceforth the XG) – is owned by Mr. Xao Gi, a Han Chinese businessman with a long history of agricultural and business investments in both Muang Long and Muang Sing districts. In addition to investing directly in banana plantations, the XG operates as one of the intermediaries facilitating land acquisitions and plantation implementation on behalf of other investors. When targeting Ban Sirimoon in 2010, the XG was operating on behalf of a private Chinese investor.

Mr. Xao Gi used a similar land surveying strategy as the LFA's Mr. Peng. Relying on his knowledge of the area, he engaged Mr. Tang, a well-connected local businessman, as a middleman. Once the suitable land in the case study village was identified, Mr. Tang

[2] *Naiban* is Lao word for the village headman.

[3] *Na* is the Lao word for 'lowland paddy rice land'.

[4] The Bureau of Fiscal Services, US department of Treasury, exchange rate 31.12.2010 https://www.fiscal.treasury.gov/fsreports/rpt/treasRptRateExch/1210.pdf.

approached Mr. Chai—an entrepreneurial farmer in Ban Sirimoon and old employee of Mr. Tang's. Encouraged by Mr. Tang, Mr. Chai compiled a list of all the relevant households in the village and asked the village naiban to call for a general meeting:

"*He [the Naiban] mobilised the meeting for me, and I told them [the villagers] the rate of leasing fee and duration of the contract and then they discussed with each other for some days. Then I went back to visit them again to note down all the households who wanted to grant land to the banana plantation. Some time after the meeting, maybe 1–2 weeks, I got their final agreement*" (Interview, Mr. Chai, 08.11.14).

The plantation investor paid a land survey fee of 50 RNB (1 USD = 6.67 RNB[5]) per *mu*[6] to Mr. Tang, while Mr. Chai received 200 RNB per hectare (13.3 RNB per *mu*). The XG plantation totals 46 ha within the territory of Ban Sirimoon and 70 ha in the area in general. In Ban Sirimoon, six households joined the XG contract, while the rest of the land was farmed by households in neighbouring villages.

Following some disputes with landholders in another village in the area, the original investor sold the plantation after one year of cultivation. Again, the sale was conducted without the involvement of village or district authorities and the new investor still relies on the legal registration of the XG Company.

### 5.2.3. Contractual arrangements

After finalising the agreements with the villagers, both companies set up contracts in April 2011. Mr. Thon signed the LFA contract on behalf of the households in the village and kept a copy of the contract. The XG contract was signed by the village naiban and no written record of it was found in the village or elsewhere. The villagers 'signed' with their fingerprint upon receiving the first land leasing fee, whereby none of them had received copies of the contracts. According to the local middlemen, the contracts are similar for both companies: they state the annual land leasing fee of 10mio LAK per hectare and the yearly payment date in April. The leasing period is limited to six years until April 2017, with the possibility of an extension for another six years. This extension will depend on the investors' willingness to continue farming banana in the area, as well as a renegotiation of the leasing fee. No agreement on the responsibilities of investors regarding land restoration upon termination of the leasing period is found in the contracts.

### 5.2.4. Villagers' experiences with the acquisition process

Sixteen of the nineteen households involved with the banana investors in Ban Sirimoon participated in the household questionnaire survey. On average, these households had leased out 0.93 ha of land (ranging from 0.2 to 1.44 ha) that had mainly been used for paddy rice (12 out of 16 surveyed households) with the rest used for sugarcane, vegetable gardens or young fallow. All of the surveyed households involved stated that they had temporary user certificates for their land. For the majority of the households involved, the leased land constituted their entire paddy rice landholding and they now relied on upland rice cultivation, as well as cash-crop production of sugarcane, pumpkin or cassava. Six households had paddy plots for rice production left in addition to the land leased to the banana plantations.

As indicated by accounts of the different middlemen, the local land brokers of the two companies approached the households in slightly different ways. While Mr. Mai and Mr. Thon, on behalf of the LFA, generally went directly to the targeted households, Mr. Chai called a general meeting at the Naiban's house on behalf of the XG. In both cases, the involved households indicated, during focus group discussions and individual interviews, that the proposals had been discussed both within and between households before being accepted. Several villagers stated, however, that they had only participated silently in these discussions, and had subsequently followed the general decision among the households to accept the lease arrangement.

When inquiring into the reasons for leasing out the land, both the local middlemen and villagers also mentioned that the targeted land had suffered from a periodic lack of water, which restricted the paddy rice cultivation and sometimes resulted in water-sharing conflicts between villagers. In light of this, several villagers noted that the land leasing fees were substantially higher than the possible income from the sale of surplus rice pointing to the strong economic incentive to enter into the banana contracts. Moreover, many villagers indicated that leasing land to the banana investors was perceived as '*earning money without working*' and the fees indeed enabled people to invest in house improvements, small business ventures or new goods, especially motorbikes. Others indicated, however, that some households spent the new income "*inappropriately*" resulting in lack of means to buy rice once their supply of upland rice ran out. The plantations generated some employment opportunities for daily wage work, especially in the peak-cultivation periods, though mainly for young and abled-bodied villagers. Aside from these economic incentives, villagers of all age and economic status groups often stated that '*we just have to follow the society's development*' when talking about the banana developments. People stressed that entering into new forms of agricultural activities was pertinent for their village's development, reflecting a sentiment actively used by several of the interviewed investors as a legitimising argument for getting people to accept their proposals.

However, several villagers stressed that despite the economic incentives, they had also felt pressured by the investors and village land brokers to accept the deals. During a household questionnaire interview, one farmer explained:

"*Most of the neighbouring land was already granted, and the other villagers also wanted to grant their land, so I just had to follow them. Also we would have a water-sharing problem [with the plantation], if we were the only ones who farmed na in that area*" (Household questionnaire #37, 04.10.14).

Another farmer mentioned that the middleman had put his name on the list of households with land in the targeted area and thus he felt socially obliged to agree to the proposal, although he would have preferred not to. Others mentioned that the middlemen had threatened that the chemical impacts of the plantations, as well as the lack of access to fields and water would make it impossible or very difficult to continue with paddy rice cultivation after the plantation implementation. Some villagers mentioned cases of households from other villages having their rice seedlings 'accidently' ploughed up or their field huts bulldozed by investors, thus forcing them to lease their land to the banana investors. Only a couple of households successfully refused to lease out their land and now held paddy rice fields in the middle of the banana plantation (see Fig. 2). One of these households experienced severe erosion in their field due to the mechanical tilling of the plantation. Six of the interviewed households indicated that they initially refused the investors' proposal before finally giving in due to threats of pollution, accessibility and social pressure.

## 5.3. Rapid implementation and land use change

Both banana investors started implementing the plantations in early 2011. In general, the two plantations use similar cultivation practices: they start by clearing the land, tilling it into deep ditches using heavy machinery, before planting rows of banana

[5] The Bureau of Fiscal Services, US department of Treasury, exchange rate 31.12.2010 https://www.fiscal.treasury.gov/fsreports/rpt/treasRptRateExch/1210.pdf.

[6] The Chinese measure *mu* corresponds to 614.4 $m^2$ and in the local context farmers and investors calculate at 15 mu to 1 hectare.

**Fig. 2.** Top left: Newly tilled banana plantation with water pipes, Muang Long district, June 2015. Top right: Replanted banana palms in the LFA plantation, June 2015. Mid left: Bananas ready for harvest in the LFA plantation, November 2014. Mid right: Gravel road, water pipes and left-over plastic insulation in the XG plantation, October 2014. Bottom left: Banana fruits covered with protection plastic, Muang Long district, August 2014. Bottom right: View of the XG banana plantation with an isolated paddy field of the one household that refused to join the plantation scheme in Ban Sirimoon, November 2014 (Photos: by author).

seedlings and building new irrigation systems (see Fig. 2). Chemical fertilisers and a range of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and growth-enhancers are sprayed heavily in the first growing months and more moderately during the ripening of the fruit. Several layers of plastic and paper are used as insulation to protect the fruit against pests and cool temperatures during the cold, dry season months from November to January. In the XG plantation, a small network of gravel roads and footpaths was also established.

When asked about the greatest impact of the plantations on their village, the villagers highlighted the rapid land use change and associated land degradation, particularly chemical pollution. Some farmers reported that crops growing adjacent to the plantations had been damaged by the chemicals, while others expressed concern for the long-term impacts to the soil. Several people mentioned that breathing and sleeping problems often followed the spraying of chemicals in the plantations.

In addition, the banana roots, plastic waste and the gravel stone roads worried the villagers. Consequently, many people expressed concern that they would be unable to '*turn back the land*'– as it was often expressed – to other agricultural uses after the end of the contracts. The lack of clear assignment of responsibilities for land restoration in the contracts contributed to these worries. Villagers as well as district officers expressed concern that the investors might leave the plantations before the contract finished and without restoring the land. The plantation manager in the XG plantation noted that up to 60 trees had already been infected with the Panama disease in the Ban Sirimoon plantation. One DAFO officer also explained that there had been several examples of investors going bankrupt and '*taking-off in the middle of the night*', leaving the hosting villages with the task of cleaning and restoring the land.

Moreover, the clearing and tilling process in both plantations entailed the destruction of the paddy rice irrigation system of channels and sluices, as well as the traditional plot borders. While some households had invested in stone land markers and installed them prior to the implementation, the majority had not. The former village naiban articulated this concern:

"*There are no problems at the moment, but maybe problems will come after the contract is over because they [landholders] will have problems with land borderline, for sure they will have problems with this, because the Chinese destroyed all the previous land borderlines*" (Interview, Mr. Tong, 12.11.14).

As a result of the combined concerns over land degradation and destroyed plot borders, most of the households involved stated that they expected to accept a contract extension offer from the banana investors if the leasing fee were raised to reflect the rising land prices in the area.

Finally, several villagers expressed concerns about the general expansion of banana plantations in the district, leading to an overall decline in rice production. Even for households, who had leased out low producing paddy fields, the production of rice from these fields had constituted a considerable part of their food supply, and in general villagers were increasingly relying on purchased rice leading to substantial concerns with rising rice prices. These concerns were aggravated in the spring of 2015 when a new large banana plantation was established on some very productive rice paddies in three neighbouring villages.

## 6. Discussion

### *6.1. A case of successful 'control grabbing'*

Recent advancements in the land grabbing literature have begun to challenge the meta-narrative of 'global land grabbing' and especially critiqued the predominant focus on large-scale and long-term land acquisitions (e.g. Edelman, 2013; Kandel, 2015) by so-called 'powerful' foreign corporate and government investors (e.g. Baird, 2014b; Beban and Gorman, 2015; Shohibuddin et al., 2015). While this early focus is unsurprising in light of the extent and pace of the reported land rush in the aftermath of the global food and financial crisis in 2007-8 (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Deininger et al., 2010), as well as the severe poverty and justice implications of many large-scale land acquisitions (De Schutter, 2011; Messerli et al., 2013; Olwig et al., 2015; Shete and Rutten, 2015; Thondhlana, 2015), recent advancements in the literature has highlighted that adopting the concept of 'control grabbing' makes it possible to approach land grabbing as something more than near permanent and large-scale concessions or illegitimate expropriation of land (Borras et al., 2012a). Additionally, turning analytically towards the ways in which actors combine various exclusionary powers to establish and maintain control over land enables us to analyse highly variable processes of land alienation in particular contexts (Hall et al., 2011) thus revealing the blurred lines between land acquisitions by 'economic' and 'extra-economic' means (Hall, 2013). Supposedly 'straight-forward' market transfers, purchases or leases of land are, as our case study illustrate, often wrought with pressures of force and legitimation. Based on these insights, it becomes possible to analyse the banana plantations in Muang Long district as potential land grabs.

While the banana plantations substantially differ on several accounts from the state-granted large-scale land concessions currently dominating the literature on 'land grabbing' in Laos, they essentially lead to the same outcome for local farmers, namely a loss of land to foreign investors. As such, the findings of this study question the importance of *scale*, spatial as well as temporal, as the key factor in terms of understanding contemporary land grabbing. First, the investors driving the banana boom are not the large regional or multinational corporations involved in land acquisitions elsewhere in Laos (Baird, 2010; Kenney-Lazar, 2012), but rather private businessmen and small-scale companies local to the borderland region. This intimate knowledge of the area has allowed them to take advantage of the new investment opportunity presented by the increased demand for bananas in China, because land could be identified and obtained relatively quickly. The banana cultivation thus to some extent represents a continuation of the long historical, social and economic cross-border interactions between Luang Namtha Province and China's southern districts (Lagerqvist, 2013; Sturgeon, 2013). Second, the limited spatial extent and temporal scope of the banana plantations can be partly attributed to the 'nature of the crop' (Hall, 2011). The technical requirements for the banana cultivation compel the investors to target the relatively flat and easily accessible lowlands along roads and rivers. In a landscape characterised by rugged terrain and narrow river valleys, larger continuous plots of lowland land are difficult to find, thus limiting the spatial extent of individual plantations. Regarding the temporal scale of the acquisitions, the short-term growing season of the banana plants – i.e. 10–14 months with 3–5 crop cycles per banana seedling – renders six-year short-term lease arrangements suitable for investors. The potential for extending the contracts after the six years also allows the investors to take advantage of the good soil quality, while maintaining flexibility in light of the risk of the Panama disease and the potential for land degradation.

Despite the limited scale of the individual plantations, the banana acquisitions have substantial implications at the local level: most notably, they are considerable in size compared to local landholdings. For the involved households, the banana plantations occupy a sizeable share of the paddy rice area, thus entailing a rather widespread land use conversion when aggregated at the village or district level. As a result, villagers and government officials alike are beginning to express concerns about an overall decline in the rice production in the district. Similar results have been shown in cases of small- to medium-sized land acquisitions in various places in Africa (Becker, 2013; Hilhorst et al., 2011; Kandel, 2015), underscoring that the implications of the spatial scale of acquisitions are highly context-dependent. The relativity of the magnitude of acquisitions vis-à-vis the extent and importance of local land assets are thus key to assessing the consequences of land acquisitions (Cotula, 2012).

Furthermore, where studies have revealed the hierarchical and top-down implementation processes for at least the early stages of state-granted land acquisitions in the Laotian context (Messerli et al., 2015) as well as the importance of investors' relations to the Lao state (Kenney-Lazar, 2015), the case of the LFA and the XG companies in Ban Sirimoon shows how the banana investors are able to circumvent the formal involvement of government authorities by relying on more informal acquisition strategies. The extensive use of personal relations and 'snowballing' techniques made it possible for these companies to set up networks of local middlemen and land brokers acting as gatekeepers to the village. In relation to this, the long-term residency of some of the Chinese investors in Laos, as well as the joint ventures between relatives, i.e. sons- and fathers-in-law, enabled companies to act fast and seek the opportunities for expanding into banana without official investment permission. The story of the XG Company also illustrates how the intermediary role adopted by some of the locally knowledgeable investors has provided access to these networked strategies for new investors who are unfamiliar with the area.

The accounts of the local middlemen as well as the villagers in Ban Sirimoon allude to the intermingling of the powers of exclusion – market demands with legitimation and force – in the investors' negotiation strategies. Up front the banana leases appear to be driven by market powers: The relatively low price and good quality of land in Laos drive the interest of the banana investors and converge with the economic incentives for villagers to lease out the land, given the relatively high leasing fees compared to the few cash income opportunities in the village. The argumentation used by the middlemen also drew distinctly on these economic incentives. However, while the villagers to some extent confirm the influence of the market forces, their stories also reveal how the economic incentives were supported and reinforced by the extensive use of legitimising arguments, as well as force or threats thereof. The middlemen used strong legitimising arguments in their emphasis on the plantations' provision of 'stable' incomes from leasing fees and employment opportunities in the plantations. Such legitimisations resonate with the official Lao land management policies and their emphasis on bringing settled agricultural activities to rural areas (Lestrelin, 2010; Rigg, 2005), and furthermore play into the villagers' expressed desires to 'follow the society's development'. In addition, the extensive use of local middlemen contributed to a general legitimation of the investors' agenda by introducing a level of intimacy in the negotiations with landholding households. In Ban Sirimoon, the village land brokers created an atmosphere of social peer pressure, making it uncomfortable for some villagers to refuse. Finally, the unsuccessful resistance of six households to the plantation proposals illustrates how investors used direct force by destroying rice seedlings or cutting off access to fields, as well as indirect force in the form of threats concerning the succeeding land degradation, chemical pollution to crops and loss of water access to persuade households to lease out land. Employing the framework of exclusionary powers provide an analytical entry point for understanding these informal strategies.

In Ban Sirimoon, the intimate and networked land acquisition strategies coupled with the use of exclusionary power made it possible for the investors to ensure a rapid and successful implementation of the plantations: something that has proven increasingly difficult for the large-scale formal concession projects in Laos (Hett et al., 2015; Messerli et al., 2015; Schönweger and Messerli, 2015). Moreover, the subsequent swift land use conversion was central for the investors' ability to establish and consolidate control over the land. According to the contracts, the investors have no responsibilities for restoring the land to its previous uses and most of the involved households are thus considering extending the initial contracts beyond the six years to avoid having to deal with re-establishing their fields. While it is too soon to assess the full and long-term consequences of the banana boom in Muang Long district, the susceptibility of monocropped banana plantations to the Panama disease and long-term soil depletion, as well as the risk of general market-price drops, render the banana investments vulnerable to the type of sudden crashes known from other crop booms in Southeast Asia (Hall, 2011). Whereas investors are generally free to move to uninfected land elsewhere or seek alternative investment opportunities, local farmers are left to deal with land that – while not necessarily being permanently destroyed – requires difficult and costly restoration (See e.g. Hall et al., 2011). These threats contribute to the potential longer-term implications of the banana acquisitions and illustrate that "*while the 'grab' itself is important, it only marks the beginning of a process of gaining (or grabbing) access [to land]*" (Peluso and Lund, 2011).

Overall, the banana leases in Ban Sirimoon and Muang Long district can be characterised as 'small-scale land acquisitions' with limited spatial reach and involving short-term and temporary allocations of use rights. Based on these characteristics, they would for example disqualify for inclusion by the criteria of many influential 'land grabbing' definitions used by the global land acquisition inventories (e.g. Anseeuw et al., 2012), and would hence not feature in the statistics used by many as a basis for discussions of the scale, scope and processes involved in 'global land grabbing'. However, as our findings show, the combined effects of the land use conversion and the cultivation practices in the plantations create a lock-in of land use, which represents a strong 'control grab' of the land. While the banana acquisitions do not lead to permanent dispossession of the villagers involved, the immediate and potential longer-term alienation of the land facilitated by the use of forceful acquisition strategies nonetheless qualify them as land grabs. A growing number of studies have similarly engaged with other types of commoditisation of land and capitalisation of the agricultural production to show the various ways in land loss or loss of autonomy over land use decisions takes place around the world today (Cramb et al., 2015; Vicol, 2015; Woods, 2015). Our findings support such studies in providing a critical contexts for claims in the broader debate on possible agrarian futures that presents contract farming, smallholder outgrower schemes and land management contracts as better alternatives to large-scale land acquisitions (i.e. Deininger, 2011; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010).

From a broader policy perspective, these perspectives hold implications for discussions concerning how to design adequate policies to abate the consequences of land loss among local communities. Messerli et al. (2015) have illustrated how increasing land scarcity and competition between investors are giving rise to more inclusive modes of acquisition processes in Laos, with a stronger involvement of local authorities and communities in the implementation of new investment projects. While the banana acquisitions in Muang Long district somewhat exemplify such emerging processes, our findings also highlight some of the difficulties and remaining pitfalls related to attempts to regulate land acquisition processes in Laos. First, the informal negotiation processes and the rapid implementation of banana plantations make it difficult for the authorities to intervene in plantation projects, especially in the cases where investors pay deposits to villagers upfront. The use of intermediaries as well as the sales and resales of plantations between investors create additional confusion and a lack of transparency for both villagers and district authorities, thus adding further complexity to any efforts towards monitoring the banana development. Second, the current attempts at regulating the banana boom have not had much effect to date, despite government authorities and villagers expressing concern regarding the decline of rice production. The provincial decree to prohibit banana acquisitions of paddy rice fields has largely failed, partly due to corruption and non-compliance among district authorities, but also since the short-term economic gains for both villagers and investors outweigh any concerns for potential reprisals. For many villagers, the pressure to secure increasing cash income in the short run also leads to the strategic pursuit of opportunities to commercialise agricultural activities despite the acknowledged potential for severe land degradation and other environmental problems.

## 7. Conclusion

The scholarly debate on 'land grabbing' is advancing, with an enhanced understanding of mechanisms of contemporary land grabbing being achieved through recent in-depth theoretical and empirical engagements with the actors, scales and processes involved in various forms of land acquisitions. Part of the endeavour has been to begin a critical discussion of the challenges and limitations of the 'global land grab meta-narrative' (Baird, 2014b) and its focus on large-scale and long-term acquisitions by 'powerful' corporate actors. Accordingly, this paper has aimed to contribute to these ongoing efforts by exploring the case of Chinese banana plantation investments in Ban Sirimoon, Laos. The banana investments encountered there represent an illustrative example of an emerging form of 'small-scale land acquisitions' that differs from the large-scale state-granted land concessions dominating the literature on 'land grabbing' in Laos.

Our study demonstrates how the banana acquisitions are limited in both their spatial extent and temporal contractual arrangements. The small-scale investors driving these acquisitions have long-term trade experience and social relations in the area. This allows them to set up networks of middlemen and local land brokers, making it possible to avoid the formal involvement of government authorities in the land acquisition process. In Ban Sirimoon, the two banana companies' use of local middlemen and land brokers ensured a successful negotiation of leasing contracts and a rapid implementation of the plantations. Using the 'powers of exclusion' framework to analyse the land acquisition strategies, the study reveals how the investors – and by extension the local land brokers – mix 'economic' and 'extra-economic' means to gain access to the land. Furthermore, the study illustrates how the land use change and associated destruction of plot borders, irrigation systems and accessibility to water coupled with the land degradation from erosion and heavy use of chemical inputs create a lock-in of land use. Despite the limited spatial and temporal scale of the plantations, the land use conversion that they entail thus represents a rather strong and longer-term 'control grab' of the land from previous users. From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of creating a better understanding of how highly diverse forms of land acquisitions shape the alienation of land from local users in Laos and elsewhere.

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