



FairFrontiers Newsletter

Issue 3

January 2024

In our first issue for 2024, we share reflections from trips to the field in Laos and in DR Congo last year, and updates including new researchers, and upcoming events/meetings. Articles, organisations, and events highlighted in this newsletter have [embedded links](#).

The commercialisation of Northern Lao landscapes to produce for Chinese markets

Grace Wong

September 2023

The landscapes of Northern Laos have changed dramatically over the past decades; from shifting cultivation mosaics of upland rice, forests, fallows and mix of subsistence and commercial crops, to vast hills of monoculture sugar cane, maize and tobacco fields. The changing landscape is driven in part by the Government of Laos' visions and policies of rural agrarian development, which involves resettling shifting cultivators and implementing participatory land use plans designed to enable flows of investment to drive commercialization of the land. In the far northern corners of Oudomxay and Luang Namtha provinces adjacent to China, flows of Chinese capital and actors (traders, middlemen) directly lead to Lao farmers planting the crops that are desired by Chinese markets and being paid in Chinese yuan.



Vast fields of maize crops in Laos.

In September 2023, the FairFrontiers team provided methods training to Prof. Sithong Thongmanivong and his team of researchers and students from the National University of Laos (NUOL) and Oudomxay Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment. Over the following months, the NUOL team then carried out participatory mixed methods in villages in Namor district of Oudomxay, and Namtha district of Luang Namtha to gain deeper and gendered understandings of local village and land use histories, and perceptions of wellbeing. We will return to the villages in March 2024 to implement household surveys and collect and assess soil samples.

Intense and inspiring weeks at Upemba National Park, DR Congo

Alimata Sidibe

October 2023

The Upemba National Park in the DRC, is a UNESCO biodiversity reserve that hosts a rich biodiversity of plant and animal species, such as elephants, zebras and the Katanga impala, making it one of the most



Local partners actively engaging with the group of women during a focus group discussion.

biodiverse regions in the world. It also has a long history as one of the oldest national parks in the country, established in 1939 on the basis of a Belgian royal decree. The park is currently threatened by several factors including habitat loss, illegal poaching and mining which not only reduce the number of species but also have serious implications for the communities that depend on its natural resources for their livelihoods and wellbeing. The Upemba National Park is seeking to foster good relationships with communities around the park and to support local sustainable development as these communities have experienced histories of displacement and land-use restrictions.

FairFrontiers conducted a four-day methods workshop at the Upemba National Park headquarters in October 2023, and shared FairFrontiers' methods of critical policy analyses, and assessing ecosystem services and well-being with local partners, including researchers from the University of Lubumbashi, the Upemba National Park staff, and wildlife conservation government officials. The workshop was followed by a three-day field research in Kisandji village, where data was successfully collected through gendered focus group discussions household surveys and transect walks.

Our local partners were a group of wonderfully motivated and dedicated researchers and conservation staff with diverse expertise (biology, agronomy, ecology and economics, community development). Their incredible openness, flexibility, and positive energy contributed with no doubt to the success of the workshop and research activities in Kisandji. We were ourselves very inspired by the partners, the welcoming local communities and the beautiful environment of Upemba and are very much looking forward to the next steps in our research together!

New feature: Get to know our FairFrontiers project partners!

Aristide Chacgom, Green Development Advocates



Since 2009, [Green Development Advocates \(GDA\)](#) has been advocating for local community and indigenous people's rights in Southwest Cameroon, where the development of large-scale plantations as well as a conservation area have created various environmental and socio-economic pressures on these communities. During the project's annual meeting in January 2023, we sat down for a chat with GDA's coordinator, Aristide Chacgom.

How did you get involved in GDA? I am an environmental lawyer and joined GDA after graduating from university, and I have been coordinating the activities in GDA since 2015...so that means it has been more than six years!

What types of work does GDA do? Beside advocacy work for local communities, we support them by introducing them to agroecology practices, as one alternative livelihood strategy. In Campo, for example, where we have been working since 2019, communities have been impacted by the clearing of intact forests adjacent to the biodiversity rich Campo Ma'an National Park for oil palm

plantations by the company CAMVERT. We also work on capacity building. This involves ensuring that community members understand the legal provisions, laws on NTFPs etc. so that they have the knowledge to negotiate, and are aware of their legal rights when a company approaches them.

How does our collaborative research on forest-agriculture frontiers contribute to GDA's activities, and how? The discourse analysis of newspaper articles is a useful approach for us to see what kind of discourses are there in the public. We are also able to understand how various actors try to promote or justify their agenda in the media, such as the oil palm companies.

What do you think needs to change in order to reach a more equitable future in this region? There are many, many things that need to change...what I can say for now is from the legal perspective. First, procedural law needs to ensure companies respect FPIC, and include communities in the negotiation process. Second, forest and agricultural laws need to secure customary rights and local people's rights to access land and forests. The important question is, how can the law protect communities and provide them benefits in the face of companies looking to extract resources? Communities have the right to benefit, and should be able to access the courts when they have grievances, and companies should also be held accountable for their actions.

Check this out for further information on GDA's work in Campo Ma'an:

[Joint report by Greenpeace Africa & GDA on illegal palm oil plantations and impact on villages \(December 2021\)](#)

More publications by GDA can be found [here \(available in English and French\)](#)

Seminar on Biodiversity Offsets – Niak Koh, RIHN Visiting Research Fellow December 13, 2023

[Niak Koh](#) was a RIHN Visiting Research Fellow from November 2023 to January 2024. Niak has a background in sustainability science, and her research interests include how biodiversity policies can be designed and implemented for effective and equitable outcomes. Her stay at RIHN involved working on ongoing research with the FairFrontiers project that examines whether REDD+ finance can lead to transformative forest and land-use decisions, using a telecoupling framework to analyse the flows of finances and commodities in Mai-Ndombe, DR Congo.



In December, Niak presented a public seminar titled “Safeguarding nature and people: Biodiversity and climate financing policies within the science-policy interface”. She discussed how policies can be designed and implemented for effective and equitable outcomes for people and biodiversity, referring to examples of two policies: biodiversity offsets and REDD+ finance. Biodiversity offsets are a policy that can be used to protect and restore biodiversity loss from infrastructure development, but have also have been criticized for poor ecological outcomes, commodifying nature, and creating social inequality. For REDD+ finance, she introduced the Mai-Ndombe case, which demonstrated the complex political landscape of competing land uses, interests, and financial flows.

In the last section of the seminar, she shared some of her experiences of navigating the science-policy interface from the national context in Sweden, as well as international policy processes at the CBD. She concluded with a list of some important lessons she learned, one of which is the importance of being reflexive

as a researcher, which means to be aware of how one engages with various stakeholders, as well as what kind of impact one wants to make through their research.

Graduate Course on Plantations and Unequal Development in Forest Frontiers, Kyoto University

December 5-19, 2023

Grace Wong taught a course in Comparative Development Studies, Graduate School of Economics at Kyoto University. The course, titled “Plantations and unequal development in forest frontiers of the Global South,” introduced students to different theoretical concepts

and analytical frameworks that enable them to critically analyse the histories and political processes of plantation development in frontier regions, with references to FairFrontiers research, as well as scholarship related to the Plantationocene (e.g. [Wolford 2021](#), [Kenney Lazar and Ishikawa 2019](#)).



In one exercise to reflect on power, students were each given a stakeholder role in forest frontiers, and were asked to form a line with those perceived as “most powerful” to “least powerful”. One interesting observation by a student: debates centred on which actors have the *most power*, while those actors with *less power* were well aware of their status

Publications

• **FairFrontiers Research Brief 2: Gender & Intersectional Aspects in Scientific Research on Forest-Agricultural Frontiers**

Henriette Kyntschl (University of Freiburg)

This brief examines how gender and intersectional issues are investigated and portrayed by scientific research, identifying prominent narratives and the extent to which marginalised voices are represented. The second part assesses whether research on gender has changed over the past decades, or whether it has perpetuated the same narratives. To read this brief, [click here](#).

• **Can REDD+ finance compete with established and emerging land investments? The case of Mai-Ndombe, Democratic Republic of Congo**

Niina Pietarinen, Niak Sian Koh, Alizee Ville, Maria Brockhaus, Grace Wong

This info brief examines whether REDD+ finance can lead to transformative forest and land-use decisions in a complex political landscape of competing land uses, interests and financial flows in Mai-Ndombe, DR Congo, using a telecoupling framing. [Click here](#) for the CIFOR-ICRAF brief.

• **Crises, Complexities and Claims in Protected Areas – Landscape of (In) Coherent Biodiversity Governance and Social-Environmental Injustice in Southwest Cameroon**

Samuel Assembe-Mvondo, Julius Chupezi Tieguhong, Grace Y. Wong, Maria Brockhaus. (2023). Crises, Complexities and Claims in Protected Areas – Landscape of (In) Coherent Biodiversity Governance and Social-Environmental Injustice in Southwest Cameroon. In S. Ongolo & M. Krott (Eds.), *Power Dynamics in African Forests: The Politics of Global Sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363101>.

This chapter, from the book *Power Dynamics in Africa Forests*, examines how biodiversity conservation and related public policies and strategies have affected local social-ecological and -economic contexts, illustrating conservation and biodiversity outcomes with a situation analysis of the implementation of forest conservation policies and related community rights from the Southwest region of Cameroon. The book is open-access and available online (click DOI).

• **Environmental Justice and Human Well-being Bundles in Protected Areas: An Assessment in Campo Ma'an Landscape, Cameroon**

Ahmad Dhiaulhaq, Catherine M. Hepp, Laetitia M. Adjoffoin, Corine Howe, Samuel Assembe-Mvondo, Grace Y. Wong. (2024). Environmental justice and human well-being bundles in protected areas: An assessment in Campo Ma'an landscape, Cameroon. *Forest Policy and Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2023.103137>.

Based on household surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews in three villages adjacent to the Campo Ma'an National Park (CMNP) in Cameroon, this paper examines how the creation of CMNP amidst the expanding large-scale commodity plantations affects perceptions of well-being bundles and justice among local and indigenous communities.

If you would like to read the full paper, please email: ayami.kan@chikyu.ac.jp

New members!

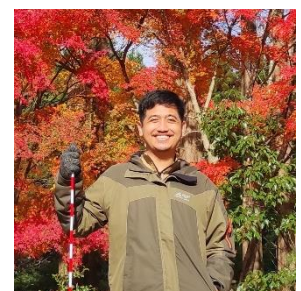
Starting in January, we are excited to have three researchers joining us at RIHN:

Wai Phyo Maung is from Myanmar, and has a PhD in Area Studies from Kyoto University. He has conducted research on tropical forest management, and the diverse livelihoods of local people in rural areas. He has field experience in the forests of Myanmar, Korea, and Japan, and is passionate about exploring the intricate dynamics of local communities and forest management.



Andi Patiware Metaragakusuma is from Indonesia and completed her PhD in Rural Development at Ehime University, Japan. For her PhD, she examined the socio-economics of communities linked to environmental issues in North Luwu Regency, Indonesia. More recently, she has carried out studies on transdisciplinary communities of practices (TDCOPs) to overcome the mercury pollution caused by artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) activities in Gorontalo, Indonesia with the RIHN SRIREP project.

Azwar Azmillah Sujaswara will be joining us as Research Associate in Land Use and Land Change Detection. He is from Indonesia, and graduated in spring of 2023 from Kyoto University's Graduate School of Agriculture, where he specialized in Forest and Biomaterial Science. Currently he is a GIS, Remote Sensing and UAV Specialist at ALGM Solution, based at IPB University. He has contributed to various projects including Rainforest Alliance Indonesia as an independent GIS and Remote Sensing consultant.



Upcoming Activities and Events

2024

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| January 15-20 | Methods training workshop in Sarawak with UNIMAS and field visit. |
| January 23 | Public Seminar at the Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS) , Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS): 'Methods for examining local voices and discourses around forest and land change in Sabah' |
| January 23-28 | Photovoice research activity in Pitas, Sabah with BorIIS and PACOS Trust |
| February 6-8 | EREC Board meeting, RIHN |
| February 15-16 | RIHN International Symposium: <i>Re-thinking "Policies" in Transdisciplinary Research</i> Speakers include Anne Lasimbang, Executive Director of PACOS Trust. |
| February 27-29 | Global Comparative Study on REDD+ Workshop, CIFOR, Bogor, Indonesia This work- and think-shop involves current and former CIFOR staff who has been working on the GCS-REDD+ project over the past 15 years, including FairFrontiers members Prof. Maria Brockhaus, Dr. Moira Moeliono and PL Grace Wong |
| March 6-15 | Methods training II and household surveys in Luang Namtha, Laos |
| April 10-12 | 5th International Forest Policy Meeting (IFPM5) , University of Helsinki. FairFrontiers has organized a panel: 'The Intersection of Discourses, Finance and Politics driving 'Development' in Forest Frontiers', and will be presenting 3 papers of our work. |
| June 23-28 | 26th IUFRO World Congress , Stockholm PL Grace Wong will be presenting a paper and co-authoring on 3 other papers. |
| July 22-26 | FairFrontiers 2024 Annual meeting in Sulawesi, hosted by the Forest and Society Group at Universitas Hasanuddin |
| August 12-15 | Program on Ecosystem Change and Society (PECS)-3 conference : Pathways to Sustainability, Montreal |
| November 4-8 | Global Land Programme 5th Open Science Meeting : Pathways to Sustainable and Just Land Systems, Oaxaca |