



FairFrontiers Newsletter

Issue 6

March 2025

With one year left to go on the FairFrontiers project, 2025 will be an intense but exciting year. We started off with our four-day workshop and first seminar of the year. Included here is our interview with project member Kelvin Egay, as well as reflections from the Global Land Programme conference in Oaxaca, Mexico. Articles, organisations, and events highlighted in this newsletter have [embedded links](#).

If you have any suggestions for what to include in our next newsletter, please email Ayami.

FairFrontiers Workshop: Brainstorming on the Political Forest

21-24 January 2025

Ayami Kan

How do we approach the questions of indigeneity, of resistance in frontiers? What are the ways in which our research can contribute to achieving just and equitable futures? How do we disentangle the layers of complexity in the changes happening in forest-agriculture frontiers? These were some of the key questions we discussed in our four-day workshop, where participants shared their perspectives and experiences from the field and reflected on the underlying 'political' dimensions when examining the forest frontier landscape. We were fortunate to have [Professor Nancy Lee Peluso](#) (University of California, Berkeley) at the workshop, which was indeed inspired by her work. Also joining us were project members from Finland, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan, and a visiting researcher from Spain.



Workshop participants at RIHN



Our workshop started with looking at the intersections of global critical political economy and political ecology with stimulating talks by Nancy Peluso and Maria Brockhaus. They highlighted how both approaches examine global-regional-local scale linkages in environmental changes and their implications at the local and regional levels. Both approaches also consider the historical and social contexts and processes that are driving environmental changes, and examine persistent patterns of capitalist, extractive resource use. While these approaches may use different methods, both call for a close re-examination of the origins of the issues we are looking at, and to avoid generalisations and homogenous framings in our analyses of the various interactions happening in these landscapes.

[A walk-and-talk excursion to the Imperial Palace during the workshop](#)

Idealised notions and portrayals of resistance and indigeneity for example often create generalised categories of people and simplified ideas about how people respond. Resistance is often unseen, though it can include instances of overt protest. Kelvin Egay (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) provided some examples from his research with communities in Sarawak. Communities facing changes in their land are forced to negotiate with and navigate through institutions and actors with different levels of power, but also face issues of internal social conflict (see the interview with Kelvin below). Alif Sahide (University Hasanuddin) discussed the dilemmas of indigeneity, referring to tensions between the need for public advocacy, versus the risks of creating new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. The use of labels such as “local” or “indigenous” can conceal the dynamics of power within and between communities. There are also actors that have co-opted these terms and ideas for their personal benefit. Moira Moeliono (CIFOR-ICRAF) commented that while learning the histories behind these categories can bring feelings of discomfort, it is necessary to consider *who* makes these categories, and *how* they change over time.

A key part of our workshop involved reflecting on our own positionalities, and the need to consider how research is contributing to the (re)production of the narratives that we are being critical of, and the ethical implications behind our interactions with communities in the field sites. Karno Batiran (University Hasanuddin) also reflected that we tend to focus on things that we want to see, yet there is a lot that is “unseen” in the landscape. One discussion that was missing from our workshop, suggested by Mireia Pecurul (Forest Sciences Centre of Catalonia), was on the topic of futures, such as what the implications of these changes at the frontiers have for future relations between people and nature, as well as social relations between people.

Our workshop ended with a seminar, “The Political Frontier: Bridging political economy and political ecology.” The seminar is part of RIHN’s Land Use Innovation Seminar series, and featured talks from Nancy Peluso, Maria Brockhaus, Kelvin Egay and Alif Sahide. The presentations shared some of what was discussed in the workshop. Some interesting questions asked by audience members were about the constant challenge of juggling between examining change, and making changes. The presenters responded that unexamined assumptions and generalisations can make the problem worse, leading to policies and projects that exacerbate the situation, even with good intentions. Both critical global political economy and political ecology are approaches not just to simply ‘critique’ but also to identify areas and actors that would be key to making effective changes. As researchers, one way to create change is starting with the people in your network. This means making thoughtful choices on who we work with, and how we will work with them.



Nancy Peluso at the seminar

Professor Mikitaro Shobayashi, Director of the Land Use Innovation Program at RIHN, closed the seminar by sharing his experiences working on policy and planning related to agriculture, water, trade and other environment-related issues at different levels of governance from global to local, and reflecting on what he learned from this seminar. He shared his thoughts on the need to go beyond mechanisms designed to simply ‘compensate’ those who experience more environmental and social burdens, and instead look at nuanced policies that pay attention to their needs. Institutions also need to address the challenges of accommodating value conflicts, especially long-held values attached to the forest and agriculture sector that are particularly difficult to change.

Labor, Land, Extraction: Gold Farmers in Indonesia's West Kalimantan

5-26 February 2025

Nancy Peluso, RIHN's Invited Scholar from January to March, is currently holding an exhibition of photos she took during her fieldwork in West Kalimantan. As the title suggests, the photos depict the lives, labor and landscapes created by small and medium scale gold miners. Our next newsletter will share Nancy's seminar on 21 February that narrates the photos in this exhibition.

For those interested in seeing her photos, see this [online exhibition](#) and [Video and article in New Mandala](#).



She has also written some articles based on her fieldwork:

- [Plantations and mines: Resource frontiers and the politics of the smallholder slot](#)
- [Entangled territories in small-scale gold mining frontiers: Labor practices, property, and secrets in Indonesian gold country](#)



In it, of it

Morning coffee



Histories (and the dead) in paths for a just future

30 October - 8 November 2024

Grace Wong

I craned my neck to watch the 'skeletons' passing by in the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) parade, feeling overwhelmed by the noise of popping firecrackers, laughing crowds and festive music in the chilly night. The scent of marigold flowers permeates the air as homes and shops decorate their entrances with the vibrant orange flowers and create altars both as memorials and as a bridge connecting the living with their ancestors. It is said that the dead can only 'see' orange and the flowers thus create a pathway for the dead ancestors to return and share a meal of their favourite foods with the living family members.



The Dia de los Muertos parade in downtown Oaxaca, 1 Nov 2024

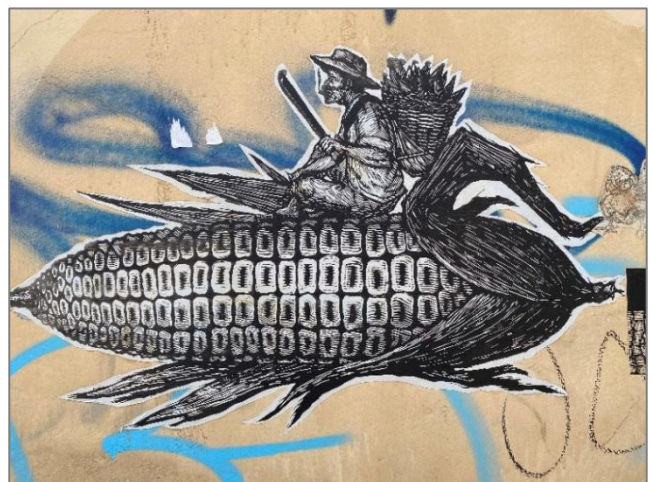


This unique celebration of culture, life, death and family was such as a brilliant experience, and I felt very lucky to be able to see this while participating at the [Global Land Programme 5th Open Science Meeting \(GLP-OSM5\)](#) in Oaxaca, Mexico last November. The GLP is a global interdisciplinary network of science and practice, working to foster understanding of land systems and the next generation of science-based solutions for local- to global-scale challenges.

Dia de los Muertos altar created by the family running our guesthouse in Teotitlán del Valle

Oaxaca was an inspired location for the GLP-OSM5, as the city is a hub for indigenous activism, knowledge and practices of land use that prioritize collective management of their territories and emphasize cultural identity to the land. The conference leveraged on this diversity by partnering with local communities and cooperatives throughout the event, ensuring that not only food for thought was grounded in local experiences, but also the delicious food that was served!

Mural art by local artists depicting culture and identity related to farming and indigenous produce were common throughout the city.



This unique context provided an invaluable perspective to the conference and to the discussions in the FairFrontiers and [Forequal](#) panel session on “[Infrastructures of inequality in forest and forest lands: Flows of commodities, finance and ideas to influence policy for transformative change](#)”. Our session invited papers that examine forms of inequalities related to the globalisation and financialisation of forests and land, with the aim to identify together with the audience, pathways that allow us to break with the infrastructures of inequality or to overcome obstacles that would halt the machinery of inequality production. Over 30 participants joined our session for lively small group discussions of their research on similar topics, and shared experiences and perspectives.



Project member Prof. Maria Brockhaus and long-time collaborator, Prof. Pham Thu Thuy.



Small group discussions on inequality within forest and land governance in our panel session, with project member Prof. Ole Mertz

The invigorating conversations interrogated our options for transformative change – and there was general agreement that change will require the strength of our collective knowledge, the need to address the politics of land and territoriality, recognition of histories and the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate worlds in which we live.

We left the conference – and Oaxaca – feeling rejuvenated and inspired by the commitment (and activism) of many of the different scholars and activists who were present ... and feeling more convinced than ever that our work is still relevant to inform pathways for a just change.

Some resources to learn more about indigenous agriculture and activism in Oaxaca:

- New America: [The Festival Is Resistance: A Fight to Preserve the Future in Oaxaca, Mexico](#)
- NPR: [Why Mexican Chefs, Farmers and Activists are Reviving the Ancient Grain Amaranth](#)

For an introduction to Dia de los Muertos, watch [Coco](#)!

Get to know our FairFrontiers project partners!

Kelvin Egay, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Kelvin leads the project's work in Sarawak, where he has been doing research collaboration with different indigenous communities for more than twenty years. His research focuses on indigenous communities' land tenure and natural resource use systems, specifically on the issues of competing claims, contested rights, and livelihood capabilities.



Kelvin presenting at the Land Use Innovation seminar

How do you see the frontiers? What does it mean to you?

The word 'frontiers' was for me a Western concept, with imageries of cowboys, the "Wild West". In the project's context though, 'frontiers' is about establishing boundaries of power, which is not a new process, but rather something that has been happening long before colonialism. For example, in some of Sarawak's indigenous communities' traditional customs, a man who travels out of his territory and found "new" land was considered a hero in his longhouse. In today's context, power is also established in the frontiers through development projects.

What does a fair and equitable future in forest-agriculture frontiers in Sarawak look like?

I don't know... (laughs). What is considered fair and equitable has a lot to do with discussing what "development" really means, and who actually benefits from it. At the moment, local participation in "development" of forest-agriculture frontiers is lacking, with most of these initiatives coming from the top. I am not saying that communities at the frontiers are passive recipients of "development". In many cases, they do actively respond to this transformation taking place in their customary land. But these responses sometimes take a different trajectory than outright resistance. For example, there are many different responses to narratives of "development" even at the household level. Most often, livelihood objectives between different rural households within the same communities are not always the same. Household livelihood objectives may not even always correlate with the community's livelihood objectives. We need to then examine the social relations and disparities between and within communities, and the complexity of people's lives, how this influences their way of thinking.

It is also really important to think about how we as researchers interact with people in the field, as well as our positionality. For example, I have seen conflicts and tension between family members in regards to their land claims and resettlement, which makes me question my own principles as a researcher when observing these processes. Who is making the decisions for whom? That said, communities also have agency to choose who they want to interact with, such as international NGOs who are able to fund their activities. Researchers should be aware of their own interests, and also what kind of expectations each person has, including your own.

How have certain concepts or ideas contributed to your understanding of forest-agriculture frontiers?

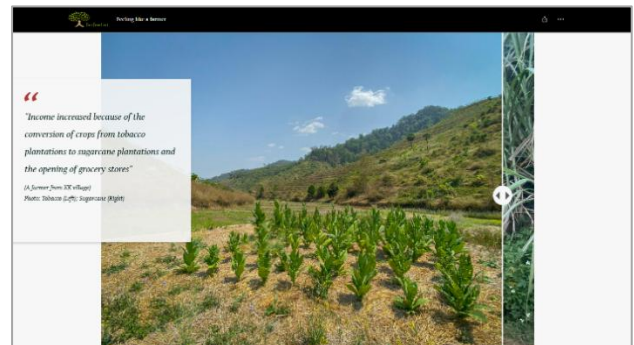
The project's approach to examining the relationship between human well-being and ecosystems is a useful way of looking at equity, in terms of understanding people's ability to access for resources and land, and their perceptions of the benefits they derive from different land uses. Besides the concepts and theories, the project's process of continuous critical reflection has also helped me think about my own work critically.

Feeling like a farmer: ArcGIS Story Map

January 2025

Wai Phyo Maung

Inspired by the digital storytelling methods developed by ArcGIS, I am excited to share a story I created as part of our research in Northern Laos. This initiative complements our academic publications, with the goal of making our findings accessible to a broader audience.



Find the story through the link: [Feeling like a farmer](#)

Publications

Forest and Society Special Section/Issue

Navigating change in forest-agriculture frontiers: Centering equity and justice in land use transformation in the Global South

The journal Forest and Society now has a Special Section/Issue in collaboration with FairFrontiers. The aim of this special section is to highlight existing research and practices that can contribute to advance our understanding of equity and justice during the processes of land-use change in the Global South. The section now has 4 papers published, and an additional 4 are in review. To read the articles under this section, check the [Forest & Society website](#).

IPBES Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food, and Health (Nexus Assessment) Summary for Policymakers

The [Summary for Policymakers on the IPBES Nexus Assessment](#), of which FairFrontiers project member Odi Selmoane (University of Pretoria) is a co-author, is now available. Grace Wong is lead author of Chapter 6 for the Report (Options for delivering sustainable approaches to public and private finance for biodiversity-related elements of the nexus), to be published soon.

Calls for papers –

Special Issue for *Forest Policy and Economics*

Following the [5th International Forest Policy Meeting \(IFPM5\)](#) that was held in April 2024 at University of Helsinki, **Forest Policy and Economics** is calling for papers as part of special issues originating from IFPM5:

Special issue: A political forest – an examination through critical political economy and ecology perspectives

More details regarding aims and scope of the special issues can be read [here](#). The deadline for manuscript submissions is extended to **July 31, 2025**.

Upcoming Activities and Events

2025

February 21

Nancy Lee Peluso held a seminar on small-scale gold miners in West Kalimantan titled “Labor, land, extraction”

February 25

Nancy Peluso gave a talk at [Center for Southeast Asian Studies](#), Kyoto University on “The Remittance House on Forest Land: Migrant Labor's Fixities in Mountain Java”

February 22-March 10

Grace and Alimata travel to Cameroon to work with GDA to implement photovoice in Campo Ma'an where we have carried out FGDs and household surveys in 2022/2023. Together with GDA, they will also present findings from FairFrontiers research at the International Colloquium on Which Environmental Diplomacy for the Congo Basin? at the International Relations International of Cameroon (IRIC), organized by [Forequal](#) and IRIC.

April

FairFrontiers team will travel to Sabah to work with Pacos Trust and BorIIS on data management and collaborative analysis.

August

Participation at the [Transformations/Earth System Governance Conference](#) in South Africa

October 13-17

Annual Meeting in Kyoto!