



Are socialist domestic land grabs egalitarian? Insights from a case involving a rubber plantation in Dien Bien Province, Vietnam



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Domestic land grab
Rubber plantation
State-owned enterprise
Egalitarian land distribution
Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the land grab processes dominated by a domestic state-owned enterprise in Vietnam. We examine the case of a rubber plantation in an ethnic minority area in the Northwest of the country. In doing so, the paper seeks to address how the Vietnamese socialist State – often considered a ‘strong state’ because it has pursued egalitarian land distribution policies over the past three decades – proceeds with domestic land grabbing in a context where the local people follow customary land use practices. The field research revealed the following. First, the Vietnamese government, while maintaining land distribution policies for its rural farming population, has increasingly sought to bring these policies more in line with the global trend of large-scale land acquisition at the expense of the traditional interests and livelihoods of the local population. By seeking to justify their essentially non-egalitarian land grab processes through the policy of post-land grab ‘egalitarian land redistributions’ in areas with disembedded customary control, the domestic state actors deployed a cunning duplicity in their persistent adherence to agrarian egalitarianism. Second, with the supports from the local and central governments, a state-owned enterprise named Vietnam Rubber Group, carved out its land grab processes with more freedom, leverage, and power than similar firms investing abroad through land concessions. Last, the post-land grab redistribution of land rights materializes state formation through re-territorialization of and re-legalization within the frontier zone.

1. Introduction

In this era of the ‘global land rush,’ there has been an explosion of scholarship on ‘transnational land deals’ or ‘global land grab.’ These terms are generally defined as large-scale, cross-border land deals through lease, concession, or outright purchase by transnational corporations or foreign governments for diverse profit-seeking activities, including food/non-food production, natural resource exploitation, and speculation (Edelman et al., 2013; Zoomers, 2010). Earlier literature on global land grabs has largely identified foreign investors as key grabbers in the process. Zoomers (2010) calls this the ‘foreignization of space.’ Correspondingly, a series of studies has emphasized the roles of ‘host’ countries and other domestic actors in paving the ways for foreign

investors and transnational corporations to engage in land grabbing (Borras and Franco, 2013; Borras et al., 2011; Deininger et al., 2011; Kaag and Zoomers, 2014; Margulis et al., 2013; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Wolford et al., 2013). Meanwhile, there is yet another strand of research that sheds light on the involvement of domestic investors in land acquisition, including government entities (e.g., politicians, public servants, and the military), private companies, urban elites, traders, chiefs, smallholders, villagers, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Baird, 2014; Fairbairn, 2013; Feldman and Geisler, 2012; Lavers, 2012; Xu, 2018).¹

Although the existing land grab literature has greatly enriched our understanding of the roles of various domestic actors involved in land deals, the transformative process of land use and control, and the

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¹ In this paper, chiefs refer to customary authorities or customary community leadership (Ahmed et al., 2018; Fairbairn, 2013). Urban elites refer to those who live in urban areas and are involved in land deals (Baird, 2014; Fairbairn, 2013).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.06.009>

Received 10 June 2019; Received in revised form 25 May 2020; Accepted 5 June 2020

Available online 13 June 2020

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consequences for the people and the environments affected by land grabbing, there are also three understudied issues that this paper attempts to address. First, the previous studies have not paid attention to investigate how a socialist State – often considered a ‘strong state’ for its pursuit of egalitarian land distribution policies – proceeds with domestic land grabs in a context where local people follow customary land use practices. Second, there have been no attempts to examine the distinctive roles and features of an SOE investor in an agrarian land grab project in its home country by way of comparison with the case of SOEs investing abroad. Last, very few empirical studies have been conducted to identify how a socialist state seeks to involve ethnic minority populations in land deals as a way to strengthen its power over the frontier area. The details of each issue are provided below.

First, some existing studies on land grabs have depicted the state as either a weak, fragile, or failed entity lacking the capability to oppose the pressure placed on it by foreign investors, or as a ‘host state’ which facilitates land accumulation by providing financial and infrastructural support to (trans)national corporations (Arezki et al., 2011; Deininger et al., 2011; Gonda, 2019). States like Madagascar, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Cambodia have been portrayed as being incapable of providing the kind of tenure security and formal land markets that would generate order and serve to protect their national territory (Wolford et al., 2013). However, the arguments of a ‘weak state’ or ‘passive victims’ would lose face in the case of Vietnam. While the countries listed above have gone through large-scale land acquisition processes dominated by foreign investors, Vietnam typifies a case whereby “...transnational corporations faced often insurmountable hurdles when they sought to acquire land” (Sikor, 2012, 1091), and “...international investors searching for land had to return home with empty hands” (ibid., 1092). In addition, since the ‘Đổi Mới’ (i.e., economic renovation) reform was introduced in 1986,² the State has undertaken efforts to promote egalitarian land distribution policies, commonly understood as the Vietnamese State’s approach to providing ‘equal access to land for all’ based on the considerations of the equitable distribution of wealth. In practice, each household is allocated several plots in different locations, with careful regard to land quality, irrigation conditions, location, capacity for crop rotation, distance to plots, household size, the amount of available household labor, and equity between households (Pham et al., 2007). Thus, the meaning of what is ‘egalitarian’ is not limited to the equal distribution of wealth, but also involves the idea of an ‘equitable’ distribution of benefits, whereby the long-term utility of the asset provided for sustainable livelihoods is also taken into account. This study bases our understanding of Vietnamese socialist egalitarianism on this perspective. Under the 1993 Land Law and its subsequent revisions in 2003 and 2013, the State provided land rights to every household (called the ‘Land Use Right Certificates’ (LURCs) or ‘Red Book’ in short) in accordance with the size of the family household. The Land Law also stipulates a limit on the maximum area of agricultural land that each household can be allocated, with the dual aims of ensuring both that every farmer would not become landless and that the land would be distributed widely among rural residents.

Meanwhile, the State has pursued modernization of agricultural production as the key driver for agricultural development.³ This process has included the state-led acquisition of a large amount of agricultural land that is to be re-distributed to domestic investors for the expansion of agricultural production. Based on the case study of a rubber

² The reform stressed a greater role of market mechanisms in the economy, while still maintaining the political domination of the State and the Communist Party (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2002; Painter, 2005).

³ In this article, ‘modernization of agricultural production’ refers to the process of transforming agricultural production from traditional labor-intensive agriculture to a Green Revolution technology-based one that mobilizes capital-intensive inputs and outputs based on specialized production systems in order to improve the efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness of the agricultural sector and to facilitate agricultural commercialization.

plantation in Northwest Vietnam, Dao (2015) points out that land grab processes are linked to the official task of industrialization and modernization for the region, whereby the rubber plantation is deemed to represent a key state development strategy designed to help strengthen state sovereignty over the people. These aspects add up to an assertion of Vietnam as a ‘strong state’ or ‘active state’ which takes strong initiatives in defining and enforcing the agenda of domestic land deals. Based on the context given above, the central question we seek to address in this paper is to what extent the socialist state-led domestic land grab continues to follow its egalitarian socialist principles and practices, and subsequently, through what means do such principles and practices manifest themselves in the early phase of developing a rubber plantation in Northwest Vietnam?

Second, while the literature has increasingly identified SOEs as key grabbers in host countries (Baird, 2010; Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013; Cotula et al., 2009; Global Witness, 2013; Laungaramsri, 2012; Lu, 2017; Visser and Spoor, 2011), little has been studied on the distinctive roles and features of SOEs in their agrarian land grabbing investment in their home country by way of comparison with the case of SOEs investing abroad. Indeed, the growing body of literature on land grabbing tends to portray SOEs as key transnational grabbers advancing into other countries with indirect support from their home government. For instance, Chinese SOEs are considered as critical players in acquiring large tracts of farmland in Africa (Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013; Cotula et al., 2009), the Asian part of Russia (Visser and Spoor, 2011), and Southeast Asia (SEA) (Lu, 2017). Likewise, Vietnamese SOEs are actively involved in large-scale land acquisitions in neighboring countries, like Laos and Cambodia (Global Witness, 2013). One of these SOEs, the Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), has used its local subsidiary companies to acquire vast areas of land in order to establish a large-scale rubber plantation under the land concession contract with the governments of Laos and Cambodia. Consequently, the land grabs for rubber plantation conversion have turned a number of upland farmers into landless laborers, resulting in the loss of their traditional livelihoods (Baird, 2010; Global Witness, 2013; Laungaramsri, 2012). However, our study examines the case of an SOE (the VRG) investing in its home country. We compare, among other things, the land acquisition mechanisms adopted and associated financial transactions, the post-acquisition land use rights of local people involved in land contribution, the kind and amount of support obtained from the Vietnamese government, and the degree of freedom permitted in land acquisition processes between domestic land grabs in Vietnam and transnational land grabs in Laos and Cambodia. In doing so, we ask and seek to answer what distinctive roles and features an SOE investor would have in undertaking a domestic agrarian land grab project in its home country, and how it is distinct from the case of SOEs investing in the host countries.

Third, while a large number of studies have discussed the goal of domestic land grabbing in Vietnam in relation to the for-profit objectives of both domestic investors and the state (Dang, 2015; Harms, 2013; Phuc et al., 2014; Ty et al., 2014), its political links to the process of state formation is often overlooked, *inter alia* those related to the frontier areas. Particularly, land acquisitions implemented in remote areas, such as mountainous highlands, are viewed as an essential process of state formation, where land grabs are often linked to state territorialization and legalization as a means of monopolizing control over both the land and the people using it (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Wolford et al., 2013). The state commonly claims that land is their own possession or rightfully theirs to dispose (Alden, 2012), while state actors often either see indigenous people as ‘squatters’ (McGee, 2011) illegally occupying state land or, in some cases, simply do not acknowledge any inhabitation of land where people actually live but claim it to be ‘unused’ (Hall, 2011). In Northwest Vietnam, however, the State has made efforts to involve ethnic minority populations in the frontier areas in “market integration, replacing common property with private land use rights, pressing shifting cultivators to become settled farmers” (Bonnin and Turner, 2014, 321), rather than expelling them from their land or

treating them as ‘anarchic settlers.’⁴ This aim was to “ensure that [ethnic minorities’] economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were” (Scott, 2009, 5). After the introduction of the Đổi Mới, the State designed and implemented numerous policies to promote socio-economic development and poverty reduction among ‘backward’ ethnic minorities in mountainous areas (Bonnin and Turner, 2012; Do et al., 2015; Kyeyune and Turner, 2016; Michaud, 2009; Sikor, 2011; Sowerwine, 2004). Echoing some earlier studies on the mutual linkage between land grabbing and state territorialization/legalization (Beban and Gorman, 2017; Dwyer, 2013; Peluso and Lund, 2011; Sikor, 2012; Wolford et al., 2013), this study asks and examines how the socialist state seeks to involve the ethnic minority populations under customary land control in official land deals as a way to strengthen its power over the frontier area.

In addressing the three issues and associated research questions articulated above, this paper contributes to advancing our understanding of land grab processes and mechanisms dominated by the socialist state and affiliated domestic SOE investors. In doing so, it uncovers the dynamic changes in land use and control, which are adversarial from the viewpoint of the most original land users. This is done by presenting a case study of an export-oriented rubber plantation located in a village of Dien Bien province, Northwest Vietnam. This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review recent land grab studies by conducting a systematic literature review in order to situate domestic SOE investors in the broader land grab literature. The third section provides an overview of the context of Vietnam, where conjunctures of domestic SOE land grabs have emerged. The fourth section discusses the research methods. The fifth section presents the research findings, while the sixth section is dedicated to a discussion on the findings. In doing so, we analyze both the roles of the domestic actors involved and their discourses/incentives in rubber plantation, as well as the consequences of how the land grabs affect the original landholders. The final section concludes the paper by highlighting key research findings and main arguments derived from them, based on which it claims to make a novel contribution to the literature on domestic land grabs.

2. Grabber identity: the positioning of domestic SOE investors

In the global land grab literature, foreign investors have largely been identified as the key grabbers (Cotula, 2012; Edelman et al., 2013; Zoomers, 2010). However, a growing body of reports have examined the patterns of land grabs led by domestic actors in dealing with the land of their national territory (Dang, 2015; Fairbairn, 2013; Hall, 2011; Harms, 2013; Lavers, 2012; Mellac, 2014). The latest figures from the Land Matrix show that on the global scale, about 30 percent of the total contracts signed for land are led by domestic deals (retrieved from landmatrix.org, accessed on January 22, 2019). While several databases have provided useful information about land grabs across the world, helping to trigger a proliferation of studies and discussions on domestic land grabs, debates among scholars are continuing, in part due to the suspected validity and representativeness of the available data

⁴ In Vietnam, the State recognizes 54 distinct ethnic groups. As of 2015, the ‘majority ethnic Kinh (Việt or lowland Vietnamese) and 53 ‘ethnic minorities’ (dân tộc thiểu số) accounted for 85.3 percent and 14.7 percent of the country’s population, respectively (CEMA, 2017). Of these, the Kinh majority has played a ruling role in the Communist Party and State agencies and controlled the national economy. Since the Đổi Mới reform, the Vietnamese state has worked consistently to integrate ethnic minorities into the national economy by promulgating the political ideologies of Việt Nation via the expansion of infrastructure, the delivery of education in Vietnamese language, and economic reorganisation through settled agriculture, the elimination of shifting cultivation, and the development of marketplace (Bonnin and Turner, 2012, 2014; Turner, 2012).

(Edelman et al., 2013). The recent surge of empirical in-depth studies has revealed the heterogeneous background and characteristics of domestic investors. To properly situate domestic grabbers, like Vietnamese SOE investors, in the scholarly literature on land grabs, we conducted a meta-study in which 204 peer-reviewed articles were selected based on a systematic literature review.⁵ The criteria for case inclusion were such that the case was published in a peer-reviewed journal, with the paper providing concrete empirical information on the land acquisition process from 2007 to 2019.⁶ We acknowledge that many relevant studies of land acquisition may use different terms, as they would not necessarily see themselves as being part of the broader land grab debate. Publications are excluded if they meet the following conditions: i) the finding does not provide concrete empirical information on a specific case of acquisition, for example, overviews and global data reports; ii) the article discusses land grabs for non-agricultural purposes (e.g., urban residence, conservation, tourism, hydro-power, subsoil resource extraction, and so on.). Based on the screening, 47 peer-reviewed articles were selected for analysis, which covered 86 cases from 26 countries (Appendix 1). The main features of the acquisition dynamics related to the investor, land property, and land acquisition mechanisms were identified (Fig. 1).

We found that a significantly large number of studies have been conducted on foreign investors (61.6 percent). Private companies or transnational corporations were most the commonly examined grabbers, followed by government entities (e.g., politicians, military, public servants, and oligarchs) and foreign ‘SOEs and Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs).’ There are only two cases showing the grabbers as foreign governments (Cotula, 2012; Nolte and Voget-Kleschin, 2014).

The analysis of land property systems reveals that 69.8 percent of the cases show acquisitions took place on state land, that 15.1 percent are explicitly referred to as those relevant to private property, and that 8.1 percent are described as those pertaining to legal pluralism (i.e., the coexistence of different kinds of property regimes). In addition, the acquired land in 31.4 percent of the was designated for the production of biofuel or industrial crops, followed by 29 percent for food crops and 8.0 percent for flex and drug crops. The acquisitions were carried out through various mechanisms, including leases and land concession (33.7 percent and 26.7 percent, respectively), government titling policies (14.0 percent), and purchase (10.5 percent). Other mechanisms, such as out-grower contracts, also played a role in certain land transactions (5.8 percent).

Table 1 shows the distribution of investor types, which are sorted based on the ‘investor origins’ and ‘pre-acquisition land property types’ identified in the host countries.⁷ We can see that the domestic actors have the most heterogeneous background, including government entities (e.g., politicians, public servants, military, and oligarchs), private

⁵ We looked for cross-references among articles and conducted a keyword search [(TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Land grab” OR “Land grabbing” OR “Land rush” OR “Large-scale land acquisition”) AND ALL (“Domestic investor” OR “Foreign investor” OR “State land” OR “Private land” OR “Communal land”)) AND DOCTYPE (ar) AND PUBYEAR greater than 2007 AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))] in the Scopus database.

⁶ The identification of the duration, starting from 2007, is based on the argument of Edelman et al. (2013) regarding the ‘making sense period’ of land grab literature being from 2007 to 2012. Around 2007, the media, NGOs, policy experts, and scholars began to study land grab issues more intensively.

⁷ We argue that the land tenure regime of the host countries plays a critical role in facilitating land grabs. A number of global assessments (e.g., Deininger et al. (2011)) have highlighted that land tenure regimes are ‘enablers’ of land grabs. Likewise, the quantitative data from various sources also suggest that most land deals occur on stated-owned land (Cotula, 2012). The results of our aforementioned systematic literature review of 86 in-depth case studies are consistent with the findings discussed in the previous reports, namely, that land grabs occurred on the state land of the host countries and/or in the countries where the land regime retains state ownership.

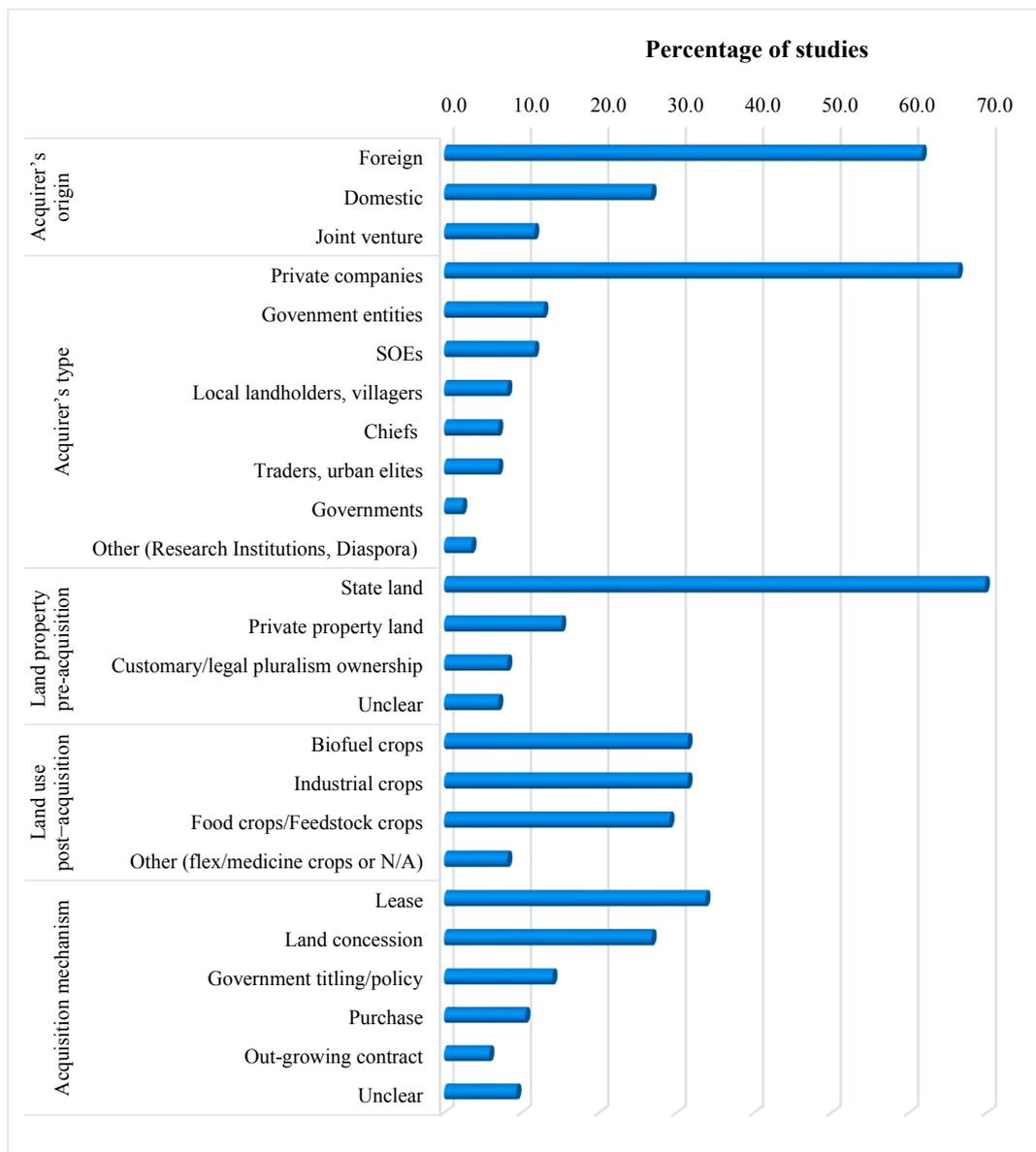


Fig. 1. Frequency distribution of land acquisition characteristics out of the 86 selected case studies. Source: Authors' compilation from a systematic literature review.

Table 1

Investor's origins and pre-acquisition land property types identified in host countries.

Dimension	Investor's origins		
	Foreign (53)	Joint venture (10)	Domestic (23)
Pre-acquisition land property types			
State land (60)	42 cases: SOEs (5) Private companies (34) Diasporas (2) Government (2)	1 case: SOEs (1)	17 cases: SOEs (3) Private companies (3) Chiefs (3) Government entities (9) Local landholders/villagers (3) Traders/urban elites (3) None reported
Customary/ legal pluralism ownership (7)	5 cases: Private companies (5)	2 cases: Private companies (2)	None reported
Private property land (13)	4 cases: Private companies (4)	3 cases: Traders/urban elites (3) Private companies (2)	6 cases: Government entities (2) Local landholders/villagers (5) Traders/urban elites (3) None reported
Unclear (6)	2 cases: SOEs (1) Private companies (1)	4 cases: Private companies (4)	None reported

Note: Numbers in parentheses show how many studies are associated which each category.

Source: Authors' compilation from a systematic literature review

companies, urban elites, traders, chiefs, smallholders, villagers, and SOEs. Of these, there is relatively less focus on domestic grabbers featuring the privately-owned land (6 cases) than those focusing on the state-owned land (17 cases).

The grabbers that form the focus of this study are domestic SOE investors. In the reviewed land grab literature, there are three studies that highlight the land acquisition process in the country maintaining the state-owned land regime. One of these concerns Ethiopia (Lavers, 2012), while another focuses on Kenya (Smalley and Corbera, 2012). In both cases, the authors identified significant economic driving forces regarding the state-owned sugar companies that rested on a type of out-grower arrangement with smallholders. They paid scant attention, however, to other important factors, such as investors' political or social incentives. The transformation processes of land use and control were not discussed thoroughly either. The last case study was carried out by Dao (2015) on Vietnam. This study focuses on a case in which a subsidiary company of the VRG, located in Son La province of Northwest Vietnam, implemented a large-scale rubber plantation project. The study was conducted in two new resettlement villages, which were established after their original village was submerged and abandoned for the construction of the Son La dam, with the rubber project considered part of rehabilitation schemes for the resettled people. The study revealed various adverse consequences of rubber plantation land grabs for the villagers involved in land contribution. In the resettlement land area, a state-owned rubber company accumulated and concentrated much of the fertile land for the prosperity of their plantation business. Meanwhile, the local villagers found it difficult to maintain subsistence levels of food production, given that they were allocated only small plots of land (about 1.0 ha per household), without any compensation for the land loss. Other than farming, they were also struggling with restricted local employment opportunities and tough working conditions involving gender inequality in the new area, resulting in a serious lack of food security at the community level.

While Dao's case study represents a useful precursor through which to reflect on the possible consequences of rubber plantations in northern Vietnam, it focuses on the resettlement villages context where agricultural land had already been allocated legally to the villagers before the land acquisition took place. Since the resettlement land represents a completely 'new' land for the settlers, there is no room for the influence of customary land control. Hence, land boundaries across households remain quite clear by way of their land contribution to the rubber company. However, in most areas of rural Northwest Vietnam, rubber trees are planted mainly in permanent villages, such as our case study, where a large amount of hill land is often dominated by customary land tenure systems that involve gaps, or even contradictions, with legal land tenure systems in terms of land boundary, land use purpose, and land access/control. This juxtaposition of different land tenure systems could result in the loss of traditional land boundaries and their associated topographical distinctions, hence requiring the incorporation of a new land distribution mechanism into the set of considerations regarding post-land grab benefit distribution and sharing. This comprises the focal context of our study on domestic land grabs.

Further, the results from our systematic literature review show that no previous studies have investigated the distinctive features and roles of SOEs investing in their home country by way of comparing them with the case of their international land grabbing. In this paper, we delve deeply into grabber identify by comparing the findings of our case study on the VRG's land grabbing in its home country, Vietnam, with existing studies on the firm investing in host countries such as Laos and Cambodia.

3. Background: The conjunctures of domestic land grabs in Vietnam

3.1. The transition of land control in Vietnam: The socialist land tenure system and the adhesion between the State and SOEs

Land represents a pillar of Vietnam's political evolution, as well as the socialist ideological roots of the Communist Party-State. In the established political credo of the Communist Party, land confiscation from colonialists for re-distribution to the tillers became one of the most important motivations of the revolution for national independence (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2002, 3). Following the 1954 victory against France, the Northern Vietnamese government immediately confiscated lands from their landlords and re-allocated them to landless residents and peasants, a process which was conducted under the Communist Party slogan "land to the tillers" (Người cày có ruộng) (Le and Quang, 2014; Lentz, 2011). Since the beginning of its transformation from a centrally-planned economy to a state-led market economy in 1986, Vietnam has consistently sought to maintain the socialist principles of land ownership. A critical condition of Vietnam's land tenure regime relates to the state's division of land rights in key categories, which are held by different entities: ownership rights belong to the entire people, control rights are under the state, and use rights are allocated to individuals, family households, and organizations for a certain period of time. Hence, citizens' land rights are viewed as being granted by the state (Wells-Dang et al., 2015). Vietnam's Land Law also defines a maximum limit on the amount of agricultural land that each household or individual can be allocated. Article 129 of the 2013 Land Law stipulates that the allocation quotas for annual crop land must not exceed 3 ha of land in the Southeast and Mekong Delta regions and 2 ha for each type of land in the other regions. Furthermore, quotas for perennial crop lands must not exceed 10 ha for each household or individual in delta areas and 30 ha in midland or mountainous areas (National Assembly, 2013). Thus, rural Vietnam has been conditioned by a historically constructed form of smallholder agriculture, where the State allocates small plots of land to peasants for their long-term use for farming. The Agricultural and Fishery Census of the General Statistics Office (GSO) indicates that the country's 10.3 million hectares of agricultural land is divided into 70 million plots, cultivated by approximately 12 million households. Approximately 70 percent of the households using agricultural production land own less than 0.5 ha (GSO, 2016). Meanwhile, the socialist land policies have generated a relatively limited concentration of private land ownership and foreign investment in the agricultural land. Sikor (2012, 1077) attests to this point by saying that, in Vietnam "...private companies and transnational corporations have not been able to get much of a foot into Vietnam's plantation sector."

However, the socialist egalitarian principles of small but equitable land distribution to the peasants, as well as state restrictions regarding foreign investment in domestic land deals, do not render impossible the practice of large-scale land acquisition in Vietnam. There are two key changes with the Land Law that have facilitated domestic investors to acquire large tracks of land from smallholders. First, since the 2003 Land Law was enacted, households and individuals have gained LURCs which could be used for capital investment, along with various associated rights, such as lease, transfer, exchange, inheritance, mortgage, and use as gifts, of the land (Article 106 of 2003 Land Law). Such a provision of land rights to rural households allowed them to use their land in order to enter into an economic relationship with private companies or SOEs. Second, the State changed the Land Law in such a way that permits itself to take lands from landholders and reassign them to concerted domestic investors, such as the private companies or SOEs involved in the agricultural production project (Article 40 of 2003 Land Law and 2013 Land Law). The State came to posit that to foster a more rapid economic development of the nation, it is necessary to modernize the national agricultural sector by developing large-scale

commodity production through the adoption of advanced technologies. However, such a policy shift could be curtailed by the vast amount of existing rural households engaged in small-scale production being grounded in fragmented plots of land, low yields or productivity, and limited integration into the global market. In particular, land fragmentation was perceived as the key underlying obstacle that held back the development of the agricultural sector (To et al., 2019). Therefore, the state exerted legally binding force to help domestic investors to both collect lands from landholders and concentrate a large area of land for their investment in export-oriented agriculture. Accordingly, thousands of smallholder peasants were forced to transfer their small plots of land to the investors, while the state gained substantial revenues from land levies and land-use charges (Dang, 2017). The conversion of agricultural land into large-scale plantations and other purposes such as industrial or residential development has been the primary cause of most major land disputes of recent years in Vietnam (Gillespie, 2014).

As Vietnam has pursued more market-oriented policies, such as through the promotion of decentralized economic activities and private forms of ownership, SOEs have increasingly been assigned more pivotal roles in the country's domestic economic management (Tran and Fallon, 2016).⁸ This is particularly the case with the VRG, one of the 19 largest state-owned corporations in Vietnam. The precursor to the VRG was related to the French-owned rubber plantations of the colonial period, which came to be nationalized by the Vietnamese government after the country's reunification. Following several organizational realignments between 1975 and 2005, the VRG was established in 2006 based on the Prime Minister's decision to re-structure the Vietnam General Rubber Corporation (Hieu, 2007). At that time, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) was the state's representative in the management of the VRG group. In 2018, its ownership was transferred to the Commission for the Management of State Capital at Enterprises (CMSC), a state property commission controlled by the central government. In the VRG, the chairman of the board of directors is appointed by the Prime Minister, thus becoming the Communist Party Secretary of the VRG's Party Committee (VRG, 2019).

As the largest state-owned rubber corporation in Vietnam, the VRG plays a pivotal role in strategizing the development of the country's rubber industry (To and Tran, 2014). Since the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government has considered rubber as a key crop for export, with the expectation that the favorable soil and climate conditions for growing rubber trees, especially in the Southeast and Central Highland regions, would help them meet increasing global demand (Tran, 2008). The government promoted the development of large-scale rubber plantations by providing support to the VRG for converting large areas of the officially designated 'inefficiently used agricultural land' and forestland into rubber plantations (To and Tran, 2014). In 2017, the VRG managed to gain a total of approximately 293,300 ha of land for plantations, accounting for 30 percent of the total national rubber area. Accordingly, it produced 277,300 tons of latex in 2017, accounting for 26 percent of the total production in Vietnam (Tran et al., 2018; VRG, 2018). To date, the VRG has been the leading rubber enterprise in Vietnam in terms of the total net worth and profit, as well as the total amount of tax paid to the State. In 2018, the total net worth of the VRG reached more than VND 49.56 trillion (about USD 2.15 billion),⁹

⁸In Vietnam, SOEs are organized, managed, and funded by the Vietnamese government. These corporations transfer any profits they generate to the government, while the latter reimburses any losses to the former. Every critical decision made by SOEs requires the approval of the Prime Minister or other relevant ministers, as well as support from the Secretary of the Communist Party. The State also retains the right to dissolve or reorganize SOEs, approve any strategic plans prepared by SOEs, and appoint senior SOE leaders (Tran and Fallon, 2016). The current share of SOEs in Vietnam accounts for about 30 percent of the country's annual GDP (ibid.)

⁹Regarding the currency exchange rates between VND and USD, in this paper we use the annual average exchange rates of 2008, 2011, and 2018, with USD

holding ownership of 99 subsidiary enterprises throughout the country. The VRG's total profits after tax deductions in 2018 amounted to VND 3334 trillion (USD 0.14 billion) (VRG, 2019).

Through the institutional backup of the central government, the VRG rapidly expanded its rubber plantation areas not only in Vietnam, but also in neighboring countries, such as Laos and Cambodia. According to a VRG report, by 2017 the company had planted rubber trees on 28,000 ha of land in Laos and 90,000 ha in Cambodia (VRG, 2018). However, based on land concession arrangements reported by the Global Witness (2013), the VRG actually operates on 28,893 ha of land through 7 subsidiary companies in southern Laos, and on 132,992 ha through at least 19 subsidiary companies in Cambodia.

3.2. The rise of rubber plantations in Dien Bien Province

In Dien Bien province, rubber plantations were first introduced in Dien Bien district in 2008, accounting for the total area of 673 ha. Subsequently, the plantation area was roughly doubled in just one year. During the period of 2008–2016, rubber plantations were expanded into 16 communes located in 5 out of the 8 districts of the province. By 2017, the rubber trees aged 3 to 10 years old covered 5122 ha of the provincial land (Dien Bien DARD, 2017) (Fig. 2). At the time of the authors' field research in 2018, large-scale plantations accounted for 98 percent of the provincial rubber land area, which was developed by the VRG through its local subsidiary company, the Dien Bien Rubber Company (DBRC). The DBRC, which represents the VRG in Dien Bien province, was established in 2007 and is solely funded by the VRG. The initial duties assigned to the DBRC were: i) planting, tending, exploiting, and processing rubber latex; ii) planting forest trees (e.g., acacia and eucalyptus) other than rubber trees, and then harvesting, buying, and selling the harvested woods; and iii) processing wood products. Over the past decade, however, the company has fulfilled only the first duty. In terms of its organizational structure, the DBRC is divided into three sub-units collectively, which are called 'plantation farms,' including Muong Cha, Dien Bien, and Tuan Giao. Each 'plantation farm' is divided by the so-called 'plantation plots' normally located in a specific commune. In 2017, the company employed 448 permanent workers and approximately 500 seasonal wage-laborers. Out of this population, local ethnic minority people accounted for 82.8 percent of the total labor force (DBRC, 2018a). According to the DBRC's business report, in 2017, the company harvested 631 ha out of the total of 5122 ha. The average productivity was 0.77 ton per hectare, while the average rubber latex price reached VND 31.85 million (USD 1380) per ton (DBRC, 2018a).

To plant rubber trees in Dien Bien, a model for collaboration between the rubber company and local people was established. Under the contract that the former provides the latter, all the necessary investment capital and services, including seedlings, input materials, training, and access to the markets are provided, and in return, the latter contributes their land to the rubber company (while still maintaining their land use rights certificate, or 'red book,' on that land). The duration of the contract was for 27–30 years, while also containing options for renegotiation or extension. The contract guaranteed that when the trees become productive, 10 percent of financial values obtained from latex harvesting and wood liquidation would be shared among the land contributors.¹⁰ Local people were also recruited as workers for the rubber company, and were promised financial compensation for their

(footnote continued)

1.0 equivalent to VND 16,600, VND 20,000, and VND 23,000, respectively.

¹⁰In this article, the term 'land contributors' refers to the persons/villagers who confer their land to the investor. Land contribution generally refers to a conferring of land, regardless of whether the original landowners or users follow a voluntary scheme of land contribution or a more or less forceful command of powerful or privileged outsiders.

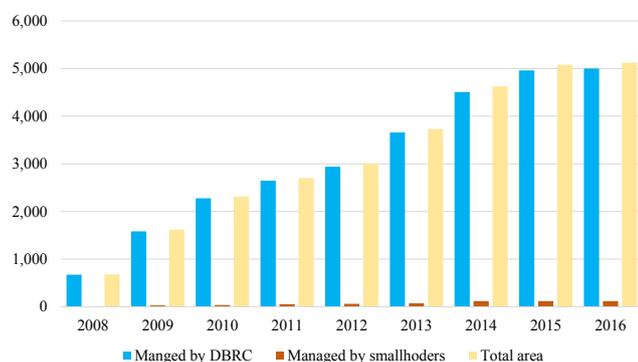


Fig. 2. Area of rubber trees in Dien Bien province (hectare). Source: The *Dien Bien DARD* (2017).

land contribution from the provincial budget. By the end of 2017, 4135 households in the province had contributed to the rubber company, a total of more than 5000 ha of land (DBRC, 2018b).

When the project was launched, rubber was considered the best crop to introduce to the province by the provincial authority, the VRG, and the central government, yet with differing motivations and objectives among them. First, in formulating the master plan, the Provincial Communist Party (PCP) and the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) – a provincial governmental unit in charge of socioeconomic and political policies – asserted that Dien Bien province had a large area of forestland and ‘unused land,’ and that the potential of these lands has not been effectively utilized through the allocation of LURCs (Dien Bien PCP, 2007a, 2007b; Dien Bien PPC, 2008).¹¹ In Resolution No.144/2008/NQ-HDND, dated December 12, 2008, it is stated that “...rubber plantation facilitates the new ways of land concentration for high valued agricultural commodity production” (Dien Bien Provincial People's Council, 2008, 2). If rubber trees are planted as forest trees, those lands could be reinforced to meet the guidelines of the central government for certifying rubber as a highly useful multi-purpose crop. Rubber trees were expected not only to produce latex (i.e., high value rubber woods obtained at the end of the harvesting cycle), but were also regarded as the key medium to increase the proportion of green coverage on degraded forestlands, non-forested lands, and low-productivity agricultural areas, hence allegedly contributing to the global agenda of the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming (interview with provincial DARD staff). The provincial government strictly followed the guidelines of the central government in their implementation of the rubber project, while also issuing a series of policy documents for rubber plantation development in the province (see Appendix 2).

Second, following the unexpected gain of cumulative profits during the 2000s, which was largely due to the surge of the global rubber latex price, the VRG was motivated to expand its rubber plantations throughout the Northwest region, not just Dien Bien province.¹² The VRG aimed to plant rubber trees across a total of 20,000 ha in Dien Bien by 2020 (Dien Bien PPC, 2009). Accordingly, the Dien Bien PPC approved the VRG's land use plan for rubber plantation development for the period of 2008–2020. This policy aimed to convert 72,900 ha of

¹¹ According to the Provincial Statistical Yearbook of 2008, the total agricultural land area of the province in 2008 was 782,533 ha (accounting for 81.83 percent of the total land area), of which the land for agricultural production accounted for 143,000 ha, forestland covered by trees 335,382 ha, and forestland without forest cover 302,325 ha. Meanwhile, a total of 148,562 ha was classified as ‘unused land.’

¹² For instance, during the period of 2006–2011, the latex price in the global market surged to around 2000 to 3000 USD per ton, which brought enormous revenues and profits to the VRG. In 2011, the total value of the VRG reached more than VND 57,717 trillion (USD 2.88 billion), while the total revenue reached VND 33,380 trillion (USD 1.67 billion), tripling the amount of 2006.

land into rubber plantation. These lands included 61,983 ha of production forestland and 10,917 ha of protection forestland (Dien Bien PPC, 2009).¹³ By 2009, the planned area for the rubber project under the provincial government had exceeded 3.6 times the VRG's target. This was because the provincial agency expected that, aside from the VRG's rubber plantations, rubber trees could be expanded further by small-scale plantations owned and managed by farmers, as observed in southern provinces (interview with provincial DARD staff).

The last, and most important, reason is that the central government originally regarded the rubber project not only as the source of economic benefits for domestic investors, such as the VRG, but also of wider socio-political merits. Rubber was expected to create local jobs and improve the lives and livelihoods of ethnic minorities, thereby helping to both narrow the economic gap between the uplands and lowlands and consolidate the trust of ethnic minority people to the Party and the State. As the General Director of the DBRC remarked in an interview: “The former Deputy Prime Minister, Truong Vinh Trong, in his visit to the DBRC in 2009, underscored that rubber trees could be seen as the grateful gift for having gained the loyalty of ethnic minorities to the Party and the State since reunification.”

Furthermore, the Chairman of the VRG Board of Directors, Tran Ngoc Thuan, stated in his speech at the annual group meeting in 2016:

The VRG's rubber plantation development in the Northwest does not target profitability as the top priority. We shall cooperate hand in hand with the local authorities for improving social welfare such as new roads, schools, health clinics, and employment, hence consolidating the trust of ethnic minorities to the Party and the State, and ensuring security in the region (VRG, 2016, 6).

As we have seen, the historical transition of the State's land policy led to two distinctive streams of land use and control, including the long-standing socialist ‘egalitarian land distribution’ policies and the state-led land acquisition for large-scale commodity production. The two streams of land control mechanisms seem to cater to different goals: the former focuses on the social equity of the rural population, while the latter's emphasis is on the profitability of the domestic agribusiness sector. Nonetheless, the extent to which the state-led land acquisition follows the egalitarian principle and practices that have been valued over half a century since the first land reform in Vietnam is not self-evident. Therefore, this paper centrally addresses this question in the context of domestic land grabs. In doing so, it delves into the workings of the State's so-called ‘egalitarian land re-distributions,’ which are adopted *ex-post facto* exclusively for land contribution compensation to the original landholders in the post-land acquisition phase of rubber plantations.

4. Research site and methods

4.1. Research site

To gain a hands-on understanding of the processes and outcomes of socialist, state-led domestic land grabs in Vietnam, we selected Huoi Rung village as the site for our case study.¹⁴ It was the first village in Dien Bien province where rubber trees were planted. This allows us to examine the long-term processes and consequences of land grabs related to the development of rubber plantations in Northwest Vietnam. Established in the 1970s, Huoi Rung was a small village of an ethnic minority group called Kho Mu in Muong Pon commune, Dien Bien

¹³ This policy document was revised later to include Decision No. 1049/QD-UBND of the Dien Bien PPC, dated December 26, 2014, on the adjustment of land use planning for rubber development toward 2020. The total area of land for rubber trees decreased to 38,825 ha, and the VRG aimed to plant rubber trees on 16,000 ha across the whole province (Dien Bien PPC, 2014).

¹⁴ The name of the village has been changed to ensure its anonymity.

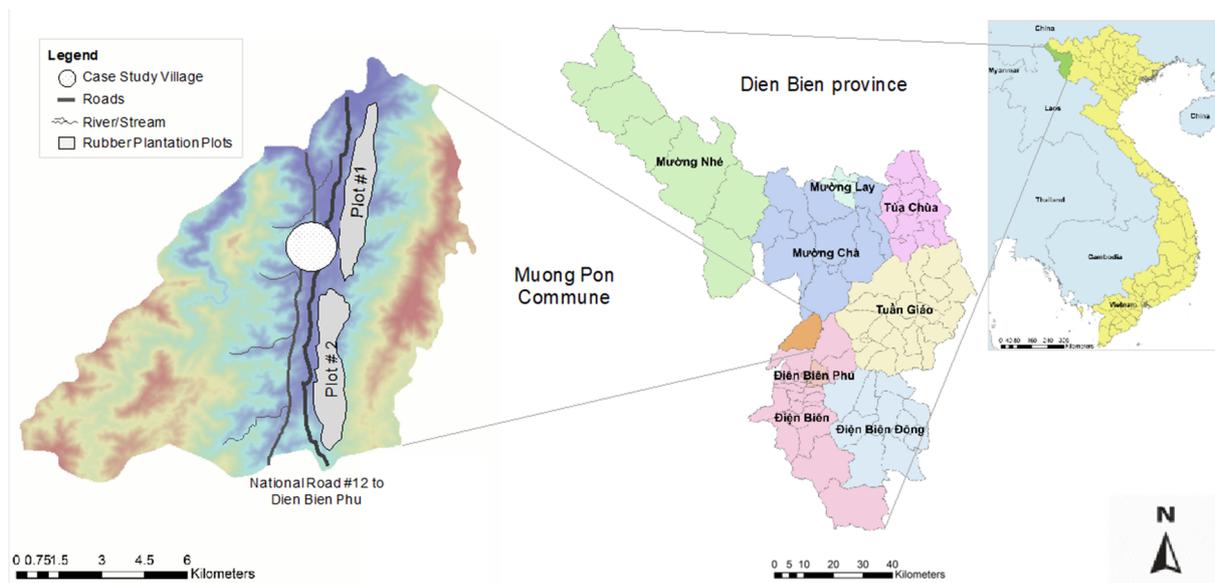


Fig. 3. Map of the study site Source: Author's drawing based on the DBRC plantation maps and Google Map database.

province (Fig. 3).¹⁵ Oral histories with Kho Mu elders in the village suggest that their ancestors originally inhabited in the northeast region of Laos. They evacuated to Vietnam to avoid American bombs dropping on their old village during the Vietnam War. The villagers have traditionally relied on slash and burn cultivation and the collection and use of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) as their main livelihood sources. The villagers rotate some combination of crops, such as upland rice, maize, and cassava, for a period of three to four years, after which they fallow the land for two to three years in order to recover its soil fertility. They then begin the next rotational cycle. At the time of our field research, the village had 335 residents across 68 households, 85 percent of whom were classified as poor or near-poor according to the national poverty line of 2017.¹⁶ According to the commune statistics, the total land area of the village is 374.6 ha. In 2008, the DBRC designated 201.0 ha of the land area for rubber plantations (accounting for 53.6 percent of the total land size), which was provided by 39 households in the village (accounting for 83 percent of the total households at that time). Previously, most of the land was cultivated by the villagers for their livelihoods. As of September 2018, rubber trees on 141.4 ha of the village land were in their third year of tapping latex.

4.2. Research methods

Before starting the fieldwork for this study, we first sought to receive permissions to do research in the area from the DBRC, the PPC, the District People's Committee (DPC), the Commune People's Committee (CPC), and the administrative village leader of Huoi Rung. Before we began to have discussions with villagers on sensitive issues, we spent one month in the village to build trust with the local people. To minimize the risk of cultural misrepresentation and

¹⁵ In Vietnam, Kho Mu people inhabit mostly in northern mountainous provinces with a population of 84,525 people (22nd most populous among 53 ethnic minorities) in 2015 (CEMA, 2017). In Dien Bien Province, Kho Mu is the third largest ethnic minority population with 19,276 people, accounting for 3.34 percent of the province's population in 2017 (Dien Bien General Statistic Office, 2018).

¹⁶ The national poverty line has been promulgated by the central government. For the period of 2016–2020, rural households with an average monthly income of less than VND 700,000 per capita were regarded as 'poor,' while those with incomes of between VND 700,000 and 900,000 per capita were regarded as 'near-poor.'

misunderstanding, we had frequent consultations with village leaders during our stay in the village. The study was conducted based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and a household questionnaire survey (see Table 2), as well as analysis of secondary data from the official documents collected (see Appendix 2). We also carried out participant observation throughout the fieldwork in order to gain insights into the villagers' daily activities. Fieldwork was completed by the first author with assistance from three Kinh researchers at Vietnam National University of Agriculture who had prior experience conducting household surveys in Northwestern provinces. The interviews were conducted from July to September 2018.

During the household survey, we interviewed the heads, or their spouses, of 33 out of the 39 households that had contributed their land to the DBRC.¹⁷ The questionnaire featured categorical items including 'household composition and size,' 'household assets,' 'livelihood strategies,' and 'land use activities.' The questionnaire results provided insights into the individual/household experiences of participation in the rubber project.

Based on the preliminary analysis of the obtained household survey data, we conducted in-depth interviews with 6 selected households. We also conducted in-depth interviews with the administrative village leaders. The field survey comprised three focus group discussions using transect mapping, seasonal calendar, and village history to gain a greater depth of understanding from the local people regarding their land contribution processes. The selected participants for the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reflected on various attributes, including landholding size, land loss, economic conditions, gender, and age status.

Further, we conducted semi-structured interviews with local government officials at various levels, including commune, district, and province. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with rubber investors, including the general director of the DBRC and managers of the DBRC sub-units of Dien Bien district and Muong Pon commune. In this paper, we focus on the secondary data gathered from both the DBRC and the local authority offices, as well as qualitative

¹⁷ The remaining 6 household heads refused to be interviewed and expressed suspicion about the objectives of our study. They linked our research to the activities of media reporters for fear that we might share their responses with the rubber company or the media.

Table 2
The research methods used, informant types, themes covered, and quantitative density.

Method	Informants	Themes covered	Quantitative density
Participant observation	N/A	Daily life; agricultural practices; and livelihood activities	One month stay in the village
Semi-structured interview	Local authorities	Land allocation and conversion processes; and problems of and challenges in rubber plantation development	6 interviews (2 with provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); 2 with district DARD; and 2 with the staff of the CPC)
	The DBRC managers	Basic information of the DBRC; land acquisition processes; and relationship with villagers and local governments	3 interviews (1 with the general director of the DBRC; and 2 with directors of the sub-units of the district and commune)
Household questionnairesurvey	Household heads or their spouses	General household characteristics (land acquisition, compensation for land contribution, and the involvement of households on rubber plantation); and the changes in livelihood assets and activities	Interview with 33 households
In-depth interview	Villagers	Household characteristics; their involvement in rubber plantation; their perceptions of land contribution to the DBRC; and their perceptions of changes in agricultural and livelihood opportunities	6 interviews
	Village leaders	History of villagers' land use practices and land acquisition processes by the DBRC	2 interviews (1 with the administrative village leader and 1 with the secretary of Communist Party)
Focus group discussion	Villagers	Transect mapping; seasonal calendar; and village histories	3 groups (6 to 8 participants)
Analysis of secondary data	The central government	Policy documents issued from the central government offices (See Table S3 in Appendix 2)	
	Local authorities The DBRC	Policy documents issued from the central and local government offices (See Table S4 in Appendix 2) Annual reports of the DBRC; lists of the households who contributed land to the company; the area of land contribution; conditions of land contract; and lists of the permanent/casual workers of the rubber company	

interview data, and participant observation. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and then axial coding, while descriptive analysis of quantitative data was completed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Direct quotes used in the analysis have been corrected grammatically for readability, and all the informants' names have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

5. Results

5.1. Actors involved and their discourses/incentives on land acquisition

Under the support provided by the central government, the rubber development program attracted the attention and participation of numerous subsidiary political divisions, including the PCP, the PPC, and other related social and political organizations (interview with officials from the provincial DARD). The province also established the provincial Rubber Development Steering Committee (RDSC) to guide and direct the program (Dien Bien PCP, 2007a, 2007b). The RDSCs were organized at the sub-provincial administrative levels, including district, commune, and village. At the district and commune levels, the steering committee members consist of the deputy president of the DPC, the head of the DARD, the head of the Department of the Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE), and the representative of the rubber company. At the village level, the RDSC members consist of the village leader, the secretary of the Communist Party, the chairman of the Fatherland Front, the head of the Youth Union, the head of the Women's Union, the head of the Farmer's Union, and the head of the Veteran's Union. The roles of the actors involved were articulated in a series of documents, and policy guidelines were issued (see [Appendix 2](#)). Based on document review and semi-structured interviews with the local authority officials, the DBRC representatives, and the villagers, we summarize the roles of the actors, as well as their discourses/incentives, in [Table 3](#). The local authorities from provincial to commune levels both designed policies for implementation and prepared budgets for the project. With the support of the government at all levels, the rubber company invested in planting rubber trees while the local people, some of whom became wage laborers in order to work for the rubber company, contributed their land. The key stakeholders in promoting the rubber project pursue various political, socio-economic, and environmental goals (e.g., state formation, employment generation, poverty reduction, agricultural development, greening of the environment for

climate change, and so on) and financial interests (e.g., rewards, a 90 percent benefit-sharing in cash, low interest rate loans, tax exemption, and so on). Land contributors are offered financial incentives for doing so, including compensation for contributing their land, a 10 percent benefit-sharing in cash, and earning money through wage laboring.

As mentioned earlier, the central government has played an important role in motivating the VRG to invest in a large-scale rubber plantation in Dien Bien by approving the latter's land conversion, as well as certifying rubber trees for 'multiple-use.' The central government has also directed the provincial government to design supportive policies for the VRG's expansion of rubber plantations. Likewise, the provincial government also strongly supported the rubber project by providing budgets for land compensation, endorsing preferential interest rate loans to the DBRC, and publicly promulgating the land planning of the project. Since the rubber plantation project was approved by the provincial government, it has become a 'must do' project for district and commune officials, who are obliged to implement provincial policies at their respective levels. However, some were concerned about the feasibility of the project, particularly in terms of the village and household-level risks arising from the loss of land related to the contribution of most of the villagers' land to the rubber company. Even so, they still had to persuade the villagers to contribute their land. As one former district DARD official confessed:

Rubber is not a native plant, nor has it proven any economic efficiency on the sloping land in Dien Bien yet. However, the project was exercised by force from the PCP and the PPC to the district. Those district officials who did not engage in the project were considered as opposing the province's policies. The DBRC considered our roles to be like nothing. The former director of the company even texted a message of menace to district officials. We had no choice but to implement the project, despite our feeling of pity for the villagers in terms of the merciless transfer of large tracts of their land.

A commune official also complained:

Commune officials doubted the possibility of the success of the rubber plantation. We anticipated that the project would fail within one to two years after planting. Then, the local people would return to cultivating food crops, as before. We cannot accept the fact that the company will continue to seize villagers' agricultural land in the next two decades.

In the entire land conversion process, village leaders became key

Table 3
Actors involved in the rubber project, their actions and discourses/incentives.

Actors	Actions	Discourses/Incentives
The Central Party/Central Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certify rubber as a multiple-use crop (MARD, 2008) • Allow the provincial government to convert 'unproductive agricultural land' and 'degraded natural forestland' to rubber plantation and expand it (Prime Minister, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve the goals related to agricultural development, poverty reduction, preservation of national territory, and environmental improvement (Prime Minister, 2009) • Aim to capture and effectively use the so-called 'marginal land' through large-scale investments by the VRG and private rubber companies (To and Tran, 2014)
The Provincial Party/ Provincial government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow the DBRC to convert forestland and unproductive agricultural land to rubber plantation (Dien Bien, 2011a) • Support credit loans to the DBRC • Support compensation to land contributors (Dien Bien PPC, 2011a) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet the market demand for rubber, and improve the efficiency in the use of land and labor, in order to change the structure of cropping, labor, population, and economy at large, thereby improving income levels and livelihoods of people while reducing their poverty (Dien Bien PPC, 2009)
District Communist Party/DPC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the provincial guidelines • Formulate cartography and issue LURCs (Dien Bien PPC, 2011b) • Persuade local people to contribute their land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the number of the district level administrative staff of the DARD and the DONRE (Dien Bien PPC, 2011a)
Commune Communist Party/ CPC and village leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the guidelines set by higher-level officials • Persuade local people to contribute their land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commune and village receive cash from the provincial budget as the reward for implementing the guidelines^a • Commune officials and village leaders receive VND 50,000 (USD 2.5) per hectare from the provincial budget for persuading local people for their land contribution and propagandizing the rubber plantation project (Dien Bien PPC, 2011a)
Villagers	Contribute their land to rubber companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive benefits through product sharing (10 percent of the total value from latex harvesting and wood liquidation) • Obtain financial compensation for land loss • Earn labor wage from the rubber company (Dien Bien PPC, 2011a) • Enjoys the availability of access to large tracts of land at no cost • 90 percent benefit sharing in cash • Receives provincial government supports (e.g., low interest rate loans, tax exemption, and so on.)
The DBRC	Provides all the investment capital and technical support including seedlings, input materials, training, and access to markets	

Source: Authors' compilation based on the review of the collected policy documents and semi-structure interviews with the local authority officials, the DBRC officials, and selected villagers.

^a For the total rubber area gained of 100–199, 200–299, 300–399, and 400 or more hectares, commune receive VND 50 million (USD 2500), VND 100 million (USD 5000), VND 150 million (USD 7500), and VND 200 million (USD 10,000), respectively. For the total rubber area gained 30 ha, village receives VND 20 million (USD 1000). For the total area received of 31–60, 61–90, and 91 or more hectares, the village receive additional VND 0.5 million (USD 25), VND 0.8 million (USD 40), and VND 1.0 million (USD 50) per hectare, respectively.

players in persuading the villagers to join the project, given that their voices were heard by the villagers as critically important.¹⁸

5.2. Land acquisition on the ground: how different actors exercise control over the land

In 2007, Huoi Rung village was selected as the provincial pilot taskforce zone for the rubber plantation due to its favorable traffic and soil quality conditions. This selection was made at a time when no specific guidelines for rubber development had been issued in the province (Fig. 4). Prior to the inception of the rubber plantation, a total of 374.6 ha of the village's land was classified according to the *de jure* and *de facto* land ownership statuses (Fig. 5).¹⁹ It consisted of the following land categories:

- Paddy rice land, which accounted for 3.6 ha that the government allocated to the villagers *de jure*, with each villager having been assigned 163 square meters (0.0163 ha) since 1999 (interview with village leader #1).
- Protection forest, which accounted for 170 ha. This land was

allocated to the village *de jure* as a result of the Song Da Social Forestry Development Project implemented during the period of 2002–2012, as well as the National Program on Payment for Forest Environmental Services, which has been in place since 2013. However, this land was considered as *de facto* communal land, with the villagers having a collective right to gather NTFPs, firewood, and wood for house construction. The villagers also believed that these forests would help them to preserve water sources during the dry season (interview with the two village leaders and secondary data from the commune cadastral office).

- Cultivated upland (119 ha), which the villagers were distributed *de facto* a long time ago based on customary tenure (focus group discussion). It was assigned *de jure* in 2002, and in 2004, villagers received LURCs for that area for the purpose of agricultural production under the Land and Forest Allocation (LFA) policy.²⁰ In the meantime, there were significant gaps between the *de jure* land allocation by the official authority and the *de facto* land distribution of the same land according to the customary land tenure. According to the officials of the Dien Bien district DARD, the LFA had not been fully completed in the district, largely due to both inaccurate and out-of-date land inventory data and the limited financial and technical capacities of district and commune governors. The district

¹⁸ Focus group discussions revealed that villagers consider the village leaders as the most prestigious people in the village. Village leaders are typically qualified as people who deeply understand traditional local customs and culture, and who have strong voices in the village. They select an administrative village leader through village-level election based on their trust with him/her.

¹⁹ In this paper, *de jure* means that an area of land is recognized as involving officially designated legal rights of ownership, such as those expressed in the Land Law and other administrative documents. *De facto* means that a land area is recognized only under customary laws, and hence it has not been officially recognized as pertaining to the legal rights of land ownership.

²⁰ The LFA policy was approved by Decree 163/1999/NĐ-CP of the central government. The policy aims to demarcate village territorial boundaries and zones for villages and forestlands, as well as to institute more forms of *de jure* land tenure within the village boundaries. This is intended to confine upland villages within specific territorial boundaries in order to restrict shifting cultivation and promote the protection of the remaining 'forestland.' The final step of this policy involves the allocation of LURCs to households within the village territory.

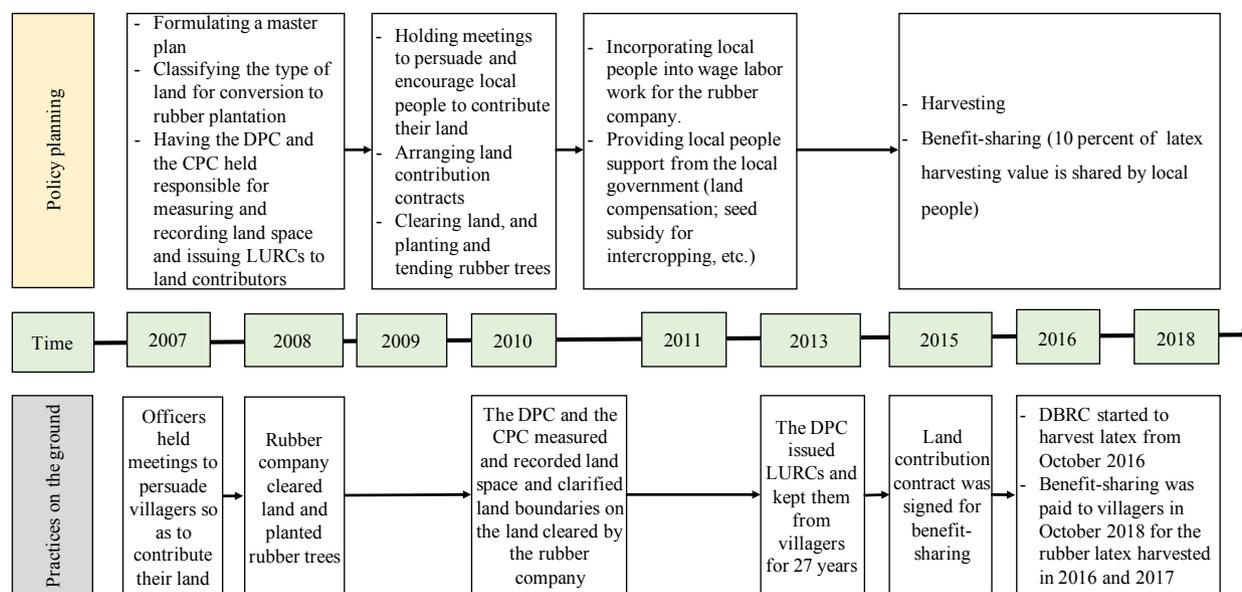


Fig. 4. Land acquisition process: Policy plan versus actual implementation in the village. Source: Author’s focus group discussion with villagers, in-depth interviews with village leaders, and secondary data from the PPC, DPC, CPC and the DBRC.

cadastal office only mapped out village territorial boundaries when allocating LURCs to households. Thus, the land area reported on LURCs did not match the actual area.

- Natural forestland and unused mountainous land, which totaled 82 ha. These lands belonged to the State because they were recognized by the local government as ‘degraded forest.’ In reality, however, they were recognized *de facto* as the communal land for villagers’ open access for livestock grazing and firewood collection (focus group discussion).

The rubber company aimed to convert the land of the last two categories into a rubber plantation in view of its relatively high soil fertility and suitable altitude for rubber tree growth. The paddy land area has been maintained by the villagers without being converted into a rubber plantation because both the local authorities and the villagers do consider that the land retains critical importance for the latter’s subsistence needs (interview with commune officials).

To persuade the villagers to contribute their land, the local authorities and the DBRC held at least 6 meetings designed to explain both the overall benefits of the rubber project and what kinds of benefits local people would receive. In the persuasion process, a very positive picture was painted in which the villagers would be able to raise themselves from a poor and ‘backward’ existence into a rich and prosperous status featuring new roads, schools, and health clinics to be built by the company, as well as stable and well-paid employment opportunities associated with the plantation project. Further, it was promised that participating households would receive compensation for their land contributions, as well as other forms of support from local governments. As villager Mr. Keo remarked:

At that time, a big car with many provincial and district officials and the rubber company managers visited the village. They propagandized by saying that if local people contribute their land for the rubber project, the company would plant ten rubber trees and then give back to the land contributor one tree, and that the rubber trees would ensure enough food for the villagers throughout their lifetimes without the cultivation of food crops.

The village officials comprised several village RDSC members, who were the pioneers of land contribution for the rubber company.

Moreover, under the direction of higher governors, the commune officials directly visited each household in order to persuade the villagers regarding their participation in the rubber project (interview with Muong Pon commune officials). One day, the chairman of the CPC even came to the village by himself. According to villager Mr. Mun, the chairman noted: *“The rubber project will not take your village land. The ‘red book’ still belongs to the villagers. The land will merely be converted from inefficient traditional cultivation to rubber plantations. Then, villagers will receive a ‘rubber red book’ for benefit-sharing.”*

In early 2008, the rubber company started to clear the land for rubber plantations, even though some households had repeatedly refused to contribute their land. A villager Mr. Loi shared his story:

By the time of rubber’s arrival in the village, three households resisted giving up their land to the rubber company because they owned only a very small amount of paddy land, which was not enough even for their survival. When the bulldozer came to their hill land, they asked the driver to stop the land clearance. Otherwise, they said, they would pull him out by knives and hoes. The bulldozer workers then stopped clearing the land and reported the incident to the DBRC and the CPC. From the standpoint of the authorities and the rubber company, those villagers were as equal as opponents of the state.

In fact, consent regarding land contribution between the village and the investor had not been given, mainly due to the lack of clear specifications concerning the area and type of land to be converted into rubber plantations. The villagers claimed that the land demarcation procedure undertaken by the local authorities was incomplete, and that little or no arable land would be available for them any longer (interview with villager Mrs. Cu). Despite this, only a half month later, 201 ha, including 119 ha of agricultural production land and 82 ha of production forestland, were cleared for rubber tree planting (focus group discussion).

It should be noted that the company with only a few staff stationed in the village could not complete the task of clearing a large area in such a short while. Thus, the DBRC representatives used a variety of strategies to acquire the land. When the company staff came to the village to clear the land, they told the villagers that the local authorities had already agreed to dispatch the company for land clearing. The local people felt that they had no other choice, since the decisions had

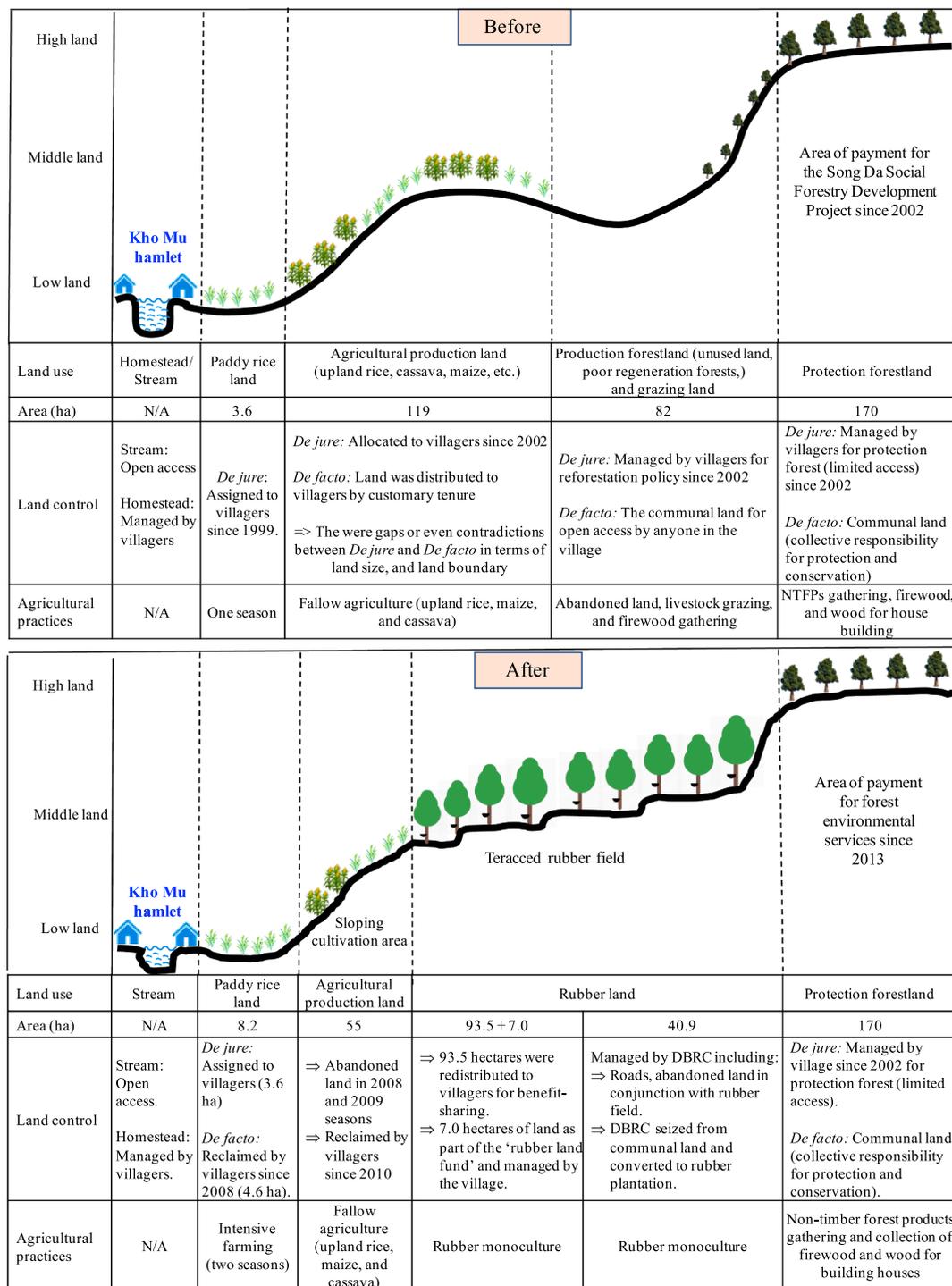


Fig. 5. Transformations of land use, control, and agricultural practices in the village. Source: Author’s focus group discussion with villagers, in-depth interviews with village leaders, and secondary data from the CPC and the DBRC.

already been made at higher levels.²¹ The DBRC workers also used bulldozers to clear the land so quickly that the local people did not have time to make any meaningful response. Along with force and pressure, the company also relied on local workers who had already contributed

²¹ When respondents were asked: “Please explain the reasons why you contributed your land to the rubber company,” 72.7 percent of the household heads responded that they had contributed their land because they simply followed the advocacy of the local authorities. Moreover, 81.8 percent felt that their contribution was made on a more or less compulsory basis.

their land to the company to help clear other villagers’ land and forestland in exchange for the promise of a high wage payment. As rubber worker Mr. Cho noted: “The villagers received VND 1.0 million [USD 60] per hectare for clearing the field. Some villagers were able to get as much as VND 15–20 million [USD 900–1200]. That was a lot of money for those poor people at that time.”

Subsequently, rubber seedlings were planted by both local full-time workers and casual wage-laborers. The villagers could not identify how much of their land had been lost, nor what would happen in the future (focus group discussion with villagers). Many villagers became enraged

by the process, and some responded by covertly destroying a portion of the rubber plantation. According to the DBRC report to the Muong Pon CPC, 19 cases of rubber tree cutting were reported during the first year of the rubber project in the village. The company could not identify the persons responsible, however (DBRC, 2008).

During the first year of rubber tree planting, the CPC received a series of villagers' formal complaints, which were to be conveyed to the rubber company (interview with Muong Pon commune officials). Subsequently, the DPC directed the district DONRE and the CPC to clearly demarcate the land acquired by the rubber company (interview with Dien Bien district DARD officials). Accordingly, the previous land boundaries, which had been customarily drawn among households, were removed, resulting in the subsequent changes regarding the farming systems and practices. As a result, an accurate re-assessment of the land area in reference to the previously contributed areas became impossible. In order to address the problem, the DPC and the CPC held several meetings with the rubber company representatives and villagers (focus group discussion with villagers). Finally, they reached a resolution – a plan the local officials termed 'egalitarian land re-distributions' (interview with Muong Pon commune officials and district DARD officials).

According to the resolution plan, each household member in the village would be re-allocated 0.34 ha of rubber land for benefit-sharing after the rubber trees had been tapped. The households who did not contribute land were also allocated the same amount of land for benefit-sharing, although they would not receive any land compensation. The household survey results show that, on average, each household contributed 2.97 ha, which accounted for 75.6 percent of the total land they had used previously, while they only received 1.8 ha exclusively for benefit-sharing purposes based on the new LURCs provided by the local authorities. The village was also allowed to maintain about 7.0 ha of land as part of the 'rubber land fund' scheme, which had been in place for such use as reallocation to extremely poor households. The promises of new roads, schools, and health clinics remained unrealized, even by the time the rubber trees began to be tapped in 2016, 8 years after the land had been cleared for plantation (focus group discussion with villagers). Unlike the original promise, the villagers have never received any form of cash reward regarding land contributions that exceeded areas targeted under the regulations of the provincial government (*ibid.*). To date, the village has only received collective financial support from the rubber company equivalent to VND 50 million (USD 2170) in order to buy the facilities of the community house (interview with village leader #1).

According to the interviews with the DBRC staff, households received their first benefit-sharing payment from the rubber company in cash in October 2018 for the rubber latex harvested in the fiscal years of 2016 and 2017. At that time, Huoi Rung village collectively received VND 67.83 million (USD 2959), which represented 10 percent of the latex values derived from the rubber harvest of the previous two years. In other words, an average household received about VND 1.2 million (USD 52.0), equivalent to 2.2 percent of total household income in 2017. Overall, the implementation process of the project has been much slower than the initial targets set out in the policy planning (Fig. 4).

5.3. Changes in land use and control: Consequences of domestic SOE land grabs

Fig. 5 shows both the transformation of the land use and control and the agricultural practices in the village. The rubber plantation project had significant impacts on both the landscape inside the rubber field and the typology of land in the village. Prior to the introduction of the project, most of the land was used to grow subsistence food crops, such as rice, cassava, and maize, under the slash and burn cultivation system. The production forestland was considered by villagers as *de facto* communal land, which every villager could access freely for the purposes of livestock grazing and firewood gathering. However, since the

inception of rubber plantation, rubber monoculture has come to dominant the landscape, spanning a total area of 141.4 ha, 40 percent of the village land (DBRC, 2018b).

In 2013, when 5 years had passed since conversion of the land into the rubber field began, the villagers received only 93.5 ha on their 'red book' as the collective amount of land they had contributed to the rubber company.²² This amount was equivalent to about 47 percent of the 201 ha of total land cleared in the village. The DBRC argued that rubber trees could not be planted on 59.6 ha of the clearer area because much of the land was considered both unfertile and too steep, and therefore worthy of abandonment.²³ In addition, according to the company, a total of 40.9 ha of land converted from 'unused land,' 'bare hills,' and 'degraded forestland' was not recognized as owned by the villagers. Hence, the company claimed that they were not held liable for redistributing such lands to the villagers (interview with the company's staff).

Although LURCs have been issued for the land contributed for rubber plantations since 2013, the results of our household survey revealed that no villagers have ever seen the certificates. After issuing the 'red book,' the DBRC negotiated with the provincial government to add one 'specific article' under the 'land contribution contract,' thereby allowing the district cadastral office to keep the book away from the villagers for 27 years (Article No. 5 of the 'Land Contribution Contract' signed between the DBRC and local land contributors). It is likely that the practice of keeping LURCs from the villagers is intended to withhold information on rubber land allocation from the knowledge of land contributors. Accordingly, the villagers were unclear as to which specific locations and within which boundaries their rubber plantation plots were located – a situation that is different from new resettlement villages, such as Dao's (2015) case study, where villagers could easily identify their plots for contribution as they were allocated to them on the new land during the pre-acquisition phase. Meanwhile, during the focus group discussion, the villagers told us that during the tending and tapping periods, the DBRC divided the rubber plantation plots in Huoi Rung village into many small parcels, which were largely inconsistent with the official recognition of land use rights derived from LURCs. Some villagers claimed that this strategy was designed to ensure that they would not be able to take their land back, nor to take any control over the use of the land they had owned (focus group discussion with villagers). In addition, the tapped parcels were allocated to 20 local workers and 30 informally contracted tapping laborers for the next 20 years of their plantation activities (interview with the manager of Muong Pon plot #1). The assignment of rubber parcels to each laborer for tapping was carried out in a randomized fashion. On average, a laborer who taps on 3–5 parcels, equivalent to 4.0 ha of land (consisting of roughly 1400–1600 trees), is paid VND 4000 (USD 0.17) per kilogram of harvested latex. The household survey results show that in 2017, an average worker in Huoi Rung village earned VND 28.29 million (USD 1230) from their rubber tapping work, accounting for 52.6 percent of his/her total household income.²⁴ With this financial incentive, they would become dedicated guards for the rubber

²² The area is calculated based on the population of the village in 2010, when the re-allocation was approved by the local authorities and the company.

²³ According to our focus group discussion, this area had been reclaimed informally by the villagers for subsistence food crop production since 2010. It consisted of 4.6 ha of terraced paddy rice land and 55 ha of hill land for upland rice, maize, and cassava cultivation.

²⁴ The household survey results in Huoi Rung village show that 52.6 percent of total household income comes from wage labor regarding rubber tapping and tending, 16.8 percent from crop farming (paddy rice, maize, cassava, and upland rice), 7.9 percent from livestock rearing, 5.6 percent from non-timber forest production (mainly bamboo and medicinal plants), 6.8 percent from remittance through out-migrated wage labor, and 10.3 percent from miscellaneous sources (e.g., pensions, trading/business, subsidies/support for the poor and elderly, etc.).

plantation (interview with the manager of Muong Pon plot #1).

Further, although provincial legislation guarantees that the villagers receive cash compensation for the land they have lost, nobody received any such payment over the first two years following clearing the land. Cash began to be dispensed for compensation regarding land contribution only in 2010, based on the estimated amount of land contribution by individual households in 2008. At that time, the villagers had reached a consensus about the amount of land they had contributed to the rubber company, and then held a village meeting to discuss how to fairly distribute the compensation received from the provincial government. According to Decision No. 02/2008/QĐ-UBND of the Dien Dien PPC regarding the issuance of regulation for land contribution compensation in the province, dated February 25, 2008, the amount of compensation for their contribution of perennial cropland, annual crop land, and forestland per hectare should have been VND 150 million (USD 7500), VND 130 million (USD 6500), and VND 30 million (USD 1500), respectively. In actuality, however, according to each of these types of land, the households only received VND 7.0 million (USD 350), 4.5 million (USD 225), and 6 million (USD 300), respectively, for their land contribution to the rubber company (interview with village leader #2). The survey results show that an average household in Huoi Rung received about VND 10.73 million (USD 536) in cash, and that 87.9 percent of the villagers were unsatisfied with the amount they were paid. Some villagers complained that the amount of compensation was not proportional to the area of land they had contributed, claiming that the figure was insufficient to even cover the opportunity cost of food crop cultivation for a single year (interview with villager Mr. Keo).

The villagers also lost access to a total of 82 ha of communal land for pasturing, giving neither informed consent nor being presented with the option to retain their communal lands. They have not received any compensation for the loss of these lands (focus group discussion with villagers), while they also had nowhere else to release their livestock. Moreover, once the company gained control of the land and planted rubber trees, the villagers were prohibited from releasing their livestock within the rubber field, for the sake of protecting the rubber seedlings from possible damages. As one village leader noted: *“If our buffaloes damage one rubber seedling, the company penalizes us with a fine of VND 200,000 (USD 10.0). It is big money for us. Moreover, they threaten us by saying that our buffaloes’ legs will be cut if our violations are repeatedly found.”*

Meanwhile, the land use transformation towards rubber plantation inevitably changes the ecosystems of neighboring land plots (e.g., hydrological and insolation conditions). As villager Mr. Than complained: *“We cannot grow upland rice or maize beside the rubber plots because there is not sufficient sunlight for the growth of food crop.”* In addition, when the rubber company cleared the land, one-third of the irrigation system in the village was buried (Report No. 34/TTr-UBND of the Muong Pon CPC, dated November 5, 2008, sent to the DBRC in order to convey information about compensation regarding the damages to local people’s irrigation systems and fishponds caused during the land conversion process). Such changes had significant adverse effects on farming in the village. As villager Mrs. Thuy noted: *“Two years after the rubber came, our villagers lost not only the hill land, but also the paddy land, due to the lack of irrigation water. We dug irrigation canals once again and reclaimed for our survival the more sloping fields that the company had abandoned.”*

This points to the reason why the paddy area increased from 3.6 ha in 2008 to 8.2 ha in 2018, during which the sloping lands were re-cultivated by the villagers both as a way of improving their conditions for subsistence and to prove their pride. As villager Mr. Loi noted:

Most fertile uplands were occupied by the company, so our villagers had no choice but to cultivate on all possible areas of the village land. The villagers reclaimed the lands abandoned by the rubber company not only for their survival, but also to show the DBRC and the commune governors that even though it is very difficult to cultivate on that type of land, which

was out of use for the rubber company, it was still a productive land for them.

In sum, with support from the local authorities, the rubber company exercised full authority and power to enclose the common land and dispossess the villagers’ lands. The local government and its affiliated agencies imposed rules and regulations designed to legitimize such activities, facilitating an environment in which the rubber investor could take control over the villagers’ lands for the project. While the villagers were not necessarily passive victims of the project, they tended to have relatively weak bargaining power with both the investor and local officials.

6. Discussion

Based on the findings above, this study solicits a renewed understanding of the roles and characteristics of both the socialist state and affiliated domestic SOE investors in domestic land grabs, particularly in the following regard.

First, the Vietnamese government, while pursuing socialist egalitarian land distribution policies regarding the rural farming population over the past three decades, largely pulls itself back from following its egalitarian principle and practices in its promotion of land acquisition for large-scale rubber plantations. Meanwhile, it vigorously seeks to comply with the trend of economic globalization at the cost of both the social equity and traditional livelihoods of the local population.

The amount of compensation and benefit sharing received by the villagers as a result of their land contribution regarding the rubber plantation project observed in Huoi Rung village does not seem equitable with the value of the land they lost. By 2017, the monocultural rubber plantation accounted for 37.7 percent of the total land area of the village, whereas the lands cultivated by the villagers accounted for only 16.8 percent (2.1 percent for paddy rice land and 14.7 percent for the reclaimed hill land). Even though the villagers still nominally maintain land use rights, they are no longer able to use the land that was taken for the rubber plantation. This suggests that the villagers have permanently lost much of their fertile land, which could otherwise have been used for sustaining their livelihoods over future decades. In comparison to the magnitude of their sacrifice, the villagers received only a tiny amount of money, accounting for 3–4 percent of the compensation values officially set, as well as a modest amount of benefit-sharing (10 percent of the total value) and a one-time collective payment for the village (VND 50 million [USD 2170]).

The actual state procedures regarding both the land contribution compensation and post-harvest benefit sharing appear to point to the State’s adherence to the principle and practices of egalitarian land distribution, yet essentially without any substance from the perspective of the land contributors. Huoi Rung village represents the upland context of a permanent village whereby the significant mismatch between *de jure* and *de facto* land ownerships in the pre-land acquisition phase complicated the matter of compensation and benefit sharing. To address the issue, the State resorted to what the local officials called ‘egalitarian land re-distributions’ in the post-land grab phase, which was based on retroactively setting the official territorial boundaries and associated land re-distributions *ex post facto*. As we have seen, the benefits that the villagers have received remain meagre compared to the tangible and intangible values of the land they have lost, hence exposing the meaning of ‘egalitarian’ as ‘making everyone equally poor.’

All of these factors clearly suggest that the Vietnamese State-led rubber plantation land grabbing falls well short of an equitable distribution of benefits, hence leading us to conclude that it hardly follows its egalitarian socialist principle and practices in any meaningful sense of the word. The essentially non-egalitarian land grab processes observed in the study area are broadly in line with the features of global land grabs, where transnational capitalist corporations engage in the

Table 4
Mechanisms of land acquisition by the VRG in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

	Vietnam	Cambodia	Laos
Source	Our case study and Dao (2015)	Global Witness (2013)	Baird (2010); Global Witness (2013); Laungaramsri (2012)
Location	Northwestern region	Northeastern region	Southern region
Scale	28,000 ha including 5122 ha in Dien Bien	132,992 ha (90,000 ha according to the VRG's report)	38,893 ha (28,000 ha according to the VRG's report)
Land use pre-acquisition	Agricultural land and communal land (forest and pasture)	Agricultural land and communal land (forest and pasture)	Agricultural land and communal land (forest and pasture)
Land acquisition mechanism	Land use entitlement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRG enjoys land access at no cost. • The province used provincial budget to pay land compensation for local people (our case). No compensation has been provided (Dao's case). • The VRG receives provincial support (low interest rate loans and tax exemption). • Benefit-sharing: 90 percent of revenues are held by the VRG. 	Land concession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRG paid land concession fee for the annual amount of USD 10 per hectare to the government of Cambodia. • The VRG paid land contribution compensation • There is no evidence of the host country's support for the VRG. • 100 percent of revenues are held by the VRG. 	Land concession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRG paid land concession fee for the amount of USD 6–9 per hectare per year to the government of Laos. • The VRG paid land contribution compensation • The VRG receives provincial support (tax exemption). • 100 percent of revenues are held by the VRG.
Duration of land deal	One rubber harvesting cycle (27–30 years), with possible extension of one more cycle	One rubber harvesting cycle (27–30 years)	50 years of land concession deals
Post-acquisition land right of local people	Villagers still retain LURCs for nominal land use right but have lost their right <i>de-facto</i> .	Villagers lose their land use right while being landless laborers.	Villagers lose their land use right while being landless laborers.

Source: Authors' compilation from Baird (2010), Dao (2015), Global Witness (2013), and Laungaramsri (2012).

dispossession of land from its previous users in their pursuit of profit maximization at the expense of the interests and livelihoods of the local population (Bottazzi et al., 2018; Fairbairn, 2013; Feldman and Geisler, 2012; Hak et al., 2018; Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Moreda, 2017; Porsani et al., 2017; Shete and Rutten, 2015). Further, by mobilizing nominal land re-distribution measures in the post-acquisition phase, domestic state actors demonstrate a cunning duplicity in their persistent adherence to its socialist land distribution principle.

Second, backed by direct support from the government, and without any external interference, an SOE company investing in a domestic land grab project can implement such a scheme with more freedom, leverage, and power than cases involving SOE firms investing abroad. The rubber plantation development by the VRG illustrates this point in terms of comparing of our case study (Vietnam) with other in Laos and Cambodia (where the investment was made by the VRG's subsidiary companies) (Table 4).

In Laos and Cambodia, the VRG tends to launch and engage in large-scale plantations (roughly around 5000–10,000 ha) under land concessions, and does so by taking full direct control of the production process by turning upland farmers into landless laborers (Baird, 2010; Laungaramsri, 2012). The VRG's involvement in our study site seems less direct in controlling land acquisition and conversion, as well as financial compensation. The villagers are considered as 'capital contributors with land use rights,' meaning that they still maintain land use rights only under nominal control. As we have seen, the villagers in Dien Bien received only small amounts of compensation in exchange for the loss of their land through contribution. While local governments take lands from the poor in exchange for only a restricted amount of financial compensation, no financial sacrifice is required of the state-owned rubber company for their investment. The VRG was not liable for paying such compensation fees, as they were covered within the provincial budget. In contrast, at least by 2010, the VRG had paid a large amount of compensation for land concessions in both Laos (Global Witness, 2013; Laungaramsri, 2012) and Cambodia (Global Witness, 2013). This means that under close partnerships with central and local governments, a domestic SOE investor can enjoy far greater financial advantages than cases in which they invest in foreign countries.

An SOE engaging in domestic land grabs can also enjoy much more freedom and power in terms of implementing their agrarian projects. This is in part related to their advantages as a domestic public company. According to To and Tran (2014), district and communal officers often consider state-owned rubber companies as 'local companies.' Those

companies often seek to fulfil corporate social responsibilities (e.g., the provision of support for the construction of schools, roads, houses for the poor, and so on), while also committing themselves to employing local laborers for their business. Backed by such official perceptions, SOE investors are afforded a great deal of freedom during the implementation phase of their projects. This is exemplified by the ease with which the DBRC freely determined the type of the village land for its capitalization, while simultaneously showing no regard for either the *de jure* or *de facto* forms of land tenure held by the previous land users. Unsurprisingly, the DBRC initially cleared the agricultural land that was more fertile and less costly for clearing, followed by the 'unused land' and 'degraded forestland.' Further, the political affiliation of a domestic SOE investor with the government also enables it to access various privileges from the government. The rapid implementation of land acquisition by the VRG could not have been made possible without significant support from the government at every level. Both official documents and interviews with government officials showed that local officials planned to implement the project as promptly as possible in order to satisfy the needs of the investor. Accordingly, the VRG could have undergone a rapid, large-scale land acquisition through both the enclosure of common lands and dispossessing previous users of their small plots of land. Such privileges could be less readily available in cases involving transnational SOEs, where the support from the home country's government tends to be less direct, or where the host country's government even creates further constraints.

Third, the rubber plantation land grab in Huoi Rung demonstrates the way in which the distribution of post-land grab land rights substantializes the process of state formation through the re-territorialization of, and re-legalization in, the frontier area. Besides domestic economic goals, the central government also capitalizes on the agrarian project of rubber plantation development in order to meet the political ends of national and local governments. Sikor (2012, 1099) argued that "[n]arrow readings of commodification, market expansion or accumulation by dispossession may not fully explain the occurrence of land grabs in some circumstances, and their absence in others ... Understanding practices and processes driving or limiting land grabs requires attention to dynamics of state formation." As was described earlier, Sikor's case studies regarding tree plantations in Vietnam show that the State acknowledges villagers' customary land rights. Accordingly, the land distribution program it introduced helped the local people to both freely access their land and gain significant economic benefits from the plantation business. Sikor notes that the State's aim of such an equitable

distribution of benefits was also linked to its political goal of resurrecting the State's authority over land matters. Hence, this case highlights the ways in which the central government seeks to empower its local political control for 'state formation' by ensuring an equitable distribution of benefits. Our case study in Huoi Rung village draws a different light from Sikor's into the dynamics of state formation. We focused on the context of remote highlands, where customary land use practices and legal land rights tended to exhibit significant gaps with each other. Although one of the original aims of the State in its promotion of egalitarian land distribution was to synchronize *de facto* and *de jure* land tenure systems, no clear official demarcation was executed in the customary land of Huoi Rung village during the pre-acquisition phase. Although the villagers had been granted LURCs, they do not have control over their land. The land acquisition and conversion processes that followed largely veiled the original territorial boundaries that the villagers have followed over generations. Hence, the State newly introduced the aforementioned 'egalitarian land re-distributions' in order to clarify the villagers' post-acquisition land ownership in terms of land contribution compensation and post-harvest benefit sharing. We argue that such a post-land grab substantiation of land rights materializes state formation through the re-territorialization of, and re-legalization in, the frontier area. This argument is more in line with the claims of Peluso and Lund (2011) and Wolford et al. (2013), who argue that land grabs are often linked to state territorialization and legalization as means through which to monopolize control over both the land and the people using it. Our findings of the re-territorialization of, and re-legalization in the frontier area are also closely related to what Turner (2012, 415) noted regarding the control of the State over ethnic minorities: "The Vietnamese state is committed to expanding its control over the country's borderlands and frontiers, integrating the Vietnam uplands and their predominantly non-Kinh inhabitants into the nation and steering them toward market integration as quickly and thoroughly as possible."

7. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the involvement of domestic actors in acquiring large tracts of land from smallholders for rubber plantations in Huoi Rung village, Dien Bien province, Northwest Vietnam. In examining the domestic land grabs implemented by the DBRC through a subsidiary company of the SOE, the VRG, this research has revealed three critical findings.

First, while continuing to pursue traditional socialist egalitarian land distribution policies for the rural farming population, the Vietnamese government has increasingly sought to come to terms with the global trend of large-scale land acquisition at the sacrifice of the traditional interests and livelihoods of the local population. Under the cooperation of the State and its SOEs, large-scale land acquisition has been undertaken by dispossessing previous users of the small plots of land they have customarily inherited and used over generations. Consequently, the transition process resulted in various adverse effects in terms of the traditional interests and livelihoods of the local people, such as loss of fertile land for subsistence and sustainable livelihoods, limited land contribution compensation and post-harvest benefit-sharing, and the largely unmet original promises of the state and the rubber company for community development. This essentially non-egalitarian land grab processes, only marginally veiled through the adoption of formalistic land re-distribution measures regarding post-land grab compensation and benefit sharing, represents similar practices mirrored by transnational capitalist corporations.

Second, this study has highlighted the issue of grabber identity, firstly by conducting a systematic literature review of academic land grab literature, and based on this, secondly, by looking into a case involving a land grab which was dominated by a domestic SOE investor. This was done by way of comparison with the case of the identical SOE investing abroad. Our systematic literature review of the academic land

grab literature revealed an alarming scarcity of primary research on the roles and features of SOEs investing in land grabs in their home country. In particular, no studies have been identified that examine the distinctive features and roles of SOEs investing in their home country by way of comparing them with the case of their international land grabbing. Considering the lack of such a systematic review in the existing land grab literature, this paper has contributed to this body of the literature by identifying a critical understudied area of land grab studies and conducting a case study to fill the void. Accordingly, our case study on the VRG land grab in Northwest Vietnam has shown how the authority attached to an SOE investing in its home country, through the direct support of the government, can help it to carve out its land grab processes with more freedom, leverage, and power than cases involving the SOE investments in foreign countries. Backed by the official land use entitlement, which permits people's land use only under nominal control, the SOE firm was able to freely bulldoze the land for clearing without regard to any form of land tenure held by the previous land users. In addition, the SOE rubber company was also given the authority to determine which types of land on which to plant rubber trees, enjoying land access at no cost in terms of land compensation, and without due consideration of the concerns and livelihoods of the villagers who used to have *de facto* ownership of the land. To gain control over the land, the company employed various tactics to exclude the villagers from their land without fulfilling corporate social responsibilities, such as promising the provision of roads, schools, health care, and increased income for the poor, while exercising various tangible and intangible forces against the local opponents of the plantation project. In turn, the company did not have to pay any compensation for the land loss of the contributors, as the financing is the responsibility of the State. This sort of financial privilege is largely unseen when an SOE invests internationally, where the investment firm pays all the compensation fees (Global Witness, 2013; Laungaramsri, 2012; Visser and Spoor, 2011).

Third, the land grab processes during the early introductory phase of the rubber plantation project in Northwest Vietnam reveal the mechanism of how state land use entitlements materialize state formation in the post-land grab phase through both the re-territorialization of and re-legalization in the frontier area. The central government originally intended to introduce rubber plantations in the North West region as a kind of development project for improving the life and livelihoods of people in frontier areas, thus helping the State to stabilize the political tension and extend its state formation process (Dien Bien PCP, 2007a, 2007b; Dien Bien PPC, 2009; MARD, 2007). As we have described, our research findings lead us to question the effectiveness of this political aim in a number of ways regarding the effects of the land grabs on the local people's livelihoods. Meanwhile, we have also observed that, in the pre-acquisition era, the State failed to dissolve the entangled co-existence of the two land tenure systems, *de facto* and *de jure*, with the former predominantly relied on by the local population. The legal land tenure structure introduced in the pre-acquisition era was based on the incomplete surveying of the local geographical, topographical, and social conditions, which collectively contributed to the neglect of the local people. After the land clearance process through bulldozing and rubber planting, which left the local landscape modified to such a degree that the original landholders found themselves incapable of recognizing the previous customary territorial boundaries, the State newly introduced a land re-distribution scheme that the local officials believed 'egalitarian' by following the traditional socialist form of land distribution. This re-territorialization of and re-legalization in the frontier zone served the retroactive purpose of re-creating the villagers' assets for land contribution compensation and future benefit sharing by making up for the lost land and its territoriality. Hence, we posit that this process of re-territorialization and re-legalization substantializes the process of state formation, given that the process led to the alteration of legal force from nominal to real land control in the post-land grab stage.

In sum, the rubber plantation process in Vietnam underscores the critical role of both the state and affiliated domestic investors for land grabbing. The process is driven by the socialist land tenure systems, in which lands are nominally owned by the whole national population but substantially controlled by the state through bureaucratic mechanisms in decision-making, adhesion between the state and SOEs, and engagement in geopolitics over ethnic minorities. While incorporating these domestically distinct features, the rubber plantation land grab in Vietnam appears to exhibit a convergence with the global trend of land grabs in terms of capitalist aggression and its orientation toward economic globalization. By seeking to justify their essentially non-egalitarian land grab processes through the insertion of post-land grab 'egalitarian land re-distributions' into the land of disembedded customary control, the domestic state actors exhibit a cunning duplicity in their persistent adherence to agrarian egalitarianism.

8. Author declarations

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Luu Van Duy: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization. **Yuichiro Amekawa:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Review & Editing. **Hiroshi Isoda:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Review & Editing, Funding Acquisition. **Hisako Nomura:** Supervision. **Takaaki Watanabe:** Supervision.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the Vietnamese Government for providing scholarship to the first author's Ph.D. program at the Kyushu University. We wish to thank all villagers, officials and DBRC staff for their hospitality and collaboration in this study. We express special thanks to Mrs. Pham Hoai Thu; Mrs. Le Thi Thu Huong, Mr. Tran The Cuong, Mr. Nguyen Minh Duc, Mr. Trinh Cong Son, Mr. Tong Duy Hoai Vu for their great contributions to the field survey. And we note here our gratitude that this paper partly reflects the outcomes supported by The Foundation for Dietary Scientific Research, Japan. Last but not least, we also thank the Editor Sarah Turner and four anonymous reviewers for their very helpful and insightful comments.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.06.009>.

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