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**Raising Homes for a Rising Asia:
Development-induced-displacement and Regionalism in Laos.**

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**Raising Homes for a Rising Asia:
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Even in the most networked societies, people identify with places; make a living in places; build relationships in places; produce and consume in places; and live, love and die in places (Rigg 2007: 21).

Abstract

It is widely agreed that much of Asia's rise over the past two decades has been built around the regions increasing connectivity. Far less attention has been given, however, to the implications of new mobility flows on the millions of people throughout Asia who remain, for the most part, bound to place. With a focus on Laos, a land-locked and 'least developed' country that has until recently remained largely isolated from transnational flows, this paper considers how growing regional connectivity's are reconfiguring, and in some cases destroying, local communities. In examining this problem two key issues are addressed. First is the concern that Laos is becoming a 'corridor country' or a space of 'non-places' to be passed through, but not to dwell. Second is the widespread displacement and resettlement of local communities that is occurring in the country's urban nodes as a result of processes of 'development' and modernization. As infrastructure upgrades continue to bring new forms of transnational exchange into Laos, people's homes are being destroyed and local communities are being broken apart by resettlement programs that show little consideration to the social and cultural relationships, the sense of belonging, or the affinity to particular landscapes that make up a sense of 'home'. Place is being reconfigured by space, the fixed is becoming increasingly fluid, and those not able to move along regional networks are finding themselves increasingly marginalized in order to make way for connectivity. In the wake of these transformations it is important to consider if there is a place for being 'at home' in a space of flows, networks and nodes and who is it that such landscapes of connectivity benefit and disadvantage.

Author Biography

Kearrin Sims is a 3rd year PhD Candidate at the University of Western Sydney's Institute for Culture and Society. His research explores processes of regionalism and development in Laos in respect to the 'rise of Asia', China's growing regional influence and the emergence of the 'Asian Century'. Kearrin has published on his work in a variety of mediums. More information on his publications and research can be found at www.laophd.com

Keywords

Asian Century, Displacement, Laos, Modernization, Regionalism.

Introduction

As we move further into the 21st century continued economic growth across much of Asia and the worsening economic crisis in Europe has led numerous theorists to speak of the rise of an ‘Asian Century’. Driven largely by increasing intraregional trade and investment that has been mobilized through rapid industrialization and infrastructure development (Zhai 2009), Asia’s economic growth over the past three decades has been heralded as ‘the most spectacular development experience the world has seen during the second half of the twentieth century’ (Anderrson et al. 280: 120). Regional trade and integration agreements continue to expand across the region and as Asia continues along its current trajectories of widespread economic growth many economists, national governments and powerful international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have argued that ongoing poverty-alleviation during this ‘new era of growth’ will be dependent on further increases in regional integration, facilitated by ‘accelerated investment in hard and soft infrastructure’ (Zhai 2009: xiii). Yet, as this article will show, the results of current processes and practices of regional connectivity have been far from the ‘all-inclusive’ benefits that such neoliberal development discourses have suggested. With a focus on Laos this article gives consideration to the poverty-inducing consequences of new forms of connectivity within Asia. In doing this, the article sets out to address two primary concerns. Firstly, attention will be given to the ways in which a growth in regional flows in Laos has led to a re-shaping (or at least amplification) of the countries political-economic landscape into a ‘space of flows’ along key corridors and nodes. Here, the focus will be on the airport upgrades that are currently taking place all across the country. Following this, the article will turn to consider how the reconfiguration of Laos towards such ‘post-Keynesian’ (Brenner 2004) spatial networks is impacting on the lives of the poor.

The Remapping of a Global World

In the wake of the 1980s Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl political era, processes of globalization (and regionalism) have been increasingly accompanied and reinforced by the spread of neoliberal discourses that argues in favor of free trade and transnational flows as the most appropriate means to economic

growth, industrialization and a reduction in global poverty (Berger 2004). This shift towards global neoliberalism has brought with it a transition away from a 'Keynesian', equality oriented, distribution of resources across nation-states towards increasing centralization along key networks and nodes that facilitate the global flows of goods, people and information. As states become increasingly competitive in their pursuit of accessing transnational capital flows the state itself has become an entrepreneurial agent seeking to ground movements of capital within its territorial borders (Brenner 2004). Such attempts to remain globally competitive have led to a 'race to the bottom' in regards to social service provision (ibid: 264) and an increase in the production of 'non-places' that are devoid of 'symbolic expressions of identity' (Bauman 2000), and that are to be passed through but not to be lived in. Inequality has risen both within and between countries and 'the inequitable distribution of rights, instances of injustice, [and] unequal life chances' that have accompanied this inequality have increasingly come to be seen as necessary costs of economic growth and national development. Described by Carroll (2010) as 'socio-institutional neoliberalism', such restructuring has legitimized the extension of state power at the same time as it has seen a withdrawal of state provisions (Brawley 2008: 5). Consequently, inequality is increasingly becoming expressed through spatial divisions that have seen 'the polarization of development among different territories, regions, places, and scales' (Brenner 2004: 13).

Key to these new spatial networks of local, national, regional and global interconnectivity has been the expansion of urban nodes or global cities. Cities 'provide the urban meta-system on which the networked world of global capitalism is built' (Durr Schmidt & Taylor 2007: 24), and have become the primary spaces of global/regional exchange. Perceived as the shining pillars of modernization and development, 'global' cities have become the primary means for nation-states to plug into 'global political, economic and social networks' (Bunnell 2002: 287) and a powerful symbolic marker of a nations wealth. As Soja states, 'The metropolis has invariably functioned as the privileged figure of modernity... [It] represents the highest form assumed by both economic and aesthetic forces' (Soja 2000) and, as the key landscapes of global neoliberalism, urbanization has become widely perceived as crucial to a nations development. To achieve this transformation, nation-states have promoted 'new growth-driven urban redevelopment... deregulation, the employment

of new zoning strategies, and public–private partnerships in the provision of major new infrastructure and real-estate development’ (Roy & Ong 2011: 81) ‘industrial agglomerations, ... [and] large-scale transportation networks (Brenner 2004: 33).

With the rising importance of global cities have come attempts by both states and private investors to transform existing urban environments into symbolic representations of modernity and wealth that will make the city more attractive to further foreign investment. Described by Ghertner as ‘aesthetic governmentality’ such conceptualizations of the urban perceive space as ‘illegal or legal, deficient or normal’ and acceptable or unacceptable based on visual characteristics that are drawn from simplistic categorizations of modern/developed and traditional/undeveloped (Ghertner 2011: 289). Through such aesthetic governance the past-two decades of urban development in Asia has seen the growing proliferation of what Shatkin has referred to as ‘urban integrated mega-projects’ (UIM’s) that cover large areas of a city, include multiple forms of urban space (hotels, schools, apartments, roads, hospitals, industry, and so on) and are built on a for profit scale (Shatkin 2011: 77). UIM’s represent ‘the wholesale commodification of the urban fabric’ (ibid) and the pursuit of urban development along the contours of for-profit objectives that are concerned with attracting investment and mobilizing corporate entrepreneurialism (ibid) rather than social welfare or the rights of the poor. For Shatkin, such projects have led to ‘the ascendance of private-sector actors from an historically fragmented and indirect role in shaping urban form to a central role in the core functions of urban planning’ (ibid: 78).

As transnational capital flows increasingly leave their imprint on the configuration of space ‘new places are emerging, new spaces are being created, [and] new scales of organization are being developed’ (Brenner 2004: 12) that undermine, consolidate, reaffirm and reconfigure nation-state geographies. As key cities have become increasingly important spaces within transnational networks the places and people that are outside of these spaces have experienced a simultaneous increase in their level of marginalization, exclusion and abandonment. The result of this transition is ‘an increasingly obsolete, nation state-centric configuration of capitalist development’ (ibid: 29), that requires ‘a reconceptualization of how the geographies of state space are being transformed at various geographical scales under contemporary geo-economic conditions’ (ibid: 30). Growing regionalism in Asia

involves not only connectivity but also the bypassing of certain locations. It involves both connection and disconnection meaning that the connectivity of one space may also involve the detaching of the global economy from elsewhere (Ferguson 1999). Such geographically uneven development involves not just the marginalization of space but also the marginalization of individuals and communities (who are deemed inadequate members) from the privileged spaces of capitalist networks. Thus debates around globalization must attempt 'to account for not only the quickening of liquidity within some realms but also the concomitant patterns of concentration that create zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility in other cases' (Graham & Marvin 2001). This 'geographically uneven development is an essential feature of capitalist spatiality' (Soja 1985: 178), and according to Robinson, requires us to 'rethink development not as a national process, in which it 'develops' as a nation, but in terms of developed, underdeveloped, and intermediate population groups occupying contradictory or unstable locations in a transnational environment' (Robinson 2003: 326). This is especially so in authoritarian states such as Laos where state and private investors acquisition of land within the country's urban nodes has seen the frequent displacement of local communities. Yet while this shift has been recognized by a number of theorists, the focus of their analysis has remained on Europe or on the more 'developed' parts of Asia. For countries such as Laos, development continues to be conceptualized at the national scale and the need for this 'least developed *country*' to become modern and developed. Indeed the term least developed country, with its focus on the national scale, is becoming an increasing inadequate measure of development in the context of 'global sociospatial restructuring [that] has ~~also~~ unsettled the state-centric geographical assumptions that have long underpinned traditional, disciplinary approaches to social science, in which social, economic, and political processes have been presumed to be geographically congruent within national state boundaries' (Brenner 2004: 23). While it is being increasingly acknowledged that new regional connectivity's continue to bring Laos into a rapidly rising Asia more attention needs to be given to the spatial networks along which these transnational flows operate.

Laos in an Asian Century

The Lao PDR is a small, mountainous and land-locked country that ranks 138th (of 182 countries) on the UNDP Human Development Index (online). In spite of its various geo-political weaknesses, such as the smallest population of any mainland Southeast Asian country (and 1/200th the size of China's population), Laos' land-locked location makes it instrumental to regional connectivity programs. Economically, Laos is heavily dependent on its fellow ASEAN member states which account for more than 69 per cent of its total exports and 55 per cent of its imports (UN 2010: 12). As a land-locked country Laos is naturally oriented towards its neighbors and the primary regional connectivity program in Laos is the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). Described by the UNDP as 'a landlink connecting the most dynamic Asian markets' (ibid: iii) that is 'rich in natural resources, most of which are unexploited and yet to be explored' (ibid: 29), Laos is becoming increasingly important to the regional trade flows. For Laos itself, greater regional integration has become the country's most widely influential development strategy.

Broadly speaking, the Lao government's regional aspirations are primarily driven by the perceived need to open the country to foreign investments and provide the country with improved access to seaports. The Lao government is "an especially enthusiastic supporter of sub-regional cooperation" (Stuart-fox 1996: 231) and according to the CIA World Factbook (online), Laos participates in at least thirty-five international organizations. Expanding market integration and overcoming the isolation that being land-locked has supposedly created has been a guiding principle of the Lao government development strategy since the mid 1980s (Rigg 2006: 128). For the ADB, Laos' regional integration is a matter of linking the chief urban centres of the member countries of the GMS while offering Laos access to ports and markets for its exports (Pholsena & Banomyong 2006: 131). A region that has become the showcase of the ADB in its efforts to strengthen other regional bodies in Asia, the GMS is an economically driven regional connectivity program that is structured around three major economic corridors and eleven flagship programs for development. Connectivity within the GMS has included a growing number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Export Processing Zones (EPZs), upgrades to numerous airports and improved transportation along the Mekong river, an 'information highway' for

regional telecommunications, hydropower projects and ongoing plans to develop a regional railway network that will link the Chinese city of Kunming to Singapore.

The most profitable of regional investments in Laos have been in hydropower and mining, with almost three quarters of total FDI being directed to these two sectors (UN 2010: 1). 'In mining, some 96 companies are operating 156 concessions, while hydropower potential is estimated to be more than 18,000 megawatts (MW), of which only about 3% (627 MW) has been developed (ADB 2007: 6). Hydropower is a key industry for the regional integration of Laos and contracts for large dams are increasingly being pursued by regional investors from countries such as China, which now has more dams than any other country in the world (Becker 2006: 202), and Thailand, the source country for the vast majority of energy generated from hydropower dams in Laos. In addition to their enormous ecological effects (particularly on Mekong fisheries), hydropower dams in Laos have seen the large-scale displacement of local communities, the loss of local farmland, and worsening food security. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have also been a part of the Lao government's regional integration and industrial development plans with three such zones currently operating on the two GMS 'economic corridors' that run through the country. To date, these SEZs have seen little industrial development, drawing their money instead from casino's targeting tourists from neighboring China and Thailand. Tourism is an important and growing component of Laos' economy and its regional integration plans with tourist numbers rising almost 500% between 1995 and 2008 to 1.7 million visitors (UN 2010: 37) and the majority of these tourists come from within GMS countries. Scholarships to China and other GMS countries have increased in Laos, as has legal and illegal migration and the number of commodities flowing into the country.

'Cash crop' plantations, especially rubber, have been a growing consequence of regional connectivity in Laos and these developments have been the cause of environmental degradation, a threat to food security, and increased rates of trafficking, prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS. As regional integration continues to increase in Laos the country's natural habitats and biodiversity is being rapidly depleted. This loss of forestry and other natural resources has, in turn, undermined the food security of some of the country's most vulnerable communities and seen the appropriation of communally used 'state' land for private investments. In 2007 large-

scale land concessions that were leased to foreign investors on concessionary agreements for a minimum period of thirty years were estimated to cover one million hectares, or 1/23rd of Laos' total land area (Guttal 2011: 93) and, according to Simon Creak, between 2006-2010 more than 80% of all private investments in the country for from foreign investors (Creak 2011: 215). Laos top three biggest providers of FDI (China, Vietnam and Thailand) are all border countries from within the GMS and, like FDI, Laos' aid assistance has also seen a shift from longstanding Western donors to greater regional support from countries such as China and Korea. This growth in regional investment in aid has been both a consequence of and catalyst for growing urbanization and large-scale transnational infrastructure projects in Laos including roads, railways, river transport and airport runways. One consequence of the spread of infrastructure across the country has been a growth in 'development-induced' displacements to make way for connective infrastructures and the investments that accompany these networks. Such displacement has been especially pronounced in urban areas indicating that even in the 'connected', 'modern' spaces of development local communities are not being incorporated into these 'developed' spaces of neoliberal accumulation of capital.

Connections and disconnections in a regionally integrated Laos

Growing regional connectivity's in Laos are foremost a product of new transnational roads and air-travel networks. Of the Greater Mekong Subregion's three economic corridor projects two, the East-West (EWEC) and the North-South (NSEC) corridors, pass through Laos. Both corridors have been designed to link up key nodes that are located outside of Laos and, despite the rhetoric of the ADB that new industries will develop all along these roads, the vast majority of cargo traveling on these roads is expected to move from one node to the next as quickly as possible. Almost all discussion of road networks and other forms of connectivity in Laos discuss the speed at which they will allow commuters to move from one place to the next, failing to consider the vast space between these two points that is being moved through (or perhaps bypassed is a better term) at increasingly rapid speeds. As Sofield (2009: 2) writes on the NSEC, 'designed by engineers and economists to facilitate the movement of goods and passengers by the shortest (by time and distance) routes[.] Virtually no consideration was given to basic infrastructure for tourism such as

lookouts, small river piers for ecotourism, rest stops [etc]... or linkages for impoverished wayside communities to take advantage of the passing traffic'. Commercial interests, predominantly from China, have brought with them new opportunities for economic gains by local communities but they have also come with new risks and, as Tan states, 'while Chinese investors and petty traders are the main drivers of change, they are also the main winners' (Tan 2012: 71).

Confronted by those in search of new business opportunities and with little knowledge of capitalist markets themselves, many local communities often face precarious and high-risk living conditions as a result of the changes that regional road networks have brought with them. To date, the only major investments to develop along the NSEC in northern Laos have been cash-crop (primarily rubber) plantations and two casino complexes. These 'developments' have provided little working opportunities for local communities other than prostitution and have reportedly seen a growth in illicit drug use and alcoholism, trafficking, kidnapping, and even torture and murder. Physical accessibility to hospitals, schools, and other facilities may have increased with the building of new roads but this does not equate to social, cultural or financial access and for many people in these services remain beyond their reach. While presented by the ADB and the Lao, Chinese and Thai states as a poverty-alleviation project it is clear that the NSEC is far more about commercial exchange between medium and large-scale companies (that are mostly from outside of Laos) than it is about Lao industry or village level production. As Phraxayavong (2009: 228-9) states 'Aid-funded roads now link the various remote areas of Laos to Thailand, Vietnam, and China. ... Without roads, the poor would have remained poor. However, with roads but without basic education, they have become poorer'. In addition to Laos' transnational roads airport development and air-travel agreements have also been an important feature of the countries growing regional integration.

With no direct access to the sea airports are of crucial importance in strengthening linkages between Laos and the rest of (South)East Asia. According to the CIA world Factbook (online) Laos has 42 airports, but only 9 with paved runways. At present the country's two busiest airports are Vientiane's Wattay International Airport and Luang Prabang airport. In 2012 both airports received upgrades with funding from China, while upgrades for Savannakhet, Xieng Khouan, Attapeu and Champasak airports are also planned to be completed in the next few years. Beyond

Laos, airport upgrades have been taking place all over the GMS, with Kunming airport in China, Sihanoukville airport in Cambodia, and Yangon airport in Burma being just three examples. While roads remain the most important transport arteries connecting Laos to its immediate neighbors, airports have been a key aspect of Laos' connectivity with wider Asia. Airports bring a new dynamic to the spatialization and development of Laos as they provide linkages to countries far beyond its borders and in a speed that is historically unprecedented for this land-locked country. According to the Director of the Aerodrome and Security Division, Department of Civil Aviation Mr. Somphonh Sygnavong (Pers. Comm. 16/02/2012), like GMS roads, Laos' airports are directed primarily towards regional traffic, with upgrades to the country's airports being funded by China, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. More so even than roads, airport development is targeted exclusively at those who can afford this form of luxury travel and in Luang Prabang the costs of an airport upgrade has been the displacement of more than 420 families.

The UNESCO World Heritage site of Luang Prabang is Laos' foremost tourist attraction. With its numerous Buddhist temples and young monks wandering about its quiet streets, Luang Prabang embodies the 'Authentic Asia' and 'Asia back in time' that appeals to so many tourists who visit Laos. A city that is becoming an increasingly important relay point for commerce between Laos, Thailand and China, Luang Prabang can be reached by land, river, and by air, however, overland routes to neighboring countries or the Lao capital of Vientiane remain long journeys of a day or more. The city's airport currently serves as a regional airport with scheduled international flights to Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Siem Reap and its upgrade is directly related to the governments plans make Luang Prabang Laos' key northern node for regional connectivity and to further the towns tourism market. With a continual growth in the number of tourists traveling to Luang Prabang by air the Lao government has deemed it necessary to conduct an upgrade and expansion of the current airport facilities and at an estimated cost of US\$83.6 million, the airport upgrade will be almost twice as large as the existing airport.

Currently limited to serve only short haul services up to 1,500 kilometres with no more than 80 passengers per flight, Luang Prabang airport is only served by only three scheduled airlines, Lao Airlines, Bangkok Airways and Vietnam Airlines. Once the upgrades are completed, however, the new runway will allow operations of

medium haul services that will almost double the capacity per operation and allow Laos to project itself beyond GMS regional networks towards East Asia. The possibility to serve aircraft of longer-range will allow for more non-stop destinations, accessing new markets and providing the potential to see flights from destinations such as Seoul, Tokyo and Taipei. In regards to new airlines, a longer runway will also present the possibility to receive new network carriers and increased connectivity to the rest of the world through alternative hubs such as Bangkok, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. Presently, only Vietnam Airlines can provide network traffic through connections at their hub in Hanoi, however, it is anticipated that with a longer runway Thai Airways will be interested in feeding traffic from its extensive network and from its Star Alliance partners. One other new airlines expected to start flights to Luang Prabang will be China Eastern Airlines, who is expected to operate flights from two airports in Yunnan province. Although AirAsia is not yet planning to conduct flights directly to Luang Prabang, its Vientiane to Kuala Lumpur and Vientiane to Singapore flights are also expected to have a significant impact in the domestic services between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Overall, it is expected that an increase of 125% of new foreign visitors will be arriving within the first 3 years of the project, with total passengers increasing by almost 400% over the next twenty years. While it is almost certain that these changes to the airport will bring an increase in tourist numbers to Laos the Lao government and the ADB's primary stated objective for increasing regional connectivity is to promote development and poverty alleviation. So how has the airport upgrade impacted upon the lives of local communities?

Immediately behind Luang Prabang airport, and as a direct result of its construction, are people whose homes have been destroyed and their lives worsened in order to make way for regional interconnections. In contrast to what ADB and Lao government policy documents suggest, we do not need to go far away 'rural' areas to find marginalized or excluded communities, rather such peoples are also located where connectivity is most prevalent. To complete the upgrade of the Luang prabang airport, a total of 814 households from seven villages were identified as likely to be directly affected through loss of land and assets. Of these households 424 were relocated while another 391 lost land and other minor fixed assets. Brick factories, educational institutions, religious sites, private homes, businesses, agricultural plots and fruit bearing trees all needed to be destroyed to make way for the airport upgrade

and estimated costs for resettlement and environmental mitigation and compensation were approximately \$14.5 million (ADB 2008). From July 2011 – April 2012 I conducted a series of visits to one of the two new village relocation sites to speak with the displaced villagers about their relocation.

To conduct the resettlement of affected families land was given out on a lottery based system, whereby villagers would draw the plot number of their new land from a container. Almost all villagers were allocated the same size plot of land (10x18m), regardless of how much land they owned in the last village, resulting in some people getting more land than before but a majority being given much less. In an attempt to provide land to those who did not previously own land and to try and prevent people from leaving the city to find new land in the countryside, ‘landless’ villagers were given their own plot of land, however, all families that I spoke with complained that the land they had been allocated was too small to build a house on. Of every villager that I asked about the resettlement process, the size and quality of the land was their primary concern with many families being allocated plots on steep and extremely rocky terrain that was almost impossible to build on. For those families who were given new land that they could begin building on immediately, it took two months before they were given water or electricity and during that time they had to travel far to the Mekong to collect water. At the more extreme end of the resettlement process, I spoke to four families (although there were more in the same situation) who were still living in tents with no access to electricity or fresh water, more than a year after being relocated. Three of these families paid expensive fees to purchase water from their neighbors but one family that could not afford to do this had to dig a hole in the ground just to get water. Apart from being immediately evident when visiting their tents on hot days to conduct my interviews, people specifically explained to me the discomfort of living in a tent for such a long period of time. ‘Just this morning’, I was told on one particular day, ‘it was raining and water was coming in so we could not sleep.’ On another occasion, when speaking with a different family an elderly woman told me that ‘we live the same as the chicken; when it is hot we are hot and when it is cold we are cold. When it rains we get wet’. Living in a tent had also limited people’s ability to work, visit friends, or travel for other everyday reasons such as shopping, or to see a doctor. As one man told me:

‘I am angry because me and my wife cannot go anywhere because we have no door and we cannot lock our tent. If I leave the tent my wife must stay here and if she leaves I must stay here. Otherwise people can come and steal from us and I am worried people will take our rice’.

The man’s concern over people stealing his rice was because at this time many people in the village were facing rice shortages as a result of their resettlement and a flood that tore through the relocated village before people had built their homes and had the means to protect their belongings. Unable to leave, the man’s home had become a prison and a denial of his right as a Lao citizen to unrestricted movement within his own country. Furthermore, the limited mobility he faced as a result of being homeless has also had an effect on his employment. As he continues, ‘it is also a problem because we [him and his wife] used to work together and could earn 50 000 kip per day. Now only I can work’. Furthermore, he explained to me that he does not own a motorbike and that previously if him and his wife had a job far from home they would stay at the worksite together for several days. Not being able to do this now he has to travel much more and this is time consuming and expensive.

The majority of the people I interviewed in the relocation site, (although not all), did not possess passports or the money to ever take advantage of the opportunities for mobility that the new airport will provide. Although the upgrading of Luang Prabang airport will put the airport community right on top of expanding regional connectivity networks many people continue to face social, cultural and economic marginalization and disadvantages that prevent them from benefitting from such developments. While regional (and Lao government) development discourses present mobility as a sign of increased progress (this is much of the argument driving regionalism in the GMS) regional infrastructure development involves both increased mobility for some and a ‘tying to place’ - a restriction of mobility - for others. Seeing the planes above my head while interviewing people in the relocation site I often wondered if the mobile, connected, ‘culturally aware’, cosmopolitan tourists that fly into Luang Prabang airport notice the collection of green tents that sit beneath them or if they knew that peoples homes were destroyed in order to make their leisure travel more convenient.

From Crossroads to Regional Node

At the same time as infrastructure is being rapidly built to pass through Laos, there is an inter-related attempt to develop the country's key national nodes into regional nodes. In order to try and encourage capital to stay in Laos, rather than just passing through at an increasingly quickening pace, the Lao government, the ADB, and many private investors have sought to upgrade and (re)develop Laos' key urban environments. As post-Keynesian states throughout Asia have sought to become increasingly competitive on a global scale, city development has become increasingly privatized. Faced with a lack of state resources, governments such as the Lao government have become entrepreneurial states, competing with other cities from the region to attract private investment by offering incentives such as land concessions, tax breaks, the removal of importing/exporting fees, and 'perhaps most importantly, rhetorical and political support for developer goals' (Shatkin 2011: 81). In the country's capital of Vientiane, this shift has involved the beautification or 'worlding' of the city in accordance with global norms of what a modern city must look like. A practice that has been discussed by academics across East, South, and Southeast Asia, no attention has yet been given to processes of worlding in Laos.

Vientiane does not present the typical urban environment that most people would associate with the words 'capital city'. Young children can often be seen skipping and running across the city's streets without even checking for traffic and the majority of its buildings (including many *Wats*) are less than five storeys tall. Yet at the same time, Vientiane also does not present the typical imagery that one would associate with the term 'Least Developed Country'. A ten-minute walk through Vientiane will take you past Italian, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Turkish, French, Belgian, Mexican, Spanish, Scandinavian, Swedish, and American restaurants. On this walk, you may also pass Hummers, Mercedes's or Lamborghinis, as well as several upmarket wine bars. New shopping centers are being built all over the city and there has been a growth in urban integrated mega-projects (UIM) that are being funded primarily by investors from China, Thailand and Vietnam. All together, approved land lease/concession projects in Vientiane Province cover 391,709 ha - or 21% of the total land area (NLMA 2009: 14). Unsurprisingly, development-induced displacement has been a prominent phenomenon in Laos' most populated province and one highly controversial UIM to have recently completed the first stage of

development is the Vientiane New World complex that played host to the visiting delegates for the 9th Asia-Europe meeting in November 2012.

At a cost of \$US180 million and covering 25 hectares of riverfront land, Vientiane New World (Herein referred to as VNW) is a key component of the Lao governments attempts to transform Vientiane city into an important node in the GMS and wider (South)East Asia. Located in the city centre on Vientiane's Don Chan island, the development is intimately linked to the upgrading of Vientiane airport, the improvement of transnational highways, and the planned Singapore-Kunming railway project. Without these infrastructure upgrades and the increasing regional connectivity that they are anticipated to bring such large-scale developments would not be financially feasible in Vientiane, where the city's middle and upper-class remains small. As with the Luang Prabang airport upgrade, VNW involved the relocation of hundreds of people, in this instance to a relocation site more than 25km from the city centre that appears to be a dumping ground for displaced villagers from all over the city. However, my intention here is not to discuss the implications of this displacement, rather I focus instead on the discourses and aspirations driving the spread of these Urban-Integrated Megaprojects (UIM's) throughout Vientiane. To do this, I turn my attention to the investment promotion video for the project.

Released on the video hosting website *Youtube* under the name 'Vientiane New World VNW' the investment promotion video for VNW begins with the type of music one would associate with an action-thriller movie. Displaying images of global cityscapes text flashes across the screen saying 'Not New York... Not Beijing... Not Hong Kong... Not Paris', suggesting that after the Vientiane New World development is completed one may be likely to confuse these cities with Vientiane. Moving on to describe 'A pearl shining around Mekong river... one Vientiane, one World', the link between VNW and practices of 'worlding' is reinforced through depictions of shining high-rise buildings that rise dramatically into the clear blue skies above. 'It's Vientiane New World', the video exclaims, showing us an aerial view of the development that sits on the shores of a deep blue Mekong river and is backset by a green landscape that removes the actually-existing Vientiane and all its inhabitants from the picture. Here, an attempt is made not only to present VNW as more aesthetically pleasing than it actually is, but also to create a fictitious representation of the development as a profound and unprecedented step for Laos away from the

jungles of Indochina and into the glass and steel fronted urban landscapes of modern Asia. This is a strikingly different aspiration for development to that of the preservation of heritage or the promotion of minority cultures, as has often been the objective of Western development assistance, rather this is a portrayal of how Laos can become a part of 'rising Asia'. Reinforcing the lack of concern for Lao social or cultural values that such practices of worlding employ, the over voice for the video does not even pronounce the name of the city (Vientiane) correctly.

After fading to black the video returns with the sounds of wood instruments and images of golden Buddhist statues, pictures of Wats, Lotus symbols, the That Luang Stupa and a seated statue of King Setthathirat, a hero of Lao nationalism narratives. The voice over returns with the words 'glorious cultural heritage from Lan Xang', making a link to Laos' historic past and traditional culture in an attempt to suggest that these two representations of the country can exist side-by-side. Attempting to suggest that VNW will be both a world-city and uniquely Lao, the narration continues with the words 'today, a new Laos is becoming the hub of Mekong river'. Dreams to turn Vientiane into a hub on the Mekong are very real aspirations of the ADB and the Lao government and a key part of the country's regional integration plans and these objectives are becoming increasingly private-sector led. Continuing with the words 'attracting global investment as well as worldwide tourists' it becomes clear that the video is attempting to depict two contrasting representations of modern and ancient Laos in order to appeal to both the country's tourism sector and global investment and Laos' future as a part of modern Asia. Describing VNW as an 'oasis of modern sophistication', there is a suggestion that this is a site of beauty amidst emptiness, a site of life amidst lifelessness and, perhaps most importantly of all, a space that exists within an empty space (of desert) - a space free of people. As 'Vientiane's international cultural and tourist centre, international business centre, and international residence centre, through which Laos goes to the world, the crown of Vientiane, the spirit of the country', VNW is a development project that is directed at international residents, at the globally and regionally mobile and capital-rich, but not local residents who have been pushed away to make room for this projected space of global modernity.

At this point the music in the film shifts again to that resembling high British culture and displays people moving through the development at night. The voice-

overs description of VNW as ‘a sleepless city where people linger and stay’ contravening the Lao governments current laws that businesses must not stay open after midnight. A good example of how the countries laws seem to not apply to large-scale investors the emphasis here on people lingering and ‘staying’ is seen as important to Laos and the widespread concerns that the country is becoming little more than a ‘crossroads’ for regional exchange. Continuing on with further representations of worlding the city, the video states that VNW will include ‘the highest construction set in Vientiane’, seeking to draw Laos into the global cities network through the visual impact of skyscrapers, as Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur and Dubai (amongst others) have each done. Again, VNW seemingly has no interest in complying with Lao law and the regulations of the current urban master development plan for Vientiane which states that no buildings over 7 stories tall should be constructed. VNW, so the video states, ‘exhibits to the world the endless charms of Laos in a new era’ and, with fireworks blasting over the computer-generated imagery of the development, the video soon shifts to a map of the GMS with red lines appearing between Vientiane and to two other nodal points that appear to be in China and Burma. A picture of an airport is displayed to highlight the importance of air travel to this development project before the map of Laos pans out to a map of the globe. In this eight minute video the word ‘international’ is stated fourteen times.

Proposals for UIM developments such as the Vientiane New World project are being planned all over Vientiane, with two similar projects on the cities only remaining wetland sites and another not far from Wattay international airport having already received the ‘go ahead’ from the Lao government. Although it is clear that the government, the ADB, and the private sector are not seeking to transform Vientiane into a global city of the scale or significance of Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai, processes of urban development in the city do adopt the same aesthetic governmentality of practices of worlding that have been pursued within these global cities (Ong & Roy 2011). Beautification, modernization, and development-induced displacement have been key to Laos’ widening urbanization and attempts to make the country more than just a thoroughfare for the regional exchanges and resource extractions of its neighbors. It is without doubt that the images presented within the investment promotion video discussed above are strikingly different to the reality of the development on the ground, yet while the resemblance between the idea and the

reality may be less than identical this has not seemed to put a stop to the faith that many seem to have in these projects and the belief that what is important for Laos' future is developing regional infrastructure and the rapid modernization of its key regional nodes. Prioritizing the transformation of space over livelihoods, this approach to development has in many cases seen the destruction of local communities homes, land, and means of employment or subsistence.

Conclusion

The last decade has seen some remarkable shifts in the global economy. A region that is 'home to over half the world's population, produces three tenths of global output (in terms of purchasing power), and consistently records the world's highest economic growth rates' (Peter 2008: 10). 'Asia's' rise in East Asia is now coming quickly to the regions LDC's – the 'missing links' in an Asian Century. Yet with this shift we are also witnessing growing levels of development-induced displacement and a host of other vulnerabilities that large numbers of the regions impoverished must now contend with. Moving beyond the confines of the market, neoliberalism has become a part of state governance of society (Ong 2008) creating new spatial matrix's of socio-economic networks and replacing the societal and welfare providing obligations of the state with the dogged pursuit of economic growth (Brawley 2008: 4). Processes of globalization and regionalism 'cannot proceed without segregation, separation, polarization and exclusion' (Mannson 2008: 163) and according to Khan, six million people are displaced every year by urban development and transport programmes alone (Khan 2009: 153). Mobility and connectivity has undoubtedly increased across the region, yet at the same time millions of people remain marginalized, disadvantaged and denied access from the new opportunities that regional integration has brought to offer. 'For some people, globalization augurs an unprecedented freedom from physical obstacles and constraints, for others, it portends the impossibility of escaping their locality... [causing] feelings of constraint, imprisonment and an inability to enter the first world of the global elite' (Davis 2008: 143). Spaces of 'development', 'connectivity', and 'modernity' are being created through the abjection and expulsion of local communities who are not considered acceptable global/regional citizens and, as the Asian Development Bank (2011: 2) has acknowledged, 'while the incidence of income poverty has fallen across the region,

empirical evidence shows that the wealth production of cities has not necessarily contributed to improved living conditions for the vast majority of Asia's urban population'.

In Laos, discourses of development have been employed both to resettle communities closer to infrastructure and urban environments and to push communities aside to make way for modernization – for hotels, shopping malls, and airports in urban areas, and for agribusiness, logging, and mineral resources in rural areas. In both cases development is uprooting people and dramatically altering their lives in pursuit of a modernity that seeks to both include and exclude people for different reasons. Unfortunately, it seems that the re-spatialization of Laos to better accommodate regional flows has also meant the increasing marginalization and disadvantaging of the poor as development has taken on a particularly technocratic, economic growth driven, and apolitical form. Displacement of local communities to make way for development has featured extensively in the urbanization and transnational infrastructure projects of Laos and has been made worse by unclear land ownership, corruption and authoritarian rule. Landscapes of Asian modernity are 'bound up with new geographies of exclusion' (Bunnell 2004: 10) and as governments across the region try to rapidly draw their countries into the 'global sphere' there is a growing awareness that the cost of opening up national borders to neoliberal flows may be the leaving behind their own national citizens. Once 'isolated' places are becoming sites of connectivity, but these are also sites to be populated by 'the connected' -by those who are already moving along these continually emerging space of flows, and who move into these areas in search of profit and wealth extraction rather than a concern for the welfare of the communities who live in this space. In Laos, as in other parts of Asia, people are being pushed aside to make way for development as the 'coming together' of the Asian region sees a rise in spatial inequalities and geographically uneven development.

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