

Spotlighting Women in Large-Scale Land-Based Chinese Investments in Myanmar and Cambodia: A Gendered Analysis of Social Risks for the Belt and Road Initiative

Abstract

The past decade witnessed the come-into-shape of a cemented Belt and Road Initiative with major influx of Chinese foreign direct investment flooding into countries across the world. Myanmar and Cambodia, in the process, emerged as the regional hot spots. Ambitious large-scale land-based infrastructure projects, the predominant form of investment, are planned in both territories. These projects, since their early days, have attracted wide-range analysis and interpretations regarding the associated risks in environmental, legal, and social spectrum. Central to the contesting scholarships are land acquisition, summary eviction, dismantling of local livelihoods, and the adverse impacts on the environment. Large-scale land-based investments also affect local women profoundly in terms of their economic participation as well as gender relations in the community. On one hand, a high percentage of rural women in both countries toil in their land or collect forestry-products for a living and practices such as land grabbing and deforestation will inevitably undermine their livelihoods; On the other, the job opportunities provided by Chinese companies, largely hard-labour work in the case of land-based mega infrastructure projects led by state-owned enterprises, effectively excluded women on many occasions. These changes in women's economic participation reshape their status in family and society and the community-level gender power relations. Nevertheless, they are significantly underrepresented in public consultation and social license acquisition, and the inquiry into the interactions between Chinese companies and local women remains untapped. This research thus aims to reveal a gendered picture of how China-backed large-scale land-based investments influence women's economic and social participation and its implications on local gender dynamics based on two case studies from Myanmar and Cambodia—the China National Petroleum Company oil and gas pipelines and the Hydrolancang Lower Sesan II Dam. The findings are based on both primary data derived from the field as well as second-hand resources drawn from interviews with grassroots organisations, women's groups, and NGOs and from previous literature.

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