

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Author(s): Sabaheta Ramcilovic-Suominen

Title: Democracy through technocracy? Reinventing civil society as a state-monitored and unpaid service provider in the EU FLEGT VPA in Laos

Year: 2024

Version: Published version

Copyright: The Author(s) 2024

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Ramcilovic-Suominen, S. (2024). Democracy through technocracy? Reinventing civil society as a state-monitored and unpaid service provider in the EU FLEGT VPA in Laos. *Global Environmental Change*, 85, 102809. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2024.102809>

All material supplied via *Jukuri* is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights. Duplication or sale, in electronic or print form, of any part of the repository collections is prohibited. Making electronic or print copies of the material is permitted only for your own personal use or for educational purposes. For other purposes, this article may be used in accordance with the publisher's terms. There may be differences between this version and the publisher's version. You are advised to cite the publisher's version.



Democracy through technocracy? Reinventing civil society as a state-monitored and unpaid service provider in the EU FLEGT VPA in Laos

Sabaheta Ramcilovic-Suominen

Natural Resources Institute Finland, Itäinen Pitkätatu 4 A, 20520 Turku, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Civil society
Neoliberal governmentality
Rendering technical, Counter-conduct
EU external relations
FLEGT VPA
Laos

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the European Union's (EU's) democratising agenda within the frame of the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in Laos. In particular, it focuses on the requirement for the participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the VPA and the Lao state actors' responses to this requirement. I frame the VPA's democratising agenda and its conditionality of civil society participation as acts of governmentality exercised by the EU in Laos. This EU governmentality is exercised through the EU and EU member states' funded development partner in the frame of their project supporting the FLEGT VPA process in Laos. The Lao government responses and strategies to the EU governmentality resulted on the one hand in the Lao state's governmentality towards domestic CSOs, and in counter-conduct (i.e. a subtle and sly resistance to some aspects of the VPA) on the other. First, by tracing the establishment of the Lao FLEGT Civil Society Organisations Network (FLEGT CSO Network), I highlight the trend of depoliticisation and rendering technical, where the EU-funded development partner, with full support and backing from the Lao state, trained the CSOs in various VPA and timber legality issues. In the training, the CSOs were given specific roles and tasks, building up their fields of expertise, and were integrated in the formal VPA organisational structures, which allowed for their scrutiny and tight surveillance by the state. Second, I analyse the counter-conduct by the Lao government against a civil society that is independent from the state, which the government manifested through further disempowerment of CSOs and tightening of the CSO regulation shortly after the FLEGT CSO Network was established, while at the same time simulating democratisation by welcoming CSOs' participation in the VPA. Summoning CSOs as compliant actors and unpaid service providers working for and alongside the state was in part enabled by the VPA's own rendering technical approach. Hence, the EU's VPA governmentality and the Lao state counter-conduct mutually reinforced one another, even if their initial agendas around democratisation and CSO engagement in forest governance and the VPA diverged.

1. The EU FLEGT VPA's contradictory agendas in Laos

1.1. FLEGT VPA promotion of technical expertise, timber legality, the rule of law, civil society participation, and democracy

In the early 2000s, the European Union (EU) adopted the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan as its key anti-deforestation policy for the years to come (EU 2003). The EU FLEGT was the first international anti-deforestation policy to focus on forest legality, indicating the problem of illegal logging and the associated trade as the key drivers of global deforestation (EC 2003, 2007). Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) are legally binding bilateral agreements, negotiated and agreed upon between the EC and an individual timber-supplying country (i.e. VPA partner countries). While the EU

FLEGT contains other mechanisms such as the EU Timber Regulation, the VPA is a central component in the FLEGT for regulating illegal logging in, and the EU's timber trade with the VPA partner countries (EU FLEGT Facility, 2019).

VPAs focus primarily on developing the timber legality assurance system (TLAS) and on strengthening the forest governance in VPA partner countries (EC, 2007; EU FLEGT Facility, 2020; FERN 2019a,b; Bollen and Ozinga, 2013; Owusu, 2009). The TLAS involves various steps, from defining timber legality in terms of timber products, processes, and national state laws to be considered, to independent monitoring and strict regulation across the timber value chain, from land rights, to planting, harvesting, trade, and export, depending on which of these are included in the timber legality definition for each VPA partner country. The forest governance component in the VPA aims for policy

E-mail address: sabaheta.ramcilovic-suominen@luke.fi.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2024.102809>

Received 21 December 2022; Received in revised form 1 February 2024; Accepted 6 February 2024

Available online 17 February 2024

0959-3780/© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

and legal reform, strengthening transparency, ensuring a multi-stakeholder process in the VPA negotiation and implementation, and importantly, the active role and participation of an independent civil society, and to some extent other non-state actors such as business and forest communities, whose representation in the VPA is to be realised through civil society participation (Lewis and Bulkan, 2022; Lesniewska and McDermott, 2014; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2019).

While on the one hand, the VPA promoted greater role and devolution of decision-making power to non-state actors, focusing on nation-state policies and laws, the instrument also reinstated and strengthened the role of the nation-state, which was fading in the existing international and multilateral environmental and forest governance (McDermott, 2014). It was especially the CSOs among the non-state actors who were assigned significant roles in the VPA, including in the process of defining timber legality, the independent auditing of the timber legality assurance system, and representing local forest communities in the negotiation and implementation of the VPA (EU FLEGT Facility, 2019, 2020; EU FLEGT Facility, undated). In countries with a weaker civil society such as Laos (Sims et al. 2016), this became one of the key challenges for the EU, EU-based donors, and EU-funded development partners in the country, and of course, for the Laotian government (Mustalahti et al., 2017; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2019).

Apart from legality and democracy promotion, which can be considered as 'novel' in the FLEGT instrument, compared to other anti-deforestation policies at the time (Beeko and Arts, 2010; Bollen and Ozinga, 2013; Owusu, 2009), FLEGT in many respects resembled other international anti-deforestation policies such as the REDD+ and forest certification schemes (Rutt et al., 2018). Discursively, it reproduced the timber-producing countries as places of weak governance and weak legal compliance, thus justifying the EU and other donor interventions and capacity-building programmes (Myers et al., 2020). The VPA's focus on illegal logging rather than, for example, legal overlogging and/or the conversion of forests to monocultures, served the purpose of shifting attention from large-scale profit-driven agro-businesses to socioeconomic and political challenges (e.g. corruption, organised crime, lost revenue, violent conflicts) (see Deros, 2019; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2019). This socioeconomic and democratising agenda of the VPA in turn reinforced the EU's reputation as a benevolent development partner with a strong normative agenda, working on strengthening the role of law, democracy, civil society, and corruption (for normative power in Europe, see Kurki 2011b, von Lucke et al., 2021). Finally, and importantly, the focus on *illegal* logging introduced the need for numerous highly complex bureaucratically and technically demanding aspects, related to legality standards and definitions, indicators, traceability, and so on, which required new technical knowledge, and which in turn led to anti-politics and rendering technical (Li, 2007), even in the case of democracy and civil society promotion (Lewis and Bulkan 2022; Verhaeghe, 2021).

As far as democracy promotion and strengthening civil society are concerned, the VPA is also far from an exception in the EU wider external relations, both at home and globally (Kurki 2011a; Lucke et al. 2021; Malmvig, 2014). The key policy instrument for the civil-society-focused promotion of democracy in the EU is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIHDR), which allows the EU to support democracy outside its borders. At the same time, however, the EU argues that it operates in a non-interfering, non-coercive, and locally sensitive manner (Kurki 2011a). These claims of neutrality and non-interference have been challenged by scholars, who find the EU interventions to be self-centred and far from non-interfering (Rutazibwa, 2010). Similarly, studies of the EU's interventions in the EU accession countries and in the Arabian peninsula (Malmwig 2012, 2014; Kurki 2011a,b; İşleyen, 2015) suggest that the EU promotes a specific notion of freedom and free individuals, who are regulated through the discourse of voluntary action and independence from the state, referred to as neoliberal governmentality.

As far as the role of civil society in neoliberal governmentality is

concerned, Kurki (2011a:362) argues that the EU promotes 'entrepreneurial civil society', i.e. a civil society that poses certain expertise and capacities, and that can act as a service provider for various clients, which is in line with neoliberal governmentality. Studying the EU's democracy promotion in its external relations, she argues that the EU actively shapes and brings such civil society into being. As I will show in sections 3 and 4, this closely resembles the civil society promotion in the VPA, with the difference that the entrepreneurial character is for the time being underdeveloped, as the CSOs perform the prescribed tasks largely free of charge.

Promoting democracy and civil society is challenging in countries with an authoritarian political establishment (Barney, 2016). To give a sense of the civil society void in the country, it is worth noting that in 2012, during the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum held in the Lao capital Vientiane, the nationally and internationally renowned Lao activist Sombath Somphone criticised the government and was thereafter abducted by the police, never to be seen again. A decade later, there is no information about his disappearance, despite the outcry and various international campaigns (Gindroz, 2017).

Faced on the one hand with authoritarian policies and the lack of an independent domestic civil society in Laos (IFHR, 2017; Milne et al., 2022; Gindroz, 2017; Mustalahti et al., 2017; Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2019; Sims et al. 2016) and with the EU's push for active CSO participation in the VPA (EC, 2007) on the other, the German Agency for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ) had to be highly creative in balancing what was possible in Laos against what was desirable by the EU. Funded by the EU and the EU member state Germany, the GIZ (hereafter referred to as the EU-funded development partner) was responsible for coordinating and implementing one of the largest EU FLEGT VPA donor programmes in the country and for supporting the Lao government in the VPA process (see section 1.3. for more details). The growing role of China in the region, certainly created additional pressure for the EU and the EU-funded development partner, as did their shared interests in ensuring the continuity and success of the funded FLEGT VPA project and the VPA process. At the same time, the Lao government did not straightforwardly reject the demand for civil society but worked through it by agreeing to involve civil society on specified terms, including working alongside the government and the donor, thereby ensuring an even stringier but now legitimatised scrutiny of the work of civil society, while satisfying the basic condition that donors have CSOs at the VPA negotiation table.

The paper is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1), personal communications, and the author's long-term research in donor-state relations and CSO participation in forest governance in Laos. The interviews were conducted during 2017 and 2018. The author conducted fourteen interviews in English; two research assistants, one from an international CSO and the other from the governmental sector, conducted the rest. The research assistants were compensated by the research funding for conducting, word-to-word transcribing, and translating the interviews to English. The transcribed and translated interviews were organised and analysed in categories, based on the respondents' backgrounds: international CSOs (iLCSO); Lao CSOs (LCSO); government (Gov); development partners (DevP); and academia (Aca). The data was then organised under various themes and analysed using Foucault's governmentality framework, in particular in terms of rendering technical, neoliberal governmentality, the role of CSOs, and counter-conduct, all of which are described in section 2.

1.2. Civil society and the wider socio-political context in Laos

Laos remains one of the world's few communist regimes, alongside Vietnam and China as its close political allies and development partners. At independence in 1975, the country barely avoided economic collapse, thanks to the support of its wartime allies Vietnam and the Soviet Union (Evans, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 1997). However, the direct economic support to Laos by these countries dwindled in the ensuing years as they faced

their own economic and geopolitical challenges (Evans, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 1997). This in turn led to Laos shifting from a centralised to an open market economy in 1985, adopting the New Economic Mechanism in 1986. Following this event, various western development agencies moved into Laos, including the EU and EU member states (e.g. Finland, Sweden, Germany), Japan, the United States (USAID), Australia, and international economic and development agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations.

Despite the formal shift from a planned to an open market economy, the authoritarian political regime and state control of economic, social, and political affairs remained in Laos. The Laotian open market economy operates under the direct control of the only political party – the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The Lao reputation as an authoritarian neoliberal state, or a neoliberal authoritarian state, or an ‘illiberal neoliberal’ state (Barney, 2013; Creak and Barney, 2018; Hiedänpää et al., 2022; Yamada, 2018) relates to the intensive developmental agenda, which led to extractivism and the exploitation of natural resources, especially forests and hydro energy, at significant socioecological costs (Hirsch et al., 2022), combined with state control of citizens and civil society (Gindroz, 2017; International Federation for Human Rights 2017; Milne et al., 2022; Mustalahti et al., 2017; Ramcilovi-Suominen et al. 2019; Sims, 2017).

It is only since 2009 that the Lao Non-Profit Associations (NPAs, equivalent to CSOs) have been able to register and therefore legally exist and operate in the country. This was when the first *Decree on Association (No. 115/PMO 2009)* was adopted. Decree No. 115 was welcomed by the international development community, as well as domestic non-state actors, but it was also criticised as overly complicated and bureaucratic, with excessive procedural demands and requirements related to registering as an NPA (MPI 2015). However, under this Decree, once registered, the CSOs existed as permanent entities. This right of permanent existence was taken away by the new Decree of Associations, which was adopted in 2017 (Decree No. 238 (No. 238/PMO 2017)). The new CSO Decree required annual renewals of CSO registration and that it be subject to reporting on its activities and funding to the government. This was a significant blow for the international community, donors, and development partners in Laos, which expected the new regulation to loosen up bureaucracy and facilitate a more independent role for the state civil society (Anonymous Policy Review, 2017, Milne et al., 2022, IFHR, 2017).

In 2017, only two years after the FLEGT VPA negotiations officially commenced (GoL 2015) and the FLEGT CSO Network was set up, the Lao government adopted the new CSO Decree No. 238 (No. 238/PMO 2017). Contrary to expectations, Decree 238 introduced further restrictions and control of and limitations to CSO freedom, rights, and operations. Under the new Decree, the CSOs agree Terms of Reference (ToR) with the government, which is stated in their registration papers and is the subject of governmental approval. They must report their activities to the government ‘every two to three months, and engagements with the media must first be cleared with the governmental agency in charge (the department of Forest Inspection in this case)’ (FERN 2019b). The activities need to be in accordance with their ToR if their annually considered registration is to be renewed. The CSOs must also report all foreign donations, which the government must approve before their transfer and use. Also noteworthy is the prohibition of foreign nationals to work or even volunteer for the Lao CSOs. The new Decree No. 238 also prescribed a list of issues the CSOs were allowed to work on. This list excludes the involvement of CSOs in human rights issues. Altogether, a new level of scrutiny of CSOs was brought by the new Decree, which is further evident in the fact that thirteen governmental agencies across all levels (village to national) are now entitled to ‘supervise’ the work of the Lao NPAs.

The Lao shift to a market economy in 1986 also marks the beginning of continued and ongoing western donor assistance programmes supporting Laos’s transition to a market economy and a more open society, as well as various legal and political reforms to that effect, including an

independent civil society – all of which are deemed favourable conditions for international investment and western donors (Stuart-Fox, 2005). Despite or perhaps *because* of the donors’ continued assistance (Hickel et al., 2021), Laos remains heavily dependent on aid and after the Covid pandemic and global energy crises, is once again at risk of economic collapse, with high inflation rates (Laotian Times, 2022). Since the early 1990s, western donors have dominated the Lao development stage as far as forest governance and environmental protection are concerned, with Japan, Finland (until 2018), Sweden, Australia, and Germany as key donor countries (Broegaard et al., 2017; Norén, 2015; Ramcilovic-Suominen and Mustalahti, 2022). Alongside this environmental and nature protection agenda, China’s investments in Lao infrastructure, forestry, agriculture, etc. have grown steeply and steadily (Lu, 2020; Pang, 2017), with unprecedented socioecological consequences (Barney, 2008).

China’s involvement, while not a key element in my analysis, is important, as it provides an alternative political outlook and a leverage for Laos in negotiating international and EU-driven environmental governance instruments such as REDD+ and the EU FLEGT. It also provides a role model of economic development that does not require democracy and civil society engagement in decision making. In addition to, as well as being entangled with, the EU’s democracy, good governance, and civil society promotion, the EU development agenda in Laos focuses strongly on promoting technical capacity building using the politics of expertise to neutralise and depoliticise its otherwise highly political and strategic interest backed agenda (Broegaard et al., 2017; Lewis and Bulkan, 2022; Ferguson, 1994; Kurki 2011b; Li, 2007).

1.3. The FLEGT VPA kick-off in Laos: donors’ role, bureaucracy, and the multistakeholder process

In 2010, the Lao officials from the *Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)* and the *Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MOIC)* sent a letter of interest to the EU to join the FLEGT VPA, followed by another letter of interest two years later, which was signed by representatives of an additional ministry (the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, MONRE). Despite Laos being the first to show interest in the FLEGT VPA, it would take five years until the government formally acknowledged the start of the VPA negotiation (GoL 2015). This ‘in-between’ period of five years was efficiently used by the EU donor and development partners from the EU member states, especially Germany.

In 2013, the German government committed to technical assistance to Laos worth EUR 5.8 million for the VPA negotiation process for a period of five years. The project was administered through the German Agency for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ). Despite the fading interest and support for the FLEGT VPA in the EC after the *Fitness Check of the EU Timber Regulation and the FLEGT Regulation* (Birchby et al., 2021), and in light of the EU’s then emerging new deforestation regulation, which was in the pipeline as the first five years of VPA support were coming to an end, the German government extended the support for the FLEGT VPA process with an additional EUR 1.5 million for the 2019–2022 period, and later incorporated the work on the VPA in an extended EUR 8 million project called Protection and Sustainable Use of Forest Ecosystems and Biodiversity (ProFEB) (Vientiane Times 2021a). This was followed by an additional EUR 20 million for forest law enforcement and trade, of which the Lao government is contributing the equivalent of EUR 4 million as non-cash benefits between 2021 and 2026 (Vientiane Times 2021b). These figures are based on secondary data and the grey literature and their purpose is only to show Germany’s continued commitment to the FLEGT VPA process in Laos.

The EU FLEGT VPA is a demanding and complex process, requiring technical capacities and knowledge related to traceability and timber legality assurance system, as well as institutional, policy, and legal reforms. These technology- and capacity-oriented features serve as the anti-politics machine of the VPA, reproducing the discourse of weak domestic capacities and the consequent need for training and capacity-

building programmes. It also requires a complex institutional infrastructure of the VPA itself, which has increased the existing bureaucracy in the Lao forestry sector. The VPA infrastructure adds layers of hierarchy in the form of committees and various expert groups, including the following: i. the National Steering Committee; ii. the FLEGT Standing office; iii. the Negotiation Team and Negotiation Support and Development Committee; iv. the FLEGT VPA Supporting Task Force; v. Technical Working Groups; and vi. Thematic Expert Groups. The same or a very similar structure is also established at the provincial level in the so-called FLEGT ‘pilot provinces’.

In addition, and as mentioned above, the VPA agenda also requires a multistakeholder process, increased transparency, civil society participation, and social safeguards, and includes poverty alleviation aspirations (EC 2003; FERN 2019b). In Laos, the social safeguards, including support for smallholders, ensuring local livelihoods, and poverty alleviation, have in practice lagged behind the technical aspects of the VPA, as discussed in section 3. This is despite the interest of organisations such as the WWF and Village Focus International (VFI) in promoting social safeguards. The dedicated FLEGT Laos webpage (<https://flegtlaos.com/>) documenting the process since 2012 contains only a handful of documents focusing on local livelihoods, compared to an endless list of documents related to establishing the multistakeholder process, capacity building, and the training of civil society in the VPA (see also section 3).

Some scholars have praised the VPA’s multistakeholder process and transparency, especially in Ghana (Beeko and Arts, 2010; Bollen and Ozinga, 2013; Owusu, 2009). Others have argued that the VPA has failed to challenge the unequal rights to land and resources, as well as unequal power relations (Lewis and Bulkan, 2022), leading to further marginalisation of small-scale actors and communities (Setyowati and McDermott, 2017; Lesnewska et al. 2104; Rutt et al. 2018; Wodschow et al., 2016). In this paper, I approach the multistakeholder process as a governing technology that helps govern the subjects, prompting them to accept the policy problems, solutions, and logics, truths, and values promoted in the VPA, at the expense of making other problems, solutions, ideas, and truths invisible and therefore irrelevant. In Laos, the multistakeholder process involves representatives from eight ministries and provincial governments from three FLEGT ‘pilot provinces’, the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (representing the legal timber industry), ‘mass organisations’ (i.e. various unions forming part of the state apparatus), and Lao civil society. Forest communities and local people are supposed to be represented by civil society, while small-scale and largely informally operating timber businesses are not directly represented (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2021; Setyowati and McDermott, 2017).

2. Governing at a distance: rendering technical and the neoliberal governmentality

Governmentality is a central Foucauldian concept that has found extensive application in the environmental and forest policy and governance field, with contributions rising steeply in recent decades (Fletcher, 2017). The Foucauldian notion of power is at the core of the concept of governmentality. Foucault conceptualised power as capillary, relational, and productive. He saw power as operating not only through coercion, discipline, and law (disciplinary and sovereign power) but through practices of freedom and technologies of the self (i.e. power as government and power as freedom) (Foucault, 1990, 2008). This diffused, horizontal, decentralised, and omnipresent idea of power underpins the concept of governmentality, or code of conduct, which describes a new ‘art of governing’.

Governmentality has been explored in significant detail by ‘Foucault scholars’ (e.g. Rose, 1999; Rose et al., 2006; Dean, 2010; Fletcher, 2010, 2017). It is important to highlight that Foucault engaged this concept differently at different stages of his work, resulting in the concept being differently framed in the literature. Some conceptualise

governmentality in relation to Foucault’s three forms of power – discipline, sovereign, and government (derived from Foucault’s previously published essay, which was extracted from a lecture series Foucault gave at the College of France in 1977). In this case, governmentality is understood as a specific mode of governing and a ‘face of power’ different from and opposed to the disciplinary and sovereign faces of power. Drawing on the later published work ‘*Birth of Biopolitics*’, based, however, on the same lecture series by Foucault at the College of France in 1977, scholars have framed governmentality more generally, broadly, and abstractly. As Fletcher (2010:173, quoting Sennellart, 2018) explains, the concept was initially linked to a ‘*a precise historically determinant sense*’, but informed by further translations of Foucault’s work has since evolved into a more general and abstract meaning concerning the logics and mentalities of governing the population.

In this paper, I draw on this more recent literature on governmentality as a more inclusive concept in which the different faces of power (sovereign, discipline, and government) are not opposed to one another but represent different government modalities or mentalities, and hence governmentality (Foucault, 2008). Governmentality is therefore seen as a broad concept, constituted by different strategies for directing the conduct of conduct (i.e. the governing of the population). These strategies represent different governmentalities, including disciplinary, sovereign, neoliberal, and governmentality according to truth (Fletcher, 2010, 2017). Over the last many decades, governmentality has been widely applied in the environmental policy context (Derous and De Roeck, 2018; Fletcher, 2010; Hjort, 2020; Rose, 1999) and used in a wide range of issues, from the critique of neoliberal conservation (e.g. Büscher et al., 2012; McGregor et al., 2015) to forest governance and management (Agrawal, 2005; Fletcher, 2010, 2017).

Unlike the literature on environmental governance that has drawn extensively on Foucault’s governmentality over decades, the field of study that only recently begins to engage governmentality as heuristic is EU external relations (DeRous and De Roeck, 2018; Kurki 2011a; Müller, 2020). Moreover, unlike in environmental governance, in which the governmentality lens is mainly used to explore the interactions between local people and the dominant governing power (domestic or international), in the EU external relations literature, governmentality is used at the transnational level. This is predominantly for the analysis of interactions between states in more traditional policy domains such as security, border control, and democracy reforms but more recently also in the environmental domain (Death, 2015).

The EU external relations literature draws extensively on neoliberal governmentality (Derous and De Roeck, 2018) and the will to improve. Kurki (2011a,b) argues that the EU’s promotion of democracy through civil society facilitates neoliberal governmentality and supports a particular vision of freedom and a good life. However, as she highlights, Foucault’s reading of neoliberal governmentality sees ‘*civil society (...) as something fundamentally tied to the production of liberal governmentality and economic rationality*’ (Kurki 2011b:354). A significant share of the EU external relations literature that applies the governmentality framework is concerned with the EU’s promotion of democracy and civil society as a form of (neoliberal) governmentality, thereby linking democracy and neoliberalism (Malmwig 2012, 2014; Kurki 2011a) but also democracy and technocracy (Kurki 2011b; Radaelli, 1999).

In the EU international relations context, governmentality is commonly approached as ‘governing at a distance’ (Joseph, 2009), which is enabled through (i) neoliberal governmentality (Kurki 2011a, b) and (ii) ‘rendering technical’ (Li, 2007). Tania Murray Li’s work on the will to improve shows how the two technologies mutually support one another. *Neoliberal governmentality*, or governmentality through freedom and soft power, uses techniques and logics that are presented as being of self-interest for the governed population (e.g. democracy, human rights). As Fletcher (2017) and Kurki (2011a,b) also argue, neoliberal governmentality is not about liberating markets and businesses but about setting up guidelines, standards, and models of behaviour to produce free subjects that eventually on their own and

voluntarily conform to a particular kind or vision of freedom (Kurki 2011b:352). The market, enterprise, and economic rationality, while not central, are present in the bigger picture of neoliberal governmentality. The market is seen as a central component of freedom in which free individuals think within economic rationality. Neoliberal governmentality defines and encourages the right ways of being free (Kurki 2011a,b). The key mode of the production of freedom in neoliberal governmentality is the creation of expertise and the entrepreneurial self through capacity building and training for producing human capital. Civil society plays a key role in neoliberal governmentality. A highly skilled, responsibility-taking, independent, and self-governed civil society that can keep the state in check is the kind that is promoted in neoliberal governmentality (Kurki 2011a,b; Li, 2011) and EU environmental governance and trade more broadly (Orbie et al., 2016).

It is here where rendering technical as a governing technology (Foucault, 2007,2008; Rose, 1999; Li, 2007,2011) becomes relevant. *Rendering technical* refers to building and confirming expertise that is non-political, and that does not deal with political questions (Kurki 2011a,b; Li, 2007,2011). Producing experts in certain fields (e.g. timber legality) through training and capacity building is a central component of anti-politics and rendering technical. Civil society often becomes a domain of expertise (Li, 2011; Rose, 1999). As Li (2011:103) states: *‘The deficit of civil society (...) has to be rectified. Civil society became a thing to be designed and promoted, “grown from ‘the outside’”’* (Howell and Pearce, 2000: 78), *‘a project to be accomplished by training and capacity building’*. Rendering technical is further pursued through tasking the new experts (CSOs in this case) to work on issues that are highly political yet framed as technical. For example, this can happen by dislocating the focus from the root causes of symptoms in the problematisation process (e.g. instead of questioning the source of climate change or poverty, the focus is on finding ways to mitigate these symptoms) or by reproducing technical, complex, and bureaucratic measures and procedures such as monitoring, mapping, taxonomy, classifications, and traceability (e.g. of timber legality and/or gas emissions), etc. (Li, 2011; Rose, 1999).

As other studies have also shown, the FLEGT VPA makes use of all these technologies (Deraus, 2019; Hansen 2022; Lewis and Bulkan, 2022; Verhaeghe, 2021). These scholars suggest that illegal logging, timber legality, and even forest communities’ rights and landownership have all been rendered technical in various VPAs. Yet what about civil society and democracy promotion – an explicitly political concept and ideology that is opposed to technocracy? As Fischer (1990) argues, technocracy requires minimal democracy and openness. Whether such strictly political phenomena can also be rendered technical is a question to which I return in section 4.

2.1. Counter-conduct as sly resistance that challenges some but co-constructs other governing mentalities

Deraus and De Roeck (2018) argue that while governmentality is well equipped to analyse the international and EU’s governance approaches from a top-down perspective (i.e. from the EU to the local scale), it is less optimal for a bottom-up (local perspective) analysis of EU interventions, without which policy effects and policy discourse analysis are incomplete. To analyse local complexities and power relations and their influence on the supra level (the dominant power and policies they enact), more recently, and to a much lesser extent than with governmentality, scholars have used Foucault’s notion of counter-conduct (Death, 2010; Hjort, 2020).

Counter-conduct is understood as ‘the will *not* to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price’ (Foucault, 2007:75). Hence, it is not a straightforward resistance but a sly defiance towards the dominant or promoted form of power. It is a form of resistance that is not entirely and/or visibly opposed to that power. As Death (2010:236) in his analytics of protest puts it, ‘protest and government are mutually constitutive, (...) resistance has the potential to reinforce and bolster, as well as *and at the same time as*, undermining and challenging dominant forms of

global governance’ (original emphasis). Unlike a clear and visible protest against promoted governing mentalities, counter-conducts are also subtle, indirect, and hidden forms of resistance and attempts to subvert a specific set of others’ directions (Death, 2010; Odysseos et al., 2016). They emerge as a response to a particular way of being governed and set of actors or principles rather than to or against the dominant governmentality at play, and often lead to reinforcing some aspects of the opposed mentality (see Deraus, 2019). This is why Death (2010) explains conduct of conduct (i.e. governmentality) and counter-conduct as often mutually supporting one another.

Odysseos (2011:440) also explains that ‘counter-conduct does not necessarily require a rejection of government in general’, and that by resisting, subjects are an intimate part of the interplay between the art of governing and practices of resistance – as originally theorised by Death (2010). It therefore follows that while challenging the dominant forms of power and knowledges, mentalities, and truths, counter-conduct does not necessarily result in new forms of knowledge, logics, or relationalities but may in part reproduce specific aspects, knowledge, and mentalities of the dominant form of governance (Malmvig, 2014), which is precisely the case observed in this study. In Karl Death’s words, ‘Protests both disrupt and reinforce the status quo, at the same time’ (Death 2010:235).

Both bodies of literature of interest here – the environmental governance and the EU external relations – engage counter-conduct to analyse resistance, protest, or dissent. The former commonly engages the concept to analyse citizens’ and local people’s counter-conduct towards external actors, which may include either domestic or international actors and their interventions. With few exceptions (e.g. Death, 2015; Hjort, 2020; Odysseos et al., 2016), in the environmental governance literature this engagement remains at the nation-state level (Arifi and Winkel 2020; Astuti and McGregor 2017; Asiyani et al., 2019; Benjaminsen, 2014; Nepomuceno et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the EU external relations literature applies the concept of counter-conduct to analyse bilateral relations, but mostly for more traditional international relations domains like security (İşleyen, 2015; Juncos, 2017) or democratic reforms (Malmvig, H. 2014). In this sense using counter conduct to study EU external relations within the forest governance is rather novel (see Deraus and De Roeck, 2018).

The analysis of counter-conduct complements the analysis of governmentality and various governing techniques by illuminating the complex interplay between the dominant power and counter-conduct strategies and responses to this power, and how the two shape and co-construct one another. I use the counter-conduct lens to analyse how Lao state actors respond to the EU’s anti-deforestation policy agenda and in particular, to the demand for civil society participation, in the bilaterally negotiated and implemented FLEGT VPA process, and thus respond to calls for using counter-conduct in international and bilateral environmental governance regimes (Deraus and De Roeck, 2018).

3. How the EU’s and Lao state’s governmentality coupled with the Lao state’s counter-conduct subverted the VPA’s democratising agenda

On 5 August 2015, invited by the Department of Forest Inspection (DOFI) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), twenty-one participants from 19 invited Lao CSOs attended a one-day workshop, with the aim of creating the FLEGT CSO Network to represent Lao civil society in the FLEGT VPA process in Laos. GIZ and Village Focus International (VFI) organised and facilitated the workshop.

The first part of the meeting focused on a presentation by the participating CSOs, as the organisers introduced the FLEGT VPA to them. The afternoon session was reserved for the election of the FLEGT CSO Network members, for which the EU Handbook for Elections was used (Anonymous Policy Review, 2017; ICSO representative, personal communication). The organisers had prepared the criteria and Terms of Reference (ToR) for the future FLEGT CSO network members (see Annex

6 of the Anonymous Report, 2015). The participating CSOs could self-nominate their interest in building a core committee of the Network. Of the seven CSOs who self-nominated, five were elected as core committee members, while the other 14 participating CSOs became members of the Network.¹ The meeting ended with the outlining of the next steps and plans for the financial and technical support for the FLEGT CSO Network. The meeting was beyond successful, enabling what the EC representatives would later call a success story and the historic moment when Laotian civil society sat at the negotiation table with the government and donors (see EU FLEGT Facility, undated; FERN 2019b; Grlas, 2022).

The interviews offer further details of the FLEGT CSO Network creating event and shed light on who was and who was not invited and the preconditions for being invited to participate in the Network. In line with the Lao disciplinary mode of governing and the VPA's adherence to state laws, to be eligible for the Network, the CSOs had to be registered as non-profit associations (NPA). This precondition was the first step in eliminating the more experienced and more independent CSOs from the Network. Registering as an NPA became possible only six years before the FLEGT CSO Network was formed. The more experienced CSOs, which operated well before 2009, were therefore systemically excluded from the Network. To the present day, many remain registered as 'social enterprises' rather than NPAs, as this status gives them comparative freedom and independence. Fifteen of the nineteen selected CSOs were newly established organisations with three or less than three years of experience when joining the FLEGT VPA CSO Network, as per their websites that can be accessed at the Civil Society Laos website.²

Allowing only registered CSOs also meant that their operations and areas of work were defined in their ToR and included in their registration application and therefore subjected to annual approval by the government, as I elaborate in subsection 1.2. Further, in line with the latest CSO Decree No. 238, the CSOs' domains of work are limited (e.g. human rights is not among the allowed areas of work). This discriminated against more experienced candidates working independently of state CSOs joining the FLEGT CSO Network. As a respondent from an iCSO explained:

PADETC (a CSO where the activist Sombath Somphone who was abducted by police was based) is one of the few organisations that does real grassroots work and acts as what we would call a CSO in the western world. But PADETC is registered as a social enterprise, not because they are an enterprise, but because being an enterprise brings more rights and less government scrutiny.

The involvement of less experienced civil society was in favour of the Lao government, but it also facilitated a smoother process and created fewer conflicts, which was of clear interest for the VPA development partner. The state targeting of 'troublemaking' CSOs and activists was nothing new, especially after the disappearance of Sombath three years earlier, in 2012. In addition, it was about the same time as another GIZ project (CliPAD REDD + project) experienced difficulties and relocations due to, among other reasons, the involvement of CSOs without prior consultation with the government (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2019). While in this case, the government did not take any similar action, its counter-conduct worked through readjustments not of the donor's demand for civil society participation but of the kind of civil society it would include. The development partner and the Lao government settled for an agenda that satisfied everyone's interests: bringing about a disciplined civil society in the FLEGT VPA that satisfied the development partner's interest in proceeding without conflicts, and the Lao

government's interest in knowing and closely monitoring the new forest governance partner. This logic was further reinforced by the perception among the respondents who were involved in the VPA CSO building project, including the Lao CSOs themselves, that working with the government was the safest if not the only way. This quote, by a respondent who was directly involved in the CSO trainings, captures the different aspects described above:

The government and the GIZ have a clear idea about what they want CSOs to work on, and they hand them tasks and place them in this or that training. But that's the choice these CSOs have. It's that or nothing. When and if a CSO chooses to work to its own agenda, problems always occur. They become the subject of political detainment, arrest, or disappearance. Alternatively, the government may take softer measures like closing their operations by rescinding their registration (iCSO1).

Nevertheless, various Lao domestic actors (governmental and others), as well as development partners working for many decades in the country on projects other than the VPA, criticised how CSO participation was handled in the VPA process. The development partners working on other forestry-related projects argued that the VPA paid no attention to the country's specific political context, with one of them (DevP1) suggesting that the VPA was to blame for a stricter state regulation, referring to the new PM Decree on Associations (Decree No. 238). A respondent from a governmental organisation argued along similar lines, stating that: 'It's no surprise that two years after this FLEGT CSO Network was created, the prime minister introduced a decree that cut all the rights and powers of CSOs, making them the least powerful actors in the country' (Gov1).

My data is insufficient to support the argument that the demand for EU CSO participation and the VPA's extensive mandates was the main factor in bringing for the stricter new CSO legislation in Laos. Yet it clearly and unambiguously suggests that the technical nature of the FLEGT VPA had reframed the very meaning of the civil society, from a non-state to close-to-state actor, from a non-profit to service-oriented actor, and that it had weakened the legitimacy of the domestic CSOs as representatives of forest communities, as the following interview quotes indicate, and as further elaborated in subsection 3.1.

A respondent from academia argued: 'This Civil Society is not working for the interests of Lao peoples and local communities. It is working for donors' interests' (Academia 1). Dissatisfaction with the broad mandates prescribed for CSOs in the VPA was especially visible among respondents from the government. As a representative of one of the eight ministries involved in the FLEGT VPA remarked: 'They're everywhere. They're drafting the TLDs (timber legality definitions), they represent the communities, and they're meant to be independent monitors of the legality verification system. They're unfit for any of the three tasks' (Gov1). Another respondent, also from the government, stated: 'Traditionally, the CSOs were unimportant in the forestry sector in Laos, but FLEGT gives them too much of a mandate. So we need to monitor them, not only train them, and assess their work in the communities' (Gov2). In summary, this demand for democracy has backfired in more than one way, including stricter state control and further scrutiny of CSOs.

The restrictive nature of CSOs and the Lao government opposition to the open and unmonitored participation of CSOs is also evident in the limited number of CSOs that were invited to and (s)elected for the FLEGT Network, comprised of only 19 CSOs, compared to 65 CSOs in the VPA in neighbouring Thailand (Lewis and Bulkan, 2022), for example.

3.1. The VPA rendering technical and the Lao counter-conduct ensured governmental support for CSO participation but reinvented civil society as donor-driven unpaid service providers for the state

Considering the lack of experience of the (s)elected FLEGT CSO Network members, a key challenge and top priority for the VPA development partner was to transform the Network into experts in timber legality, legality assurance, and the verification system. The technical

¹ During my fieldwork and the Report for the Meeting for Lao CSO formation (<https://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/900-English.pdf>, 19 CSO are mentioned, while some of the more recent reports mention 20 CSOs.

² Civil Society Laos, all Lao CSOs in one place <https://www.laocivilsociety.org/en/#>.

capacity building and training of the CSOs in timber legality, traceability, and an independent monitoring system, as well as in representing forest communities, started immediately and was funded by the EU. Writing in 2019, the EU-supported international NGO, FERN states: *‘To overcome this (lack of capacity), Lao CSOs have had to go through a transformative capacity change and acquire not only technical knowledge, but confidence’, (and that) ‘there is now a young generation of CSOs’, (and that) ‘it is crucial that the CSOs have access to funds to allow them to dedicate more time to FLEGT’* (FERN 2019). Rendering technical in the VPA was an important government technology used by the donor and the donor-funded development partner alike. This technology facilitated the subversion of the VPA’s democratising agenda, that is, the rise of a civil society independent from the state, one that would keep the state in check. The technical nature of the VPA, the prescription of a concrete agenda, expertise, tasks, and the formalised way of working of the FLEGT CSO Network – as I will later describe – all enabled the Lao state to influence and monitor what the Network was working on, and how.

Following the (s)election of the CSO network members, their capacities were evaluated by the key VPA actors working on CSO capacity building, consisting of the EU-funded development partner, the state (DOFI), and international CSOs and consultants working on the VPA CSO training. This evaluation included two sets of assessment: the first was based on the CSO’s existing organisational statements and missions, while the second was based on interviews were conducted with the (s) elected CSO members. The assessment based on the CSOs’ mission statements resulted in nine areas of expertise for the CSOs, including education, gender, human and ethnic rights, health and nutrition, and sustainable agriculture and forest management. In the second evaluation, based on the interviews, only six areas of expertise were considered: occupational safety and health; export procedures; timber for village use; log landing; criteria and principles; and plantations. Gender, education, ethnic rights, health, and sustainability, which are arguably aligned with democracy and human rights objectives, were not evaluated in the interviews with these CSOs, despite being listed in their mission statements. This suggests that these areas were considered less relevant for the CSOs’ roles in the VPA than those associated with economic profit, such as export procedures, timber for village use, log landing, criteria and principles, and plantations. Once the thematic domain for each CSO was mutually agreed, their training in the specific themes or set of themes commenced. Eight years after the (s)election of the FLEGT CSO network, in 2023, the profiles of the CSOs members have changed to include the following new areas of expertise in addition to what the development partner referred to as the ‘traditional CSO agenda’ (i.e. nature conservation, community development, gender, livelihoods, poverty alleviation, food and agriculture): capacity building; education; career development; income generation; administration; finance; human resources, jobs, and labour; renewable energy; legality; timber wash.³

When asked about poverty alleviation and social safeguards, a respondent familiar with the CSO capacity-building programme and training said, *‘The VPA safeguards are one of the policy domains in the Pro-FLEGT project. But the CSOs are trained in the technical sides of the VPA, such as legality, timber trade, traceability, independent audience, policy, and legal review’* (iCSO1). Another respondent working closely within the donor-funded FLEGT project reported that *‘at first, when we ask them what they’d like to work on, they talked about livelihoods and communities – you know, those kinds of things. They were completely unaware of things relevant in the VPA like timber legality, traceability, and so on’* (personal

communication from donor-funded development partner working on the FLEGT VPA). Accordingly, each of the 19 Network’s members were given predefined roles and responsibilities in line with their areas of expertise, promoting a consultancy culture among the CSOs. As the member of the FLEGT CSO Network explained: *‘Each of us in the Lao CSO network is given a topic to work on. We’re trained in that topic, and we’re invited to meetings that concern that specific topic’* (LCSO2).

This planned and guided process obstructed the open, voluntary, ad-hoc, and evolving character of civil society engagement, and the decision to work on issues they see as relevant. With this, the possibility for civil society to act as a counterbalance to dominant state power evaporated. As a respondent from an international CSO commented: *‘Today, all FLEGT structures have one CSO delegated as a civil society sector representative. It’s all very formalised and integrated into the formal VPA committees’* (iCSO1). Rendering technical is therefore visible not only in the training and expertise building but also how the CSOs and their work are organised, based on a request by the VPA development partner and the Lao government, as I explain next.

The FLEGT CSO Network is embedded in the formal FLEGT organisational structure, and they provide inputs when invited. This planned participation and clear roles and responsibilities are formally established by a ministerial decision of 2015. The formalised work, combined with the predefined field of expertise and thematic work, redefined civil society as a service provider, whose work could easily be monitored by the state, or any other VPA actor for that matter. A respondent working for an international NGO, whose mandate included VPA CSO promotion, argued that it would be best to organise CSOs as consulting agencies, not only because this was *‘a safer way to operate but also because it gives them leverage to respond to donor demands in the VPA’* (iCSO2). The same respondent continued that the FLEGT CSOs should be accompanied by a government officer or an expert from the project when going to local communities, and that the FLEGT CSO agenda should be established within rather than outside the governmental policy framework.

Hence, in this case, the Lao government’s counter conduct towards the independent work of civil society reproduced the originally promoted mentality, i.e. civil society participation, but it enabled a particular type of civil society – one whose activities were easily monitored, and one that was trained and tasked to work within specific VPA-related issues. The Lao government, instead of fully resisting the idea of civil society participation promoted by the EU, therefore used the EU’s own rendering technical approach dominant in the VPA to navigate the situation and subvert the idea of democracy and free civil society, while first seeming to comply with the EU’s ‘governing at a distance’ (Joseph, 2009).

While there was a significant degree of dissatisfaction with how the CSOs involvement was organised in the VPA (section 3), some actors started to appreciate the benefits that this ‘new partner’ might deliver, as this governmental respondent shows: *‘CSOs can be good partners because they have more time to get in touch with local communities. They can help us transfer our messages to local levels’* (Gov3). Several members of the FLEGT CSO Network also told how the government had begun to welcome their input, which they interpreted as the government treating them as cheap labour: *‘We still haven’t been paid, but the GoL (Government of Laos) saw we could implement their activities and started to welcome our work’* (LCSO1).

Given the above, it should not come as a surprise that the FLEGT CSO network members complained they were working for free and demanded a salary for their work on the VPA. A prominent and more vocal member of the Network explained (LCSO3):

People work for the government or an NGO and receive a salary for their work. Some people still think that CSOs aren’t involved much because we don’t receive money. Actually, we want to. Anyone who works wants to get rewarded. This doesn’t mean that we work because of the money, we don’t want to profit, we just need money to pay for our transport,

³ This analysis is based on the comparison of the FLEGT CSO Network members’ missions, visions and objectives as stated in the Lao CSO Directory of 2017 (available at https://interactions-laos.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/e-Directory_LAO-CSO_eng.pdf), and in the current CSO members’ websites that can be accessed from the Civil Society Laos Website: <https://www.laocivilsociety.org/en/>.

accommodation, and our meals. We don't want to make a profit from it, but everyone needs to feed themselves, right?

While in the current context this only makes sense, the long-term implication is that civil society is reinvented as an entrepreneur and service provider, assisting the government and donors to implement the VPA rather than providing a critical voice to keep the later actors in check.

4. Governmentality, technocracy, democracy, counter-conduct: Connecting the dots

It is clear from the above that exercising governmentality and soft power through rendering technical is common in the EU's global environmental governance, including in climate change (DeRoeck 2019; Hjort, 2020) and the FLEGT VPA (Derous, 2019; Lewis and Bulkan, 2022; Verhaeghe, 2021). What is more intriguing is the evidence that the EU uses technocratic discourse even when promoting explicitly political issues such as democracy, the rule of law (i.e. timber legality), and civil society (Kurki 2011a,b; Kochenov, 2007; Raik, 2004). This study shows a similar pattern in the EU's external relations within the environmental and forest governance domain. Traditionally, the technocratic discourse has been used by the EU to protect its self-proclaimed non-interfering character. However, faced with a critique of direct interference and self-interest (e.g. Rutazibwa, 2010), the EU has moved in the last decade to acknowledge its political agenda towards partner countries. The FLEGT VPA is a good example (see Kurki 2011b for other EU instruments where this is the case).

If the VPA was less open and clear about its democratising agenda, one could wrongly assume that rendering technical was only a Trojan Horse for the promotion of democracy, in which case, the self-fulfilling prophecy of 'democracy through technocracy' in the EU external relations (Kurki 2011a,b; Kochenov, 2007; Raik, 2004) would be fulfilled. In the case of the VPA, the technocratic and democratic agendas were promoted together, with a seemingly equal level of importance. Nonetheless, being implemented in an authoritarian context and in the absence of independent civil society, in combination with the Lao counter-conduct or resistance to the idea of such, VPA rendering technical obstructed democracy and facilitated an even greater scrutiny and monitoring of the CSOs by the state. This was made possible primarily by the discourse of professionalisation, the hope for a future self-reliant civil society that could secure its own funds and/or be paid for its work – thus demonstrating that rendering technical and neoliberal governmentality play alongside each other. Counter-conduct also played a role, as both the development partner and the donor knew that if they were to continue the work on the VPA in Laos, they had a few options at their disposal.

I next elaborate on how the different aspects, including governmentality, rendering technical, democracy, and counter-conduct, are linked, and what the implications are for power relations, CSOs, and democracy more broadly. Previous studies have shown how power operates through technical aspects of governance and depoliticisation (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007,2011; Rose, 1999), so much so that rendering technical and depoliticisation are considered a textbook case of governmentality in international forest governance, including the VPA (Derous, 2019; Hansen 2022; Lewis and Bulkan, 2022; Verhaeghe, 2021).

Rendering technical in promoting democracy and CSO participation led to changes in the very meaning of civil society, and to an extent also the meaning of democracy – making both about management and control rather than about participation in decision-making, freedom of speech or expression. As I show above, rather than working for the interests of society or of local forest communities, the CSOs were trained in timber legality that could support the state in the VPA implementation (see also FERN 2019b).

In addition to shedding light on how the VPA's technocratic nature

and the discourse of the importance of technical knowledge and expertise jeopardised the EU's broader agenda to establish civil society and promoted democracy in instruments such as VPAs, this study explores the complexities associated with the counter-conduct exercised by the Lao state. Being on the one hand at the receiving end of the EU governmentality (and funding), while on the other and at the same time, exercising governmentality towards the Lao CSOs, the study shows how the Lao state's responses facilitated some while obstructing other governing technologies to which they were subjected. As an actor with two distinct roles – being governed and governing others – the Lao state replicated some aspects of the dominant EU governmentality, including technical expertise and capacity building, leading them to welcome the CSOs' inputs to invited and predefined terms and roles. However, it effectively bypassed the donors' request to give any real decision-making power to the CSOs, treating them as free consulting agencies and messengers of state policies to the villages. The Lao state therefore exercised governmentality over the CSOs, while it merely simulated change by agreeing to bring the CSOs on board.

Adopting the new and significantly stricter CSO Decree (No. 238) barely two years after the FLEGT CSO Network was set up, while accepting the CSOs in the VPA, is perhaps the most visible example of counter-conduct, or sly protest, by the Lao state in relation to the EU's demand for civil society participation. This Decree ensured the CSOs would be kept in check with clearly defined ToRs and obligations to report all their activities and funding to the government. Apart from this, the Lao state operated within the boundaries of the techno-managerial VPA, which aided the Lao counter-conduct, by tasking, training, and directing the CSOs, all of which allowed the state to define and monitor the work of the VPA.

Finally, the Lao counter-conduct was also made possible thanks to the EU's and Germany-funded development partner's self-interest in continuing the VPA project in a way that is as smooth and as conflict-free as possible. The partner understood (from other projects, as well as from the intimidation and incarceration of CSO activists, as describe above) that carrying out the work with (s)electd, invited, and state-compliant civil society, was the least trouble-free way to proceed. The continuity and success of the VPA was also certainly in the interest of the other actors, including the EU as a donor, the Lao state as a beneficiary, and the newly established Lao CSO Network members, whose participation and role – even if invited and predefined – was welcomed and valued. Aside from the labour for which they demanded payment, they did not complain about their positions.

4.1. Policy recommendations with the new EUDR in focus

The policy recommendations for future global and EU environmental and forest governance are timely, considering the recent shift in the EU's anti-deforestation policy. As we witness the FLEGT VPA's exit from the EU's new regulation on deforestation and forest degradation (EUDR) (EC 2021), the study results urge for the EU's restraint in establishing competing and contradictory agendas and demands on timber supplying countries. Allowing more space and time for bilateral negotiation and reiteration in the process of designing new policies is also central: even if the EUDR is now adopted, much can still be changed in the frame of the new forestry partnerships, for example. Deliberating on which problems require attention, and which solutions are more or less suitable in each country, rather than unilaterally deciding that all countries should tackle the same problems and work through same solutions, as it has been the case so far. It is not enough to rely on stakeholder consultations and feedback from partner countries especially as the EU is not held accountable for responding and acting upon the feedback. Some

countries are already showing dissatisfaction regarding this aspect in the EUDR, calling it a ‘unilateral and top-down’ instrument, quoting a lack of bilateral deliberation with their countries.⁴

The EUDR is attempting to govern value chains for several deforestation-risky commodities by enforcing a due diligence regulation on companies and traders in the producing countries, which are classified as low, standard, or high-risk deforestation countries (EC 2021). It is refreshing to see that the EU has moved away from promoting legality as a proxy for sustainability and even democracy. With the Forestry partnerships in the EUDR remaining vaguely defined, it is also quite clear that the EUDR has shifted from attempting to influence socio-political and governance challenges, as the VPA did. Yet simply ignoring the challenges is also not an answer. For example, the exemption of financial investors in agricultural production is an obvious gap in the EUDR, as is the regulation’s weak position on human rights, land tenure, the right to Indigenous self-determination, free prior and informed consent (FPIC) (Verhaeghe and Ramcilovic-Suominen forthcoming), and finally the lack of the right to remedy for victims of land grabbing and/or land use change (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact et al., 2022).

I recommend that the ‘anti-politics machine’ in the EUDR and other similar instruments be abandoned, as well as the discourse of technical knowledge and capacity building, policy, and legal reforms, whose main goals are technical sophistication and standardisation in line with EU standards. The EUDR could instead re-politicise and open for debate some of the issues, such as who defines deforestation or forest degradation, and how these definitions affect power relations not only between the EU and the timber-producing countries, but also those within the producing countries. Similarly, it could call for deliberations regarding participation, including the questions of who demands it and for what/whose needs. Most importantly, what are the terms of participation, and who defines them? As this study shows, predefined and forced participation can backfire and lead to more rigorous state control, the lack of freedom, and the reproduction of civil society as an additional layer of bureaucracy within the state apparatus. The EUDR could also work on reducing inequalities and injustices, including those emerging from their own seemingly well-intended policy and project interventions, rather than working on mitigating effects later, as it has done thus far. If representation and tackling inequalities is genuinely on the EUDR’s agenda, local rather than EU ideas of justice and equality should be adopted (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. 2023). Similarly, the traditional authorities and local community representatives should represent local people’s interests and concerns rather than externally influenced CSOs, and representation should be on their own terms and within the institutional structures to which they are accustomed, instead of within the state institutions as the only venue for participation.

Finally, but importantly, at a time when the EU is facing various challenges at home, including the overshooting of biophysical

boundaries and growing inequality (Dabi et al., 2022), the green transition, war, and the resulting geopolitical tensions and neocolonial green grabs (Almeida et al., 2023), the shift towards the extreme right, and the rise of an authoritarian political establishment within its core, the EU may need to revisit its priorities and foci. In terms of the environment, this reconsideration includes the need to reduce its disproportional ecological footprint (Kumeh and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023). Given that the EU is one of the world’s largest consumers of natural resources and land-consuming agricultural products (Cuyper et al., 2013; EUROSTAT, 2021) and given the global biodiversity, climate, and planetary justice crises, I urge the adoption of transformative (McDermott et al., 2022, Hamilton and Ramcilovic-Suominen 2023), holistic, transdisciplinary, decolonial, and post-growth policies (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2022). This implies the abandonment of green capitalism and green neo-colonialism, as well as the embrace of ontological plurality and justice in the EU anti-deforestation policies (Verhaeghe and Ramcilovic-Suominen, forthcoming).

Funding sources

The author gratefully acknowledges the Academy of Finland Post-doctoral (no. r 285984) and Research Fellowship Grant (no. 332353) research support.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sabaheta Ramcilovic-Suominen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to the Academy of Finland for supporting her research, as well as the two research assistants and to all respondents who took part in the study.

Appendix 1. Number of respondents

Respondents by sector	Number of recorded interviews	Number of personal communications and unrecorded interviews
Academia	1	1
Civil society	9	2
Development partners	2	3
Government	7	
Total	25 interviews	

⁴ Recording of the event available: <https://www.fern.org/publications-insight/how-partnerships-complement-the-eu-deforestation-regulation-2628-1/> (accessed 23.12.2023).

References

- Agrawal, A., 2005. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Almeida, D.V., Kolinjivadi, V., Ferrando, T., Roy, B., Herrera, H., Gonçalves, M.C., Van Hecken, G., 2023. The "Greening" of Empire: The European Green Deal as the EU first agenda. *Polit. Geogr.* 105, 102925 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102925>.
- Asiyambi, A., Ogar, E., Akintoye, O.A., 2019. Complexities and surprises in local resistance to neoliberal conservation: Multiple environmentalities, technologies of the self and the poststructural geography of local engagement with REDD+. *Polit. Geogr.* 69, 128–138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.12.008>.
- Barney, K., 2008. China and the Production of Forestlands in Laos: A Political Ecology of Transnational Enclosure. In: Nevins, J., Peluso, N.L. (Eds.), *Taking Southeast Asia to Market: Commodities, Nature, and People in the Neoliberal Age*. Cornell University Press, pp. 91–107.
- Barney, K., 2013. Locating "green neoliberalism", and other forms of environmental governance in Southeast Asia. *CSEAS Newsletter* 66, 25–28.
- Barney, K. 2016. Environmental neoliberalism in Southeast Asia. In: P. Hirsch (ed.), *Handbook of the Environment in Southeast Asia*. New York: Routledge. 2016. pp. 99–114.
- Beeko, C., Arts, B., 2010. The EU-Ghana VPA: A comprehensive policy analysis of its design. *Int. For. Rev.* 12 (3), 221–230.
- Benjaminsen, G., 2014. Between Resistance and Consent: Project-Village Relationships when Introducing REDD+ in Zanzibar. *Forum for Development Studies* 41 (3), 377–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2014.961953>.
- Birchby, D., Madzharova, G., Giannelos, G., Finney, H., Dubey, J., Bougas, K., Nicholls, G., Solazzo, F., Forestier, O., Womack, L., Glaser, S., Berninger, K., Berkhout, E., Ingram, V., Arets, E., 2021. Service contract on EU policy on forest products and deforestation: Fitness Check of the EU Timber Regulation and the FLEGT Regulation [Specific Contract under Framework Contract ENV/F1/FRA/2019/0001]. *Trinomics*. <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/pdf/EUTR-FLEGT%20Fitness%20Check%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>.
- Bollen, A., Ozinga, S., 2013. Improving forest governance: A comparison of FLEGT VPAs and their impact. *FERN*.
- Broegaard, R.B., Vongvisouk, T., Mertz, O., 2017. Contradictory land use plans and policies in Laos: Tenure security and the threat of exclusion. *World Dev.* 89, 170–189.
- Büscher, B., Sullivan, S., Igoe, J., Neves, K., Brockington, D., 2012. Towards a synthesized critique of neoliberal biodiversity conservation. *Capital. Nat. Social.* 23 (2), 4–30.
- European Commission (EC) 2003. *Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT): Proposal for an EU Action Plan*. (Brussels, 2003). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52003DC0251>.
- Creak, S., Barney, K., 2018. Party-state governance and rule in Laos. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 48 (5), 693–716.
- Cuyppers, D., Geerken, T., Gorrissen, L. et al. 2013. The impact of EU consumption on deforestation: Comprehensive analysis of the impact of EU consumption on deforestation. Study funded by the European Commission, DG ENV. Contract N° 070307/2010/577031/ETU/E. Access: <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/pdf/1.%20Report%20analysis%20of%20impact.pdf>.
- Dabi, N., A. Maitland, M. Lawson, H. Stroot, A. Poidatz, and A. Khalfan, *Carbon Billionaires: The Investment Emissions of the World's Richest People*, Oxfam International, November 7, 2022.
- De Roeck, F., 2019. Governmentality and the climate-development nexus: The case of the EU Global Climate Change Alliance. *Glob. Environ. Chang.* 55, 160–167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.02.006>.
- Dean, M., 2010. *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. Sage publications, Newcastle.
- Death, C., 2010. Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian analytics of protest. *Soc. Mov. Stud.* 9 (3), 235–251.
- Death, C., 2015. Disrupting Global Governance: Protest at Environmental Conferences from 1972 to 2012. *Glob. Gov.* 21 (4), 579–598. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24526352>.
- Decree on Association (No. 115/PMO 2009). Government of Laos. Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2009.
- Decree on Associations (Decree No. 238 (No. 238/PMO 2017) Government of Laos. Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2017.
- Derous, M., De Roeck, F., 2018. On Foucault and foreign policy: The merits of governmentality for the study of EU external relations. *European Politics and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1499587>.
- Derous, M. 2019. The EU and the 'Problem' of Illegal Logging: The Case of the EU-Malaysia VPA European Foreign Affairs Review 24(3):327–348. <https://doi.org/10.54648/erf2019028>.
- EC, 2007. FLEGT briefing note 6: Voluntary Partnership Agreements. European Commission Expert Group 1–3.
- EU FLEGT Facility. 2019. VPA unpacked. <http://www.vpaunpacked.org/en/web/vpa-unpackedmultilang/vpa-unpacked>.
- EU FLEGT Facility. 2020. How a VPA promotes good forest governance | FLEGT. [Vpaunpacked.Org. https://www.vpaunpacked.org/how-a-vpa-promotes-good-forest-governance](https://www.vpaunpacked.org/how-a-vpa-promotes-good-forest-governance).
- EU FLEGT Facility. Undated. EU–Laos Voluntary Partnership Agreement <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/pdf/Laos.pdf>.
- EUROSTAT 2021. Extra-EU trade in agricultural goods. Access: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Extra-EU_trade_in_agricultural_goods#EU_trade_in_agricultural_products_surplus_of_E2.82.AC43_billion.
- Evans, G., 2002. *A Short history of Laos: The Land in Between*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Ferguson, J., 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- FERN 2019a. Forest Watch Special FLEGT VPA Update. June 2019. Deepening and expanding multi-stakeholder participation in VPAs to achieve greater impact. <https://www.fern.org/fileadmin/uploads/fern/Documents/briefing%20VPAs.pdf>.
- FERN 2019b The Laos-EU Voluntary Partnership Agreement Laos civil society takes stock. The Laos-EU VPA. Briefing Note June 2019 | Page 1 of 8.
- Fischer, F., 1990. *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise*. Sage, London.
- Fletcher, R., 2010. Neoliberal environmentalism: Towards a poststructuralist political ecology of the conservation debate. *Conserv. Soc.* 8 (3), 171–181.
- Fletcher, R., 2017. Environmentality unbound: Multiple governmentalities in environmental politics. *Geoforum* 85, 311–315.
- Foucault, M., 1990. *The History of Sexuality*. Random House, New York.
- Foucault, M., 2007. *The Politics of Truth*. Trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter. Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, CA.
- Foucault, M., 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Springer, Berlin.
- Gindroz, A. 2017. Laos, the Silent Repression: A Testimony Written after Being Expelled. p. 145.
- GoL (Government of Laos) (2015) Notification No. 986/PMO.
- Glas, B. 2022. Talk given at the 'Fighting Global Deforestation: Cooperation with partner countries'. Event organised by ACES – Amsterdam Centre for European Studies. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUZQQEArXSw> (timing: 1:10–1:12).
- Hamilton, R.T.V., Ramcilovic-Suominen, S. 2023. From hegemony-reinforcing to hegemony-transcending transformations: horizons of possibility and strategies of escape. *Sustain. Sci.* 18, 737–748 (2023). doi: 10.1007/s11625-022-01257-1.
- Hickel, J., Sullivan, D., Zoomkawala, H., 2021. Plunder in the Post-Colonial Era: Quantifying Drain from the Global South through Unequal Exchange, 1960–2018. *New Political Economy* 26 (6), 1030–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2021.1899153>.
- Hiedänpää, J., Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Salo, M., et al. 2022. The varieties of neoliberalism: Land use institutions in Chile, Finland, and Laos. *Forest Policy and Economics* 142(2). Under Review in *Forest Policy and Economics*.
- Hirsch, P., Woods, K., Scurrah, N., & Dwyer, M. (eds). 2022. *Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region (Culture, Place, and Nature)*. University of Washington Press. 264 pages.
- Hjort, M., 2020. Who should be governed to reduce deforestation and how? Multiple governmentalities at the REDD+ negotiations. *Environment and Planning c: Politics and Space* 38 (1), 134–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419837298>.
- Howell, J., Pearce, J., 2000. *Civil Society: Technical Instrument or Social Force for Change?* In: Hulme, D., Wallace, T. (Eds.), *New Roles and Relevance: Development NGOs and the Challenge of Change*. Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, C.T.
- IFHR, International Federation for Human Rights. 2017. *New Decree on Associations Is the Last Nail in the Coffin for Civil Society*, www.fidh.org/2017/07/04/region/asia/laos/new-decree-on-associations-is-the-last-nail-in-the-coffin-for-civil/.
- Isleyen, B., 2015. *Governing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process: The European Union partnership for peace*. *Secur. Dialogue* 46 (3), 256–271.
- Joseph, J., 2009. Governmentality of What? Populations, States and International Organisations. *Glob. Soc.* 23 (4), 413–427.
- Juncos, A.E., 2017. EU security sector reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Reform or resist? *Contemporary Security Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2017.1391625>.
- Kochenov, D., 2007. EU enlargement and the failure of conditionality: pre-accession conditionality in the fields of democracy and rule of law. *Wolters Kluwer, Netherlands*.
- Kurki, M., 2011a. Governmentality and EU Democracy Promotion: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Construction of Democratic Civil Societies. *Int. Political Sociol.* 5 (4), 349–366.
- Kurki, M., 2011b. Democracy through Technocracy? Reflections on Technocratic Assumptions in EU Democracy Promotion Discourse. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 5 (2), 211–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2011.566482>.
- Laotian Times, 2022. Laos Inflation Reaches 22-year High at 23.6 Percent. By [Latsamy Phonevilay](https://www.laotiantimes.com/2022/07/04/laos-inflation-reaches-22-year-high-at-23-6-percent/), July 4, 2022 <https://www.laotiantimes.com/2022/07/04/laos-inflation-reaches-22-year-high-at-23-6-percent/>.
- Lesniewska, F., McDermott, C.L., 2014. FLEGT VPAs: Laying a pathway to sustainability via legality lessons from Ghana and Indonesia. *For. Policy Econ.* 48, 16–23.
- Lewis, S., Bulkan, J., 2022. The political logics of EU-FLEGT in Thailand's multistakeholder negotiations: hegemony and resistance. *Journal of Political Ecology*. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2398>.
- Li, T.M., 2007. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Duke University Press.
- Li, T.M., 2011. Rendering Society Technical: Government Through Community and the Ethnographic Turn at the World Bank in Indonesia. In: Mosse, D. (Ed.), *Adventures in Aidland: the Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*. Berghahn, Oxford, pp. 57–80.
- Lu, J., 2020. Grounding Chinese investment: Encounters between Chinese capital and local land politics in Laos. *Globalizations*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1796159>.
- MAF (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) 2018. Ministerial Instruction on Development of TLAS (2018).
- Malmvig, H., 2014. Free us from power: Governmentality, counter-conduct, and simulation in European democracy and reform promotion in the Arab world. *Int. Political Sociol.* 8 (3), 293–310.

- McDermott, C.L., 2014. REDDuced: From sustainability to legality to units of carbon—the search for common interests in international forest governance. *Environ. Sci. Policy* 35, 12–19.
- McDermott, C.L., Montana, J., Bennett, A., Gueiros, C., Hamilton, R., Hiron, M., Maguire-Rajpaul, V.A., Parry, E., Picot, L., 2022. Transforming land use governance: Global targets without equity miss the mark. *Environ. Policy Gov.* 33 (3), 245–257.
- McGregor, A., Challies, E., Howson, P., Astuti, R., Dixon, R., Haalboom, B., Afiff, S., 2015. Beyond carbon, more than forest? REDD+ governmentality in Indonesia. *Environment & Planning A* 47 (1), 138–155.
- Milne, S., Mahanty, S., Lamb, V., Barney, K., To, P., Ironside, J., Wells-Dang, A., Thuon, T., Hirsch, P., Chann, S., 2022. Civil society in the Mekong: What can we learn from environmental struggles? *New Mandala Blog*. <https://www.newmandala.org/civil-society-in-the-mekong-what-can-we-learn-from-environmental-struggles/>.
- Ministry of Planning and Investment, Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan VIII (2016–2020), 2015, para. 297.
- MOIC (Ministry of Industry and Commerce) 2020. Decision on Input and Output Monitoring for Wood Processors and Traders (Decision 0777/MOIC 2020).
- Müller, F., 2020. Can the subaltern protect forests? REDD+ compliance, depoliticization and Indigenous subjectivities. *Journal of Political Ecology* 27 (1), 419–435. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23198>.
- Mustalhti, I., Cramm, M., Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Teegne, Y.T., 2017. Resources and rules of the game: Participation of civil society in REDD+ and FLEGT-VPA processes in Lao PDR. *Forests* 8 (50). <https://doi.org/10.3390/f8020050>.
- Myers, R., Rutt, R.L., McDermott, C., Maryudi, A., Acheampong, E., Camargo, M., Cam, H., 2020. Imposing legality: hegemony and resistance under the EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) initiative. *Journal of Political Ecology* 27 (1), 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23208>.
- Nepomuceno, I., Affonso, H., Fraser, J.A., Torres, M., 2019. Counter-conducts and the green grab: Forest peoples' resistance to industrial resource extraction in the Saracá-Taquera National Forest, Brazilian Amazonia, *Global Environmental Change* 56, 124–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.04.004>.
- Norén, S. (ed.) 2015. Swedish forest relations with Asia and Latin America. An anthology. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Department of Forest Ecology and Management. Report 7. Umeå, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-576-9348-8, Printed by SLU Repro, Uppsala.
- Odyseos, L., 2011. Governing Dissent in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve: Development, Governmentality and Subjectification amongst Botswana's Bushmen. *Globalizations* 8 (4), 439–455.
- Odyseos, L., Death, C., Malmvig, H., 2016. Interrogating Michel Foucault's counter-conduct: Theorising the subjects and practices of resistance in global politics. *Glob. Soc.* 30, 151–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2016.1144568>.
- Orbie, J., Martens, D., Oehri, M., Van den Putte, L., 2016. Promoting sustainable development or legitimising free trade? Civil society mechanisms in EU trade agreements. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 1:4, 526–546 doi: 10.1080/23802014.2016.1294032.
- Owusu, B., 2009. The Dynamics of Multi-Stakeholder Processes in the Negotiation of Voluntary Partnership Agreement in Ghana. MSc Thesis. Wageningen University Department of Social Sciences, the Netherlands 124 p.
- Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact et al. (2022, January 27). To Stop Deforestation Uphold Land Rights. https://www.fern.org/fileadmin/uploads/fern/Documents/2022/EN_Open_Letter_-_Land_Rights_Final_.pdf.
- Pang, E., 2017. "Same-Same but Different": Laos and Cambodia's Political Embrace of China. Perspective. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. ISSN 2335-6677.
- Radaelli, C., 1999. *Technocracy in the European Union*. Longman, London.
- Raik, K., 2004. EU accession of Central and Eastern European countries: democracy and integration as conflicting logics. *East European. Politics* 18 (4), 567–594.
- Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Lovric, M., Mustalhti, I., 2019. Mapping policy actor networks and their interests in the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement in Lao PDR. *World Dev.* 118, 128–148.
- Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Mustalhti, I., 2022. Village forestry under donor-driven forestry interventions in Laos. In: Bulkan, I.J., Palmer, J., Larson, A.M., Holey, M. (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Community Forestry*, 1st ed. Routledge, pp. 434–448. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367488710-33>.
- Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Kröger, M., Dressler, W., 2022. From Pro-Growth and Planetary Limits to Degrowth and Decoloniality: An Emerging Bioeconomy Policy and Research Agenda. *Forest Policy Econ.* 144, 102819.
- Ramcilovic-Suominen, S., Chomba, S., Larson, A.M., Sinclair, F., 2023. Decolonial environmental justice in landscape restoration. In: Katila, P., Colfer, C.J.P., de Jong, W., Galloway, G., Pacheco, P., Winkler, G. (Eds.), *Restoring Forests for Sustainable Development: Policies, Practices and Impacts*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Anonymous Report. 2015. Meeting for Lao CSO FLEGT Formation and Representatives' Selection for FLEGT VPA Process. <https://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/900-English.pdf>.
- Anonymous Policy Review. 2017. Policy Review of CSO Engagement in the FLEGT Initiative in Lao PDR. December 2017. 13p.
- Rose, N., 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Rose, N., O'Malley, P., Valverde, M., 2006. Governmentality. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2 (1), 83–104.
- Rutazibwa, O.U., 2010. The Problematics of the EU's Ethical (Self)Image in Africa: The EU as an 'Ethical Intervener' and the 2007 Joint Africa–EU Strategy. *J. Contemp. Eur. Stud.* 18 (2), 209–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2010.486976>.
- Sennellart, M., 2018. Course context. In: Davidson, A. (Ed.), *Security, Territory and Population*. New York, Picador, pp. 369–391.
- Setyowati, A., McDermott, C.L., 2017. Commodifying legality? Who and what counts as legal in the Indonesian wood trade. *Soc. Nat. Resour.* 30 (6), 750–764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2016.1239295>.
- Sims, K., 2017. More growth, less freedom? Charting development pathways in Lao PDR. Chapter 7. In: B. Howe (ed.), *National Security, Statecentricity, and Governance in East Asia. Security, Development and Human Rights in East Asia*. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-58974-9_7.
- Stuart-Fox, M., 1997. *A History of Laos*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Stuart-Fox, M., 2005. Politics and reform in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Working Paper No. 126, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.
- Verhaeghe, E., 2021. The (Post)Politicisation of Timber Trade: (Un)Invited Participation in the EU-Vietnam Voluntary Partnership Agreement. *Forest Policy Econ.* 129 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102487>.
- Verhaeghe, E., Ramcilovic-Suominen. Transformation or more of the same? Assessing the EU's anti-deforestation agenda through a radical transformations lens. *Forthcoming in Environmental Science and Policy*.
- Vientiane times 2021b) https://vientianetimes.org.la/freeContent/FreeContent_Germany_32.php (access. 20.9.2022).
- Vientiane Times 2021a. Laos, Germany extend cooperation on biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of forests. https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freeContent/FreeContent_LaosGermany227.php (access. 20.9.2022).
- von Lucke, F., Diez, T., Aamodt, S., Ahrens, B., 2021. *The EU and global climate justice: normative power caught in normative battles*. Routledge.
- Wodschow, A., Nathan, I., Cerutti, P., 2016. *Participation, public policy-making, and legitimacy in the EU Voluntary Partnership Agreement process: The Cameroon case*. *For. Policy Econ.* 63, 1–10.
- Yamada, N., 2018. Legitimation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party: Socialism, Chintanakan Mai (New Thinking) and Reform. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48 (5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1439081>.

Further reading

- Forestry Legality Compendium 2015. Department of Forestry Inspection (DOFI) and Department of Forestry (DOF). Supported by FAO/World Bank Cooperative Programme GIZ/Pro-FLEGT VPA Support Programme SUFORD – SU Project (DOF – Finland/World Bank). Compiled by: Hilary Smith Oupakone Alounsavath.