

2 Engaged research uncovers the grey areas and trade-offs in climate justice

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Introduction

The story of Cambodia's deforestation is unironically also the story of Cambodia's development. After 30 years of war, the country emerged from communist rule with abundant forests covering 73% of the country. These resources quickly became key players in Cambodia's state formation activities. In 1996, International advisors confidently declared forest exploitation to be Cambodia's best option to support their fledgling democracy, and they promoted Forest Concessions as a first step toward transition to a market economy (World Bank, UNDP, and FAO 1996). This move legitimized controversial practices within existing forest exploitation chains, through which political factions financed their earlier war efforts and secured newly democratized power to the exclusionary practices of market capitalism (LeBillon 2000). By 2005, the rapacious effects of this policy were already visible, and international brokers attempted to institute some guidelines and regulations to take stock of forest resources (WB 2005). These state-making forest policies had dramatic effects on rural and indigenous communities across the country, and by 2019 forest cover had fallen to under 40% and continue to decrease dramatically today (Mongabay 2020).

The socialist years were not quiet in Cambodia's forests, marked as they were by warring factions, but forest communities in all parts of the country mark the "transition" to Forest Concessions as a whole new kind of violence. Both Khmer and Kuy People's traditional relationship to ancient trees, and especially their respect and unwillingness to cut them, began to change as international loggers, miners, agricultural concessionaires, and national elites claimed rights to these resources (Keating 2012; Swift 2013; Work 2018). The aggressive speed of this transition thrust people into new, often violent, land and resource regimes (Forum 2008; PLCN 2014; Vrieze and Naren 2012). In response, communities organized and fought back against the appropriation of forests and farm lands (Nimol 2012; Phak 2015, 2016). The Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) waged a long-lasting

and politically engaged campaign against deforestation and unsustainable development. The Prey Lang forest is the largest contiguous lowland forest remaining in mainland Southeast Asia, a biodiversity “hotspot,” and an important watershed (Hayes et al. 2015; Work et al. 2019).

As development and deforestation continue today, localized climate change effects have become palpable, as have the effects of development projects designed to mitigate them. For people living in and around the Prey Lang forest in Cambodia, the heat, floods, drought, and storms only exacerbate the effects of forest restoration, conservation, and plantations for sugar cane and rubber (Scheidel and Work 2018; Work and Thuon 2017). In Cambodia, the emerging strength of authoritarian capitalism embraces resource extraction, intensifying its effects while constraining spaces for collective action (Beban et al. 2019). Research initiatives that include local partnerships often highlight ‘grey areas’ within this process (Franco and Borrás 2019), for example, in-migration in advance of a protected area boundary or luxury timber extraction outside concession boundaries. The complicated discourses surrounding climate politics make spaces where social justice emerges and is thwarted within the everyday experiences of situated advocates and locally affected researchers. This chapter explores how the interface between local resource users, justice advocates, and academic researchers was integral to illuminating the less obvious and sometimes intentionally hidden processes divesting users from resources in the context of climate politics.

Data collection for this chapter began in 2014, and is ongoing through a series of collaborative and independent engaged fieldwork-based projects focused on climate change politics, traditional practices, and economic development. The following pages will first describe climate politics in Cambodia and in the Prey Lang region, and then outline the land and resource losses directly associated with these projects as well as those in excess of them. This is followed by a description of the kinds of collaborative research activities that emerged out of this situation, and concludes with a discussion of the changing political landscape and the shades of grey in which continued climate injustice emerges.

Attending to both the possibilities and pitfalls of collaborative research agendas (Hunsberger et al. 2017; Moxley et al. 2017; Scheidel et al. 2017), this research demonstrates the shifting power relationships between local communities and elite policy makers, and how existing tensions between local resource users increased. Local tensions erupt at the collision of livelihoods and climate justice, of development and conservation, which is also at the heart of global ecological concerns. It is all interconnected, and the symbiosis between academic and grassroots systems of knowledge is growing in importance. As incidents of climate injustice begin to cross traditional boundaries of race, class, and gender, it will be important to continue these conversations.

Climate change politics

The term climate change politics, as deployed by Franco and Borras (2019), refers to the collection of policies, activities, narratives, norms, projects, and other social processes that “set and shape the meanings of climate change, its causes and consequences, how it can be addressed, by whom, where and when” (192). The intervention here is to point to the ways that climate change initiatives, like REDD+ or forest restoration may be the most visible, but they are not the only projects associated with climate change. In fact, in both discourse and practice, all development projects are increasingly folded into the politics of climate change, adaptation to it, resiliency within it, or mitigation of it (Work 2019; Work et al. 2019). This means that the enactment of development in any form is inextricable from issues of climate justice, which mirrors the concerns of agrarian climate justice invoked by Franco and Borras (2019). Issues of development and livelihoods that define agrarian justice, like farming and swiddens, plantation wage labor, fishing, and hunting, are fundamentally based in the land and the water, and as such are inextricable from the concerns within climate justice of clean water, living soils, hospitable climates, and healthy biospheres.

This makes it necessary to acknowledge the problem of “trade-offs” within the discourses of climate justice. Farmers still need to make a living and may have become newly dependent on the forest restoration project currently clearing their resin trees and swidden forests or may be entangled in a spiral of bank debt and illegal logging. This issue of agrarian justice and rural development sits at the heart of community fracture, which will be revisited in the paper’s final section. To understand Cambodia’s trade-offs and the configuration of climate politics in which engaged research operated, it will be useful to give a brief introduction to the development trajectory that brought Cambodia below 40% forest cover in 2019.

During the first wave of Forest Concessions (FC), local villagers were shocked at the quantity and quality of forest resources exploited by concessionaires. The companies had no fear of felling trees well known as vectors of elemental energies that flowed from the invisible lords of the water and the land. The massive influx of entrepreneurs swept many villagers, and especially former soldiers, into the work of transforming trees into cash. The earliest locally organized protests were in response to the FC, and their collective voices helped to reform them (Ashwell et al. 2004; McKinney 2003). After the detrimental effects of attempts to turn forest resources into capital that would support the national government, FC were forced to give way to Economic Land Concessions (ELC). More bounded and contained, they should have been easier to collect taxes from, and were awarded to local and international investors, who cleared forests for rubber, sugar cane, and other industrial crops.

It was with the ELC that local people felt the most dramatic changes. Converting forest into plantation involves massive inputs of human capital

and machines, which completely transformed the forest landscape. It also brought entirely new objectives, practices, and people into the lives of shifting cultivators, sparking protests and international outrage (Dararath et al. 2011; GW 2007). Because part of the objective was to create jobs for people, these dramatic changes often consumed forests close to where people lived, and this included rice fields, but especially fallow swidden forest lands used for shifting cultivation. It was in this context that people felt the changing value of land and resources, and the ways that their own security and their ancestral claims to land had no value in the new land regime. Concessionaires were the only resource users that held legitimate claims to land use, but the issues went beyond resource distribution and the real concerns were about recognition and having a voice in decision-making (Martin et al. 2016).

Prey Lang was a production forest until 2016, and before ELC reform in 2012, over 130,000 hectares of rubber, timber, and sugar cane plantations were awarded in the forest. These are all deeply implicated in contemporary climate politics, for example, rubber plantations are counted by the REDD+ program as forest cover (Khun and Sasaki 2014; MoE 2018), sugar cane as a flex crop is part of the global biofuel production system (McKay et al. 2016), and forest restoration projects are in direct response to the problem of forest degradation. After years of protest and advocacy to protect Prey Lang, the forest was transferred to the Ministry of Environment (MoE) in 2016. Since its designation as a protected area, conservation projects, which are increasingly a vehicle for REDD+ implementation (CI 2020), are using this mechanism to try to secure financing for Prey Lang conservation. Conservation projects, in conjunction with the MoE, are also promoting settled agriculture over swidden practice, the development of eco-tourism, and are attempting to institute landscape-level forest management systems. The last of these is premised on the same set of contradictions and trade-offs that ground agrarian climate justice.

Finding justice in climate change politics means grappling with the seeming incompatibility of market extraction and conservative resource use as well as understanding the multiple informal and micro-scale activities that are always going on within a given landscape. In Prey Lang, these include, but are not limited to, swidden and rice farming, elite land speculation, informal timber trading, timber extraction for building homes, illegal corporate logging, micro-finance loans, commodity cash cropping, sending children to school, paying for medical treatment, and the appropriation of charismatic community leaders, all of which become part of the climate politics in which climate justice is negotiated.

Grey areas – phase one

When rubber ELC first moved into the forest between 2007 and 2010, people quickly realized that the companies would exploit all the forest resources

in the area, even beyond their concession boundaries. Local residents panicked and report clearing their own community forests. “If we didn’t clear it, the company would have. At least we got some benefit instead of losing everything” (group discussion, Kampong Thom, July 2015). At the same time, others consciously took advantage of the changing system and the elites, indigenous, local Khmer as well as outsiders began to speculate in land, while the poor cleared community forests and felled trees for the illicit timber market driven by elite traders. Not directly the result of company activities, these are expanded effects of forest degradation and biodiversity loss.

The micro-processes of grabbing and selling in advance of being divested is one of the grey areas in which the politics of land and resource access get dramatically altered in ways that are not triggered by climate change, but by the institutional projects entangled in it. Solutions to development problems also trigger land grabs. In 2011, the prime minister announced a crackdown on ELC in which unproductive concessions would be dissolved and others would be reduced in size (Grimsditch and Schoenberger 2015). In Prey Lang, this act led to the hasty implementation of nearly 80,000 hectares in sugar cane and a forest restoration project. The latter had been on the books since 2010, but the company did not begin operations until 2012 (Work 2017). Order 01, designed to curb the destruction from ELC, brought idle concessions into action, and also quickly morphed into a land titling scheme for citizens in an effort to calm the rising fears of land loss across the country (Vrieze and Naren 2012).

This titling effort did not come to most areas in Prey Lang, except in the area where the first rubber plantations landed in 2007 (Figure 2.1). When news of the titling effort in the area spread, “people came from all over, and suddenly the only thing left were the community forests and the rubber plantations. And they all got land titles, we didn’t get anything” (interview, community forest officer, February 2016; see also, Work and Beban 2016). These same community forests were grabbed for a REDD+ project two years later, which did nothing to stop elite capture and land encroachment. The only forested areas remaining in the project area are those with strong communities protecting them.

The strength of community-managed areas and respect for indigenous knowledge are important narratives in the climate politics of UN-REDD, and this influenced some of the contents of the Environmental Code MoE drafted, under which all development activities in the country would be bound. Within this code were progressive agendas, including collaborative forest management, landscape perspective conservation-development initiatives as well as frameworks for reforestation and REDD+ schemes. Recent shifts toward authoritarian capitalism impacts these progressive politics, limits the potential of rural social movements (Beban et al. 2019), and alters the dynamics of collaborations between engaged academics, local justice advocates, and grassroots activists. The following section discusses the collaborative activities and the series of openings and closings that emerged

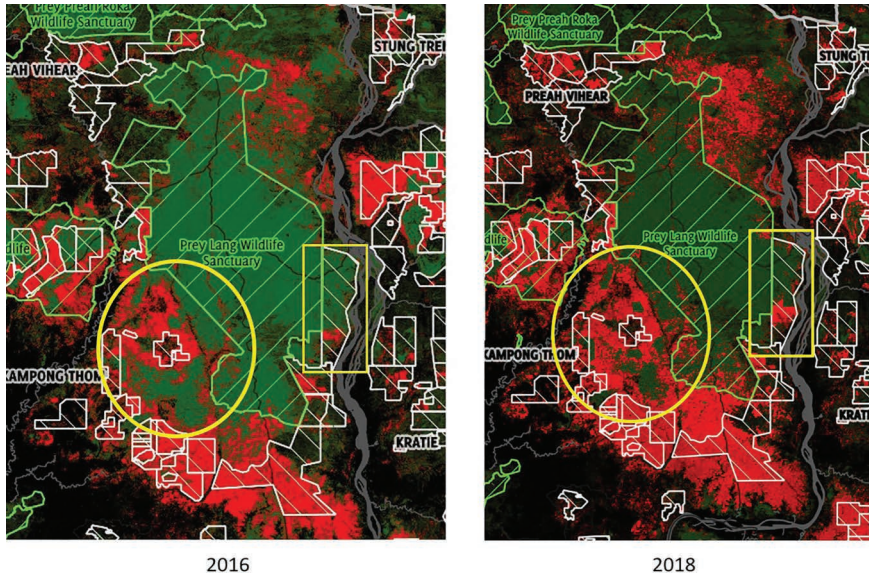


Figure 2.1 Tumring REDD+ in circled area. Green areas grabbed in 2016. By 2018 very little forest remains. Map from LICADHO https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land_concessions/.

from them, which is followed by a look at the ways advocates for agrarian climate justice are responding to the changing circumstances.

Engaged academics

Local networks of activists had organized themselves in response to company abuses and government complicity, and with the help of civil society organizations began to systematically confront both the legal ELC and the illegal trade that came in their wake. These activities did have effects and got the attention of the government as well as international advocacy organizations and researchers. While local advocacy did play a part in later changes to ELC policy, grassroots activists were vilified by the government. Protesters were arrested and network members, who began independent forest patrols, were aggressively criminalized and their activities suppressed. The most effective and long-lasting of these local forest patrol groups is the PLCN, which since the late 1990s has coordinated community volunteers across four provinces that hold parts of the massive forest.

PLCN made enemies among their neighbors who were profiting from the wood trade and local government officials, but also won awards and gained support from international forest protection organizations and academic researchers. This politically charged field was coupled with government

reforms and an infusion of training and funding from academic researchers. Two unconnected research projects started collaborations with PLCN in 2014 (Brofeldt et al. 2018; Hunsberger et al. 2017), one focused on training local activists to collect data on natural resources, food stuffs, and medicines in the forest using a specially designed smartphone app. The other project provided training in research methods to improve local advocacy efforts through effective interviewing techniques, data recording practices, drone photography, and Global Positioning System (GPS) mapping. In 2015, PLCN was awarded the UN Equator Prize for environmental protection as a result of their enhanced data collection and reporting capacity. Then, in 2016 the Prey Lang forest was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Forest Administration (FA) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, to the MoE, which finalized protected area status for the forest (see Work and Thuon 2017, for details of the transition).

This was not without contest, as the area had been proposed as a protected area for some time, and local resource users were actively contesting the contents of the policy through which they would lose rights of access to forest resources and swidden lands. Once the protected area sub-decree was finally signed, some concessions were made about swidden and forest access, with promises for more discussion. The confluence of these events sparked dialectical changes in forest education and governance for the new teams of MoE rangers, the local activists, and academics.

The project using a smartphone app, run by researchers at the University of Copenhagen, was an ethnobotany initiative to record forest resources. This was instantly transformed by local activists, who by that time had learned a lot about managing externally conceived projects for their own benefit. The original smartphone app needed immediate alteration to make space for network members to record forest crimes. This was a powerful addition, and with the help of graduate students managing the database, the network published a report with detailed maps and numbers of felled trees over the first year. This report was not well received by the FA, who vilified the network and defended their own position (Argyriou et al. 2015; PLCN 2014). The network stood firm on their findings and continued to collect data, and to revise the app to better capture the data and suit their needs in the forest. They added spaces to record various types of crimes, to record encounters with authorities, and features that allowed network members to have access to their collected data. None of this was perfect, but the team was engaged in the constant work of technology modifications (see Brofeldt et al. 2018, for details of this initiative).

The other academic initiative was also conceived as a participatory activity, but with no set research agenda from the academics. The project's analysis, implemented through the Regional Center for Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University and the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague, was informed by climate change policies and land grabbing, but what exactly was examined within that context was driven by local participants. This meant that when local researchers wanted to research the rush of internal

migrants grabbing land just in advance of establishing the protected area, and continuing until the present, academic and nongovernmental organization (NGO) collaborators assisted those activities. Local researchers were trained in data collection methods and in the new forest values emerging through the carbon economy and ecosystems services that are integral to climate change response scenarios. Academic and local researchers worked together to identify issues and develop research agendas, and again, academics needed to expand their ideas and initiatives to incorporate the real issues on the ground.

During this iterative process, local researchers shared detailed data from the ground, and academics shared information about climate change-related projects in their areas. In the case of the forest restoration project, for example, local people understood it as just another ELC. On the ground, it did not look any different from other violent land grabs in other places. Through desk research, academic researchers learned it was related to climate change mitigation initiatives and found maps of the project boundary and the company's development plans. Local researchers could clearly show the regions where they used specialized technologies to support their livelihoods through swidden, hunting, trapping, and tapping resin trees, and their literacy of the fruits and medicines freely available inside the boundaries of the forest restoration project as well as the species of luxury timber.

Local and academic researchers decided together what tools were needed to document this data, and academics procured and trained local researchers to use drone photography and GPS mapping (Figure 2.2). Through these techniques, the dense biodiverse areas were photographed and geo-tagged



Figure 2.2 Drone training in Kampong Thom. Photo by Work.

and the resin forests of local tappers were mapped. Local residents used this data to make claims against the company and the FA, who was the governing body of this controversial project.

While PLCN has hundreds of members in each province fighting against the forest exploitation, many other villagers joined in the logging trade. Authorities supported the company and encouraged residents to find jobs there, and the illegal logging that grew under the shadow of company activities was also quite lucrative. “I’d be rich like them if I were willing to sell the forest” (man in his 60s, Preah Vihear, June 2017). This causes great tensions for PLCN working in Prey Lang. While they are gaining international recognition and making visits to the embassies for the EU and the US, they are villains in the eyes of their neighbors whose livelihoods now depend on illegal logging. Villains to their neighbors and vigilantes to the authorities.

In the beginning, it was easy for the FA to dismiss community claims as lies and defamation, framing activists as criminals. However, PLCN’s enhanced research skills, data collection, and report production as well as international connections contributed to transforming the relationship between PLCN and the MoE when the forest transitioned into a protected area. When the MoE took over Prey Lang and other threatened forests across the country, it was in a spirit of forest reform to satisfy public opinion. This spirit of reform included drafts of new environmental laws that included frameworks for collaborative management of forests between locals and government. This was an uneasy collaboration from the beginning, and by mid-2018 the fault lines were becoming obvious.

With support from University of Copenhagen for smartphone technology training, data management, and report publishing, PLCN published monitoring reports every year from 2015 to 2020 showing continued forest degradation. At the same time, government and conservation organizations published reports and news articles highlighting all their successes in forest conservation and enhancing local livelihoods. After the government dissolution of the main opposing political party in advance of the 2018 elections and the increasing authoritarian climate, government agents were refusing the joint patrols with their forest protection “collaborators.”

Nonetheless, local researchers continued to gather information on forest encroachments through settlement and the ever-growing influx of migrants. Using GPS technology to map newly cleared areas in the different provinces, reports were filed with local and provincial officials to stop forest destruction. Sometimes local researchers were targeted and threatened by the complicit authorities, sometimes documents presented to the courts were lost and had to be reproduced, but on some occasions the clearing stopped and the elites involved were sanctioned. These were in the minority in an increasingly authoritarian environment.

At the end of 2018, the forest restoration concession also changed ownership from the Korean company that started the project to the new politically connected owners with a long history in Cambodia’s logging industry. Since

they took over the company, local resin tappers have faced increasing threats against their trees and their way of life. Using evidence-based data collection techniques, GPS technologies, note taking, interview strategies, drone footage, and voice recording, local researchers documented the company's activity from the first threats reported in November 2018 up to the present.

Local advocates collaborated with resin tappers and sent petitions to authorities at the local, provincial, and national levels in search of protection from the predatory tactics of the new company. Researchers gathered information related to the new owners and the legal structures under which the new company operated. They discovered that the two companies were operating from three locations across the northern portion of the protected area, in Kampong Thom (the site of a plywood company), in Preah Vihear (through partnership with another sawmill), and in Kratie (in the forest restoration plantation), each location extracting luxury woods from the protected area.

In this case, the data that researchers provided to local people caused many to give into the company's pressures. "If it were the Koreans, maybe we could make them stop, but if it's Cambodian tycoons, it's hopeless" (resin tapper, Steung Treng, June 2019). And further, the company pays a number of strong local leaders, who have started working with them to transport thousands of old-growth luxury hardwood trees through these "legal" entities into the global market. While on patrol in other parts of the forest, PLCN continued to gather evidence of the ongoing plunder of the protected area. Through collaborations with researchers, they were able to further corroborate their data using satellite imagery adding strength to their annual forest monitoring reports. Here again, the data that researchers provided caused increased tensions with officials, and MoE spokespersons even more vehemently rejected their evidence, claiming that the organization is not "legally registered" and that the PLCN's reports are "politically motivated" (Savi 2020).

In a final blow that brings us to the present moment, in February 2020, the MoE physically blocked PLCN from holding their annual tree blessing ceremony. On the day of the event, hundreds of individuals from Buddhist monks, to activists, citizens, and NGO staff were barred by MoE rangers from entering the forest for an event that had been planned in advance and fully presented to relevant authorities. According to global satellite data, over that weekend and every week since that time, especially during the weeks of isolation due to COVID-19, trees were coming down. Local researchers entered the forest in April 2020 and found hundreds of trees cut in multiple locations, lying whole, many of them quite large (Figure 2.3). They were told they were waiting to be picked up by company trucks.

In June 2020, PLCN members entered the forest again, and found a vibrant logging operation in which local people were being paid to cut during the week and store the logs in the forest until on a designated day they bring them into the company, get paid, and the company puts them on trucks and takes them off the compound.



Figure 2.3 Old tree lying dead inside the protected area during Covid-19 lockdown. Photo by Heng Sros.

Grey zone – part 2

While there were obvious incidents of climate injustice through the ELC and elements of the conservation area, there are many things that would not have been visible without a textured perspective informed by long-term local research. For example, it is easy to say that establishing the protected area is a good thing, but what local researchers reveal is the contested nature of that over time. Their access would have been restricted, but the years of forest incursions, market-crop conversions, and biodiversity loss from the first proposed sub-decree in 2009 to the final policy in 2016 changed the nature of the debate.

It was through local knowledge and the redirection of research priorities that we were able to see the way the land rush inside the forest preceded the final protected area laws. Because grassroots researchers saw when it started, we can trace this to the months when it was clear to the ministries and thus local authorities that the change would take place. And in July 2020, the prime minister announced he would award land titles for people living within the boundaries of protected areas. Only time will tell how many of these recent migrants, who have converted forest to cash crops, will receive land title and whether long-term indigenous residents will be

included in the titling. The communal land titles for indigenous communities introduced in the 2001 land law are not part of this initiative.

It is possible that some communities will take advantage of this political opportunity and demand that their languishing applications for communal land title be pushed through. Other political opportunities have been advantageous. For example, during the planning stages of the conservation initiative, PLCN was able to position itself within the negotiations. Many PLCN members became rangers for the MoE, in a move designed to get local eyes, ears, and sensibilities into ranger activities. The same was true when grassroots forest activists deployed the public declarations of the prime minister or other high-ranking officials promising to combat forest crimes and demanding collaboration across ministries and into communities.

While capitalizing on political opportunities can be critical for realizing agrarian climate justice (Franco 2008), these political structures also thwarted goals in ways that are both visible and not. Visibly, and predictably, the opportunity for PLCN to join the rangers did offer salaries to previously market-independent young men, but corruption and complicity of ministry rangers was stronger than the local voices could bear. New rangers either went with the flow, or were relegated to invisible activities, or had to quit. Collaborations with the conservation organizations have more hidden opportunities that thwart local agendas. For example, while local researchers were investigating increased deforestation and documenting company trucks and the locations of ancient tree carcasses in April, the conservation organization ran a special report on vulture preservation initiatives on their website and praised themselves for distributing patrolling equipment to community-protected areas in July. PLCN members have rejected the community-protected area model on the basis that it restricts community to small forest areas, and on that same July day local researchers were investigating new logging and plantation clearing in a different community-protected area.

The rise of a logging syndicate inside the forest restoration concession was unforeseen. Local and academic researchers did a great deal of collaborative work contesting the legitimacy of that Korean-led project. At one point, the company went quiet and all the workers were let go. The Koreans seemed to have left, and locals reported a hopeful silence. We have been unable to determine why the Koreans pulled out, but they were never able to secure an Environmental Impact Assessment because of how the loss of resin forests would affect local livelihoods, and grassroots pressure remained high throughout their operation. The new owners took a different strategy, and under cover of the old company, went directly for the resin trees inside the concession area with high bribes for local collaborators and credible threats for those who resisted.

Money from that syndicate now flows visibly into the pockets of indigenous village chiefs, influential community leaders as well as MoE rangers. Gold watches, automobiles, new houses, and new capacities to spend

thousands of dollars on medical expenses segregate those who have sided with the company from those who continue to oppose it. The ministry, like the local communities, has some actors legitimately engaged in protecting forest resources and others who are lining their pockets. There is a dark grey fault line here showing that the issue may not be the equitable *distribution* of resources, but the actual *use* of resources. To get at this issue, the inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making is just as important as the distribution of resources (Franco and Borrás 2019). It is possible that as we collectively move further away from sustainable resource uses, it will force another value shift in the face of economic necessity. Only time will tell.

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