

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

**SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES AND LAND GRABBING IN TRANSITIONING  
GOVERNMENTS: THE CASES OF LAOS AND MYANMAR**

A senior thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS

in

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

by

**Naja Steward**

June 2025

ADVISOR: Chris Benner, Environmental Studies

**ABSTRACT:** Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are geographic regulatory tools used to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) particularly in developing countries. Laos and Myanmar, two authoritarian states with weak environmental and SEZ legal legislation, use SEZs to open up their economies to accelerated capital accumulation. Laos and Myanmar give some sovereign power, long term land user rights, and other incentives to attract investors to their SEZs. Weak regulation enables extractive industries, industrial agriculture and manufacturing enterprises to commit environmental abuses, which can be exacerbated in SEZs with weak legislation. Land gained for SEZs is frequently stolen from ethnic minority groups who already have a history of discrimination, violence, and genocide in the two states. SEZ legislation in Laos and Myanmar requires SEZ developers to assume responsibility for the compensation of stolen land, and displaced people often claim they received inadequate compensation. Through analyzing the history, policies and practices of SEZs in Laos and Myanmar, and looking in more detail at six case study SEZs involving industrial and gambling complexes, I argue that while SEZs may be a vehicle for attracting foreign investment and accelerating accumulation, they often also cause significant environmental damage while marginalizing and dispossessing rural ethnic minorities in Laos and Myanmar.

**KEYWORDS:** Special Economic Zones, FDI, Laos, Myanmar, displacement, environmental abuse, land grabbing, authoritarianism

*I claim the copyright for this document but give permission for the Environmental Studies department at UCSC to share it with the UCSC community.*

---

*Student signature*

June 9th, 2025

*Date*

## **Introduction**

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are development tools used to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Laos and Myanmar, two countries with colonial and socialist histories and which today are brutally repressive authoritarian regimes, both developed SEZs and SEZ law in the last two decades. Since the establishment of authoritarian governance in the two countries, deliberate land grabbing along with discrimination, global economic changes, war, non-SEZ development projects and more, has resulted in significant displacement of rural ethnic minorities from their land. While SEZs are presented as a solution to associated unemployment and underdevelopment, the positive effects of their growth are underwhelming in Laos and Myanmar. In actuality, SEZs are enclaves of (often Chinese and Japanese) foreign influence, where local government oversight is limited and where a host country's stake in the SEZ's success takes precedence over protection of human rights and environmental abuses.

In Laos and Myanmar, SEZs are a result of the two governments' desires to attract foreign capital, facilitated by weak environmental and SEZ regulation. Host countries incentivize foreign companies to invest in SEZs by offering an "incentive package" which may include relaxed taxes and tariffs, few environmental regulations, and some degree of sovereign power. The "incentive package" allows foreign firms, whose home country's environmental regulations are typically much stronger than those in the zone, to legally increase pollution and lower production costs. The authoritarian governments of Laos and Myanmar are unsupportive of the creation of strong environmental regulation, contrarily supporting market-oriented reforms including but not limited to incentivizing foreign investment and promoting extractive industries. The governments of Laos and Myanmar are furthermore hostile towards minority groups. The six SEZ case studies (3 from Myanmar and 3 from Laos) exemplify instances of land grabbing, displacement, and environmental and human rights abuse encouraged by the authoritarian regimes of Myanmar and Laos. Notable features of the case studies are supplemented by the analytical frameworks of the core-periphery model, neocolonial civilizing attitudes, and basic economic principles to examine and understand how ethnic rural displacement is happening in SEZs.

## **Theory and Background on SEZs**

Special Economic Zones<sup>1</sup> are geographic regulatory strategies useful for attracting FDI, alleviating unemployment, and catalyzing new economic and legal approaches (Farole, 2011; FIAS, 2008). Inside most SEZs, prevailing rules are different from the host country's, which attracts companies willing to assist in accelerating development (CIIP, 2017). For developing

---

<sup>1</sup> SEZs possess many names and forms, and while there are countless acronyms to describe SEZs and their minute regulatory differences, for simplicity's sake I will use "SEZ" to describe all economic zones throughout this argument. Some examples: Export Processing Zones (EPZs), Free Ports, Foreign Trade Zones (FTZs), Free Trade Zones (also FTZs), Free Zones, Specialized Zones, and more.

countries, successful SEZs in wealthier countries are attractive models, as they can potentially accelerate economic growth, lower unemployment, and increase exports—difficult undertakings for countries without decent capital (Brussevich, 2023; CIIP, 2017; Zeng, 2021). SEZs, however, can also exacerbate cruel human rights and environmental abuses (Aung et al., 2022; Richardson, 2004).

SEZ popularity grew over the past two decades, especially in developing countries (CIIP, 2017). Developed in Shannon, Ireland, in 1959, the first modern SEZ was called an “industrial free zone” (FIAS, 2008; Zeng, 2021). As of 2008, there were at least 3000 zones operating in 135 countries, (FIAS, 2008), but more recent estimates suggest there are closer to 5400 zones operating in 147 countries, demonstrating their increasing popularity (Aung et al., 2022). Zones typically include “mega-infrastructure” such as deep sea ports, resorts, dams, and massive industrial complexes and range in size from office buildings to entire cities, such as the city of Shenzhen in China (Aung et al., 2022; Chaisse & Ji, 2020). Larger, diverse, complex SEZs are becoming more popular globally, dominated by labor-intensive industries such as manufacturing (Aggarwal, 2022). Today, SEZs are typically located in “lagging interior and border areas” to promote development, forgoing the strategic, attractive locations of past SEZs (Aggarwal, 2022). The zones with the best economic performance have been shown by the World Bank to be large, low-tech, labor intensive SEZs, rather than smaller, more high-tech focus zones, which is contrary to what designers typically expect (CIIP, 2017).

For countries with weak governance, SEZs are potentially useful for modernization and reform, acting as “regulatory sandboxes” where governments can experiment with regulatory schemas (Chaisse & Ji, 2020; Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016; Zeng, 2021). To entice would-be investors, countries seeking to attract FDI offer SEZs with incentive packages<sup>2</sup>, such as exemptions from import duties, fiscal incentives, cheaper labor costs, relaxed environmental regulations, and sovereign power (Aggarwal, 2022; Chaisse & Ji, 2020; Matsuzawa, 2023). SEZs can boost economic modernization, which potentially alleviates poverty, increases education, decreases infant mortality, and creates pensions and minimum wages (Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016; Richardson, 2004). Some scholars question, however, if the host country’s perceived benefits outweigh the costs to human rights and the environment (Matsuzawa, 2023). SEZs are costly for governments, as losses in tax revenue rarely exceed net profits, often contributing to economic problems in the host country (Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016).

A useful framework for analyzing SEZ is the core-periphery model, which describes how “economic centers (cores) dominate over peripheral areas not only in the economic sphere but also in the political and cultural fields. The core, which is usually a metropolitan area, contributes to the development of the periphery even as, at the same time, it is subordinating it in the social and economic dimensions” (Klimczuk & Klimczuk-Kochańska, 2023). Adapting the core-periphery model from country-to-country or city-to-rural relations to an SEZ-to-periphery relationship, SEZs both benefit and exploit surrounding areas. Cores possess more mechanisms

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “incentive package” to describe the tax breaks, regulatory breaks, and sovereignty rights used strategically by host countries within SEZs to attract FDI. The incentive package almost exclusively rewards the SEZ developer at the expense of the host country. This term comes from the World Bank (CIIP, 2017).

of industry, capital, and technological resources than the less populated “periphery,” which has the raw materials the core needs for production but not the means to produce “finished” goods itself. Rooted in a historical colonial understanding, the core needs to extract raw materials from the periphery to build and develop its wealth, thus, the core will invest in extractive industries in the periphery for its own gain while slowly developing the periphery in exchange.

Andre Gunder Frank argues the core-periphery model is too binary in his essays on the “Development of Underdevelopment” (Frank, 1966). Under Frank’s model, peripheries suffer from uneven development resulting from surplus resources flowing to the core (Frank, 1966). The model is not perfect nor a fully accurate representation of the complicated dynamics of development. It can, however, be useful for understanding SEZs relationships with their surrounding regions; particularly how their productive benefits are spread. While some SEZs may substantially support the development of their regions, other SEZs may find success but cause little economic growth to the areas around them, therefore gaining resources from the peripheries while the majority of productive benefits concentrate in the SEZ core (Aritenang & Chandramidi, 2020).

Richardson (2004) explains how SEZs encourage a regulatory “race to the bottom,” a phenomenon in which governing bodies, such as countries or states, compete to have the fewest environmental regulations to attract business, causing severe environmental degradation. In SEZs, the incentives package may include some detrimental incentives, such as relaxed, or “chilled” environmental regulations in SEZs (Richardson, 2004). To remain competitive locations for dirty industries, countries desiring FDI “race” to ease environmental regulations (Richardson, 2004). Slipping environmental standards encourage dirty industries to invest FDI in developing countries (Richardson, 2004). For example, for firms from a country like Japan, where environmental regulations are stringent, relocating to a developing country with weak regulations is more cost-efficient. Due to opening their economies to foreign investment in dirty industries, natural resources are further stressed in Southeast Asia (Richardson, 2004). Without regulatory checks in developing countries and especially in SEZs, where laws are weakened deliberately for the access of the investor, high levels of pollution, environmental degradation, and land grabbing are bound to occur.

In a basic economic scenario, capitalist firms seek to minimize costs and maximize profits. According to the perfect economic representation of the market, this principle should prevent undue harm from befalling the environment and the people who live in it. The economic benefits of a healthy environment, however, are often hard to value in a meaningful way for the capital market. Consider this simplification: what does the life of a fish in a polluted river cost to the polluter? If the polluter isn’t selling fish, then perhaps nothing at all, and thus the firm would decide that it is cheapest to simply continue polluting and killing more fish. In SEZs, if there is no incentive or rule to prevent the natural environment from destruction, the firm owners know the most cost-efficient business practice is to keep polluting. For foreign firms who come from countries with stringent regulations, the costs of owning and developing an SEZ are already high, and with few environmental regulations, part of the appeal of locating business within SEZs is



the potential to cut environmental protection costs. Thus, relocating to an SEZ in a host country with weak environmental law is attractive (Richardson, 2004). Not every firm in an SEZ, however, is going to pollute haphazardly—in fact, many foreign investors carry their environmental regulations with them when they develop or set up operations in an SEZ, which helps to avoid legal and activist scrutiny as well as encourage model industry standards (Richardson, 2004). Regardless, it is still cost-efficient for dirty industries, which cannot operate at the same output in their home country due to environmental checks, to relocate to SEZs in host countries with low regulatory standards (Carter & Harding, 2010).

Some policymakers believe SEZs will decrease local unemployment. SEZs are distinct, however, from the surrounding labor market because they create new jobs. People are drawn towards the SEZs because of the promise of work, leading to a concentrated available labor pool near SEZs, which means unemployment often remains the same or worsens (CIIP, 2017). The skills required by some SEZs can be unreflective of the local population's skillset. As the World Bank (CIIP, 2017) explains in a review of SEZ impacts, “industries developed in SEZs determine which labor groups will benefit. If, for example, new jobs created require medium- or high-skilled labor, the gains can go to nonpoor residents and even widen inequality.” Some SEZs are not obligated to treat workers equally: for example, women are underrepresented and underpaid in SEZ employment, while union rights are discouraged or restrained in some SEZs, and incentive- and performance-based pay are common (CIIP, 2017; Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016), complicating the purported benefits to labor pool flexibility SEZ defenders are forwarding.

Richardson (2004) writes that living standards rose in East Asia at the steep cost of a healthy environment—the double-edged sword of “grow first, clean up later” development. Despite struggles between authoritarianism and democracy, most East Asian countries wrote some form of environmental law, though this body of legislation is fraught with overly simplified, centralized, generalized, one-size-fits-all approaches to environmental issues with few means of enforcement (Richardson, 2004). Some countries may write environmental law but do not enforce it, and others may write weak environmental law with the intention to attract FDI, echoing the idea of “regulatory chill” (Richardson, 2004). Richardson (2004) argues countries *receiving* FDI—for example, Laos and Myanmar—are unwilling to craft environmental law because of their desire to attract FDI and the agendas of their authoritarian governments. Most SEZs negatively impact the environment (Aung et al., 2022), which is exacerbated by weak environmental legislation failing to prevent powerful capitalist firms and developers from exploiting the natural environment.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This analysis is a review of the literature from databases such as Google Scholar, the UCSC Library, JSTOR, Proquest, and NexisUni. Key words and phrases in the search include “Land Grabbing,” “Special Economic Zones,” “Environmental Degradation,” “Southeast Asia,” “Laos,” “Myanmar,” “Industry,” “Casinos,” “Foreign Direct Investment,” “SEZs,” “Kyaukphyu,” “Thilawa,” “Dawei,” “Golden Triangle SEZ,” “Golden Boten,” “Savan-Seno” and “Land Concessions.” I expanded my search when following a line of inquiry. I then read my collected sources and took detailed notes on each one. Following this, I divided my research into several main sections. As I wrote, I uncovered more questions which required a second round of research. This literature review and research process took well over three months to complete.

## A Brief Overview of the Historical Drivers of Development in Laos and Myanmar

### *Major Development Themes*

Before turning to a specific examination of the development experience in Laos and Myanmar, it is useful to review major development themes that are particularly relevant to understanding development in Southeast Asia. In the 1960's, the economist Walt Whitman Rostow devised a development model called "The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto." Though Rostow has been criticized for ignoring the economic impacts of politics and culture, this model is useful in distinguishing five potential stages of growth. The first stage is a traditional society identified by its rural, agrarian population where power is spread regionally rather than in a central government (Rostow, 1960). A traditional society, Rostow writes, evolves into a society with the "pre-conditions for take off," characterized by increases in investment and modern manufacturing, but "limited" by the society's traditional values and slower productivity (Rostow, 1960). The next two stages of growth are the "take off" and "drive to maturity" stages, culminating with societies reaching "the age of high mass consumption," seen by Rostow and other economists of the time as the ideal summit of society (Rostow, 1960). This model was based on the experiences of the United States, Europe, and Japan, largely ignoring the effects of colonization.

Proponents of the five stages of growth defended and encouraged the accumulation of capital (OECD, 2019), framing development as desirable and necessary for countries wishing to compete in the global economy. To increase development—and perhaps move up a stage in Rostow's model—countries without adequate domestic capital to develop turned to foreign development aid, which provided loans and grants to poor countries (OECD, 2019). As a result of the introduction of foreign capital to extractive industries in underdeveloped countries, national GDPs rose rapidly, but led to environmental degradation and inequality (OECD, 2019). Policymakers neglected subsistence and small-plot agriculture in favor of industrialization (OECD, 2019).

Rostow's model was applied not only to Southeast Asia but all of the global south, however, the model was not very accurate. As the core-periphery model shows us, underdevelopment is the result of unequal trade relations and dependencies between developed cores and rural, resource-rich peripheral regions. Latin American critics in particular saw international trade as unfair and disadvantageous for the developing world (OECD, 2019). They argued that powerful "core" countries create systems in which periphery areas are dependent on the core's finished goods. Cores need the periphery to exist to continue extracting raw materials, otherwise they cannot create expensive finished goods. Latin American economists critiqued this system and argued that developing economies depended on the expensive finished goods and capital from wealthier countries for their *own* development (OECD, 2019). Additionally, foreign development aid comes from core countries producing finished goods, thus accumulating

substantial wealth. Critics favored inward-looking development measures (OECD, 2019), such as protectionism, instead of looking to foreign countries for development assistance. Inward-looking development measures, however, have not gained considerable support from poorer countries looking for a quick way out of debt.

In the late 90's, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) assumed more power in Southeast Asia during the Asian economic crisis (Richardson, 2004). Empowered by economic policy changes, the IMF sought to open up Southeast Asian natural resources to extractive industries and capitalist countries, as well as influence laws regarding foreign land ownership (Richardson, 2004). The IMF's intervention in policy laid the groundwork for future land use disputes as SEZs became an attractive way for governments to incentivize development. Though the IMF's practices intended to increase development in poor areas and many benefitted as a result of their interventions, imbalanced trading relations sometimes benefitted core countries.

### *Brief Historical Context of Development and Governance in Laos and Myanmar*

To examine the history of displacement and discrimination in Laos and Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the ethnic composition of the two countries. Laos is an ethnically diverse country despite only being home to seven million people (Minority Rights Group, 2023a). The government divides the ethnic groups into three categories: lowland Lao Loum, midland Lao Theung, and highland Lao Sung, but a more accurate way to distinguish the groups would be through languages (Minority Rights Group, 2023a). There are up to 240 ethnic groups in Laos, many practicing Protestant Christianity, which has been the cause for discrimination in Buddhist-majority Laos (Minority Rights Group, 2023a). Myanmar has seven main ethnic groups divided between states: the Karen, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine and Karenni, however, there are more groups with significantly large populations not identified by a state (Minority Rights Group, 2023b). There are 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar. Some minorities practice Buddhism, but others are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or Animists (Minority Rights Group, 2023b). Certain groups have faced significantly more discrimination, even genocide, from the two governments: particularly, the Royhingya and Hmong peoples. Many ethnic groups, however, have seen mass displacement from their land.

One of the first widespread instances of land grabbing in Southeast Asia came with the arrival of colonial Britain and France. Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa (2019), explain how subsistence agriculture dominated the countryside, but colonists changed the rural countryside into large-scale plantations (Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019). Colonial governments preferred large plantations, conferred via land concessions, because they solidified colonial control, disorganized civil unrest, and promoted economic development plans (Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019). Land concessions typically dispossessed peasant farmers from their land, causing them to seek work as plantation or corvee labor as an alternative to a subsistence lifestyle (Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019). Deforestation, loss of biodiversity, drought, and

increased carbon emissions resulted from agricultural land concessions in Southeast Asia (Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019).

During the Indochina wars period (1946-1975), Myanmar achieved independence from Great Britain (in 1948) and Laos achieved independence from France (in 1953) (Bird & Hill, 2010; Kramer, 2015). Like many post-independence states, however, Myanmar fell to a military coup in 1962 (Kramer, 2015). The Lao People's Democratic Republic, a socialist authoritarian state, established itself in 1975, leading to the mass exodus of the educated elite, who faced imprisonment or death under the regime (Bird & Hill, 2010). Plantation expansion slowed, existing plantations were nationalized, and trade stagnated (Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa, 2019).

Civil war, uprisings, new laws, and ethnic cleansing characterized the 1980s and 90s for many Southeast Asian countries (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). During this period in Myanmar, the military ran the country with no constitution to check its power. They wrote the Land Nationalization Act, which made all land in Myanmar property of the state, leading to protests over land grabbing (McCarthy, 2016; SiuSue & Youyi, 2017). In the 80's, after attempting a true socialist state, Laos turned to attracting foreign capital (Brown, 2018). The authoritarian governments of Laos and Myanmar participated in the ethnic cleansing of minorities, suppression of pro-democratic movements and uprisings against the military juntas controlling the two countries (Shin, 2022). A staged military coup in Myanmar to restore order under "democracy," erased socialism from the country's name and moved forward with development plans (Shin, 2022). Myanmar's new "discipline-flourishing democracy" emphasized law and order, as well as capital development (Shin, 2022).

Governments with a desire to quickly develop opened up the economies of Laos and Myanmar to FDI. Chinese companies invested in land in Laos and Myanmar (OECD, 2019)—land stolen from ethnic communities. China, one of the largest investors in land, invested primarily in the development of plantations (SiuSue & Youyi, 2017). Slowly, the command-and-control economies of the authoritarian states gave some leeway to capitalist enterprises and the global economic development goals for underdeveloped states (Kenney-Lazar & SiuSue, 2020). This included Laos' embarking on a capitalist development pathway, introducing market reforms to attract foreign investment (Brown, 2018).

Later, in 2011, Myanmar voters established a civilian parliamentary republic led by President Thein Sein (McCarthy, 2016). Thein Sein's government introduced cease-fire agreements with armed ethnic groups and new laws. While many of the reforms were welcomed, Thein Sein's government invited rapid changes in investment encouraged by the parliament's military-connected majority (Linn, 2015). The cabinet invited foreign investors to develop Myanmar and turn subsistence farming into a productive cash crop economy (Kramer, 2015). Despite the civilian government, Myanmar did not recognize most ethnic land rights and wrote two new laws to replace the Land Nationalization Act: the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law and the Farmland Law (Linn, 2015). These two laws reclassified land as vacant (though it was occupied) to sell it to investors (Linn, 2015). Though not without considerable resistance, ethnic citizens effectively became squatters on their own land. One of

the responsibilities the governments of Laos and Myanmar place on SEZ developers in populated areas is to compensate displaced villagers for their land, which can lead to inadequate compensation—since the state’s retreat from the compensation process, villagers must organize for fair compensation themselves against powerful corporate entities (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). In 2021, the democratically elected government fell to a military coup (Shin, 2022). The military coup accelerated SEZ and other development plans, leading to the greater influence of Chinese developers in industrial processes.

SEZ and environmental legislation have been written in both Laos and Myanmar. Laos’ SEZ law, “Decree On Special Economic Zone and Specific Economic Zone in the Lao PDR,” was written in 2010, and their environmental legislation, the Lao PDR Environmental Protection Law, was written in 2013 (Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2010; Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2013). Myanmar’s SEZ law, “The Myanmar Special Economic Zone Law,” was written in 2014, and their environmental legislation, “The Environmental Conservation Law,” was written in 2012 (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2014; The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012). All four legal documents outline the responsibilities to protect the environment and prevent abuse, yet there are few measures in the documents that demand oversight nor provide for any measurable guidelines for punishments, preventions, or otherwise.

### **Dynamics of Displacement—Democracy and Authoritarianism in Laos and Myanmar**

Unequal distribution of capital needs powerful regulation or strong labor organizing to prevent exploitation. Myanmar’s effort (unfortunately, in vain), to create powerful regulation for land and the environment is laudable, especially because strong regulations are necessary for controlling SEZs. SEZs create different legal regimes than the rest of the host country, so it is important that the SEZ regulation at the government level is strong and enforceable (Aggarwal, 2022). Aggarwal (2022) suggests centralized zone regulations are more effective than decentralized zone regulation. Despite writing centralized zone regulation, Myanmar and Laos crafted weak centralized legislation. The laws do not clearly delineate responsibilities between developers and the state and disrespect human rights (Aung et al., 2022; Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2010; Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2014). The Myanmar SEZ law also gives full, 100% ownership of the land to the foreign power without any delineated means for land compensation, though SEZ developers are obligated to compensate land owners (McCarthy, 2016). The Laos SEZ law gives the SEZ developer “full rights in the development and management of the SEZ,” which can be interpreted broadly, considering what “full rights” are determined to be (Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2010).

The SEZ laws in Laos and Myanmar are devised with incentives in mind: governments know that corporations need substantial reason to invest millions or billions of dollars into development and infrastructure in “underdeveloped” states. Frequently, the incentives are better for business than for the host country. Incentives include (but are not limited to) tax exemptions, relaxed environmental and labor laws, and anti-union laws. Tax exemptions are designed to be

attractive for foreign developers, however, the host country may lose revenues it would receive from domestic rather than foreign development (CIIP, 2017).

Unlike SEZ legislation, in environmental legislation centralized approaches are not always the best way to go. The command-and-control regulations apparent in authoritarian states like Laos and Myanmar give wide discretionary powers to the central government (Richardson, 2004), but one-size-fits all approaches to environmental regulation are often insufficient to address the multifaceted nature of environmental problems. In Laos and Myanmar, the governments prefer national environmental strategies over local ones (Richardson, 2004), which, though certainly easier to manage, can be weaker than decentralized environmental strategies because they often lack the precision to address unique local issues. As a result, Laos and Myanmar created weak environmental laws, which is attractive for foreign dirty industries who desire to pollute at a higher output but may be barred by strong environmental regulation in their own countries (Richardson, 2004). Weak environmental laws can be easily pushed aside by corrupt local authorities who may stand to benefit from FDI influxes into regional SEZs.

Coupled with weak environmental protections, Laos and Myanmar crafted a body of weak land ownership law. Protections for customary land titles are complicated and rarely respected (SiuSue et al., 2020). Therefore, with uncertain responsibilities between the state and corporations, strong incentives to pollute and harm workers, and weak environmental regulation easily ignored by local governments, foreign developers are able to exploit regulations, people, and the environment for their own benefit in authoritarian SEZs.

Coupled with the lack of oversight and assessment, “the resource-rich countries of mainly Southeast Asia...focused their economic policies on exploitation of their forests, minerals and other abundant natural resources” which can lead to environmental degradation in the form of logging, water pollution, carbon emissions, and other harmful effects (Richardson, 2004). Extractive industries receive almost all of Myanmar’s FDI (Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016), furthering Myanmar’s periphery status as a resource colony for the wealthier, more developed cores. Myanmar’s resources are extracted not primarily for the benefit of its own people and environment but primarily for the benefit of foreign powers and corporations. In fact, the state counsellor of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, said in 2019 that “while the environment should be protected, it should not come to the point of hindering development” (SiuSue et al., 2020), therefore describing the state’s ambivalence towards environmental protection.

Weak laws concerning land and the environment in authoritarian SEZs can lead to violent disputes, but young democracies can also upset peace. Laos, with a socialist-authoritarian government since the 70’s, and Myanmar, shifting between military authoritarianism and parliamentary democracy, demonstrate how authoritarianism may appear the better option when weak democracies fail (SiuSue et al., 2020). As Nur-tegin (2014) explains, despite the acceptance that political rights are human rights, the downfall of an authoritarian government can lead to more political unrest. The period of instability following the downfall of authoritarianism results in shifting power struggles and a void of authority, leading to futile struggles for control and rampant civil unrest. In a military authoritarianism, high-ranking military officials are often

more supportive of the fallen regime than the new democracy, and as members of society wielding a lot of power from the prior regime, they have a lot of sway in post-authoritarian politics. Authoritarianism is stronger in Laos and Myanmar because of the nearby presence of China and the four Asian Tigers<sup>4</sup>: strong, centrally controlled governments with elements of authoritarianism, which found success through their resistance to lobbying and societal pressures (Bolesta, 2017). The downsides of democracy are used to defend authoritarianism: while some democracies achieved successful development, many have not achieved economic equality, a byproduct of prior capitalist exploitation of natural resources in “periphery” or “underdeveloped” countries (Chung, 2023).

Young democracies may borrow systems from the prior authoritarian regime, creating new forms of authoritarianism (Bolesta, 2017). Myanmar is an example of this: in 2021, a military coup overthrew the democratically elected government of Myanmar (Shin, 2022). Prior to the military takeover, democracy in Myanmar was weak and reflected authoritarian ideals. Myanmar’s democratically elected government in 2011, led by president Thein Sein, gave arguably more freedoms to individual citizens, yet presidential candidates were selected only by the major political parties and the military, which previously ruled the government (Shin, 2022). So entrenched within the grasp of the military, the democratically elected government of Myanmar easily reverted to authoritarianism, leading up to the 2021 military coup (Shin, 2022). Bolesta (2017) argues democracy is necessary to correct the errors of the free market, which leads to human rights and environmental violations—but these can be disregarded if the authoritarian economy is strong and governments can easily quell resistance.

As the authoritarian regimes of Laos and Myanmar opened up their economies to global capitalism, they focused on large-scale economic projects, often catalyzed in SEZs. Focusing only on economic projects can lead to a menagerie of problems. First, economic development for the sole purpose of capital accumulation ignores rampant inequality in periphery countries (SiuSue et al., 2020). Economic development in Laos and Myanmar fuels regional insecurity, tension, and conflict; people’s uprisings in Laos and Myanmar are lately associated with land grabbing conflicts increasing in scale and magnitude (SiuSue et al., 2020). Second, unpopular development plans frequently come with their own security details or military support in conceded areas, which further heightens tensions (SiuSue et al., 2020). Third, the economies created by the SEZs as part of larger economic development goals do not create economies useful for former farmers—their skills are often inapplicable to the work offered in the SEZs, they might not speak a particular language, or the work itself is undesirable, and as a result, they lose out on the “wealth” of development (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018).

The governments of Myanmar and Laos use the purported benefits of economic development to further marginalize ethnic minorities and dispossess them of culturally-held land titles. Political procedures in Laos and Myanmar frequently marginalize minority voices. During the rule of Thein Sein’s democratically elected government, ethnic minorities gained marginally more rights, though they were still highly discriminated against—unsurprising, considering the

---

<sup>4</sup> South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong

two countries' histories of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya and Hmong peoples. For example, ethnic minorities under the democratic regime were allowed to create political parties, however, the laws in Myanmar stated political parties must be “loyal to the state,” which was later used against ethnic political parties to silence them (Shin, 2022). In developing regions, Sino-Burmese investors are prioritized over ethnic minorities (SiuSue et al., 2020), giving undue economic benefits to members of the major ethnic group in Myanmar. Development sites are strategically located where agrarian ethnic minorities of Laos and Myanmar live, which are fertile areas to grow crops. When minority members are removed from their land, they are “compensated” with other parcels of land located in poor areas to grow crops (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). There are few laws to determine if ethnic minority groups are receiving adequate compensation for their losses. For example, there is no central body examining the legislation behind China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of mega-development projects increasing energy, transportation, and other development projects alongside new SEZs, allowing corporate entities to not adequately compensate people whose land they purchased (SiuSue et al., 2020). Myanmar and Laos’ laws regarding compensation and land rights are generally ambiguous, making it difficult to enforce any rules to protect ethnic minorities (SiuSue & Youyi, 2017).

The market forces allowing SEZs to exist in the first place allow the market, not the state, to determine the rights of citizens, particularly workers and landowners (Matsuzawa, 2023). Human rights abuses (and abusers) have been condemned globally, yet powerful corporations and weak governance continue to find new, subversive ways to exploit people, land, and the environment. The fluidity of SEZ law in Laos and Myanmar allows for condemnable exploitation and abuse. While economists predict market success for firms, “perfect-world” economic scenarios do not accurately demonstrate the reality of the “regulatory sandbox”—stolen land, vulnerable worker populations, unsafe working conditions, and little oversight in countries already struggling to provide basic human rights protections for their citizens.

Moreover, some SEZ developers are allowed to exercise their rules without penalty, despite partaking in illegal practices under the host country’s laws (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). In some SEZs, zone employees are subject to gross abuse, repressive laws, and the denial of inalienable human rights (Sims, 2017). Often, the host country will not interfere lest they lose the capital gained from the SEZ’s development. Therefore, residents are forcibly removed from their homes, new forms of marginalization are assembled, and gambling debts affect entire communities (Sims, 2017), and host countries not only cannot but will not do anything to protect their people.

In the authoritarian states of Laos and Myanmar, cultural assimilation agendas in SEZs are touted as the solution to alleviating poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse, however, this agenda is also used to displace ethnic minorities, create new forms of marginalization including food insecurity, housing insecurity, unemployment for the undereducated, gambling addictions, and systematic cultural destruction. Giving benefits to the wealthy with the hope that it will “trickle down” to the poor has been disproven globally (Chung, 2023), and by selling sovereign



rights to corporations, Laos and Myanmar deliberately allow the wealthy to exploit the poor, including their land, bodies, and environments.

Land acquisition and dispossession are viewed by these governments as necessary for development; in addition to physical economic development (i.e., infrastructure, industry, megaprojects), land dispossession is also “necessary” for turning the agrarian peasantry into a “productive” working class (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Chinese and Japanese foreign investors, migrating to Laos and Myanmar, use SEZs and land grabbing to deprive the peasantry of their customary land, community, and security while convincing them of the benefits of the “enclave of improvement,” which may include education, healthcare, and other positives (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Frequently, however, Chinese investors view the ethnic, agrarian subjects of Laos and Myanmar as “backwards” and in desperate need of civilization, in juxtaposition to the developers, who consider themselves the drivers of civilization in Southeast Asia (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Many of the goals of development in northern Laos include plans to blur ethnic identities through cultural development agendas: the prevention of swidden agriculture and opium cultivation, in addition to cultural assimilation of ethnic minority groups into the majority Lao language and culture (Sims, 2021). Increasing access to education and basic services, whilst appearing beneficial to villagers at first, can be part of cultural assimilation agendas if not consulted with the communities first (Sims, 2021). In one example, Sims (2021) writes that in the Lao village of Luang Prabang, two rounds of forced displacement have occurred<sup>5</sup> for the purposes of development. Both rounds of displacement led to the obliteration of homes, livelihoods, and community, leading to marginalization (Sims, 2021). For the villagers of Luang Prabang, forced displacement has incurred “food shortages, high rates of communicable diseases in resettlement sites, and severe socio-emotional stress resulting from lost livelihoods, cultural practices and other attachments to place” (Sims, 2021). After the development, villagers without an education found difficulty acquiring jobs and received little compensation for their homes and agricultural sites after the Luang Prabang land grabbing (Sims, 2021).

Poverty eradication is not solved by development alone, however politicians in Laos and Myanmar might spin its benefits. True, development has the potential to increase access to education, job opportunities, economic freedom, basic services, and transportation, but at the same time, development means intensified agriculture, oil prospecting, the eradication of particular lifestyles, cultural sites, increased carbon emissions, and extractivism. Many freedoms can be lost in the process of development. Chinese developers in Laos and Myanmar seamlessly connect social services and economic development to potentially harmful practices like gambling and drilling (Lyttleton & Nyiri, 2010), which may not be reflective of the communities’ desires for development, despite developers’ claims of civilization.

When private investors are given the power to compensate people for their land, firms maximizing profits prefer to settle land disputes for the lowest price possible. As part of the incentive package, sovereign rights are *commodified* for the SEZ developer, including land

---

<sup>5</sup> One in 2004, another in 2019

compensation powers—powers otherwise left with the state (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Long-term land user rights are commodified for the SEZ developer, effectively nullifying any prior claims on the land (Matsuzawa, 2023), leading to further issues with land compensation as informal land claims technically have no claim at all if the SEZ developer has land user rights. This reveals the objective of SEZs: to transfer ownership of land from peasants to capitalist firms (Sims, 2017).

Next, I will explore six examples of SEZ creation, operation, and abuse that previously or are presently occurring in Laos and Myanmar in light of the authoritarian natures of the two countries, as well as the extractive industries exploiting the periphery. These case studies are instructive for looking at displacement via development in Myanmar in Laos. Of the SEZs in Laos and Myanmar, these SEZs had the most available information as well, though some are still lacking.

### **Myanmar: Industrial SEZs, Capitalism, China's BRI, and Displacement**

Viewed as a region of abundant natural resources, Myanmar has been a focus of development in the last several decades, synonymous with intense resource exploitation. Myanmar's three SEZs (all explored here) reflect this primary goal of foreign investors: SEZs in Myanmar are mostly industrial, extractive, and primarily beneficial for foreign powers. The three SEZs are Kyaukphyu SEZ (part of China's BRI), Thilawa SEZ, and Dawei SEZ. Each of these SEZs has or will lead to displacement and are used for further discussion of the dynamics of displacement as enumerated above.

#### *Kyaukphyu SEZ*

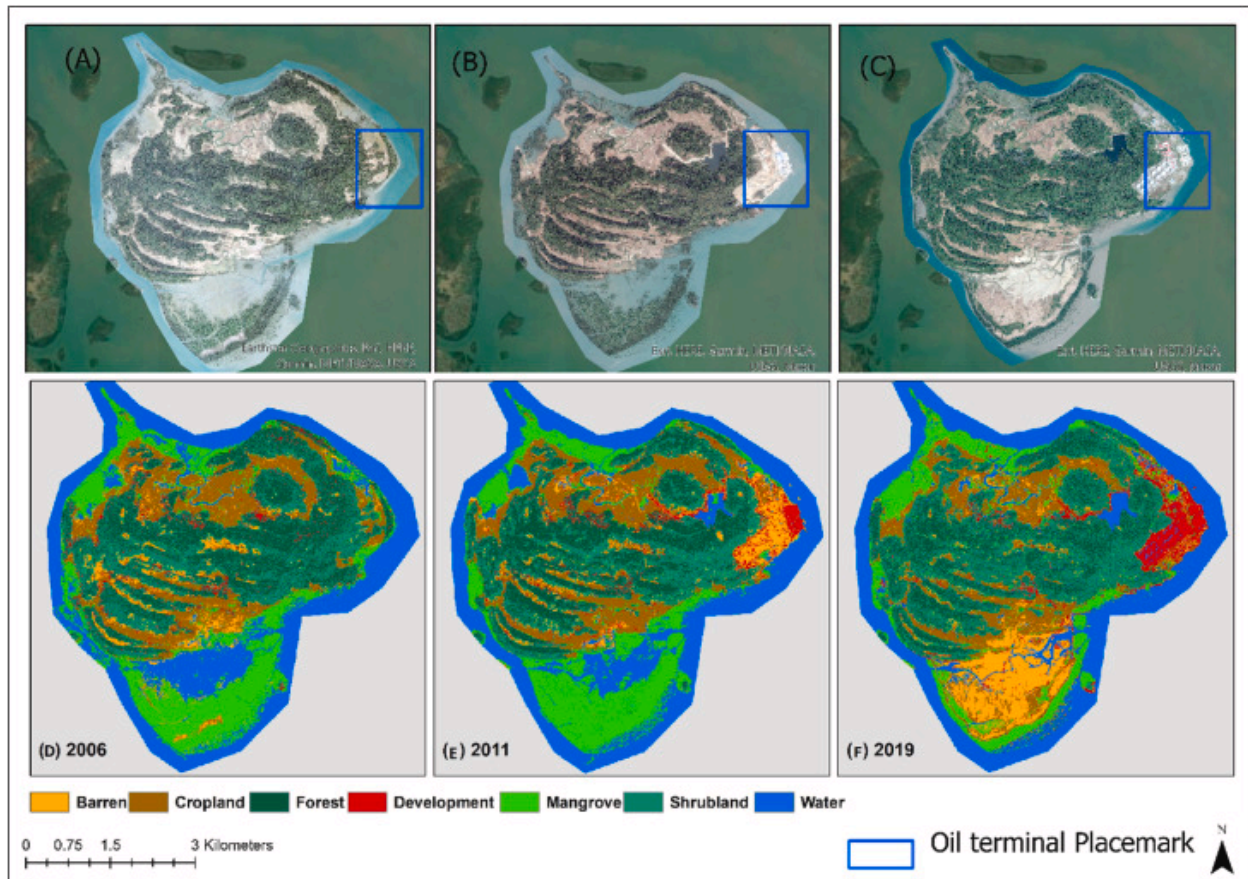


*Details:* Location: Rakhine State. Considerations began: 2015. Investor(s): China National Petroleum Corporation. Reason: the establishment of a deep sea port at this location is strategic for the Chinese. Number of people displaced: 26 families. Ethnic groups concerned: Rakhine people (Bain et al., 2017; BRI monitor, 2021; Minority Rights Group, 2023b).

The Kyaukphyu SEZ, located in Rakhine State, is a project for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a part of China's BRI (Aung et al., 2022). The BRI is a massive financial undertaking for China, but their goal to develop “underdeveloped” areas of Southeast Asia comes with the caveat that China gets rights to extractive industries they invest in as part of the project (SiuSue et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, the BRI could bring dire consequences to many of the people of Myanmar. The BRI “could affect 24 million people in Myanmar who live in the BRI corridors, as river-related infrastructure development, deforestation, and changing land use can induce flooding, sedimentation, and water pollution” (Aung et al., 2022). The Kyaukphyu SEZ alone states five mega-projects as part of its development goals: oil and gas pipelines, deep sea ports, oil terminals, industrial parks, and railways (Aung et al., 2022). The SEZ will become China's new terminal point for its oil and gas pipelines, reducing its dependence on other areas—while bringing harm to many of Myanmar's people and environment (Aung et al., 2022).

There are mangrove forests in the Kyaukphyu SEZ, but none are protected (Aung et al., 2022). On Maday Island, a part of Kyaukphyu SEZ, most land area is covered with open forest and agriculture; more importantly, 16% of the total forest area is unprotected mangroves (Aung et al., 2022). In 2011, during the SEZ construction period, mangrove forests declined by

35%—around 117 hectares—while barren land or infrastructure projects encroached on the land area (Fig. 2) (Aung et al., 2022).



*Fig. 2: Composite maps of Maday Island in Kyaukphyu SEZ, illustrating the decline of mangrove forests during the period between 2006-19 (Aung et al., 2022).*

In one example of a win for Myanmar, the Kyaukphyu SEZ's proposed deep sea port was drastically scaled down from \$7.4 billion, which would have put the country in severe debt to China (Clapp, 2020). In addition to ensuring Myanmar's power over the port, Myanmar's Ministry of Planning and Finance also wrote several requirements for development projects, including assessments of environmental and social impacts as well as specifying investors must compensate displaced communities (Clapp, 2020).

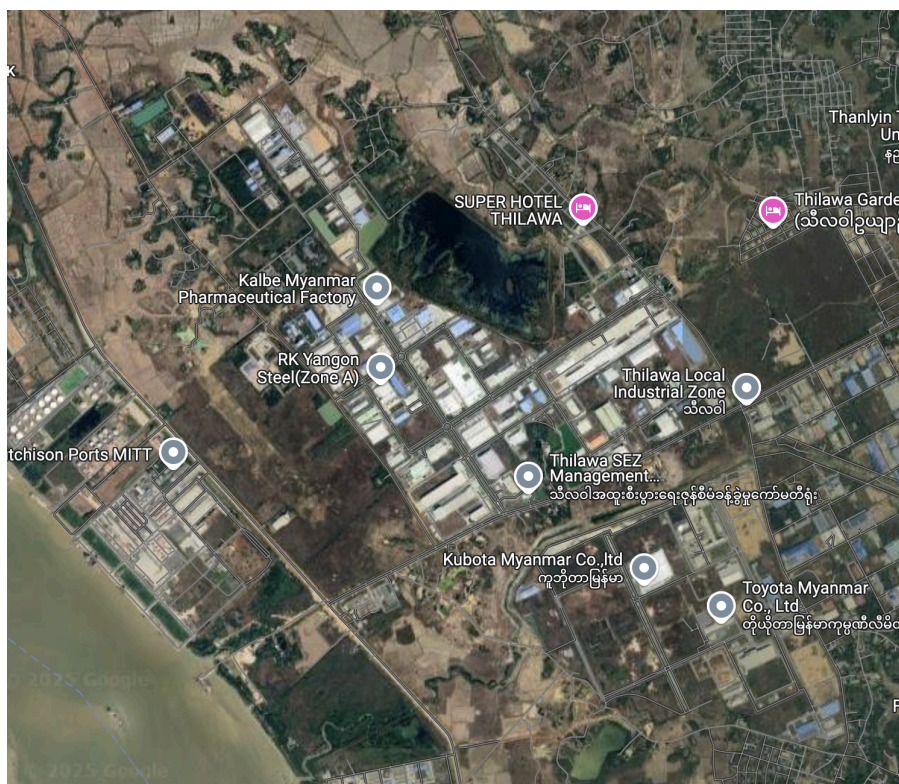
Regardless, the communities living within the Kyaukphyu SEZ region claim they received little information about the planning stage of the SEZ (Aung et al., 2022), a notable trend in many of Myanmar's SEZs. Community concerns include forced displacement and the appropriation of their land, seen in other SEZs in Myanmar as well, fanning fears that their own land is in jeopardy (Aung et al., 2022). In 2017, 300 people from 25 villages in the township area called for a suspension of the project until the release of land compensation plans (SiuSue &



Youyi, 2017). Faced with ongoing protests and a critical regional government, the government postponed plans for the Kyaukphyu SEZ (SiuSue & Youyi, 2017). This shows how villagers were able to negotiate for better conditions with governmental and investment groups.

Despite the suspension, development of the SEZ accelerated in 2023 (Hsu, 2023)<sup>6</sup>. Troops blockaded roads and waterways leading into Kyaukphyu town, barring the people from accessing basic services such as healthcare, leading unintentionally to one death (Zan, 2023). Indiscriminate arrests, shelling, and other violent actions plague the community since the acceleration of the project (Zan, 2023). Projects like the Kyaukphyu SEZ with the support of the military, known to use force against civilians for the security of massive economic projects, are violent towards displaced communities.

### *Thilawa SEZ*



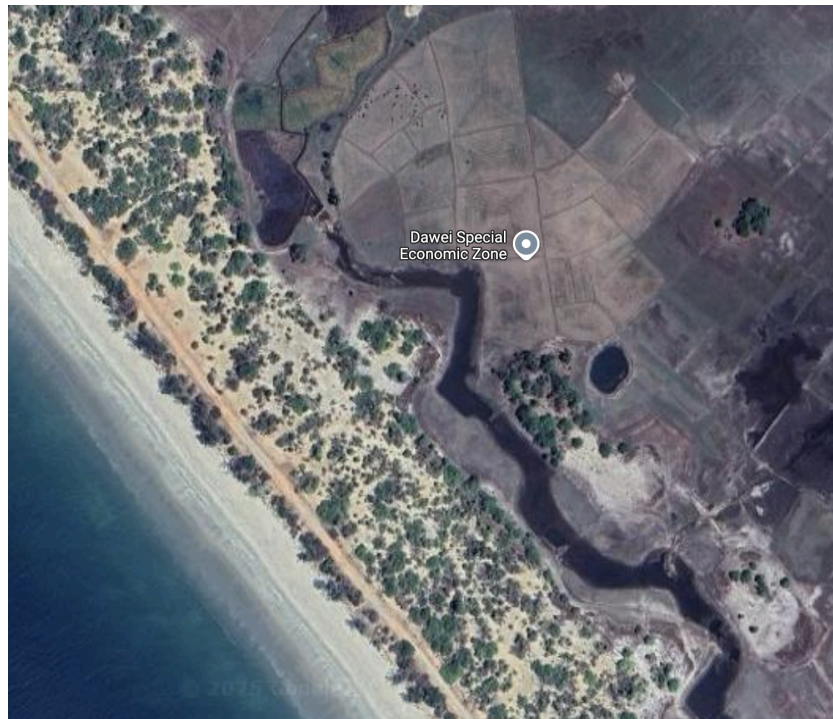
*Details:* Location: Yangon State. Opened in: 2016. Investors: 68 approved companies. Reason: lays on the outskirts of Yangon, but with proximity to a major economic center. Number of people displaced: up to 4000. Ethnic groups concerned: Tamils (Bain et al., 2017; Thilawa Special Economic Zone, 2025; Earthrights International, n.d.; Thiha, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> Hsu writes for NP News, which is one of the few news outlets able to report in Myanmar. Critics say that NP News consistently aligns with the military in its articles.

In the Thilawa SEZ, residents are experiencing issues with land grabbing. In 2014, the U.N Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, Tomas Ojea Quintana, said that Myanmar has a responsibility to follow the rule of law and fairly compensate people for their land (Asia News Monitor, 2014). Residents were verbally notified of their evictions only two weeks before they needed to leave or face a 30 day imprisonment (Matsuzawa, 2023). Prior evictions and displacements, in addition to unrecognized cultural land titles, assisted developers in negating land ownership claims (Matsuzawa, 2023). While still negotiating with developers for better compensation plans, the homes of residents in the Thilawa SEZ were torn down. The developers blocked residents from viewing the entire compensation plan and did not invite everyone in the villages to the compensation plan discussion (Matsuzawa, 2023). Afterwards, developers urged and threatened residents to sign the agreements (Matsuzawa, 2023). Despite valiant efforts to negotiate for better compensation, ultimately developers' threats forced villagers to settle for unfair compensation.

There is some evidence that some residents of the area have expressed positive attitudes towards the SEZ (Thwe, 2019), but this may have been because of increased attention to land compensation from the Japanese parliament following local protests (Clapp, 2020). Even if some residents eventually came to value the SEZ, it does not negate the problematic process of imprisonment and threats that accompanied its development.

#### *Dawei SEZ*



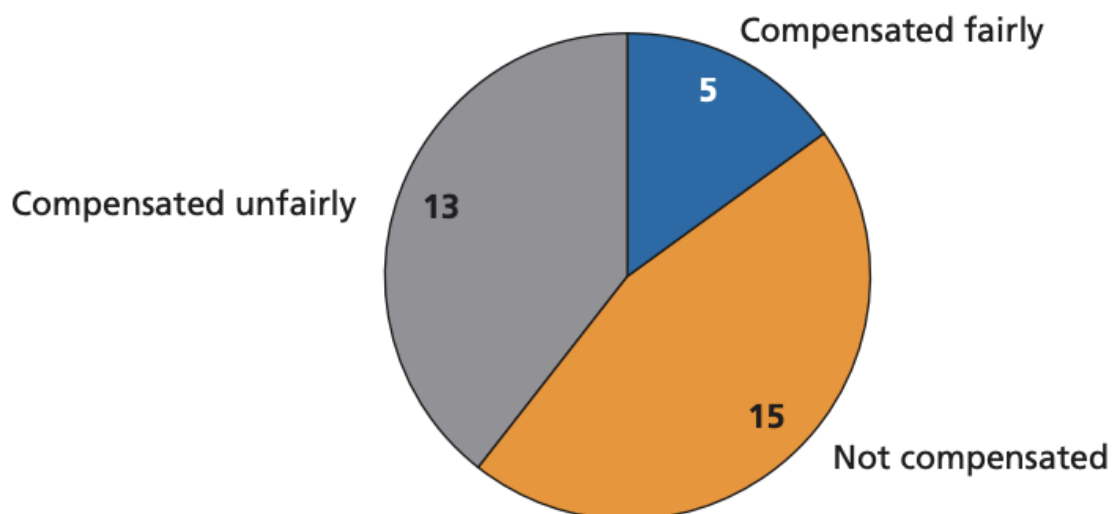
*Details:* Location: Tanintharyi Region. Considerations began: 2008. Investors: Italian-Thai Development Plc. and Max Myanmar. Unclear Japanese investment. Reason: Close proximity to the eastern seaboard, supply of local resources from the surrounding area. Number of people displaced: projected, up to 32,000. Ethnic groups concerned: Bamar and Tavoy, majority ethnic groups in Myanmar (Dawei Special Economic Zone, 2025; Linn, 2015; Earthrights International, 2025).

Dawei is home to a pristine beach, yet developers plan to turn it into a deep sea port and petrochemical facility (Blank et al., 2019), which will lead to the displacement of up to 32,000 people and 60,000 acres of land confiscated (Linn, 2015). The Dawei SEZ is a Japanese-Thai joint venture, rather than a Chinese venture (Blank et al., 2019), which leads to different villager views towards the project. For many Burmese, China's influence in infrastructure and development projects in Myanmar is looked upon with suspicion (Blank et al., 2019). Some villagers see the project as a way for Thailand to cheaply export its dirty industries across the border where pollution regulations are not as strict (Aung, 2018; Blank et al., 2019). Despite environmental watchdogs calling for the SEZ to comply with basic environmental standards, the project moved forward (Blank et al., 2019).

A particularly effective protest, organized by the Dawei Development Association (DDA) and led by youth activist Phyo Linn and others, invited community members to a conference in Yangon to share their concerns with the project, including displacement, compensation, and environmental degradation (Aung, 2018). DDA members mobilized around the cancellation of the coal power plant plans for the SEZ, handing out "No Coal in Dawei" stickers and flyers, organizing beach clean ups, and signing a petition (Aung, 2018). After Myanmar's president and prime minister arrived in Dawei, they cancelled the plans for the coal power plant (Aung, 2018). DDA organizing in Dawei demonstrates how the community protected their own environment from excess carbon emissions and exploitation.

As Blank et al. (2019) state, however, all villages in the Dawei SEZ are suffering adverse effects because of the SEZ's creation. Ciochini and Greener (2022), write that "communities have been removed against their will with a disregard for consultation, resettlement and compensation. The development of the Dawei SEZ in Myanmar has resulted in the eviction of multiple villages to make way for a reservoir and road." The project caused people to suffer impacts to their livelihoods, environment, and health. The Dawei SEZ managers also refused to create a straightforward, useful compensation plan for land grabbing incidents and lost livelihoods. The communities affected were not adequately consulted about the impacts of the project. Furthermore, community members report they were coerced into signing documents, intimidated, forced to give away produce (causing food shortages), imprisoned, and threatened. Respondents in Blank et al. (2019)'s study shared mixed attitudes towards the SEZ, but many said their employment and health suffered harm from its creation. Additionally, most respondents who gave up their farmland said they received unfair compensation for their land or no compensation at all (fig. 3).

### Have You Been Fairly Compensated for Loss of Farmland?



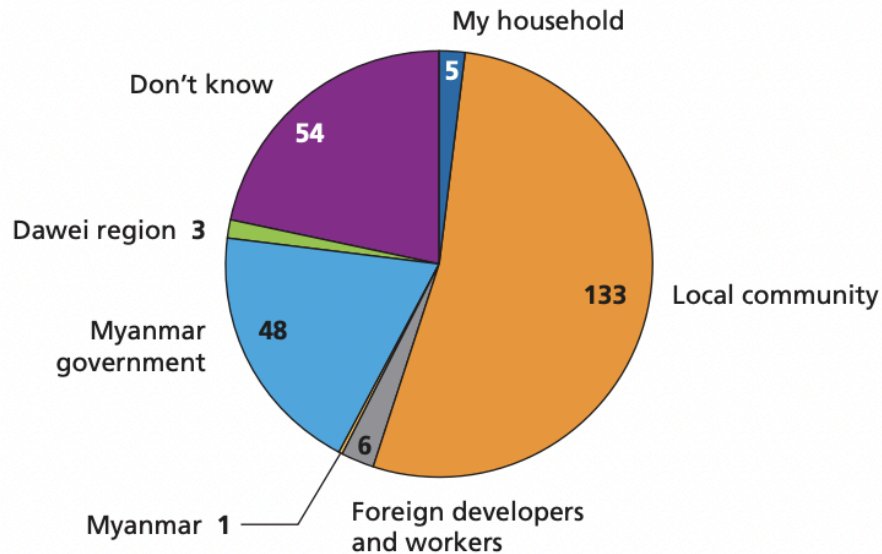
**NOTE:** This question was asked only of respondents who reported that they had given up their farmland.

*Fig. 3: Rand survey describes how farmers who gave up their land in the Dawei SEZ were mostly either uncompensated or compensated unfairly (Blank et al., 2019).*

Interviewers also asked “who will be harmed most by the Dawei project?” Most respondents said the local community would be harmed by the project (Fig. 4), however, it is interesting to note that few of the respondents said their own household would be most affected, despite the fact the respondents come from the local community.



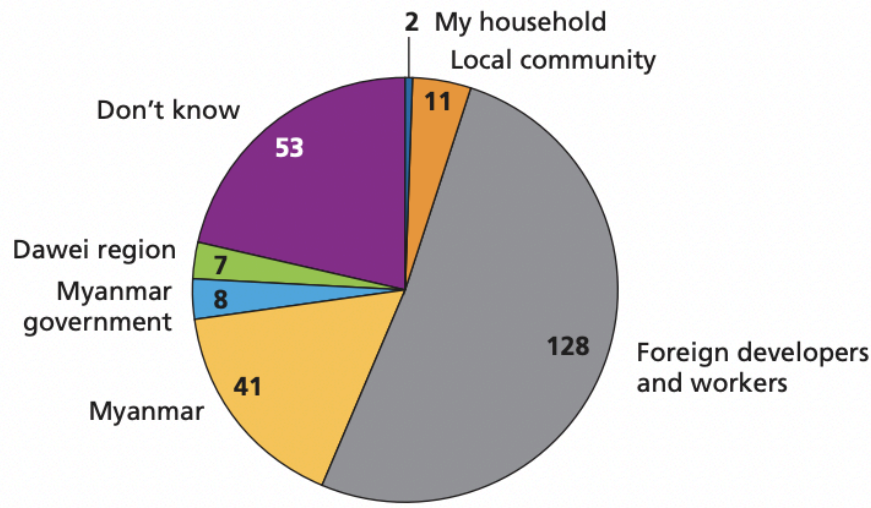
### Who Will Be Harmed Most by the Dawei Project?



*Fig. 4: Rand survey shows respondents believe the local community is most likely to be harmed by the Dawei SEZ project (Blank et al., 2019).*

Alternatively, Rand interviewers asked who was most likely to benefit from the Dawei SEZ, and most respondents said that foreign developers and workers would benefit (Fig. 5). This demonstrates that the local community in this case mostly views the project as parasitic: harming the community and the environment in exchange for benefits for foreign industries. The community's awareness of the benefits and losses of their land contrasts sharply with goals to "civilize" the backwater areas of Myanmar—the local community has demonstrated their power to organize against harmful environmental hazards.

### Who Will Benefit Most from the Dawei Project?



*Fig. 5: Rand survey shows most respondents from the local community believe foreign developers and workers will benefit the most from the Dawei SEZ project (Blank et al., 2019).*

### *What do these case studies mean for development in Myanmar?*

Myanmar is viewed by foreign developers as a resource-rich country with weak environmental regulations—therefore, it is both a magnet for extractive industries and a sink for industrial pollution exported from other countries with stronger environmental regulations. In the process, many of Myanmar's people are actively dispossessed of their land with the purpose of turning it into sites of extreme environmental degradation and extractivism, particularly beneficial for foreign core countries.

Those who lost their land are acutely aware their communities are losing out due to SEZ projects and have organized or negotiated for better outcomes. Many incidents of Myanmar's civil unrest are because of land grabbing disputes, mainly by Chinese companies, and in the Blank et al. (2019) survey, respondents knew their communities suffered losses in favor of foreign developers and workers. Furthermore, the SEZ takeover process is often incredibly violent; while resistance to land grabbing is expected, coercion, intimidation, threats, and imprisonment frame the Myanmar government as the neoliberal disposessor, participating actively in the disenfranchisement and marginalization of its own people. The government's concessions of sovereignty to foreign developers for the explicit purpose of FDI accumulation is a subversive way of diminishing the personal freedoms of its own citizens.

Therefore, the weak environmental laws of Myanmar are deliberate: fashioned to facilitate foreign investment, development, and ultimately, pollution—connecting to Richardson (2004)'s idea of "regulatory chill," in which weak laws are produced to attract dirty industries from other countries. Myanmar's authoritarian government *invites* its own future hardships by

vesting undue power to its SEZs and their developers, allowing them to effectively craft, execute, and enforce their own laws with little oversight from the government, which apparently takes an “any investment is good investment” approach towards FDI.

Myanmar’s use of the Land Nationalization Act, the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law, and the Farmland Law allow the authoritarian government to appropriate massive amounts of land for business. As Clapp (2020) states, “Passage of the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Act by parliament has had the unfortunate effect of facilitating land grabbing in ethnic minority areas because so much of their land has not been formally recognized or given individual title.” These laws give the government power to claim all land as theirs regardless of who is living on it, disregard customary land titles, and dispossess ethnic minorities, as demonstrated by SEZ area selection. Because Myanmar’s SEZs are owned by Japanese and Chinese companies, we can see their desire to bind Myanmar’s economy closely to their own: effectively, Myanmar is the resource well and sink—the periphery—for wealthier countries.

### **Laos: Casino SEZs, Chinese “Golden Cities,” and Displacement**

Part of the drive for FDI is Laos’ policy to turn land into capital (Brown, 2018). While most of their FDI is invested in extractive industries, of the twelve SEZs in Laos, three have (or had) casinos. Though gambling is illegal in Laos, ethical and political exceptions are made to foster economic development (Sims, 2017). China is the original developer of two of the three casino SEZs described here, which is interesting because gambling is *also* illegal in China, however, only on its own soil (Sims, 2017).

Lao people are extremely resistant to land grabbing. Most land in Laos is populated, and Lao citizens are no longer easily willing to give up their land (Kenney-Lazar & SiuSue, 2020). Chinese developers in particular resort to extremely violent means of land grabbing, followed by the establishment of SEZs physically and economically hostile to the local population. Laos people are underemployed at the SEZs due to language barriers, antithetical to the stated goal of SEZs to reduce unemployment. Because of Lao unemployment, Chinese developers allow Lao people to return to the land and practice agriculture again (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Laungaramsri & Sengchanh (2018) explain how “vegetable seeds were provided to 20 families who joined the project along with small patches of land to grow organic vegetables. According to the contract, the company was accountable for providing the necessary knowledge and purchasing the produce. But when the vegetables were ripe and harvested, the company was absent and the produce was left to perish.” Laungaramsri and Sengchanh (2018) posit that the SEZs create a new class: an SEZ peasantry, subject to the sovereignty of the developer who removed them from their land in the first place. The following three SEZs (Golden Boten, Golden Triangle, and Savan-Seno) demonstrate the power of Chinese SEZ developers, the civilizing culture, and the effects of displacement on the Lao people.

#### *Golden Boten SEZ*





create its own laws (Nyíri, 2017a). After the discovery that the privately-run security force for the SEZ tortured gamblers, China released a statement telling gamblers to desert the casino and avoid Laos (Nyíri, 2017a). For a long time, the casinos and hotels of Golden Boten SEZ remained abandoned: a reminder of the “dead vice economy” for Chinese tourists (Sims, 2017).

In 2016, new plans to reopen Golden Boten SEZ were revealed. Haicheng, the company that owns the SEZ, connected the newly designed SEZ to China’s BRI, reimagined as a transportation hub and urban center (Dicarlo, 2022). Proposed developments include agriculture, manufacturing parks, and a golf course (Dicarlo, 2022). The construction team also created an “authentic Lao village” where tourists can view Lao people making traditional handicrafts (Dicarlo, 2022). This only solidifies the “backwards” attitude Chinese developers take towards Laos and its people: wealthy, “civilized” Chinese tourists can ogle Lao people making crafts in simple huts on display.

### *Golden Triangle SEZ*



*Details:* Location: Bokeo Province. Considerations began: 2007. Investors: Kings Romans Group. Reason: On the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Number of people displaced: hundreds. Ethnic groups concerned: Akha, Hmong and Khmu peoples (Minority Rights Group, 2023a; Unknown).

The Golden Triangle SEZ, majority owned by the Golden Kings Romans Group, has turned the northern Laos frontier into an urban Chinatown (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). The success of this SEZ is important to the Laos government because it has a 20% stake in the SEZ (Sims, 2017). As a result, illegal activities are brushed under the rug. The Laos government commends the SEZ because it transformed the “wild/drug frontier” into a developed city (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Despite the transformation, inside the SEZ, gambling, prostitution, drug use, and wildlife trafficking are allowed (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Reports of human trafficking were substantiated in a meeting I had the pleasure of attending with James Forster, a member of the Adrianople Group, who conducted investigative journalism in the Golden Triangle SEZ. Forster shared images and descriptions of the apartment blocks where trafficked people lived: windows blacked out and barred, air conditioning units to cool CPUs in every window, and dangerously crowded and cramped conditions (Forster, 2025). He described how his team helped one woman escape who paid her way out of the human trafficking ring (Forster, 2025).

To establish the SEZ, Lao farmers were uprooted from their land despite farmers' efforts to negotiate (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). The Chinese civilizing mission exacerbated displacement—the Chinese developers viewed the ethnic, northern Laos people as uncivilized<sup>7</sup>, and therefore proceeded as though their development would bring significant benefits even for those displaced (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Chinese developers also planned to change the forms of agriculture in northern Laos, primarily through preventing swidden agriculture and opium cultivation. Swidden agriculture is associated with issues of deforestation, which is notable, however the two villages displaced by the SEZ, Khuan and Si Boon Hueang, had permanent agricultural fields and rice paddies (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Due to the perceptions of northern Lao people as backwards and uncivilized, relocation was not consulted with the community and villagers were forced to organize for decent outcomes on their own.

Laungaramsri & Sengchanh (2018) explain how villagers resisted the SEZ by going to the government, demanding the cancellation of the SEZ, but met denial because the government already approved the SEZ without the permission of the people living there. Afterwards, district officials travelled to the villages to persuade the villagers to accept the Chinese developers deal, but they shared false information on the status of the SEZ and compensation plan. After numerous letdowns by the government, in 2014, villagers blocked construction by preventing measurements of a new parcel of land designated for the SEZ, a rare moment of resistance against the police armed with AK-47s (Radio Free Asia, 2014; Tan, 2017). Though officials conceded to the wishes of the villagers about the additional land concession, unable to unite against the SEZ and the government, the villagers settled for little compensation.

For the villagers of Khuan and Si Boon Hueang displaced by the SEZ, relocation does not equate to poverty reduction (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Golden Kings Romans Group built new homes for the displaced villagers, which at first seemed nice, but later deteriorated

---

<sup>7</sup> Nyiri (2006) writes, “two Chinese public security officials characterize Laos as a ‘rather ... backward country’ that ‘has begun to wake from its thousand-year slumber, particularly with China's increasing strength and prosperity next door’.”

quickly because of their cheap construction. Many villagers used their compensation money to fix the homes the Chinese developers built. In their efforts to encourage “modern” forms of agriculture, the Chinese developers created a contract for organic agriculture, but when it came time to purchase the produce, the company was absent (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). The SEZ developers purchased auto rickshaws for displaced Lao people to earn money through tours, but these were unpopular and eventually failed (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Golden Kings Romans Group claimed they would hire Lao people displaced by the SEZ at the casinos and SEZ, however, they reneged on their promise and instead almost exclusively hired foreign workers (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). The destruction of the villages included the destruction of a culturally important, historic Buddhist temple (Sims, 2017), showing the developer’s lack of respect for culture, and further disconnecting the villagers from their community and other support systems.

Because gambling is illegal in Laos, Lao nationals are not allowed to enter the casino for gambling purposes, however, they are still present in the casinos (Sims, 2017). Gambling debts have ruined Lao communities. The casinos offer exchanges of personal assets to alleviate gambling debts, causing more harm to the communities already eviscerated by the creation of the SEZ (Sims, 2017). Suicides, imprisonment, and gambling violence cause great harm to local communities. Further exacerbating tensions, the casino is patrolled by a private-security policing company and Lao policemen, though gambling-related violence persists. In my meeting with Forster, he revealed that the owner of the Kings Romans Casino in the SEZ is defended by personal bodyguards from the Laos army (Forster, 2025).

The fertile agricultural land the SEZ claims is, since removal of the villagers, not effectively utilized (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). In addition, hydroelectric dams, mining, and plantations are some of the plans for land-use in the SEZ, highlighting the desirable extractive industries that attract FDI, particularly from China (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018). Forster described how the zoo, located in the center of the SEZ where animals were showcased in terrible conditions, was moved to a covered area after activist scrutiny—though conditions for the animals remained the same (Forster, 2025). Golden Kings Romans Group’s gambling-related capital comes with goals to build roads and schools, meanwhile selling wildlife and intensifying agriculture (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018), demonstrating that development is two-faced: it is often beneficial for human development yet brutally exploitative to people and biodiversity. Meanwhile, Golden Kings Romans Group continues to spout that their efforts will effectively eliminate poverty, which remains to be seen (Laungaramsri & Sengchanh, 2018).

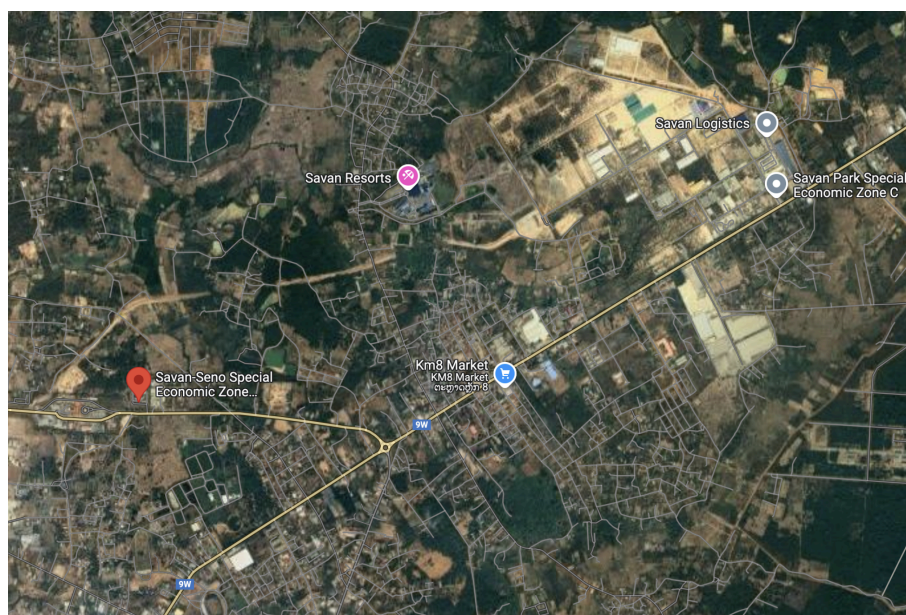
Despite illegally gaining much of its profits, it is difficult to shut down the SEZ for multiple reasons. First, inside of the SEZ, many people operating licit businesses would suffer as a result of losing them (Forster, 2025). Though Laos and Thailand are both aware of the human trafficking occurring in the zone,<sup>8</sup> Laos’ GDP depends on the illegal scams operated by trafficked

---

<sup>8</sup> There are human trafficking warnings on the Lao and Thai sides of the SEZ, though not inside

people (Forster, 2025), as well as Laos' 20% stake in the affairs of the SEZ. The SEZ's continued operation is important for Laos' economy, despite the harms the SEZ causes.

### *Savan-Seno SEZ<sup>9</sup>*



*Details:* Location: Savannakhet. Considerations began: 2003. Investors: Government of Laos, Japan External Trade Organization. Reason: Close to a major road and a strategic bridge. Number of people displaced: unknown. Ethnic groups concerned: Lao Luom peoples (Advertorial Desk, 2025; Investment Promotion Department, 2021; Minority Rights Group, 2023a).

The Savan-Seno SEZ includes factories and a casino, Savan Vegas, which closed in 2012 due to unpaid taxes exceeding \$23 million (Sims, 2017). Originally intended to be government-run, the SEZ was sold to Japanese investors in 2013 (Nyiri, 2017b). Products created in the SEZ's factories, such as wire, textiles, automobile parts, and wood products, are finished in other countries, particularly Thailand (Brown, 2018; Investment Promotion Department, 2021). SEZ developers can profit off the cheap labor and tariff waivers that are part of the SEZ's incentive package (Brown, 2018). The Savan-Seno SEZ reinforces the core-periphery model. Laos is a periphery because its factories in the Savan-Seno SEZ do not produce finished goods. The factories operate for the explicit purpose of selling goods to wealthier countries, such as Thailand, China, or Japan.

<sup>9</sup> It was difficult to find more than basic information on this SEZ—particularly about land grabbing—compared to the others on this list. While it did have a casino in the past, there is little evidence of abuses similar to Golden Boten or Golden Triangle.



On the Laos SEZ government landing page, the Savan-Seno SEZ's plans are graphically represented. Shops, hotels, sports centers, industrial centers, and residential areas are planned for the region (SEZO, 2025). The plan for Savan-Seno "Site D" includes a residential development for those displaced (SEZO, 2025), which is hopefully of better quality than the housing in Golden Triangle SEZ.

*What do these case studies mean for development in Laos?*

While Myanmar's developers are driven by the resource-rich environment to prop up extractive industries, developers are interested in Laos for different reasons. Though Laos is also resource rich, a few of their SEZs focus on gambling—particularly, casinos for the wealthy Chinese. In Laos, people are displaced on two fronts: first, they are displaced for the pleasure cities created for Chinese tourist leisure, and second, for the more subtle extractive industries accompanying them. For example, the Golden Triangle SEZ and the Savan-Seno SEZ possess casinos as well as mining, dams, and factories. Land grabbing in Laos is used to disenfranchise, dispossess, and marginalize the (particularly ethnic) people on the land, as well as replace groups with wealthier, mostly Chinese people, culture, and ways of life.

In Laos, SEZ's are "drug enclaves," where drug lords act as powerful neoliberal entrepreneurs, transforming the frontier into hotspots of modernity (Tan, 2017). Investors tap into Laos' lucrative agricultural, mining, and casino sectors, since Laos is less competitive than its neighbors for extractive industries (Tan, 2017). Gambling and the vice economy provides attractive claims to freedom, both economic and bodily—in the SEZs, one is free to participate in drug and sex culture without the fear of persecution, as long as you can pay (Nyíri, 2017a). Coupled with the massive growth of the garment and tourist industries in Laos, the country is also suffering from massive debts and inflation (Amnesty International, 2025; Ciocchini & Greener, 2023). Laos' economy is dependent on China's, and as a result, there is a widespread use of foreign currency in the country, as well as in the Golden Triangle SEZ, where only Chinese and Thai currencies are accepted (Bird & Hill, 2010; Forster, 2025).

Lao people are resistant to land grabbing, but are ultimately dispossessed of their land en masse. The authoritarian government of Laos gives undue power to the corporations to compensate people for their land, power that is not easy to disrupt or overcome. The power imbalance between government-backed development and organized villager groups unfairly advantages the SEZs. The land itself is valued more when left fallow in the Golden Triangle SEZ, showing how the government does not value subsistence livelihoods. In fact, the government devalued its own people, seeing its displaced citizens as unproductive bodies in need of civilization and industry, despite their willingness to organize around the health of their environment and adequate compensation for their land.

## **Discussion**

Special Economic Zones in Laos and Myanmar result from the government's efforts to attract foreign capital, facilitated by weak environmental and human rights regulations. Land laws are deliberately used to forcibly remove people from their land, titled or otherwise (Ciocchini & Greener, 2023). In the same vein, SEZs are both a product of foreign investment and the driver of foreign investment; their creation is encouraged by the desire for FDI and, once created, capitulate the creation of more SEZs, more FDI, more intensive extractivism, and more displacement. Thereby, authoritarianism *encourages* FDI and its associated implications of extractivism, and, unsurprisingly, displacement and other human rights abuses. Authoritarianism in Laos and Myanmar also enables the countries to become peripheries, as the governments incentivise FDI, implicitly allowing the land to become the periphery in exchange for the wealth of the foreign core.

While well-meaning environmental regulation exists in Laos and Myanmar, it is confounded by market-oriented reforms, authoritarian overbearance, and the general challenges of doing business in those countries (Bolesta, 2017). Furthermore, decent environmental regulation cannot exist without a sound defense of human rights. Humans are inherently a part of nature, and access to clean water, unpolluted air, a healthy environment, and shelter are undoubtedly human rights. The environmental regulation in Laos and Myanmar that would otherwise protect these rights are subtly overwritten by the countries' desires to capitalize. Not only is there little governmental support from the militaristic powers ruling the countries, but their goals to increase capital accumulation are often antithetical to environmental regulation. The market views the environment only as a mine for natural resources or a sink for pollution, disregarding the ecosystem services, cultural significance, human health, productivity gains, and other benefits a healthy environment possesses—benefits not easy to quantify.

Any firm under a regime with strict environmental regulations would be foolish not to export their business somewhere with looser environmental regulations. China, Thailand, and Japan, amongst others, export their pollution to more willing recipients who desire the benefits of a development partnership, such as Laos and Myanmar. If Laos and Myanmar desire to incentivize firms to invest in their countries, they will not produce strong or extensive environmental regulations. For an unchecked SEZ to exist, it needs to be developed under a body of weak environmental and SEZ regulation, with little oversight by local authorities and the support of the central government: elements that Laos and Myanmar possess and replicate to strengthen and actualize more SEZs. At the same time, the success of the extractive SEZs in Myanmar and in the case of the Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos incentivizes further regulatory chill, the success of each SEZ commencing weaker laws in a vicious cycle.

The rise of SEZs takes forbearance over the rights of displaced people, demonstrating the stark reality that human life and wellbeing is systematically monetarily valued during the SEZ approval process. The case study SEZs show how the wealth of SEZs rarely directly benefits the displaced, favoring the rights of the investor and the development project itself. From the poorly built homes for the displaced in the Golden Triangle SEZ, development policing forces armed with assault rifles, and the indiscriminate shelling and blocking of basic services for community

members by the military at the Kyaukphyu SEZ, the violent, disparaging takeovers of southeast Asian land by foreign powers truly shows how the government, FDI investors, and military value the people they displace.

For Chinese<sup>10</sup> investors, displaced bodies and livelihoods are valued in the process of the SEZ sale: the value of their compensation and labor potential are important to the investor. China's relationship with poor countries is neocolonial, casting Laos and Myanmar as colonial backwaters identified by intense exploitation coupled with massive reforms (Brown 2018; Nyíri, 2017a). The roads, schools, and other services built by the Chinese developers in the SEZs, once thriving communities, define a colonialist relationship with the people and land. Systems of knowledge, local governance, culture, language, community, and lifestyles are completely replaced with Chinese infrastructure, schools, languages, agriculture, homes, and other practices. For the Chinese investor, the SEZ human capital is an extension of Chinese domination; the pressure to conform alienates and marginalizes those who resist, breaking up community organizing and resistance.

The authoritarian governments of Laos and Myanmar are complicit actors in the civilizing missions, however. The desire for FDI and a piece of the global capital pie denies the lifestyles of many of their own citizens, who are devalued because they lack capital productivity. Subsistence farmers do not contribute to the industrial complex. Their fulfillment exists outside of the goals of the authoritarian, market-oriented state. The capital-rich Chinese and the authoritarian Asian Tigers naturally become the goal for Laos and Myanmar, countries far more industrialized, productive, capitalistic, and pollutive. Their success as authoritarian "free trade states" is the ideology to replicate (Nyíri, 2017a). The SEZs enable Chinese values to permeate the two countries. Laos and Myanmar allow the "civilization" of their own people, regardless of successful organizing attempts and tangible results gained by villagers in the negotiation process.

If civilization is the goal for Chinese SEZ investors, then what is the environment to them? Is the environment an extension, too, of the neocolonialist civilizing mission? Under the command of the SEZ and its investors, the environment no longer belongs to the people who steward and depend on it. Rather, the environment is something to be brought under control: a factory spewing carbon emissions into the air, a plantation of intense agricultural exploitation, a mine with rigid mechanical extractive processes, or a dam, controlling the powerful flow of water for the private gain of the foreign power who built it. The CMEC projects, including the Kyaukphyu SEZ, for example, are projected to disastrously change the environment for 24 million people for the benefit of investors. Almost all of the SEZs desire to exploit the natural environment within their jurisdiction as well as subjugate displaced bodies. Goals of the explored SEZs include changes in land use eliciting control over the environment. For authoritarian regimes, command is essential, and it extends to the land under the control of authoritarianism as well.

---

<sup>10</sup> I found little evidence to suggest that Japan was participating in similar neocolonial civilization processes, though further research may offer new insight. Thus, only China will be explored here.

Upland ethnic minorities are drawn into development schemas (Brown, 2018), through authoritarianism's mechanism of land grabbing to exert control and "civilization" over people and land. Land grabbing displaces established communities, thus disbanding any organized resistance against authoritarianism, silencing the marginalized through dispossession of shelter, food systems, and cultural spaces, and disrupting established practices of agriculture and land stewardship. Land grabbing turns ethnic bodies into a productive, "civilized" working class and the land into a binary resource well and pollution sink. SEZ land grabbing is not a necessary evil for the development of the underdeveloped; it is a deliberate process intended to quell resistance against authoritarianism, further marginalize particular groups, and demand industrial conformity. SEZs destroy mobility: displacement disrupts societies and demands more permanent living conditions, including permanent fields, homes, and workplaces, such as the factory jobs in SEZs. As Brown (2018) argues, mobility deprives capitalism—mobile societies are not tied to industrial mechanisms and do not produce capital for the state.

Displaced peoples, however, are not passive victims of development agendas. As proven by the protests and other organizing in Kyaukphyu, Thilawa, Dawei, and Golden Triangle SEZs, displaced villagers are active in negotiating for better development outcomes, regardless of the obscene difference in power relations. Villagers have protested against armed policing forces and have been effective enough, in many scenarios, to attract the attention of political leaders who have the means of shutting down portions of the projects. They actively resist civilization schemes and are wary of the goals of developers: after witnessing land grabbing mechanisms destroy neighboring communities, ethnic communities are vigilant in demanding adequate compensations.

How do casinos fit into the human/environment value paradigm? The Chinese-operated casinos in Laos are a less obvious obfuscation of turning land and ethnic bodies into capital. Despite the illegal practices occurring in the Chinese casinos, especially in Laos—where gambling is illegal—the casinos act as sites of civilization themselves. Though the casinos are sites of reported drug use, they replace sites of rural opium cultivation. The drug scene is more valued and civilized as it no longer happens in the resisting ethnic frontier, rather, in a highly developed casino populated by wealthy Chinese expats. Conjointly, the Chinese "golden cities" implicitly enforce "civilized" Chinese culture by only hiring Lao people who speak Mandarin, as in the case of the Golden Boten SEZ, or by participating in the desires of the casino, such as giving tours or growing the crops desired by the Chinese investors, as in the case of the Golden Triangle SEZ. In turn, the Lao people who *are* gambling are valued themselves, trading their assets to alleviate gambling debts. Thus, while the casino more subtly controls and values the environment and bodies, it shares similar mechanisms to industrial SEZs.

The hypocrisy of the casino SEZs simply reflects authoritarian control. Casinos are not allowed in Laos, except, apparently, if you are wealthy or Chinese. Certainly, poor and non-Chinese people are found in the SEZ casinos, but their assets are traded to alleviate gambling debts, thus bringing violence, incredible economic loss, and social ills back to their

communities. The casino benefits some groups but cruelly disadvantages others. The message is clear: follow the rules of “civilization,” and you can have all this.

Foreign developers constantly value people and land to find the most affordable way to maximize production. Poor authoritarian regimes, desiring capital, remove safeguards on their own laws to attract capital from abroad. To make space for developers, the authoritarian governments of Laos and Myanmar intentionally displace ethnic minorities, sacrificing them to the brutalities of policed development projects overseen by investors who deem dispossessed villagers as barbaric. SEZs turn self-sufficient people into dependent laborers with few means of organization and resistance against mega development projects.

### **Conclusion**

SEZs are powerful tools used by governments to support market-oriented reforms, however, they are also used to steal land from ethnic minorities, the poor, subsistence farmers, and other groups. The six SEZs explored in this argument are examples of violence, displacement, and the valuation of land and people. SEZs and land grabbing are topics of unrest in Laos and Myanmar, fueled by the oppressive nature of their governments, as well as a history of ethnic cleansing and negative attitudes towards particular communities catalyzed in the SEZs themselves.

In addition to SEZs being oppressive towards displaced people, they are also often oppressive towards the environment. The land constituting an SEZ is treated not as land to be maintained and stewarded but as a well for natural resources and a sink for unchecked pollution. The environmental regulations in Laos and Myanmar are not effective enough to demand that SEZs should use the best available technology to avoid pollution, yet, these laws are ineffective by design in order to incentivize FDI.

The authoritarian regimes of Laos and Myanmar have solidified their place in the global market as peripheries: sites of intense extractivism performed by foreign countries, not for the benefit of the host but for the benefit of large urban areas elsewhere. Using land grabbing as a vehicle to displace ethnic minorities and expand capital accumulation, Laos and Myanmar are deliberately dispossessing their own people for the extraction of their natural resources for wealthier countries.

## Bibliography

- Advertorial Desk. (2025). JETRO Vientiane celebrates 10th anniversary, strengthens economic cooperation with Laos. *Vientiane Times*.  
[https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freenews/freecontent\\_052\\_JETRO\\_y25.php](https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freenews/freecontent_052_JETRO_y25.php)
- Aggarwal, A. (2022). Special economic zones in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand growth triangle: opportunities for collaboration. *Asian Development Bank*.  
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/772536/special-economic-zones-imt-growth-triangle.pdf>
- Amnesty International. (2025). Laos 2024. Amnesty International.  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/laos/report-laos/>
- Aritenang, A. F., and Chandramidi, A. N. (2020). The impact of special economic zones and government intervention on firm productivity: the case of Batam, Indonesia. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 56(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2019.1643005>
- Asia News Monitor. (2014). Myanmar (Burma): U.N special rapporteur for human rights says Myanmar is witnessing ongoing human rights violations. *Asia News Monitor*.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1501379296/fulltext/80A1FAA0B6A543BAPQ/1?accountid=14523&sourcetype=Newspapers>
- Aung, T. S. (2018). Postcolonial capitalism and the politics of dispossession: political trajectories in southern Myanmar. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 17(2).  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26572844>
- Aung, T. S., Overland, I., Vakulchuk, R., and Xie, Y. (2022). The environmental burdens of special economic zones on the coastal and marine environment: a remote sensing assessment in Myanmar. *Remote Sensing Applications: Society and Environment*, 28.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rsase.2022.100809>
- Bain, S., Zarifi, S., Aguirre, D., Conte, A., and Seiderman, I. (2017). Special Economic Zones in Myanmar and the State Duty to Protect Human Rights. *International Commission of Jurists*.  
<https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Myanmar-SEZ-assessment-Publications-Reports-Thematic-reports-2017-ENG.pdf>
- Bird, K., and Hill, H. (2010). Tiny, poor, land-locked, indebted, but growing: lessons for late reforming transition economies from Laos. *Oxford Development Studies*, 38(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13600811003753776>
- Blank, J., Efron, S., and Migacheva, K. (2019). The project may serve the nation, but what about us, who live here? Villagers' views of the Dawei special economic zone, an internationally funded infrastructure project in Myanmar. *Rand Corporation*.  
[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2400/RR2416/RAND\\_RR2416.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2416/RAND_RR2416.pdf)



- Bolesta, A. (2017). The post-socialist development state in Asia. *Post-Communist Development: Europe's Experiences, Asia's Challenges*. Collegium Citivas.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Agnes-Szunomar/publication/324910047\\_Trade\\_and\\_investment\\_in\\_Central\\_Europe\\_the\\_lessons\\_of\\_transition\\_for\\_post-socialist\\_Southeast\\_Asia/links/5aead362aca2725dabb6589c/Trade-and-investment-in-Central-Europe-the-lessons-of-transition-for-post-socialist-Southeast-Asia.pdf#page=12](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Agnes-Szunomar/publication/324910047_Trade_and_investment_in_Central_Europe_the_lessons_of_transition_for_post-socialist_Southeast_Asia/links/5aead362aca2725dabb6589c/Trade-and-investment-in-Central-Europe-the-lessons-of-transition-for-post-socialist-Southeast-Asia.pdf#page=12)
- BRI Monitor. (2021). Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KP SEZ). *BRI Monitor*.  
<https://www.brimonitor.org/case-studies/kyauk-phyu-special-economic-zone/>
- Brown, J. A. (2018). Territorial (in) coherence: labour and special economic zones in Laos's border manufacturing. *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, 51(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12462>
- Brussevich, M. (2023). The socioeconomic impact of special economic zones: evidence from Cambodia. *The World Economy*, 47(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13526>
- Carter, C. and Harding, A. (2010). Special economic zones in Asian market economies. *Taylor & Francis Group*. ISBN:9780203841860
- Chaisse, J., and Ji, X. (2020). The pervasive problem of special economic zones for international economic law: tax, investment, and trade issues. *World Trade Review*, 19(4).  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474745620000129>
- Chung, K. (2023). East Asians' understanding of democracy: how income inequality prioritizes components of democracy. *New Democracy and Autocratization in Asia*, Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003271055>
- Ciocchini, P., and Greener, J. (2023). Regimes of extreme permission in southeast Asia: theorizing state-corporate crime in the global south. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 63(5). <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azac091>
- Clapp, P. (2020). The intersection of investment and conflict in Myanmar. *United States Institute of Peace*, 463. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24910>
- Competitive Industries and Innovation Program (CIIP). (2017). Special economic zones: an operational review of their impacts. *The World Bank Group*.  
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/316931512640011812/pdf/P154708-12-07-2017-1512640006382.pdf>
- Dawei Special Economic Zone. (2025). Overview of Dawei SEZ. Dawei special economic zone management committee. <https://daweisezmc.com/content/overview-dawei-sez>
- DiCarlo, J. (2022). Boten special economic zone/Boten beautiful land. *The People's Map of Global China*.  
<https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/boten-special-economic-zone-boten-beautiful-land/>
- Earthrights International. (n.d.). Analysis of the Affected Communities' Rights and Remedies Under Myanmar Law and JICA's Guidelines. *Earthrights International*.  
[https://earthrights.org/wp-content/uploads/thilawa\\_briefer\\_-\\_earthrights\\_international\\_0.pdf](https://earthrights.org/wp-content/uploads/thilawa_briefer_-_earthrights_international_0.pdf)

- Earthrights International. (2025). Dawei Special Economic Zone. *Earthrights International*.  
<https://earthrights.org/case/dawei-special-economic-zone/>
- Farole, T. (2011). Special economic zones: what have we learned? *Economic Premise*, 64, *The World Bank*.  
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/275691468204537118/pdf/644300NEWS0Eco000PUBLIC00BOX361537B.pdf>
- Foreign Investment Advisory Service (FIAS). (2008). Special economic zones: performance, lessons learned, and implications for zone development. *The World Bank Group*.  
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/343901468330977533/pdf/458690WP0Box331s0April200801PUBLIC1.pdf>
- Forster, J. (2025, May 9th). Open Zone Map. *Adrianople Group*.<sup>11</sup>
- Frank, A. G. (1966). The development of underdevelopment. *New England Free Press*.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.33125049>
- Hsu. (2023). Implementation of Kyaukpyu SEZ, deep sea port project to be accelerated. *NP News*. <https://npnewsmm.com/news/658bf38ffcc3e45d444f5844>
- Investment Promotion Department. (2021). Savan-Seno special economic zone. *Ministry of Planning and Investment*.  
<https://investlaos.gov.la/where-to-invest/special-economic-zone-sez/savan-seno-special-economic-zone/>
- Kenney-Lazar, M., and Ishikawa, N. (2019). Mega-plantations in southeast Asia: landscapes of displacement. *Environment and Society*, 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26879599>
- Kenney-Lazar, M., and SiuSue, M. (2020). Variegated transitions: emerging forms of land and resource capitalism in Laos and Myanmar. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 53(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X20948524>
- Khandelwal, A. K., and Teachout, M. (2016). Special economic zones for Myanmar. *International Growth Centre*.  
<https://data.laos.opendevelopmentmekong.net/dataset/1c992b4a-7b98-4a62-9c53-575c97c4206d/resource/b1dff3d-acdb-4806-8b27-42419846d4bf/download/igc-sez-myanmar.pdf>
- Klimczuk, A., and Klimczuk-Kochańska, M. (2023). Core-periphery model. *Palgrave encyclopedia of global security studies* (pp. 239-245). Springer International Publishing.  
[https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-74319-6\\_320.pdf](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-74319-6_320.pdf)
- Kramer, T. (2015). Ethnic conflict and lands rights in Myanmar. *Social Research*, 82(2).  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44282108>
- Lao People's Democratic Republic. (2010). Decree on special economic zone and specific economic zone. *Lao National Committee for Special Economic Zone*.  
[https://data.laos.opendevelopmentmekong.net/en/laws\\_record/decreed-on-special-economi](https://data.laos.opendevelopmentmekong.net/en/laws_record/decreed-on-special-economi)

---

<sup>11</sup> This is a zoom meeting I had with James Forster on May 9th, 2025. Forster is a member of the Adrianople Group, a group that conducts research on SEZs.

- [c-zone-and-specific-economic-zone-in-the-lao-pdr/resource/d41c7adc-cb7f-42df-926e-2f2b1d544e0f](https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/Environmental-Protection-Law-2013%20Ed_English.pdf)
- Lao People's Democratic Republic. (2013). Environmental protection law. [https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/Environmental-Protection-Law-2013%20Ed\\_English.pdf](https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/Environmental-Protection-Law-2013%20Ed_English.pdf)
- Laungaramsri, P., and Sengchanh, S. (2018). Negotiating post-resettlement livelihoods: the Chinese special economic zone and its impact in northwestern Laos. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 40(4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2019.1524748>
- Linn, S. N. (2015). Myanmar: Conflicts over land in a time of transition. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(9). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24481518>
- Lyttleton, C., and Nyiri, P. (2010). Dams, casinos and concessions: Chinese megaprojects in Laos and Cambodia. *Engineering Earth: the impacts of engineering projects*, 1. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-90-481-9920-4\\_69](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-90-481-9920-4_69)
- Matsuzawa, S. (2023). Transnational NGO advocacy to address land grabbing injustices: the case of the Thilawa special economic zone in Myanmar. *Routledge Handbook of Global Land and Resource Grabbing*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003080916-35/transnational-ngo-advocacy-address-land-grabbing-injustices-setsuko-matsuzawa>
- McCarthy, S. (2016). Land tenure security and policy tensions in Myanmar (Burma). *Asia-Pacific Issues*, 127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06454>
- Minority Rights Group. (2023a). Laos. *Minority Rights Group*. <https://minorityrights.org/country/laos/>
- Minority Rights Group. (2023b). Myanmar. *Minority Rights Group*. <https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmar/>
- Nathan Associates Incorporated. (2003). Preparing the northern economic corridor. *Nathan Associates Inc, CPCS Upham Corporation, volume 1*. <https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/boten-special-economic-zone-boten-beautiful-land/#:~:text=relocated%20in%201995%E2%80%939396>
- Nur-tegin, K. (2014). Entrenched autocracy or new democracy: which is better for business? *Kyklos: International Review for Social Sciences*, 67(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/kykl.12052>
- Nyiri, P. (2006). The yellow man's burden: Chinese migrants on a civilizing mission. *The China Journal*, 56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066187>
- Nyiri, P. (2017a). 2 realms of free trade, enclaves of order: Chinese-built 'instant cities' in northern Laos. *The art of neighboring: making relations across China's borders*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1jd94h1.7>
- Nyiri, P. (2017b). 3 instant cities in the jungle: fantasies of modernity for whom? *Tourist utopias: offshore islands, enclave spaces, and mobile imaginaries*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n7qjgr.6>

- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2019). Perspectives on global development 2019: rethinking development strategies. *OECD Publishing*. ISBN: 9789264307926
- Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. (2014). The Myanmar special economic zone law, 2014. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/mya221961.pdf>
- Radio Free Asia. (2014). Lao Farmers Block Chinese Developer From Surveying Land for Airport Project. *Radio Free Asia*.  
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/farmers-04112014180934.html>
- The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. (2012). The Environmental Conservation Law 2012. *Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry*.  
[https://myanmartradeportal.gov.mm/kcfinder/upload/files/The%20Environmental%20Conservation%20Law\(Eng\).pdf](https://myanmartradeportal.gov.mm/kcfinder/upload/files/The%20Environmental%20Conservation%20Law(Eng).pdf)
- Richardson, B. J. (2004). Is East Asia industrializing too quickly? Environmental regulation in its special economic zones. *UCLA Pacific Basin law journal*, 22(1).  
[https://ucsc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CDL\\_SCR\\_INST/ojsif2/cdi\\_crossref\\_primary\\_10\\_5070\\_P8221022172](https://ucsc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CDL_SCR_INST/ojsif2/cdi_crossref_primary_10_5070_P8221022172)
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). The stages of economic growth: a non-communist manifesto. *The University Press*. Ebook ISBN: 9781839744211
- Shin, Y. (2022). Myanmar's broken democracy "disciplined" by the military. *New Democracy and Autocratization in Asia*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003271055>
- SiuSue, M., Overland, I., and Vakulchuk, R. (2020). Sharing the spoils: winners and losers in the belt and road initiative in Myanmar. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420962116>
- SiuSue, M., and Youyi, Z. (2017). From impediment to adaptation: Chinese investments in Myanmar's new regulatory environment. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341703600203>
- Sims, K. (2017). Gambling on the future: casino enclaves, development, and poverty alleviation in Laos. *Pacific Affairs*, 90(4). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44874714>
- Sims, K. (2021). Infrastructure violence and retroliberal development: connectivity and dispossession in Laos. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(8).  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1920831>
- Special Economic Zone Promotion and Management Office (SEZO). (2025). SEZs in Lao PDR. <https://www.laosez.gov.la/index.php/en/where-invest/sezs-in-laos>
- Tan, D. (2017). 7 Chinese enclaves in the golden triangle borderlands: An alternative account of state formation in Laos. *Chinese encounters in Southeast Asia: how people, money, and ideas from China are changing a region*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnrns.12>
- Thiha. (2019). Community affected by Zone B Implementation in Thilawa SEZ. *Paungkum Myanmar*.  
<https://paungkumyanmar.org/2019/10/29/community-affected-by-zone-b-implementation-in-thilawa-sez/>

- Thilawa Special Economic Zone. 2025. Welcome to Thilawa, Welcome to Myanmar. *Thilawa Special Economic Zone Management Committee*. <https://thilawasez.gov.mm/>
- Thwe, M. M. (2019). A study on local people perception on the implementation of Thilawa special economic zone. *Yangon University of Economics Master of Development Studies programme*.
- Unknown. (n.d.)<sup>12</sup>. Chapter 3: Golden Triangle special economic zone and changes to the Tonphueng border landscape. *Chiang Mai University*. [https://archive.lib.cmu.ac.th/full/T/2013/sudev40113ss\\_ch3.pdf](https://archive.lib.cmu.ac.th/full/T/2013/sudev40113ss_ch3.pdf)
- Zan, H. H. (2023). Myanmar troops blockade Kyaukphyu as China hits accelerator on Rakhine SEZ. *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-troops-blockade-kyaukphyu-as-china-hits-accelerator-on-rakhine-sez.html>
- Zeng, D. Z. (2021). The past, present, and future of special economic zones and their impact. *Journal of International Economic Law*, 24(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jiel/jgab014>

---

<sup>12</sup> Unknown author and date of this source. Likely a master's thesis from Chiang Mai University.