

Social Networks of Corruption in the Vietnamese and Lao Cross-Border Timber Trade

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Although corruption is a core issue in discourses on Southeast Asian states and the region's illegal timber trade, its specific meanings, characteristics, and role are poorly understood. Our ethnographic study of corruption and timber trade in the lower Mekong uncovers the relationships, dealings, and networks that enable illegal timber flows. We follow the disputed case of a shipment of high-value timber that originated in Laos and was seized by Vietnamese seaport customs officials in 2011. By examining the actors involved and their efforts to obtain the release of the timber, we reveal the complex and networked nature of relationships from local to national levels that enable illicit rosewood trade from Laos to Vietnam and onward from Vietnamese ports. At the same time, interactions between timber traders and state officials highlight the recursive relationship between 'private' and 'state' actors, and the scope for mobility between these categories. Our analysis challenges the current international and national emphasis on law enforcement as a means to tackle illegal logging. Instead, policy would be better founded on a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the socio-political relationships that characterise and perpetuate corruption across these multiple scales.

Keywords: Social networks; Corruption; Timber trade; Mainland Southeast Asia

Introduction

Narratives of corruption and anti-corruption often frame the practice in normative and unambiguous terms: as a morally reprehensible situation where public agents act for private benefit at public cost (Contreras-Hermosilla 1997). Development

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