Top Down or Bottom up Development? : The Dawei Road Link Project and the Reconfiguration of Social Relations (And Social Movements)

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Abstract

Myanmar’s political transformation towards a quasi-civilian government since 2011 has held profound implications for Tanintharyi Region, including a ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar military in 2012. A “roadlink” project that connects Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand to North of Dawei town, under construction since 2012, has significantly changed transportation access, and facilitated growing cross-border trade with Thailand. The roadlink, which connects to the Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been highly contested in terms of its impacts on local communities due to uncompensated loss of land and other impacts of resettlement, livelihood and culture, as well as overall weak public participation. More broadly, it facilitates investment in agribusiness and mining industries.

This paper examines the processes of conflict transformation underway along the roadlink. It is based on fieldwork conducted in 2013 and 2014 in villages along the roadlink, as well as indepth interviews with state, civil society and private sector actors in relation to the roadlink and associated Dawei SEZ.

The paper shows how domestic and transnational investments have evoked responses by local community groups and various civil society seeking to defend their right to livelihood, access to natural resources, and ultimately voice in any development process that affects them, transforming relationship between the central government, the KNU and the Karen people living along the road. In response to the transnational nature both of the investment and wider economic vision that it reflects, some local civil society groups have also built transborder collaborations with Thai civil society. The paper argues that in Tanintharyi Region, violent conflict has been replaced with new forms of conflict over access to and control over economic resources. We suggest that despite major power asymmetries, new spaces have emerged to challenge elite actors that represent both opportunities and
challenges for local development.