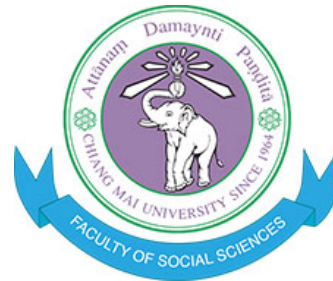


**International
Institute of
Social Studies**

**Erasmus
University
Rotterdam**



RRUSHES-5 -- Commodity & land rushes and regimes: Reshaping five spheres of global social life (food, climate change, labour, citizenship, and geopolitics)



European Research Council
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ICAS
Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies

The politics of agrarian transformations in Myanmar: A research and training initiative

‘The politics of agrarian transformations in Myanmar’ is a research and training initiative based at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Chiang Mai University in Thailand. It formally starts in January 2025. It aims to study the politics of agrarian transformations and their broader implications for society in Myanmar by looking into the dynamics of social relations around land access and control and how they shape and are shaped by broader spheres of social life. Therefore, the research covers wide-ranging themes, including agrarian relations, labour, migrant farmworkers, mining, fisheries, food politics and food sovereignty, climate change, geopolitics, governance and democratization, resistance and political struggles, war and peace.

It is located in and supported by the European Research Council Advanced Grant Project RRUSHES-5 (Project Number 834006) and the Erasmus Chairs programme for positive societal impact of Erasmus University Rotterdam under the initiative, ‘Democratizing Knowledge Politics’. The initiative is within the tradition of scholar-activism. The Initiative involves 5 PhD researchers, 3 postdoctoral fellows, 1 research associate – at least in its inception – all from Myanmar, and is coordinated by Jun Borras. The initiative has origins in an earlier research project in Myanmar funded by NWO (Mosaic research project, 2014-2018) in collaboration with Chiang Mai University led by professors Jun Borras and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, and in the ‘Activist Course for Activists’ program by the Transnational Institute (TNI), Paung Ku, Metta Development Foundation and KESAN. In addition to the critical support by each team member’s organization, the initiative receives support from RRUSHES-5, Erasmus Chairs program for positive societal impact at ISS of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), Chiang Mai University, International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and others.

**Members of the Myanmar Initiative Collective
(ISS/EUR Netherlands side)**



Sai Sam Kham

Sai Sam, a half Shan/half Myanmar Chinese, is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS, The Hague). His main supervisor is Professor Saturnino ('Jun') M. Borras Jr. His research explores how rural agrarian land politics shape the character and trajectory of national political regime transition in Myanmar during 2010-2020, and vice versa. And how that dynamics in turn shape the resistance against the 2021 military coup and its implications on agrarian politics. His dissertation is part of the global research project "Commodity & Land Rushes and Regimes: Reshaping Five Spheres of Global Social Life (RRUSHES-5)" led by Professor Jun Borras. Previously, he studied at Yadanarbon University and University of Computer Science in Mandalay, Myanmar, for his undergraduate degrees, and at the Schumacher College, Plymouth University for his MSc. He has been working with various civil society organisations in Myanmar since the early 2000s, mainly on social justice and rural agrarian issues such as agroecology farming, food sovereignty, rights to land, conflict, humanitarian works and accountability, rights of ethnic, religious, gender and sexuality minorities, rights of opium farmers and drug users, and socially engaged Buddhism. He was the former Executive Director of Metta Development Foundation.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borras (supervisor), Tsegaye Moreda and Yunan Xu (co-supervisors)



Gum Sha Aung (he, him)

Gum Sha, a Kachin, is the Executive Director of the Metta Development Foundation (Metta) since 2019. He has been working with various civil society organizations in Myanmar since 2000. His initial work focuses on the life of farmers and their social mobilization through farmer field school which is rooted in participatory action research and non-formal education. He was able to engage with farmers on the issue of their lands, seeds, natural resources and climate change at both grassroots and national level. Since COVID-19 and until now, he has been working with the broader platforms of civil society involved in humanitarian action as well as with food sovereignty networks. He earned his MA in Development Studies from Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin, Ireland in 2008.

His PhD research topic is ‘food sovereignty and the politics of land and landscape’. This research aims to study what are the challenges and possibilities of an idea of ‘landscape’ as key for food sovereignty building, in addition to studying food sovereignty in settings marked by violent conflicts and all out wars.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Tsegaye Moreda (co-supervisor), + a co-supervisor from Chiang Mai University



Phwe Yu Mon

Phwe locates her work primarily in grassroot communities and ethnic minority areas by taking different roles and positions in and through several civil society organizations for peacebuilding, governance and youth movement building in Myanmar and Southeast Asia since 2010. She has also worked on initiatives that aspire to prevent communal violence through organizing series of dialogues between different fundamentalist religious leaders during the period of escalating religious conflicts in 2014-2017. She earned a Master of International Relations from the Australian National University (ANU) in 2019.

Her current PhD research explores the democratic struggles of Burmese people in Bamar-dominated central state across different regimes in Myanmar. How has the struggle in the Bamar-dominated Dry Zone region been framed in terms of class and identity politics around exploitation and oppression? These questions are relevant to ask especially in multi-ethnic Myanmar where daily struggle against the Bamar-dominated state, state institutions and agencies have always been the domain of non-Burmese ethnic groups (Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Shan, etc.) and in which the main axis of conflict is ethnic in character. The politics of land – not only as productive resources (such as farmland) but also as a landscape and territory – is a fundamental strating point of my research.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Thea Hilhorst (co-supervisor), + a co-supervisor from Chiang Mai University



Yin Nyein

Yin Nyein is a Myanmar-based researcher with professional experience in research and development work on fisheries and natural resource governance since around 2009. His specialization is in policy advocacy and institutional building of the grassroots organization from village level to township, district, and up to the national level. Common pool resource management is also another area of his specialization and contributed to the better life of small-scale fishers by changing legal institutions for fishery sectors in many regions in Myanmar. He played a role in the fisher community's collective demand-making actions for reforms of neoliberal policies in the fishery sector. During the national regime transition period in 2010-2020, he worked in consultative processes of several regional governance bodies, while assisting local fisher communities in law-making processes.

His PhD research interests lie in studying the historically constructed social structures and moral economy values that shape the socio-cultural identity and social cohesion of coastal and riparian communities. The study will delve into the evolution of social inequality, class relations, and moral economy within small-scale fishery and riparian communities (seasonal peasants and landless) and how this shapes the emergent social order. The research will bring a longue duree perspective on governance and social order by linking with natural resource (land, water) governance and rural class dynamic analysis. It will examine how the social-cultural identity and social cohesion of coastal and riparian communities in lower and upper Myanmar were transformed by different political regimes and capitalist policies over time. Understanding social governance and cultural transformation from this angle will help clarify differences in collective movements, struggles and social order between lower and upper Myanmar.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Gerard McCarthy (co-supervisor), + a co-supervisor from Chiang Mai University



Myat Thet Thitsar

He is a co-founder and the Director of Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF) which operated as an independent non-profit research institute based in Myanmar from 2011 to 2021 until the military coup. He continues to do research on Myanmar in partnership with the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS) on the research works relating to issues of climate change in the context of armed conflict. He has experience in social research in the fields of political economy, social justice and climate change since 2008. At present, Myat Thet is doing longitudinal research works on public authorities and state-making in times of significant political ruptures since February 2021 in Myanmar. In addition to doing research, Myat Thet is continuously working on enhancing research knowledge and research capacity among Myanmar's civil society by provision of Social Research Methodology training.

The PhD project will examine how the political rupture caused by the military coup in Myanmar is reshaping the constitution of public authorities outside military-state control. A particular focus is on how new social contracts and forms of recognition are forged between people and emerging public authorities around natural resources – fundamentally about the politics of land as a productive resource, and as territory – within a context of violent conflict, resistance to military rule and pluralized authority. A range of claimants to authority who oppose military rule are now experimenting with new sub-national level governance arrangements and forms of authority through both collaboration and competition. A study of these emerging arrangements will contribute to empirical understandings of state formation in local arenas during political rupture. The proposed research will ask the following research questions: How will changing political economy of land and natural resources transform distributional consequences of power and authorities empowering some socio-political groups and disempowering others? What are the consequences of this transformed distribution of power and authority? How are new and old claimants to authority outside the military state seeking to produce *public authority* through the protection and bestowing of rights to natural resources among local populations of different ethnic, political and class groups? In what ways do the emergence of public authorities during the rupture reconfigure the relationship between people of different ethnic, political and class groups and natural resources? The geographical focus of research: Myanmar, especially ethnic nationality states: Kachin, Rakhine, Karenni and Chin states.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Helene Kyed, DIIS Denmark (co-supervisor), + a co-supervisor from Chiang Mai University



Pa Pa Phy

Pa Pa, a Mon-Burmese, is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS, The Hague). She holds MA degrees in Gender and Peace Building from University for Peace in Costa Rica, and Political Science from Ateneo de Manila University. Previously employed as a migrant worker in Thailand, she has been working with a local NGO on peace building, environmental sustainability and food sovereignty since 2008.

Her PhD research is on the political economy of land and migrant labor in the context of production and social reproduction, focusing on and inquiring into Myanmar's migrant farmworkers in Thailand. Her research will attempt to get a better understanding of the relationship between the political economy of land and labour in the context of an indivisible sphere of production and social reproduction. The axes of exploitation and oppression are necessarily intersectional: class, gender and generational – and in the context of Myanmar, also based on ethnicity and nationality. Her research will study a particular subgroup of migrant workers, those who have access to land in Myanmar, either for productive farm or everyday social reproduction, or both; meaning, they can be referred to as farmers, or belonging to a farming household; have migrant wage work, whether longer basis or seasonal and circular – as long as they remain rooted to Myanmar countryside manifesting in many ways: existing obligations to send money back home, thinking of Myanmar village as eventual retirement place or a place for convalescence, etc.; working in the agro-food sector in Thailand which the most popular destinations of Myanmar migrants.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Diana Suhardiman, Leiden University (co-supervisor), + a co-supervisor from Chiang Mai University



Myint Zaw

Dr. Myint Zaw earned his PhD in resources, environment and development from Crawford School of Public Policy at Australian National University (ANU), and an MA degree in International Development from Chulalongkorn University of Thailand. He is an environmental campaigner, civil society activist and writer. He published 12 books in Burmese on environment, civic movement and peace issues. He was a trainer on environmental journalism before he received the UC Berkeley Journalism fellowship in 2007. He was 2015 recipient of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia, and the 2024 recipient of the Niwano Peace Visionary Award. Currently he is engaging in educational initiatives for civil society activists and public awareness campaigns on peace and environment. He is the national coordinator-collaborator of the ISS/EUR-based ERC-funded RRUSHES-5 project led by Jun Borrás.



Paul Sein Twa

Paul is Executive Director and founder of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). Paul is the recipient of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2020, especially for his work on the Salween Peace Park. He is finishing an MA in Development Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok (2025).



Nwet Kay Khine

Dr. Nwet Kay Khine, a Mon, is a research coordinator at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) of Chiang Mai University. She is also affiliated as a research associate with the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counterstrategies based in Berlin supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Nwet joined the master's program for International Development Studies in Chulalongkorn University in 2006 and then continued her learning with the Erasmus Mundus master's in journalism, Media, and Globalization in the universities of Aarhus and Hamburg in 2010. She completed her doctoral study at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies in Mahidol University in 2019. Nwet conducted this research during her post-doctoral fellowship at the Passau International Centre for Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies (PICAIS) while she was hosted by Chair of Development Politics of Passau University. She also writes both fiction and non-fiction literature in Burmese.



Doi Ra

Dr. Doi Ra, a Kachin, defended her PhD dissertation in November 2024. She was part of the ERC-funded RRSHEs-5 project led by Jun Borrás. In her thesis, Doi Ra traced the political economy of historical evolution around land and labour relations under different regimes in Myanmar, starting from the pre-colonial era in the 1800s to the period of democratic transition and liberalization under the quasi-military/quasi-civilian government between 2011 to 2021. She then analyzed the contemporary land rushes that emerged after the 1994 ceasefire era and the 2010 state regime change. She examined how various features such as ceasefire capitalism, state territorialization, Burmanization, legacies of colonialism, geopolitics and development schemes came to form the 'historical present' landscape. Her conclusion is that contemporary land politics must go beyond 'merely environmental', purely agrarian and localist perspectives to struggle for a socially just future for all rural working people.

She is currently working as a researcher at the Transnational Institute (TNI), and continues to work with the RRUSHES-5 project.

PhD supervision team: Jun Borrás (supervisor), Tsegaye Moreda and Yunan Xu (co-supervisors)



Jun Borrás

Saturnino ('Jun') M. Borrás Jr. is a Filipino activist and professor of agrarian studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, and is part of the Erasmus Chairs program for positive societal change of Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. He is also an associate at the Transnational Institute (TNI), and Distinguished Professor at China Agricultural University in Beijing. He was the Editor-In-Chief of *Journal of Peasant Studies* for 15 years, until 2023. He is co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Land Politics* (2025), co-author of *Scholar-Activism and Land Struggles* (2023) and *Essential Concepts of Land Politics* (2025) – all with long-standing collaborator Jennifer C. Franco of TNI.



Tsegaye Moreda

Tsegaye Moreda is an Assistant Professor in Development Studies/Agrarian and Rural Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, The Hague) of Erasmus University Rotterdam and a founding member of the Young African Researchers in Agriculture (YARA) network based at PLAAS at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He is the deputy coordinator of the ERC research project RRUSHES-5 at ISS. He is an Associate Editor of *World Development*.