

C. Shifting Cultivators and Cultural Minorities: Introduction

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All the contributors who discuss issues of access to land and natural resources note a conflict between national governments, which tend to emphasize private property rights, and local communities, which practice varying forms of group-managed negotiation and enforcement of access to resources. This conflict between national and local practices is particularly acute for shifting cultivators who are also cultural minorities, because such people not only practice different forms of land tenure but also tend to differ from dominant social groups in language, religion, social organization, and so forth.

Cultural minorities also tend to live far from national capitals, often at the edges of nation-states, where they may share more in common with neighboring groups in bordering nation-states than with the dominant groups in their own. As a result, national elites often doubt their loyalty, suspecting them of collaborating with rival states or with wanting to assert political independence. Because ethnic minorities tend to live in remote regions, their lands often contain most of the remaining undammed rivers and uncut forests in the nation. Governments thus have good reason to exert control over such areas, not only to extend the supposed benefits of development to “backward” peoples by building roads, schools, and hospitals but also to exploit the local natural resources. Cultural differences between national elites and local groups, however, tend to exacerbate the misunderstandings between them. In the following articles Chupinit Kesmanee examines the false premises underlying government policies toward hill tribes in northern Thailand, and June Prill-Brett explores conflicts among customary, national, and international laws in the Philippines.