

# Chapter 12

## Powers of Access: Impacts on Resource Users and Researchers in Myanmar's Shan State



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### 12.1 Introduction

Research on resource use has at its core focused on what shapes people's access to natural resources, highlighting key issues ranging from conflict, state territorialization, market forces to social difference (Rocheleau/Edmunds 1997; Ribot 1998; Peluso 1996; Schroeder 1999). In Southeast Asia, scholars have contributed to broader understandings of the links between violence and access (Le Billon 2001; Hengsuwan 2013; Koubi et al. 2014; Peluso/Vandergest 2011), and recent work in Myanmar has shown how an increase in capital flow into regions as a result of ceasefire agreements has altered access to natural resource for people in these areas (Hunsberger et al. 2017; Woods 2011). Access rights, however, are not only property rights, but also include an ability to derive benefits, and this includes more than just material benefits like livelihoods, but also knowledge (Elmhirst 2011; Peluso/Lund 2011; Ribot/Peluso 2003). Yet, little to no research has interrogated the impacts of access on knowledge production and the broader links between research access and local resource access. In Myanmar, where this research is based, asking questions about researcher access is particularly salient. Due to a history of conflict and present conflicts, the forests along the Thanlwin River, particularly in Shan State, remains largely inaccessible to outsiders. This restricted access to researchers has made it difficult to investigate the impacts of decisions over natural resource access and use. In this chapter, I ask: in what ways does the changing political and governance conditions in Myanmar influence access to natural resources, not only concerning material objects like forest and river resources, but also forms of knowledge production?

To address this question, I carried out research between August 2015 to March 2016 in two villages in Shan State (Fig. 12.1: Map of Study Sites in Shan State, Myanmar) whose residents rely heavily on forest and river resources to provide for

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**Fig. 12.1** Map of study sites in Shan State, Myanmar. *Source* Cartography by Chandra Jayasuriya, University of Melbourne, with permission

their livelihoods. Both villages are also located near to the Thanlwin River, and would be impacted by the proposed Mong Ton dam. Formerly known as the Tasang dam, the Mong Ton dam is set to be the largest dam in Southeast Asia, with a reservoir that would impact people beyond these two village, overall an estimated 12,000 to over 120,000 people (International Rivers 2012; Salween Watch 2016; Maung 2016).<sup>1</sup> Research in these two Shan State villages finds that both the resource user and researcher must navigate their access through state and

<sup>1</sup>Discrepancy between reservoir and impact lies in the difference between pro-dam and anti-dam information notices.

semi-autonomous institutions and a terrain of informal and formal governance arrangements, environmental degradation, and shared identity.

To draw out these multifaceted dimensions of access—including researchers' and resources users'—I present this work in the following sections. First, I provide an overview of the concepts of access I draw on, before that access also affects knowledge production in this case. I then discuss the collaborative methods this project used and the tools we implemented to increase transparency for the research process. Next, I delve into the two case studies of North and South Village to highlight how the informal and formal governance, environmental degradation, and shared identity affect access for resource users and researchers. The findings highlight the complicated and co-produced relationships and mechanisms that surround access influence access. Additionally, this research finds that as these state and semi-autonomous institutions exercise their authority, the informal and formal governance mechanisms and the increase in environmental degradation from extraction activities increases the vulnerability of local communities and reduces their ability to benefit from natural resources.

## 12.2 Concepts: Expanding a Theory of Access

In “A Theory of Access”, Ribot and Peluso (2003: 153) “define access as the ability to benefit from things—including material objects, persons, institutions, and symbols.”

Access is gained, they argue, not only through property rights, but also through influencing power relations that can also influence the practices of others. This chapter seizes on this examination power and relations, regarding not only material objects like forest and river resources, but also forms of knowledge production.

Aspects and effects of access discussed in this paper draw on theorizations of access to understand first, the roles of formal and informal governance (Sturgeon 2004; Ribot/Peluso 2003: 2), second, environmental degradation (Blaikie/Brookfield 1987; Dove 1993; Forsyth 1996; Peluso 1996; Rocheleau 1995), and third, shared identity (Elmhirst 2011; Ribot/Peluso 2003) in influencing the ability to derive benefits. Formal and informal governance influences access authority through claims to a territory, that is legally sanctioned, locally negotiated, or simply socially acquiesced (Sturgeon 2004; Ribot/Peluso 2003).

In these links with governance, this chapter analyzes how state and semi-autonomous institutions' access to resources results in the degradation of those resources, which inhibits local community members from deriving benefits from those resources. Myanmar has a history of discourse that blames forest degradation on local people (Bryant 1997), but this chapter, instead, looks at the day to day impacts on local communities and their discourse regarding environmental degradation (Dove 1993; Forsyth 1996). Yet, in questions of access and what determines access for local communities, shared identity is also paramount in Myanmar. Shared identity includes memberships to a community or group, by age,

gender, ethnicity, or religion (Ribot/Peluso 2003) and can also help navigate access and increase cooperation (Drury/Stott 2001; Faria/Mollet 2014). Although people hold within themselves multiple and shifting intersections of identities that influence their interaction with others (Mohanty 2002; McDonald 2013), with the history of divisions along ethnic lines in Myanmar (Grundy-Warr/Wong Siew Yin 2002; Scott 2009) this chapter focuses on the shared identity of ethnicity.

Moreover, I augment this notion of access by also highlighting researcher access. These research sites are situated, and to ask questions about access involves asking questions not only about the resource users, but how we learn about them (Haraway 1988; Kobayashi/Peake 1994). This impact on researcher access requires a deviation from the self-determined forms of fieldwork geographers and anthropologists traditionally rely on (Caretta 2015; McKittrick/Peake 2005; Sundberg 2003). As such, this chapter takes political ecology's theorization of access and builds into it an inclusion of the researcher's role in the methods and analysis of these mechanisms. In doing so, I push research methods to be more transparent, particularly in conflict zones. This research seeks to avoid the practice that ignores both the role of the researcher in the research, but also the influence of politics, power, and authority on the research process (Faria/Mollett 2014; Hawkins/Ojeda 2011: 249).

Researchers, research assistants, interrupters and research participants are all part of the knowledge production process (Turner 2010: 216). Particularly in research that crosses cultures and languages, this knowledge is mediated through all actors and are influenced by their own beliefs, assumptions, fears, and preferences (Caretta 2015; Temple/Edwards 2002; Temple/Young 2004; Turner 2010). A 'triple subjectivity' of inward, self-reflexivity and outward, reflecting on the relations of others is needed then to understand the position of and interactions between researcher, research assistant, and research participant (Caretta 2015; Temple/Edwards 2002; Turner 2010).

To accomplish this, the project involved a collaboration with two researchers from different Shan civil society organizations (CSOs), with the pseudonyms of Mai and Wah. I facilitated the research project, negotiated with Mai and Wah's organizations for their support and time, and paid Mai and Wah and their research assistants. Acknowledging the situated unequal power relationship between me as a white, educated female working in a country that was once a British colony, employing two Shan researchers, I sought to facilitate a co-created research project that would subvert my situated power and give more voice to Mai and Wah. The relationship between Mai and Wah, however, was also unequal, as Wah was educated in Bangkok and had a firmer command of English, which is the language that we operated in—barring a few specific terms in Shan and Thai. What is presented in the rest of this chapter is a result of how we negotiated access to research sites and how we negotiated the uneven power relations between researcher, research assistant, and the researched (Caretta 2015; Haraway 1988; Kobayashi/Peake 1994). I detail this further in my research methods in the next section.

### 12.3 Research Methods: Collaboration in a Restricted Research Setting

This research took place between August 2015 and March 2016 in two villages along the Thanlwin River in Shan State on the border between South and East Shan State. The two villages in this study are subsistence communities that are remotely located with limited access to health care, education, and markets. Instead they rely heavily on forest and river resources to provide for their livelihoods. As noted above, the proposed Mong Ton dam poses a threat to these livelihoods. North Village is located roughly 200 km north of the proposed Mong Ton dam site and would be impacted by the flood zone of the reservoir (Salween Watch 2013). South Village, while located downstream from the dam site, would also be impacted by the change in water flow. This proximity and connection to the site of the proposed dam also adds a layer of restriction to already restricted area for researchers. These villages were at the time of research listed as “brown zones” which require special permission to access (described further below).

Taking these concerns and restrictions into consideration, the design of the research was based on feminist collaborative methods (Sharp 2005) developed alongside local researchers. At the two village sites, research was conducted in Shan language (the primary language of the researchers and the villagers) and in each village the data collected included a key informant interview, a group interview, a community drawn resource-use map, participatory learning activities (PLA) about village concerns, 12 semi-structured survey interviews, and researcher diaries (see Table 12.1: Number of Survey Interviews by Gender and Age Divisions). Off-site data collection also included a literature review on the relevant topics of land and water policies and laws, pending and present, as well as reports and publications from state and non-state agencies and institutions, and reflexive interviews, in English, with research team members.

**Table 12.1** Number of survey interviews by gender and age divisions

	South Village		North Village	
Total village population	199		116	
Total village households	60		27	
Total survey interviews	12		12	
Lead researcher	Mai		Wah	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total	3	9	6	6
No. of single young adults (a)	1	2	2	2
No. of married with children (b)	1	6	3	2
No. of elderly (c)	1	1	1	2

Source The author

### ***12.3.1 The Negotiation and Collaborative Research Approach Developed***

Mai, Wah, and I designed the research project and methods during a 3-day workshop, conducted predominately in English, in January 2016. During the workshop, we discussed our research backgrounds and to better understand our separate experiences and understandings of the research topic we conducted mock interviews. We also used participatory learning activities (PLA) to determine which research methods we had the most interest in using. Overall, the workshop allowed for the experiences, knowledges, and interests of Mai, Wah, and I to play a significant role in the design of the research.

Based on the workshop PLA activity we decided on using key informant interviews, group interviews that included PLA and resource mapping, survey-interviews, and a household inventory for our methods. Research questions centered on village histories, access to education and health care, agricultural practices, and use of forest and river resources. These questions were determined based on the sometimes separate and sometimes similar interests of Mai, Wah, and I. Selection criteria for the 24 survey interviewees were selected through a type of non-probability sampling via convenience/snowball where we ascertained which units should be observed based on our judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative (Babbie 2007: 193). Mai, Wah, and I decided to try to interview an equal number of men and women, and as per their suggestion, we decided to break the age categories based on family status, i.e. single young adults, married with family, and elderly (see Table 12.1: Number of Survey Interviews by Gender and Age Divisions).

Mai and Wah selected sites based on their organizations' association or interest in certain communities. Mai selected South Village, because she is from the same district and her organization had previously worked in that same community and had an interest in continuing to build that relationship. Wah selected the North Village because her organization had an interest to begin working with the community for education outreach purposes and North Village, like her organization, fell under the control of the Shan State Army (SSA) (Wah, 6 January 2015).

### ***12.3.2 Tools for Transparency***

To 'standardize' and make transparent the research process across research sites, with different researchers, we relied on a range of tools, including daily journaling and regular follow up. After the 3-day workshop, Mai and Wah had the same research template to work from in their respective villages. Wah and Mai then went and trained their research assistants. Wah visited North Village with five other employees from her organization. Mai visited South Village with just one other employee from her organization. All village researchers (including Mai and Wah)

wrote daily journals, noting what they did that day, what they learned, what challenges they encountered, and what they observed that they found interesting. These were then translated from Shan to English by Wah and Mai. Wah, Mai and I met again after the research was conducted, which gave me the opportunity to not only read all the translated interviews and journals, but to ask follow-up questions about the research and the research process, as well as the resource maps.

I also conducted reflexive “exit interviews” with Mai and Wah about their experiences in the villages and with the research process overall. The researcher journals and reflexive interviews allowed me the opportunity to have some insight into how the field research assistants and Mai and Wah positioned themselves within the research. Regarding data analysis, it allowed us to bring disparate data together, as a group spot trends and similarities across research sites, and it gave me an opportunity to clarify misunderstanding. I then coded the journals, reflexive interviews, key informant, group, and survey interviews using QSR NVivo11 software. Codes were development based on discussion topics and themes that emerged during the research process. The different sites and sources of data were then compared and contrasted. In the discussion below, all names are omitted from quotations.

## 12.4 Implications of Access

For North Village and South Village, we found that their access to natural resources are essential for their lives and livelihood. Both North Village and South Village have paddy fields along the riverbanks and practice *taungya* to grow food, including rice, for personal consumption. *Taungya* is the Burmese word for shifting cultivation, *taung* for hill and *ya* for cultivation. *Taungya* includes partial forest clearance, multiple cropping, shallow cultivation, and field rotation to produce food and sometimes cash crops (Bryant 1994: 226). It is a system, through use of a prolonged fallow phase that is longer than the cultivation phase, which allows woody vegetation to return to a site that had been cleared for annual crops (Brookfield 2015: 26). For swidden agriculturists, like both communities in this study, the ‘forest’ is a component of an integrated landscape that provides long-term and short-term benefits and products, including many non-timber forest products (NTFPs). As one interviewee stated, “*We use the forest resources every day. Because we have no market, we must go to the forest to find the food day by day*” (Interview 13, South Village, 3 February 2016). Yet, while both North and South village rely heavily on forest and river resources for their livelihoods, according to Myanmar State law,<sup>2</sup> all land in Myanmar remains state property and forest

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<sup>2</sup>In January 2016, the National Land Law Policy was accepted by the previous government of Myanmar. For the scope of this chapter, it has yet to be seen how this will be implemented.

products may not be extracted without a permit (EIA 2015; Scurrah et al. 2015; SLORC 1992). According to these laws, the Myanmar government has de jure rights to North and South Village and the surrounding forest areas.

### ***12.4.1 Informal and Formal Governance Impacts on Access***

This official designation of land ownership by the Myanmar government held significance for us as researchers. In South and North Village, at the time of the research, both communities were in government listed “brown zones.” As part of the previous military government’s four cuts strategy, which sought to sever connections between resistance groups and local populations (Meehan 2015), Myanmar was divided into three zones. While these zones change and alter according to conflict, and have much broader ramifications, they do influence where foreigners can travel. White zones, which include most of the major cities and much of the central valley of Myanmar, are areas where foreigners can freely travel. However, much of the periphery of the country is brown or black zone. Black zones prohibit travel from foreigners and brown zones requires special permission (Grundy-Warr et al. 1997). While not all researchers respect these designations, and through relationships with semi-autonomous institutions can find a way into ‘restricted’ zones, for this research, we chose to obey this regulation. This meant that only the Shan researchers could travel to the research sites, which then had direct implications on research project design and knowledge production, as was discussed above.

Although as researchers we chose to respect the access designation as defined by the Myanmar government, for resource users in Shan State, the answer to the question of *who* is exercising authority over access for resource users is not that simple. In practice, authority of access is enforced by state and semi-autonomous institutions, who independently or jointly control their access through custom and at times force (Callahan 2009; Jones 2014; Sai Aung Tun 2009).

For North Village, while de jure rights also technically rest with the Myanmar government, the SSA both governs the village and spatially controls access to the area and its natural resources. For example, it is the SSA, not the Myanmar government, that provides social services. The SSA recently built a water tank in the village for cleaner drinking water and, although the village does not currently have a school, four or five years ago SSA provided two Shan teachers who taught for two years. Moreover, if villagers are extremely ill, they will travel roughly 50 km to reach the SSA’s health clinic. In the past, the SSA also levied a 20% rice tax on the village; however, they now consider the village too small and no longer extract that tax (Group interview, South Village, 18 February 2016). In providing social services and extracting taxes, SSA enacts its spatial claim on North Village through custom and convention, albeit not law. According to the group interview, North Village acknowledges this territorial claim and 100% of interview respondents expressed that they did not feel that their access was restricted to forest resources.



Unlike North Village, South Village experiences more direct authority from a combination of the Myanmar government, Burmese military, and private-public and private-military partnerships. De jure land rights rest with the Myanmar government, and spatial access is maintained by force and coercion through the presence of the Burmese military and Lahu militia, which are financially backed through private-public partnerships (Kramer/Woods 2014: 65). The companies involved in the Mong Ton dam have hired the semi-autonomous Burmese military, who sub-contract with a local Lahu militia (Group Interview, South Village, 3 February 2016).<sup>3</sup> A 20-mile radius around the dam has been effectively cordoned off by both these armed groups (Samarkand 2015). The Lahu militia and the Burmese military both have an active presence around the dam site when workers are present, and their presence does influence South Village. As the headman described the situation: “*The Burmese military don’t stay in the village, but they do control it*” (Interview 13, South Village, 3 February 2016). By law the Myanmar government has authority over South Village, but in practice villagers perceive that the Burmese military has territorial control.

According to the group interview, the Mong Ton dam companies linked to the project—described by local communities as the broad category ‘Chinese’—did not directly control where villagers could travel. However, people did not feel like they could move about as freely as before and the Burmese military and Lahu militia will discourage them from traveling to certain places (South Village, 3 February 2016). While South Village did not report any conflict between themselves and the Burmese military or Lahu militia, 83% of interviewees in South Village discussed access limitations they experienced because of the Mong Ton dam. As one interviewee stated “*If we are near the dam on the river, we can’t go further because it’s limited by the Burmese military. Also, the Burmese military have limited where we can go into the forest near the Chinese’s project*” (Interviewee 1, South Village, 4 February 2016). When the company staff were present, villagers only travel into the forest between 9:00am and 5:00pm, because when it is dark, they do not feel safe in the forest (Mai, 23 February 2016). This control, however, by the private-military partnerships, is a temporal one. During the time of the interviews, the company staff were not present around the dam. Therefore, individuals from South Village expressed that they felt freer to go into the forest and fish along the river (Mai, 23 February 2016). Yet, certain pressures remained. The Lahu militia, when not employed by the company, resided on the top of the mountain above South Village, but are still seen as having influence locally (South Village, Interview 13, 3 February 2016). These spatial and temporal restrictions limit villagers’ ability to “derive benefits” from the forests and river that their livelihoods depend on. This

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<sup>3</sup>For example, the Mong Ton dam is based on agreements signed by the Myanmar Parliament with the Chinese Three Gorge’s Corporation, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and the Burmese Ministry of Electric Power, with the Australian Snowy Mountain Engineering Company (SMEC) consulting on the construction of the dams (Salween Watch 2013).

spatial claim, laid by military-private partnerships, is enforced through law and force, yet, as the quotes suggest, it is socially acquiesced to the extent that villagers navigate their access to forested areas near the dam site based on military presence.<sup>4</sup>

### ***12.4.2 Environmental Degradation Limiting Access***

Yet, while the physical presence of the Burmese military and Lahu militia limit villagers' physical access to forest and river resources around the Mong Ton dam site, these military-private partnerships have also conducted activities that have resulted in environmental degradation that has further restricted access. Although South Village interviews respondents were not able to identify specific dates and company's names, the narrative they told indicated that the private-military and private-public partnerships that led to the selection of the proposed Mong Ton dam site (Kramer/Woods 2014) also enabled logging of the forests near the dam site and mining for gold within the river (Group interview, South Village, 3 February 2016).

Seventy-five percent of interviewees from South Village reported a negative change in the last ten years to forest and river ecosystem services. Of those who discussed a perceived change to the surrounding watershed, all mentioned the narrowing and drying of the river and 78% mentioned forest loss, both of which interviewees attributed to logging around the dam construction site. As one villager observed, "*The river is changing. In the rainy season, there is flooding, and people lose their land, and because of the logging, when people are doing agriculture, they cannot get enough water*" (Interviewee 5, South Village, 3 February 2016). While the majority of villagers in South Village practice *taungya* in the uplands, they also have rice paddy fields near the banks of a tributary of the Thanlwin River. However, as the quote suggests, villagers are reporting changes to the river and nearby land. Unlike *taungya*, rice paddy fields require irrigation, but the logging along the banks of the river has decreased the water retention of the soil and in turns increases the likelihoods of floods and droughts (Kandjj et al. 2006; Verchot et al. 2007). Additionally, 33% mentioned the difficulties they now experienced in hunting. "*The noise from cutting down the trees frightens the wildlife and causes them to run away from the village*" (Interviewee 7, South Village, 3 February 2016).

As villagers summarized during a group interview, South Village perceives negative changes to their surrounding environment:

The Thanlwin River is narrower now and the water is not like before. The water level is lower and there is not enough for agriculture and it is harder to catch the big fish. The wildlife is also not like before and it is harder to hunt and there are fewer trees. This makes the weather hot. The forest and river are very important for our households and the next generation. The river is also important for our culture and tradition (Group Interview, South Village, 3 February 2016).

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<sup>4</sup>This temporal forest access is also a result of the perceived threat women face as a result of military presence. See also, Hnin Wut Yee (2016).

As this quote suggests, South Village relies on the forest and river for their livelihoods, and yet, these changes have the ability to negatively affect the community's culture and traditions. Each of these environmental changes—lowered water levels, increased disturbances in hunting territories, and increased deforestation—are examples of South Village's inhibited ability to derive benefits from resources.

For North Village, while they did not feel a restriction to forest resources, they did express an inability to continue the practice of artisanal gold mining. Gold along the Thanlwin is collected by villagers to sell in a neighboring town's market when individuals need money to buy cooking oil and salt (Wah, 23 February 2016). According to interviews in North Village, the SSA allowed companies to dig for gold in the Thanlwin River. As the headman described in North Village *"A few years ago [3–4 years ago] there was a Chinese company digging gold from the river along the village, allowed by the military [SSA]. Recently there is no company nearby the village, because the gold is gone."* (Interview 13, North Village, 18 February 2016). One-hundred percent of interviewees discussed the difficulty they now have in panning for gold along the river since that time. As one individual described:

The gold left is less than usual. We could collect more before Chinese people went to dig gold at the floor of the river. After they used large machines and took most of the gold. Now, we can only collect one piece or two. However, we have to find gold for our lives to exist (Interviewee 2, North Village, 18 February 2016).

This degradation of gold in the banks of the river, because of a private-military partnership, reflects a shift in North Village's ability to derive benefits from river resources. As subsistence farmers, villagers did not grow cash crops and get very little earnings from selling NTFPs; therefore, gold was essential for them to have the money to purchase goods like salt and oil in town. With this increased challenge in finding gold, villagers expressed a difficulty in purchasing household items. This access, which these military, private, and semi-autonomous institutions have, and communities do not, resulted in a degradation of resources that limited local communities' ability to benefit from those same resources.

### ***12.4.3 Access and Identity***

As discussed above, access can be restricted through law and force and by the effects of commercial activities. Yet, these aspects and effects of access are also often navigated through social relations. This section discusses how relationships, such as shared-identity, can also impact access. Shared identity does not guarantee a socially acquiesced access, nor does it preclude it; yet, when a shared identity with authority exists it increases the likelihood of less resistance to the parameters established by authorities. This is particularly important in Myanmar, where the various states and semi-autonomous institutions are divided along ethnic lines.

Currently, South Village experiences control by the Burmese military and receives services, like primary school education, from the Myanmar government, but the villagers still have deep connections to Shan culture and tradition (Mai, 6 January 2015). During interviews with South Village, villagers shared an ethnic identity (Shan) with the interviewers. Yet, in their interviews they did not express a shared identity with the Burmese military or Myanmar government or private companies. For these military-private partnerships that exercise authority over access, this lack of shared social identity with South Village has resulted in resistance to their authority in the form of political elections and resistance to the hydropower project. During the 2015 elections, 100% of respondents who were able to vote, said that they voted for the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) party. As one interviewee stated: *“I got an opportunity to vote. I voted for SNLD partly because I believe this party will be do justice and we are Shan”* (Interview 4, South Village, 3 February 2016). This respondent’s shared identity of Shan with the SNLD party caused them to vote for the SNLD instead of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) or the National League for Democracy (NLD) party that won elections in 2015.

Moreover, during the group interview in South Village, villagers discussed with Mai how they were not consulted for the Mong Ton dam. Some villagers did attend a meeting about the benefits and impact of the Mong Ton dam held by SMEC, but they did not feel like they were able to give their opinions (Group Interview, South Village, 3 February 2016). As a result of these mostly negative relations with the Burmese military and private companies, South Village does not support the Mong Ton dam. One-hundred percent of respondents opposed the dam, citing a belief that the dam will harm them and not benefit them. As one respondent stated: *“I don’t want and need to build this project. If the big dam is built, we will get the impact more than the benefit”* (Interviewee 10, South Village, 3 February 2016). While these negative relations do not inhibit the ability of the Burmese military and Myanmar government to extract resources, they also do not improve or reproduce that ability. Instead South Village has voiced their opposition to the Burmese military and Myanmar government through their votes and resistance to the Mong Ton dam.

For North Village, however, access was further enabled through the SSAs shared social identity of Shan ethnicity with the villagers. During the 2015 elections, SSA supported the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Shan National Democratic Party (SNDP) (Wah, 23 February 2016). One hundred percent of villagers who voted, reported voting for the SSA’s associated political party of the SNLD, as one villager said, *“if we vote, we vote for Shan”* (Interviewee 2, North Village, 16 February 2016). This shared social identity is significant, yet villagers still must navigate the unequal power dynamics between themselves and the SSA. During the interviews, the most significant concern villagers raised was that of transportation. They are a very remote village and interviewees expressed a belief that improved roads would improve their lives. This is the sort of social service that the SSA can provide and villagers have requested help from the SSA; however, at the time of the interviews they had yet to receive approval (Wah, 23 February 2016).

This shared social identity of Shan also extended to the researchers who visited this village; although, sometimes this was not necessarily emerging freely from the researchers, but was ascribed to them. For instance, when Wah described her organizations relationship with North Village she said, “*They already knew about my organization and because they know we are from the SSA military too, they just take good care of us*” (23 February 2016). Wah’s organization provides a boarding school for Shan students and much of the rice they use to feed the students comes from rice taxes extracted by SSA. Yet, Wah also acknowledged that villagers seemed “*afraid of the SSA...the military (SSA) seems to have so much influence on them*” (23 February 2016). From Wah’s observations, interviewees were reluctant to share with her information that criticized the SSA. Here, although the shared identity of the researchers with SSA enabled their access to the community, it was complicated by uneven power relations between the SSA, Wah’s organization, and North Village.

Bringing the research from these two sites together, it is evident that control over resource areas in Shan State is complicated. For South Village, spatial access and control over territory is maintained through law and the physical presence of the Burmese military and Lahu militia. Private-government and private-military partnerships that have enabled development efforts for the Mong Ton dam have also led to an increase in logging and mining for gold along the river, resulting in a degradation of these resources. Yet, these mechanisms of access face resistance from the lack shared social identity between South Village and the resource extractors. In North Village, spatial access and control over territory is maintained by the physical presence of the SSA. Private-military partnerships help finance efforts like gold mining in the river, inhibiting North Village’s access to gold. Additionally, while a shared identity of Shan has resulted in an increased support of the authority of the SSA, the unequal power between SSA and North Village has left impressions of coercion and fear.

Throughout all of this, researchers must navigate access to sites and interviews with various overlapping authorities. As a foreigner, I adhered to Myanmar government laws and did not physically travel to South and North Village, while the two Shan researchers, Mai and Wah, had to navigate the nuanced aspect of their shared cultural identity with villagers. In this, what knowledge was produced was altered by these circumstances. Information shared with researchers was filtered by their alignment (or misalignment) with researchers. As with Wah’s example, villagers’ apparent reluctance to share information with her because of her organization’s connections with the SSA suggests that how interviewees responded to questions was somewhat filtered with how they perceived they should respond in accordance with the SSA.

## 12.5 Conclusions

This chapter explored the dynamic and oft contradictory relationships that influence people's ability to derive benefits from resources, including knowledge production. The same private-public and military-private partnerships that influenced resource users' ability to benefit, also affected researchers' access. In countries like Myanmar, with brown and black zones that limit the presence of outsiders, the mechanisms that determine researcher access are especially important to dissect. The access that researchers must navigate is neither inherently good or bad; however, it must be navigated and acknowledged as essential to knowledge production and the research methods themselves.

What was presented above is just the start of the story of access in hard to reach places along the Thanlwin River in Shan State. As with most research projects, the knowledge produced about resource user access was contingent on researcher access. Further research could better tease out the nodes and points of relationships that determine the informal governance arrangements between private-military and private-public relationships. Additionally, the complexity of shared identity among ethnic populations and the corresponding armed groups needs to be further teased out.

From this research, however, what can be concluded is that the formal and informal governance arrangements, environmental degradation from resource extraction, and shared identity (or a lack of) that influence access do increase local communities' vulnerability. Be it decisions made by local and national authorities over a foreign company's right to extract gold from the river or log the forest, or the construction of a hydropower project, neither village has the power to determine who benefits. By asking questions of resource user and researcher access to river and forest resources and by increasing the transparency of the research process, it then becomes possible to better design research and analyze the impacts of resource extraction on the lives of local people.

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