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# Neglect paves the way for dispossession: The politics of “last frontiers” in Brazil and Myanmar



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## ABSTRACT

A convergence of factors creates a worrisome contemporary pattern of resource dispossession of local populations in developing countries. Growing market demand for commodities, states' interest in expanding their fiscally fertile territories, and environmental conservation pressures have promoted resource frontiers, where locals all too frequently lose access to land, water and livelihoods. To add momentum and legitimize outsiders' agendas, such locations are sometimes framed as “last frontiers” – the final places of possibility. While various forms of resource “grabbing” have gained increased attention, we argue that a crucial dimension of frontier dynamics – neglect and its role in facilitating dispossession – warrants further study as it tends to be overlooked. Drawing on the frontiers and political ecology literature, this article analyzes how neglect by state authorities, markets, and environmental organizations paves the way for dispossession in those landscapes. We compare two cases: the Matopiba soy frontier in the savannas of Brazil's Cerrado and the Chin Hills of western Myanmar. Our results show how neglect is critical to imaginatively frame regions as “empty” places of possibility, excluding local actors economically from development and politically from governance initiatives. We argue that neglect not only precedes but is an enduring feature of resource frontiers, and identify four consecutive phases: (I) pre-frontier abandonment, (II) selective support to outsiders, (III) overlooked harms to communities, and (IV) socially exclusive sustainability agendas. As environmental concerns gain increasing global salience, Phase I sometimes leaps to Phase IV as international actors pounce to control what they regard as “last frontiers” for conservation. We conclude that external actors' inaction enables local communities' dispossession as much as their actions. This raises critical policy and scholarly questions about actors' responsibility and accountability, not only for harms done but also for systematically failing to heed local actors' aspirations and needs.

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*“The first time the state made itself present in our land was to evict us from it.” – Local community leader from Matopiba, Brazil<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

Few places on the globe remain unaffected by current land transformation pressures often driven from afar (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019). Not only states seek to turn every piece of territory into “fully governed, fiscally fertile” zones (Scott, 2009: 10), transnational drivers such as market demands for commodities

and environmental governance pressures also reshape landscapes' physical, social and institutional realities (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020; Clapp, Isakson, & Visser, 2017). Frontier expansion in developing countries disassembles pre-existing territorial orders in response to those pressures and reassembles them as resource extraction sites, with considerable social and ecological consequences (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; McCarthy & Cramb, 2009; Moore, 2000; Woodworth, 2017).

That process includes material transformations and imaginative ones – that is, the mental reframing of certain regions as lands of possibility, leading to a rearrangement of resource access and control patterns, usually resulting in local dispossession (Li, 2014a; Lund, 2011; Tsing, 2003). As if to accentuate their value or attractiveness, some places are framed as “last” frontiers, the final remaining rooms of opportunity (Barney, 2009). While originally often thought of as places of physical conquering and ecological transformation (see Moore, 2000), “last frontiers” have also come

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with an Afro-Brazilian *quilombola* community leader.

to have a conservation appeal, as when environmentalists warn about vanishing ecosystems to be (urgently) preserved (see Bryant, Nielsen, & Tangle, 1997). Yet, critical scholars have shown that both industrial agriculture and nature conservation have often served as rationales for capital accumulation by dispossession (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015; Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012; Harvey, 2004).

The notion of last frontiers is not new but has recently gained resurgent currency as a narrative to attract attention and investments. Wood (2006) discusses how the term was used in the 1910–1940s to draw farmers to Canada's boreal woodlands, then regarded as that country's final remaining room for agricultural enterprise. Now, there is growing interest in resource frontiers and how they work (see Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018), as well as in issues of land acquisitions (Borras et al., 2020; Li, 2014a), tourism-related dispossession (Neef, 2021) and “green grabbing,” understood as the appropriation of resources for conservation (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015; Fairhead et al., 2012).

We argue that there is, however, an often-overlooked dimension of frontier dynamics: neglect, critical to creating the conditions for local impoverishment and dispossession. Some authors acknowledge state neglect as an element of resource dispossession (Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018) or as the twin of elite capture (Hall & Kepe, 2017). Yet, neglect seldom receives much attention as a conceptual entry point for frontier studies. Perhaps local communities are too often idyllically imagined as being – by default – better off without the state or any “outsiders,” who should just let them be (see Esteva & Escobar, 2017). That can be a reasonable impression from many instances of dispossession, but it might suggest a predisposition for total self-reliance that may not always represent local peoples' views.

In practice, local communities often resent not being heard and lacking support to meet their needs (Russo Lopes, Bastos Lima, & Reis, 2021; Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018). They are left out of what they frequently see as benefits of modern life (e.g., healthcare, housing, transportation), governance processes and decision making about the landscapes they live in (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020; Li, 2014b). If frontiers are associated with individuals' abilities to “make their own fortunes through their own efforts” (Li, 2014b: 150), and if a resource frontier is nothing but a specific re-assembly of various imaginative, material, and political elements, it might be asked why local people have not been able to develop their fortunes. It begs the question of what has sapped or stunted their capacities, and how that might make them prone to becoming victims of dispossession.

Our research objective is to innovatively delve into the shadow dimensions of frontier assemblages, using neglect as a conceptual entry point to explore how outside actors' (strategic) inaction – as much as their actions – shapes frontier outcomes. To untangle the “processes at work that precede, constitute and follow the assembling of resource frontiers as epicentres of extraction and production” (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019: 9), we contrast two cases, in Brazil and Myanmar. Despite their differences, both countries have experienced growing outside interest and involvement with places regarded as last frontiers in their territories. We investigate how this particular framing is used in the current reassembling of two “remote” regions (Matopiba in Brazil and Chin State in Myanmar) and show how the lens of neglect may help explain recent and ongoing dynamics.

## 2. Conceptualizing neglect in resource frontiers

### 2.1. Resource frontiers as imagined and material places for expansion

Frontiers can be understood as places where existing ecologies and social orders are purposefully dissolved to give way to new

ones, usually geared towards resource commodification and export-oriented extraction (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018; Tsing, 2003). They are assemblages anchored both in imaginative and material constructions (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019). On the one hand, there is an enframing effort to regard certain spaces as places of possibility – through discourses, appealing narratives of resourcefulness, as well as maps and other devices that can make investments thinkable (Li, 2014a). On the other hand, the reordering of space also relies on concrete struggles and takeover of resources, legal changes in ownership or use rights, and often the “botanical colonization” of landscapes alongside the displacement – or extermination – of its inhabitants (Scott, 2009: 12). Frontiers thus result in permanently transformed relations between landscapes, people, animals, and plants (Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011).

Often, the state itself will engender such transformations as a way to mark – or, rather, to produce – sovereignty over people and territory (Lund, 2011). Scott (2009) discusses how the state is driven to enclose outlying regions, which often are geographically challenging to access. He conceptualizes them as “zones of refuge” to where people went to escape authorities' grip in the past. Then, there was at some point “the realization that these [hitherto] neglected and seemingly useless territories [...] were suddenly of great value to the econom[y]” (Scott, 2009: 11). As Scott puts it,

“[s]een from the state center, this enclosure movement is, in part, an effort to integrate and monetize the people, land and resources of the periphery so that they become, to use the French term, *rentable* – auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange.” (Scott, 2009: 4)

Nevertheless, states should not be reified as isolated units of analysis (Moore, 2000). World-systems scholars identify frontiers as “peripheral” regions where socio-ecological transformations take place to meet the desires of a global politico-economic “core” (Arrighi, 2009; Wallerstein, 1974). As Moore (2000) argues, frontiers are not simply about incorporating peripheral regions but doing so in a particular fashion, usually to produce commodities at the lowest echelon of the global economy. Therefore, rather than only a geographical place, they are also a “space of flows” – low-value commodity flows to economic and political centers (Moore, 2000).

International conservation actors likewise take advantage of historical structural inequalities within the world-system (McAfee, 2012). As a global pressure for environmental conservation intensifies (see Buscher & Fletcher, 2018), we must broaden the classical definition of commodity frontiers as places of physical extraction (see Moore, 2000). Instead, we use the term *resource frontiers* in a wider sense to also include “natural capital”, that is, nature regarded as an economic resource (e.g., for carbon markets, payments for conservation, commodified tourism) even when it is not physically extracted from the site (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). Either way, frontiers continue to be places “where further expansion is possible,” where uncommodified land, nature and labor remains that can be successfully appropriated (Moore, 2000, p. 412), physically or not, into the dominant economic system.

Regionalist and structural expressions of frontiers, therefore, go together (Woodworth, 2017). Historical neglect often precedes the establishment of resource frontiers. Colonialism destabilized many local communities and made others into “fringe societies”, left in “underserved areas” with fewer resources or limited access to communications, transport, and economic exchange (Scott, 2009). Such abandonment by economic and political centers typically underscores the dialectical relationship they will establish as metropolises vis-à-vis “remote” frontiers (Stoler & Cooper, 1997). As Cons and Eilenberg (2019) argue drawing on Li (2014a), it is

not simply that a new resource attracts outside interest; creating a frontier demands imaginative and material anchors, and much seems to be anchored on previous neglect.

Neglect thus paves the way for the characteristic view of frontiers as places of “not yet” (Tsing, 2003: 5001), which is only made possible by disregarding what there is. Broadly seen, neglected people in such “fringe” places could be described as the “residual inclusion of subjects within a world that is indifferent to their presence within it” (Taylor, 2018: 37). That situation, in turn, is often used to legitimize interventions in the name of bringing “development” to frontier communities (Russo Lopes et al., 2021). Neglect thus becomes an instrumental – but still undertheorized – aspect of capital accumulation and economic (and political) expansion.

## 2.2. Neglect: An overlooked concept in the frontiers literature

It might at first seem paradoxical to critique neglect in contexts of resource frontiers, which after all are “zone[s] of destruction of property systems, political structures, social relations, and life-worlds to make way for new ways of resource extraction” (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018: 389). The arrival of outsider presence has usually come to signify the erasure of local communities and, oftentimes, biophysical environments. Yet we argue that neglect is not only a preliminary condition but also an enduring feature of resource frontiers.

Neglect etymologically carries the connotation of “not being read” or not being legible, from the Latin verb *neg-legere* (Taylor, 2018: 37). Using neglect as an analytical concept or lens therefore requires thinking of who does not read who. In resource frontiers, it is usually local communities that suffer exclusion, are trumped on, and frequently feel neglected (Hall et al., 2011; Li, 2014b; Russo Lopes et al., 2021). Theirs are the life-worlds destroyed in resource frontiers, life-worlds that many – if not most – continually fail to read (see Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). The “powers of exclusion” – and therefore also of inclusion – rest in turn with those who either by force or economic means gain the right or the capacity to dictate whose livelihoods are legitimate and whose are not (Hall et al., 2011). Neglect, thus, is a lens from the vantage point of local communities, usually the ones with the highest stakes at resource frontiers. While acknowledging internal social diversity, it is still possible to distinguish them from state forces, outside investors, new colonists, and others.

Many communities may wish to be left to their own devices, but that is not always the case. There is a strong self-reliance bias in notions such as “the art of not being governed” (Scott, 2009) or the understanding of local people as by default interested in being left undisturbed (see Esteva & Escobar, 2017). Moreover, that bias portrays developing country states in a hopelessly negative light, as always necessarily maleficial in resource frontiers, in contrast to Western states generally analyzed regarding their social contract and public accountability.

We argue that no matter how much mistrust developing country states may have provoked, local populations who see themselves as part of imagined national communities (Anderson, 1983) are not always ready to abandon hope of some level of relationality. Taylor (2018: 6-7) suggests that,

“[n]eglect is a profound experience of nonsovereignty, one that locates the possibilities of one’s being in a world in the attenuated attentions of another. Yet a low-grade, subtle optimism underwrites neglect’s affective repertoire of loneliness, incompleteness, and diminishment.”

Local communities may wish the state – or markets and private investors for that matter – treated them differently, not necessarily that they go away. Communities may expect support from out-

siders and that state institutions live up to their (often legally enshrined) public responsibilities. As Le Grand and New (2015) discuss, what gets commonly portrayed as “paternalism” usually involves realizing legitimate public duties and constitutional obligations. Even Stuart Mill (1860), in his seminal *On Liberty*, defending individual autonomy, argued the state should make itself present to prevent individuals from harming one another – a securing presence that communities generally fail to find in resource frontiers. Not all wish to be fully sovereign and autonomous, and to assume so from the start would be to further deny a voice to marginalized actors.

## 3. Cases, research approach and methods

As “last frontier” framings hasten the global rush for resources, it is key to understand their constitutive economic, political, and imaginative elements – their assemblages (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019). While the literature often treats those issues in terms of regional dynamics in Asia, Africa or Latin America (e.g., Cons & Eilenberg, 2019; Borrás, Franco, Gómez, Kay, & Spoor, 2012; Hall et al., 2011), we opt for an innovative cross-continental comparison to illustrate commonalities across the globe – despite regional particularities that may exist. To inquire into the role of neglect in two very different settings, we take Matopiba in Brazil and Chin State in Myanmar as case studies. Both involve struggles for resource control and have been dubbed “last frontiers” in their respective contexts.

Brazil’s Matopiba frontier has experienced staggering territorial acquisition for agribusiness expansion, notably for soy cultivation. This dynamic has increasingly threatened both the Cerrado ecosystem – the world’s most biodiverse savanna – and numerous traditional populations (Russo Lopes et al., 2021; Strassburg et al., 2017). It is a frontier that has experienced intense pressure from colonist farmers. More recently, it has also seen substantive engagement from international environmental NGOs (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020). Matopiba hence offers the case of a mature “last frontier,” where we appraise how multiple forms of neglect have unfolded during the past decades.

The assemblage in Myanmar’s Chin State is less mature. Frontier dynamics in this region emerged comparatively recently, with Myanmar’s political transition since 2010. International sanctions were lifted, and the country opened to investors, tourists and development actors enticed by narratives of Myanmar as Asia’s final frontier (e.g., Parker, 2016; Yueh, 2013). In 2012, the Chin National Front – an armed ethnic group operating in Chin State since 1988 – entered ceasefire negotiations with Myanmar’s government, which then paved the way for peace talks and imaginaries of Chin State as Myanmar’s very own last frontier (Fleming, 2014; Project Maje, 2012).

Our analysis draws on a review of country-specific literature as well as extensive fieldwork in Brazil and Myanmar. We use primary sources (e.g., national laws and policy documents) as well as literature, including scientific articles, news pieces, and civil society organization reports. The fieldwork took place between 2016 and 2019. The first author comes from one of the Matopiba states and thus builds on significant baseline knowledge. He draws on one field campaign in Brazil for a research project about agribusiness expansion and attendance at multiple supply-chain sustainability events in Europe. The second author spent seven months (distributed over three fieldwork periods) in Kalay and the northern Chin Hills, for a four-year research project on livelihood-land interlinkages in Myanmar’s uplands (Kmoch, 2020). In both cases, we conducted a combination of key-informant interviews, focus-group discussions, and participant observations, as well as three household surveys in the Chin case.

Data from this mixed-methods research was combined with the literature to draw inferences and triangulate multiple sources of evidence.

Interviews about the Brazilian frontier were conducted in Portuguese and included stakeholders from each of the four Matopiba states as well as from Brasília and São Paulo, important decision-making centers from where Matopiba is usually regarded as a frontier. Interviewees included public officials at the national and state level, agribusiness representatives, local communities (including indigenous people), and civil society organizations. The project in Myanmar was realized in close collaboration with staff from a local NGO that served as a gatekeeper and whose introductions helped to build trust among research participants from local communities and state agencies' staff. Interviews with Myanmar stakeholders were conducted in English, Burmese or Tedim Chin, and engaged Chin residents, regional-level agricultural authorities and NGO staff in Yangon and Kalay. All research activities in Myanmar were aided by field assistants from the study area (who also helped interpreting interviews), which further aided in trust-building with local respondents.

#### 4. Neglect and dispossession in “last frontiers

##### 4.1. Matopiba: Brazil's “last agricultural frontier”

###### 4.1.1. A new name for an old place

“Matopiba” is but a recent invention, an “inscription device” (Li, 2014a) put forth by the Brazilian government and agribusiness amalgamating the hinterlands of four states into one coherent, alas attractive, agricultural frontier. Formalized in 2015 through the Matopiba Agricultural Development Plan and later with the creation of a federal Matopiba Development Agency, this new imaginary region conjoins 337 municipalities of the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí, and Bahia – hence its name.<sup>2</sup> The whole region falls within a land of shrub, grass and woodlands known to conservationists as the Cerrado, a biome rich in endemic species and river headwaters (Strassburg et al., 2017). To locals, it is traditionally known for countless locales that give them local identities. The region as such had no specific name, except that such hinterlands in Brazil's interior have been generally known as the *sertão*, the broad backcountry away from the coast where people of different and often mixed ancestries eventually came to see themselves as *sertanejos* (Moraes, 2000).

Unlike many African or Asian “remote” areas, which frequently border on other countries, Matopiba is placed more or less in the middle of Brazil (Fig. 1). It is far from the country's limits, and the region's local communities have not sought to break away. Matopiba is casually comparable to the Australian Outback, not really at risk of secession, yet regarded as a rugged frontier of “civilization.”<sup>3</sup> That interior of Brazil – including what is now called Matopiba – has long served as a “zone of refuge” (Scott, 2009: 22), where indigenous peoples and escaped African slaves settled to avoid state-sanctioned violence (Moraes, 2000). Thousands of such Afro-Brazilian communities (*quilombos*) chronically suffer from invisibilization amidst other grievances (Sax & Angelo, 2020). Many communities of mixed ancestry have also emerged around particular livelihoods, such as the *Fecho de Pasto* pastoralist communities or the

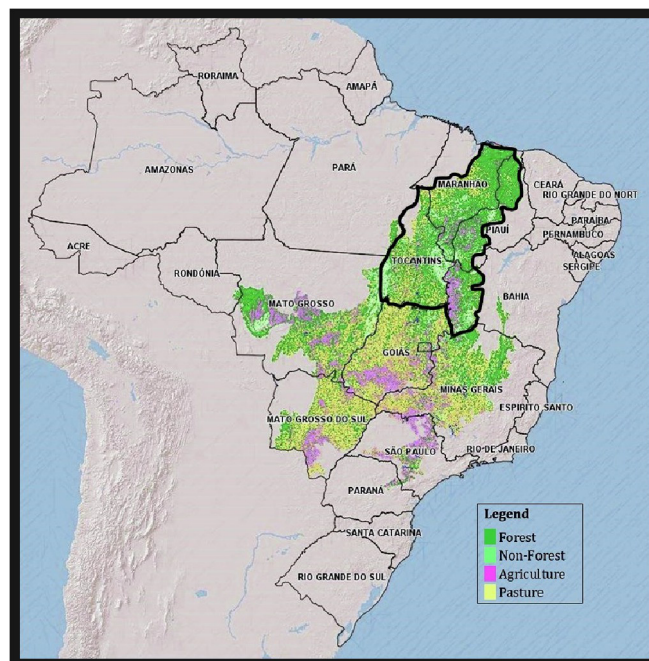


Fig. 1. Brazil's Cerrado biome and the Matopiba frontier, encompassing areas of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia states. Large-scale agriculture areas (usually soy) are shown vis-a-vis pasturelands and natural vegetation (Mapbiomas 2020). Adapted from Russo Lopes et al., 2021.

babassu (*Attalea speciosa*) nutcrackers, a traditional occupation that secures the livelihood of over 300,000 women across the region (Russo Lopes et al., 2021). Vibrant local cultures around solidarity economies have emerged (see Sabourin, 2014), though a self-regard of forsakenness has also made itself present.

###### 4.1.2. Pre-frontier neglect: Matopiba before its name

The neglected nature of this part of Brazil – by the state, private investors, urban civil society and anything commonly associated with development – has long been notorious; it has been the subject of songs and much documentation (Goodman, 1976; Silva, 2010). Until the early 1990s, municipalities in this region had “very low” Human Development Index (HDI) indicators, revealing little formal economic activity, high levels of child mortality, poor access to healthcare, below-average life expectancy, and high illiteracy rates (Pereira, Porcionato, & Castro, 2018).

Matopiba's gross economic indicators have risen over the past decades, partly because of agribusiness revenues, but they hide growing income inequality and social exclusion (Buzato, Cardoso, Favareto, Magalhães, Garcia-Drigo, & Souza, 2018; Favareto, 2019; Garrett & Rausch, 2016). Those aggregated indexes mask longstanding problems, as the testimonial of a local community member illustrates:

“We need schools, healthcare units for us... something better. [The children have] school classes under trees – a wind blows and all the papers fly away. They then ask the parents to build the schools. Next, the mayor will ask us to pay for the teachers as well. He is the one with the money and who should do it.”

Collective or individual land titling for locals has long been scant, along with little if any agricultural technical assistance or rural extension services. Smallholders and even indigenous communities in Matopiba wish it were otherwise and lament being historically overlooked by the state.

<sup>2</sup> For years, it had been previously called “Mapitoba”, in a different sequencing of the states' initials by outsiders who did not realize *toba* is a vulgar slang word in the region. A change to “Matopiba” was therefore in order before formalization by the federal government (Interviews).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in 2007 there was an attempt by politicians from the Piauí municipalities that currently integrate Matopiba to create a new state, Gurgueia, pointing out precisely the neglect the region had historically experienced. The initiative was formally proposed in the Senate (PDL 55/2007) but failed to garner sufficient support (see Claudino, 2007).

*“Technical assistance for family agriculture is almost non-existent, obsolete, abandoned, almost without any government structure. Our votes only have value during the elections, otherwise it’s always the same thing – we are forgotten.”* (Smallholder farmer)<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.1.3. From zone of refuge to resource frontier: “The gauchos are arriving”

In rather classical fashion, the Matopiba frontier emerged (much ahead of its name) in the 1980s when governments realized that this neglected, seemingly useless region could be of economic value. From the 1970s, Brazil expanded commercial soy planting at great speed and quickly became a major exporter (Oliveira & Hecht, 2016). Public universities and state agronomic research agencies, initially with Japanese foreign aid, developed new crop varieties and chemical-input packages for soy to thrive on the acidic soils of Brazil’s Cerrado, and a new frontier emerged (Wesz, 2016). In time, soy crops would cover more than 35 million hectares in the country.

Soy expansion began as a growing number of farmers from Brazil’s temperate South Region sought their fortunes at the frontier, at first in the central states of Goiás and Mato Grosso. Broadly nicknamed *gauchos*, they formed a migration wave northward between the 1970s–1990s and have been the main human element of frontiering across Brazil’s interior (Mondardo, 2010). Reaching the other end of the Cerrado was mostly a matter of time – what would happen with full force in the 2000s (Oliveira & Hecht, 2016).

Seen either from the perspective of southern Brazilian migrants or from the country’s economic centers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Matopiba lands are remote, the farthest stretches of Cerrado – its last frontier. For those who venture there, “remoteness” becomes a way of being (Harms et al., 2014). Indeed, a view of *gauchos* as intrepid and somewhat “nomadic” frontiersmen is a mainstay in Brazilian social thought (Freyre, 1968). Local accounts by such soy farmers effectively do convey enthusiasm, pride, and sometimes an almost triumphalist tone:

*“We are migrant producers; we have a history here, since the earlier ones who came in the 1970s and 1980s to grow rice and then brought soy from the South.”*

*“When we can no longer produce here in Bahia, we will go [further north] to Maranhão, to Pará... We will only stop once we reach the sea.”*

Even from the perspective of state capitals and regional metropolises (São Luís in Maranhão, Teresina in Piauí, and Salvador in Bahia), the faraway Matopiba municipalities are the backcountry of their respective states, where soy migrants have therefore been welcomed for “at least bringing something.” As a senior state-level official in Matopiba puts it, “soy has arrived in a region that produced nothing.” Tocantins is a special case in that the whole state is part of Matopiba, likely because it is the constituency of the members of parliament and agriculture minister who launched “Matopiba” as an enframing device to attract agribusiness investments (see Senado, 2016).

While neglecting locals, governments and private investors have embraced and spurred soy expansion by colonists – mostly southern Brazilians, but to a lesser extent also US American, European, or Asian immigrants in Matopiba (Mondardo, 2010; Ofstehage, 2016). State support, which finally reaches this region, primarily occurs through the creation of cargo transport infrastructure, public research funding into agricultural commodities, and tax breaks (Pereira et al., 2018). In a testimonial to the primacy

of private capital for the constitution of Matopiba, a senior state-level official related:

*“Soy and others are crops that have come by themselves – without us, the state government, pulling it – because it comes with money and private-sector impulse. [That part of our state] was long forgotten by the government until 40, 30 years ago. It was void of hospitals etc. Then the gauchos came, already with some structure to them. So it was an extremely poor region, then some money finally came to it. We are now becoming a great logistical hub.”*

Once Matopiba became formalized at the federal level in 2015, a great deal of political support to agribusiness investments also gained ground with the marketing of this “last frontier” as a final bout of opportunity (see Agência Senado, 2016). The invisibilization of the previous land uses and land users is key for this promotion, alongside the neo-Malthusian justification of having to feed a growing global population (Borlaug, 2002; see De Schutter, 2017). As a migrant soy grower in Matopiba proclaimed, “we have transformed unproductive lands into a factory of food for the world, into a protein factory.” Neglected locals, on the other hand, clearly have grievances:

*“The government’s project is much more to look at soy than to assist the families that have been in the region for a long time.”* (Local smallholder)

*“[Smallholder] family agriculture is not part of this Matopiba plan. Traditional communities do not participate. They speak of our state as a ‘productive corridor’ as if there were no people here.”* (Local rural worker)

#### 4.1.4. Dispossession and transformation in Matopiba

Soy’s expansion into Matopiba has been far from seamless. There is a fair deal of what Scott (2009: 12) characterizes as “internal colonialism”, involving

*“the absorption, displacement and/or extermination of the previous inhabitants. It involve[s] a botanical colonization in which the landscape [is] transformed – by deforestation, drainage, irrigation and levees – to accommodate crops, settlement patterns, and systems of administration familiar to the state and to the colonists.”*

In the case of Matopiba, Brazilian “soy colonists” nevertheless constitute only the bottom of an international grain supply chain. As a senior state-level official in Matopiba fatefully puts it, “soy is what the international market pays for.” Besides, together with soy – or, more to the point, before soy – comes the speculative expectation of land valorization, which has led to a frenzy of buying and the “assetization” of Matopiba’s lands for financial gain by national and international players (Frederico, 2019).

As soy estates employ very few people in their vast mechanized fields, absorption of previous inhabitants is scant. On-farm job creation is minimal and usually goes to migrant skilled workers (Favareto, 2019). Most communities have thus been vanishing from the land, either bought out or forcibly evicted. It is not uncommon for prospective agribusiness people to conjure counterfeit land titles and take advantage of the prevalent land tenure insecurity in which Matopiba’s communities have long been left (Russo Lopes et al., 2021). Fake or seemingly authoritative ordinary documents are then utilized as devices for the “legal dispossession” of locals (see Pichler, 2015). Rural conflicts over land or water access have been rampant (CPT, 2020). Violence is widespread, and accountability is rare as the frontier typically operates as an extra-legal space where the rule of law is partial and often selective (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Voting in Brazil is mandatory, and the numerous votes of vulnerable rural people are historically sought after as easy to buy when elections are near.

*“The Brazilian Justice here doesn’t exist. We have participated in intense conflicts for land and water. Evicted workers, denied rights. . . We have been attacked by those alleged owners. There have been shootouts, rape threats. . . [and] we have never had any legal hearings or assistance. [ . . . ] The Justice [system] favors only one side.”* (Local grassroots organization member)

Indigenous peoples with titled lands cannot be dispossessed, but they too have felt the frontier’s dynamic as feelings of overlooked harms and neglect are pervasive.

*“Some roads have been built for grain transportation, and the pressure increases on us. We are concerned; waters, creeks and river-heads have been decreasing. They consume a lot of water, with large-scale irrigation. The bees no longer produce honey; and children are also falling sick more easily, we believe partly because of their aerial spraying [of pesticides]. There is no dialogue, and there is no action from the State to address this problem.”* (Local indigenous leader)

Matopiba has become a “riskscape” – as frontiers are usually seen (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019: 11). Incoming agents, initially colonists but increasingly venture capitalists, corporate investors and absentee owners, indeed regard themselves as daring individuals that face climatic, investment and even physical risks to advance the agricultural frontier and “develop” the country (see Pereira et al., 2018; Russo Lopes et al., 2021). However, this purported “development” has been highly inequitable, leading some to instead call it maldevelopment (Russo Lopes et al., 2021).

*“There is one side who has power and determines how things should take place, and there is a side that suffers and cannot even keep up. This celebrated development ends up improving one group and massacring another.”* (Local indigenous leader)

While a small agribusiness elite concentrates most wealth, much of Matopiba is impoverished, with a growing number of dispossessed smallholders being forced to venture into the unacknowledged risks of city slums (see also Favareto, 2019). As a representative from a local civil society organization sums up,

*“[m]any families that have managed to resist and remain, even if in a reduced titled part of their land, have not been able to stay in this area. First, for being impacted, especially by agrochemicals in the water and in the air. Second, financial [land] speculation. They had as a historical reference free access to land, not as a commodity. After soy, the land starts to be coveted. Thus, many families end up preferring to negotiate the land for an amount they think it’s good, but going away to the city slums, the money soon runs out, and they find themselves without access to land or employment.”*

To many indigenous and non-indigenous locals, the livelihood changes brought about with frontierization have therefore come to be perceived as worse than the previous abandonment, when they at least had access to land, water, local natural resources, and what most agree to have been a peaceful life, even if lacking in services. As their social fabric disintegrates, they also become more powerless (see Vervisch, Vlassenroot, & Braeckman, 2013). Grassroots movements such as around a shared heritage of Afro-Brazilian communities do resist and have been increasingly vocal, yet their grievances are routinely neglected (CONAQ, 2018). As a local indigenous elder testified, *“we used to live in peace, and now we are troubled. Each day that passes, bad things come. And they will not be only for us, but for white people as well.”*

#### 4.1.5. A socially exclusive sustainability agenda for Matopiba

More recently, a new form of neglect has gained momentum in Matopiba as vegetation clearing raises international concerns over biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions (see Bastos Lima,

Persson, & Meyfroidt, 2019; Green et al., 2019; Escobar et al., 2020). Perhaps attempting to twist the “last frontier” signifier in favor of urgent environmental conservation, scientists have rung alarm bells about the vanishing Cerrado ecosystem (Strassburg et al., 2017). In 2017, hundreds of civil society organizations launched a Cerrado Manifesto requesting public and private conservation actions.<sup>5</sup> However, broad sustainability calls have been substantially narrowed as international environmental NGOs and grain traders capture the agenda to focus (only) on conservation in private estates and financial rewards exclusively to soy growers (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020).

Brazil’s environmental policy in Matopiba has largely been an aide of frontier expansion (Eloy, Aubertin, Toni, Lúcio, & Bosgiraud, 2016). Instead of creating public protected areas or ensuring land tenure security for the region’s traditional communities, governments have selectively emphasized conservation within private properties, requiring farms to keep a percentage of their area as native vegetation (Lima, da Silva Junior, Rausch, Gibbs, & Johann, 2019). In tandem, soy traders’ zero-deforestation commitments have incentivized suppliers to have green areas under their possession (see Zu Ermgassen, Ayre, Godar, & Bastos Lima, 2020). As such, soy growers wishing to portray themselves as “sustainable” have increasingly sought – and grabbed – also communal vegetated areas as an asset, often hilly or creekside areas unsuited to mechanized harvesting and which had been initially spared but now are also coveted (Russo Lopes et al., 2021).

As Cons and Eilenberg (2019: 12) warn, “frontierization must be understood as a process of radically simplifying the meanings of a space to, primarily, the things valued within it.” In Matopiba’s case, those things are arable land suitable for soy and, increasingly, water for irrigation and fenced-off native vegetation for commodified conservation. As a migrant soy farmer enthusiastically put it, *“we have protein to offer, and soon we will also sell carbon.”*

Land rights, social equity issues, or longstanding local development pleas from Matopiba communities have little place in the mainstream sustainability agenda discussed for it (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020). For decades, various local civil society organizations have been calling for state and private-sector support in promoting sustainable development that takes livelihoods and the region’s native biodiversity into account (Sawyer & Lahsen, 2016). Such calls have existed since at least the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, but they have remained largely unheeded (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020). Traditional forms of “convivial conservation” (Buscher & Fletcher, 2019) have been proposed for Matopiba but are sidelined as the once ignored Cerrado was turned into an appealing agricultural frontier. Harms were done, and the region’s environmental conservation value brought onto the agenda in response, yet local communities’ interests have remained neglected throughout.

## 4.2. Chin State: Tracing neglect in an emerging frontier

### 4.2.1. Chin State: Peripheral highlands at the Indo-Myanmar frontier

Chin State, bordering Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts and the northeast Indian states Manipur and Mizoram, is one of Myanmar’s seven ethnic minority states (Fig. 2). These “remote” ethnic states topographically frame the country’s central and southern regions mostly inhabited by the Barma, Myanmar’s majority ethnic group. Seen from the common Barma or international vantage points, these latter regions constitute the country’s economic and socio-political centre, while the culturally and economically diverse ethnic minority states form its center’s relational periph-

<sup>5</sup> See <https://cerradostatement.fairr.org>

ery. The residents of this periphery have yet to consolidate their relationships with the State of Myanmar, which have remained politically unsettled since the end of British colonial rule in 1948.

Prior to British rule, people and land in present-day Chin State were governed through hereditary chieftainship and clan arrangements (Vumson, 1986). Colonial times saw missionaries introduce Christian beliefs that have since been widely embraced in Chin State. Intra-community social hierarchies changed little, however, as the British administrators found the “barren and mountainous” area “commercially uninspiring” and thus did not challenge the chieftains’ local rule (Vumson, 1986: 137). Yet, it was under British rule that the present-day border separating India and Myanmar was established. Communities in the Chin Hills thus came to be associated with Burma (now officially Myanmar) and therewith subjects of successive post-colonial Burmese governments.

#### 4.2.2. Pre-frontier neglect in the Chin Hills – Myanmar’s poorest region

Post-colonial times in Chin State can be read as a long phase of pre-frontier neglect (Fleming, 2014). Burma’s ruling elites, despite claiming territorial sovereignty over Chin State’s land and natural resources, assumed little responsibility for the wellbeing of its impoverished rural communities. On the contrary, the region’s residents were subject to decades of more than just neglect. Unheard by most, they experienced “pervasive human rights violations” including forced labor, arbitrary taxation, torture and “intersecting forms of State-sanctioned discrimination, based on their ethnicity (Chin), religion (predominantly Christian), language (for most Chin, Burmese is their second or third language), and socio-economic status (the poorest in Burma)” (Fleming, 2014: 6).

Today, Chin State’s residents are the poorest people in the entire country (Central Statistical Organisation, 2020). A population of close to 480,000 inhabitants, they live in an almost entirely mountainous area spanning 36,000 square kilometres (Department of Population, 2015). The number of people with personal roots in this region is much greater, however, as a large Chin diaspora either left in search of education and economic opportunities abroad or simply fled. “Our life in the village is very difficult”, related an older Chin man, “but we would struggle even more without the help of our daughter, who now lives in Malaysia and sends money home.” Remittances have indeed become the largest income source for some of the region’s rural communities, who otherwise rely on subsistence-oriented swidden farming and homegarden crops (Boutry, Allaverdian, Win, & Sone, 2018; Kmoch, Palm, Persson, & Rudbeck Jepsen, 2018; Kmoch, Palm, Persson, & Jepsen, 2021).

Various additional indicators portray Chin State’s historic neglect. Fuelwood is households’ primary energy source, and electrification rates remain very low (Department of Population, 2015). Most people lack access to basic communication amenities or motorized transport, and a third of Chin’s inhabitants depend on rudimentary drinking water sources (that is, rainwater or unprotected lakes, rivers and streams). “Life is very difficult because it is so hard to get water [...] and we struggle to go to [the local township centre] Tedim and other places to which we need to go,” an elderly Chin woman observed. “Maybe we would be better off if we died and went to heaven” she exclaimed while reflecting on the everyday hardship she and her husband experienced, in consequence of regionally deficient public services, lacking infrastructure investments, and her children’s economic migration.

#### 4.2.3. Emergent frontier dynamics in Myanmar’s very own “last frontier”

Unlike other frontiers in Southeast Asia, rural change in Chin State has not (yet) been linked to expanding “boom crops” (i.e., fast-expanding agricultural cash-crops adopted to meet international market demands) (Vicol, Pritchard, & Htay, 2018: 451). Nevertheless, material interests in land and natural resources are rising

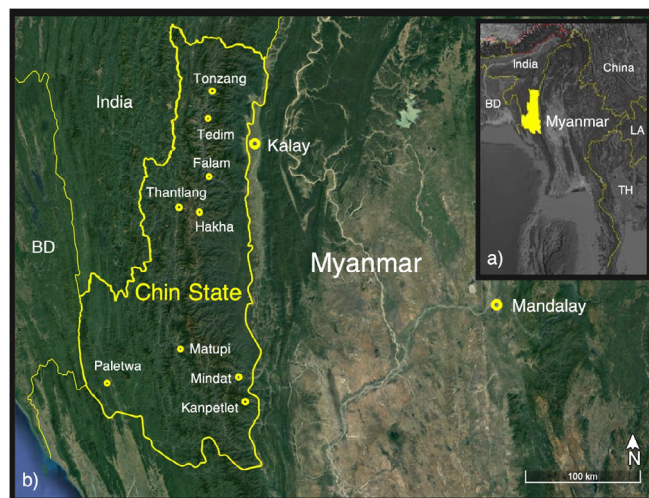


Fig. 2. Chin State, bordering India and Bangladesh a), is an almost entirely mountainous region, situated northwest of Myanmar’s central agricultural plain and delta regions b). Own maps, based on data and images © Google Earth, SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, US Dept of State Geographers, Landsat/Copernicus, TerraMetrics, GADM.

as the region has become a place of opportunity in the imagination of various stakeholders.

Chin State has been experiencing substantial construction work on transport infrastructure, *inter alia* as part of India-ASEAN road network developments (Technical Team of TRDSP Tedim, 2017). In its more rural parts, bridges across the Manipur River and smaller unpaved roads connecting some of the region’s many dispersed villages have been upgraded through a cooperation between the Ministry of Construction and Chin State’s government. The latter has spent as much as 50 percent of its budget improving the region’s road network (Soe, 2020). Although by and large welcomed by local communities, these infrastructure investments that open the Chin frontier have not come free from harm to all. “Our former house in the village had been built just five years ago”, said a Chin resident, sitting at his new home’s building site, with all his worldly possessions under the open sky. “Now we have to shift, as the new road is being constructed across our land.”

Former cropland on the urban fringes of Kalay (a major regional city just beyond the Chin Hills’ eastern flanks, gateway to the State’s north, and with a majority Chin population) has been commodified and sold off. The expanding city, with its market amenities and public services, acts as a strong attractor for Chin State’s rural households, as a new resident explained: “Most villagers dream of moving to Kalay, as life is easier here, but the mountains are where we have our Mithuns [*Bos frontalis*, a large domestic bovine] and cows to raise.”

Kalay’s development has partly been spurred by its proximity to the Moreh-Tamu border with India. Market access via this route may open commercial opportunities for Chin State’s horticultural producers, mirroring commercial activities in the Indian State of Mizoram across the border (Singh, Ramakrishna, Verma, & Singh, 2013). This potential comes at a cost, however. The city’s flourishing drug industry has been linked to its “property boom” (Marshall, 2016) and is noteworthy, as research on “narco-frontiers” has shown that drug-sale profits may accelerate land accumulation dynamics and “violent agrarian change” in historically marginalized spaces (Ballvé, 2019: 11).

Developments further south in Chin State match, or even exceed, those in the north. The construction of Lower Laivar Dam, set to supply 50,000 residents of Falam township with water, was completed in June 2020 (Myanmar News Agency, 2020).



Although delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Chin State's first airport (Surbung Airport, for USD 24.6 million) also opened (Carlisle, 2020; Khonumthung News, 2020). A first factory processing elephant foot yam (for export markets in China) now operates in Mindat township and will purchase produce from 63 villages (DaNa Facility, 2020). International tourism enterprises, once wary the region was still too remote and "underdeveloped" for most foreign visitors, now eye the Chin Hills as a promising destination for adventure and cultural tour packages (Blennerhassett, 2020). Finally, the State government has provided land to ten entrepreneurs who applied to build new hotels in the region in the 2016–17 fiscal year (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2016).

Chin State's chief minister, in an interview with the Myanmar Times, foregrounded community-based ecotourism as the regional government's "top [investment] priority", and highlighted copper, chromite and nickel mining as promising investment opportunities, while hoping for local farmers to abandon their traditional swidden practices in favor of fruit and flower production (Su Phyo Win, 2017). State and national-level authorities, in collaboration with a UK-funded private sector development programme, have held investment workshops, seminars and an investment and product fair to showcase business and trade opportunities in Chin State, such as in the region's textile, agribusiness, tourism, infrastructure and energy sectors (DaNa Facility, 2019; Su Phyo Win, 2017). Under Myanmar's new Investment Law, local and international investors enjoy a seven-year tax exemption in the country's less developed regions, including Chin State (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). These efforts to attract foreign direct investments have – as of yet – been little successful, but this may change as new infrastructure improves Chin State's accessibility.

#### 4.2.4. New risks and persistent neglect to rural peoples' livelihood security

Chin State may be a frontier in its infancy, one where frontier dynamics are yet to unfold with full force. Anticipated developments may take longer to materialize due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but persistent neglect and new risks already permeate the Chin frontier.

Since the ceasefire and given the unfurling frontier dynamics, local expectations for improved service provision have been high in Chin State (Middleton, Thabchumpon, Lian, & Pratomlek, 2017). "The most important thing that this region needs are schools," a Chin farmer noted. "Our children can only attend school to class eight in the village, and even in Tedim it goes only up to class ten." Other grievances remain; for example, following local protests the town of Hakha has been connected to the national electricity grid, but water insecurity remains a major challenge for its residents (Middleton et al., 2017), let alone for Chin State's numerous rural inhabitants.

Many Chin farmers felt particularly neglected when a disaster unfolded in 2015, as in the wake of Cyclone Komen households received insufficient support to recover from the endured losses of health, food, shelter, and productive assets (Desportes, 2019). Northern Chin farmers' persistent lack of access to locally desired agro-industrial inputs (e.g., hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides), targeted extension services, or tools and materials to establish basic irrigation systems – to address chronic poverty and food insecurity – has likewise remained largely unaddressed (Kmoch, 2020). "We cannot use our paddy fields because there is no water to irrigate our land," said a northern Chin farmer, "and most of our paddy fields were taken away by water [as Komen passed] but we did not receive help from any NGO or the government."

New risks to households' livelihood security have arisen from national-level changes in the legal framework governing land rights, too. The 2018 amendment of the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin

Lands Management Law of 2012 is a case in point (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018). In its latest version, this law facilitates the appropriation of land that has been declared idle or vacant. That, alongside growing interest in residential land near urban centers, seriously threatens local people with "legal dispossession" (Pichler, 2015) and undermines customary land-tenure practices, including swidden farming and communal land ownership (Aung & Pretzsch, 2017; Kmoch et al., 2021; Boutry and Allaverdian, 2018). "Most people in this village manage their swidden land privately, they own the land, but it cannot be officially registered," noted a local extension worker reflecting on the farmers' predicament.

Publicly voiced concern about these risks – the Chin Land Affairs Network "urged for the law to be revoked, saying it would ignite conflict in the area" – have remained unaddressed (Nyein, 2019). Moreover, the government has neglected to comprehensively inform customary landowners about its recent law amendments (Soe & Par, 2019). That, alongside failure to deliver interventions that shelter resource-poor households against land appropriation, matters not only vis-a-vis potential external investment interests. It also appears urgent as economic inequalities among Chin households grow. Vicol et al. (2018: 458) for instance characterize elephant foot yam as a "not so boom crop," but nonetheless note that its adoption has led to an accumulation of better-quality land in the hands of wealthier Chin households. Nickel mining is likewise no innocent affair, as dispossession dynamics associated with the Mwetaung Nickel Mine show. Only thanks to "grassroots mobilization" and a local "anti-dispossession movement" – rather than State authorities, who failed to act in support of "furious villagers insisting to get clear answers" – did local communities maintain their customary control over farmland in the vicinity of what could have become a 22-hectare open-mine operation (Einzenberger, 2018: 15, 22).

#### 4.2.5. Protected nature, neglected people in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot?

Unlike Brazil's Cerrado, natural resources in Myanmar's Chin State are not subject to high-profile roundtables, zero-deforestation commitments, or corporate sustainability agendas. Most of the world has never heard of the Chin Hills or its rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems: locally famous oak-rhododendron forests harboring endemic birds, a "sky island" of Himalayan alpine flora, and highly threatened medicinal orchids (United Nations Educational, 2020). Chin State's Natma Taung National Park belongs to the Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Area (United Nations Educational, 2020), the entire state falls within the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, and most of Myanmar's forest types are either "vulnerable" or face "an extremely high risk of extinction" (International Finance Corporation, 2017: 4). There are, therefore, good grounds for expanding the country's protected area system – including in Chin State, where the Chin Hills-Arakan Yoma montane forests have remained relatively intact (International Finance Corporation, 2017).

Myanmar has, however, a fresh history of state-sanctioned "green grabbing". In Tanintharyi Region, resentment has been voiced about "various forest mapping, land rezoning, and livelihood interventions" carried out without endorsement from local Karen National Union leaders (Woods, 2019: 47). In Chin State, plans are ripening for five new national parks (Aung, 2020). Although government authorities have taken note of locals' dependence on resources in Chin protected areas (Aung, Adam, Pretzsch, & Peters, 2015; Aung, 2020), there are warning signals not to be overlooked: residents of Chuncung village near Mt. Zingmuh have complained about state neglect in addressing their concerns about dam construction in a sacred religious and water-source area. An envisioned ecotourism business near Nat Ma Taung National Park, in turn, stalled in 2017 as locals denounced plans to establish a

hotel on allegedly vacant customary community land (Chin World, 2017). These cases exemplify that local people in Chin State already endure acts of neglect in the name of conservation. Time has yet to show if these troubling dynamics will abate or gain traction, as international conservation actors gain interest in the region's natural bounty and tourism takes off – or so state actors hoped.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.3. Comparative assessment: Four phases of neglect in resource frontiers

On opposite sides of the globe, the Chin Hills and Matopiba have experienced similar frontier dynamics. Places long forsaken by the outside world have rapidly gained attention and attracted multiple interests. While Matopiba is a classic “boom crop” expansion case, Chin State might be considered a more diverse frontier (though with clear signs of dispossession risks building up). Despite their differences, however, neglect appears to be a constitutive element of both of these resource frontiers.

As we contrast our cases, the emergent pattern is that neglect goes through at least four distinct phases in resource frontiers: pre-frontier abandonment, selective support, overlooked harms, and biased sustainability agendas (see Table 1).

Our first key observation is that neglect paves the way for impoverishment and dispossession throughout, not only before the establishment of resource frontiers. To be sure, pre-frontier abandonment is perhaps the most intuitive and easily identifiable phase of neglect. Communities in Matopiba and the Chin Hills were politically marginalized and impoverished before history took a turn and state actors gained interest in the commodification potential of these hitherto disregarded regions.

However, once those places caught outsiders' attention and frontier dynamics took hold, neglect merely entered its second phase. Continued but more blatant abandonment of local people by public or private outside actors, who could assist them but forgo this possibility in favor of selective support for outsiders, is characteristic during this phase. Neglectful actors seemingly add insult to injury when they finally start to come but not to assist – or finally read – communities, although they could. Rather, the state and others materially or institutionally assist only or primarily outside entrepreneurs, while continuing to mostly ignore local needs and aspirations, through preferential land tenure provision to entrepreneurs, biased research and development that does not meet long standing needs, or economic support to colonists but not to locals. There can be conviviality (however regretful) between locals and newcomers during this phase; forms of natural resource “grabbing”, and local conflicts might emerge, but this may not yet be a characteristic feature of the overall frontier. What communities resent in this frontier phase is heightened neglect and a more obvious lack of inclusiveness, perhaps tinted with a clearer sense of discrimination (see also Li, 2014b; Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020).

Neglect enters the third phase when communities start to be substantially harmed by extractive activities and no one – or too few – read their grievances. Locals may be left without access to safe drinking water or customarily used land, have their environment poisoned by chemicals, and many times become targeted by symbolic and physical violence. Our analysis shows that such dynamics have long been a bleak everyday reality for Matopiba's

communities and now begin to loom on the Chin Hills' horizon. Yet, there is usually little heeding to such issues. Resource frontiers are notoriously dangerous places, and while much is said of those who venture out into such “remote” areas (see Harms et al., 2014), most dangers seem to be experienced by local communities themselves. It might be hard to accurately distinguish this phase from the previous one – it is an escalation, and an exact threshold could be arbitrary – yet it is important to recognize this additional form of neglect. The “subtle optimism” said to underscore the feeling of neglect (Taylor, 2018) likely suffers a harder blow, albeit not necessarily fatal, when the one(s) from whom attention is expected fail to listen even in the face of dispossession and violence.

Finally, the fourth phase of neglect is distinguishable when environmental concern about frontier developments (e.g., biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions from land-use change) attracts outsider attention but, despite talk of sustainability, local people's interests fail to be read once again. Here, neglect may arise from state agencies or incoming resource users as much as from civil society organizations that make themselves present and problematize a resource frontier. As Kingdon (1995) states, a situation is only treated as a problem when it is successfully framed as one. However, due to the dominance of biophysical concerns in mainstream environmentalism (Martinez-Alier, 2002), it has become common for communities to be continually ignored, even by those who pose themselves against resource extraction. In Matopiba, as is often the case for agricultural commodity frontiers, consumer concerns and readings of sustainability have gained far more attention than local people's views (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020). The latter are thus once again neglected, in ever novel ways.

These four phases of neglect, perceptible from our comparative assessment, can serve as a heuristic framework to understand neglect's shifting roles and manifestations in resource frontiers (Fig. 3). Although we argue that frontier neglect typically evolves in such a four-phase sequence, empirical realities may depart from this stylized conception. Most notably, as the Chin case illustrates, pre-frontier abandonment may move straight to conservation or tourism-oriented dispossession (see also Neef, 2021). In other words, the creation of novel environmental commodities can cause neglect to leap from Phase I to IV in places that have not been coveted as classical commodity frontiers. That growing drive arguably arises out of heightened international environmental concerns, with an increased sense of looming scarcity of pristine ecosystems or “nature” (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015), in part due to classical frontierization and commodity-driven deforestation elsewhere.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The roles of imaginative, economic, and political neglect

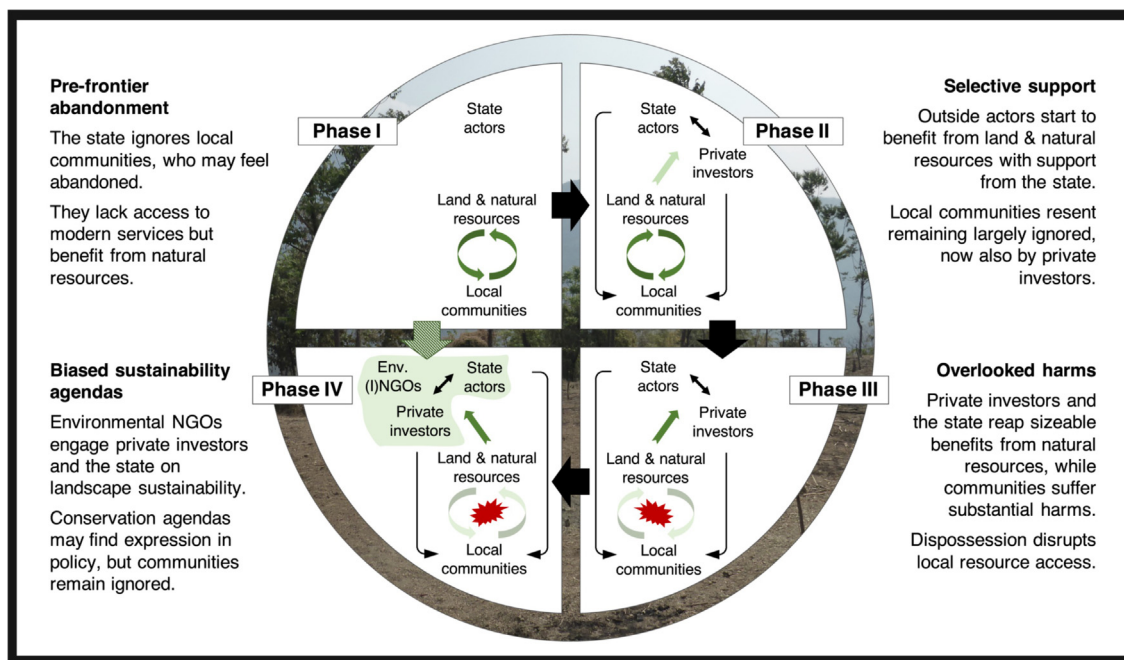
Neglect is an easily grasped concept. Still, the exact ways it operates are worth dissecting, not the least for thinking about how to address it. We identify at least three domains where neglect plays a critical role in frontier assemblages: imaginative, economic, and political (Table 2). In conjunction, they are fundamental for “obscuring” and stunting bottom-up competing alternatives while advancing dominant interests and agendas across different stages of frontierization (see McCarthy & Cramb, 2009).

First, as the Chin and Matopiba cases illustrate, imagining any region as a place of “not yet” – as Tsing (2003: 5100) characterizes resource frontiers – is only viable through neglecting what there is. Imaginations of “unpeopled wilderness, pregnant with possibility” (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019: 8) often are rather “de-peopled” places, from where inhabitants are not only concretely but also imaginatively expelled. Not rarely, under racist or culturalist discrimination, they either are regarded as people who do not count or

<sup>6</sup> The military coup on the first of February 2021, has severely disrupted Myanmar's tourism industry, public service provision and people's economic and everyday lives at large. The Tatmadaw forces have killed hundreds of people, and thousands have been detained. Clashes between military troops and armed resistance movements have taken place in Kalay and various Chin towns throughout 2021. Chin State remains a likely tourism frontier in the long run, but local people's immediate future is now more uncertain than it has been for years.

**Table 1**  
Phases and forms of neglect in Brazil and Myanmar.

Neglect phases	Matopiba (Brazil)	Chin Hills (Myanmar)
<b>Phase I:</b> Pre-frontier abandonment	Communities have wished for but lacked access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities, technical assistance and rural extension services targeted to smallholder farming, transport and communications infrastructure, and land tenure security.	Communities wish for but lack basic amenities and services including: secure drinking water, year-round electricity, affordable and physically accessible healthcare, education, vocational training and employment opportunities, extension programmes, irrigation, and enhanced communication and transport infrastructure.
<b>Phase II:</b> Selective support	Transport infrastructure being built by the state for soy cargos; public credit and state-funded research and extension favoring large agribusiness while neglecting smallholder agriculture, despite the latter's well-known importance for local and national food security.	Upgrades of major and secondary roads and bridges are underway, and Chin State's first airport just opened. Investors benefit from corporate income tax exemptions for up to seven years. Authorities provide land in support of an emerging tourism sector and showcase regional investment opportunities. Land-sector laws enable appropriation of allegedly vacant land, while neglect of basic extension and service provision, poverty and food insecurity persist.
<b>Phase III:</b> Overlooked harms	Smallholders and traditional communities evicted from their customary lands, often with "legal" blessing from the state due to lack of tenure security the state itself failed to provide earlier. Complaints about restricted or compromised access to water and other customarily used natural resources go unheeded. Public authorities and private investors ignore local grievances about widespread pesticide contamination in communities near soy farms, as well as (often not investigated) cases of physical abuse, death threats and murder.	Rural households are at risk of losing control over customary land, facilitated by Myanmar's Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law. Local inequalities grow and communities lack support vis-a-vis potentially harmful activities of outside investors.
<b>Phase IV:</b> Biased sustainability agendas	Growing global concern about conservation of Cerrado vegetation appears to regard only biodiversity and carbon stocks. View of Matopiba as a zero-sum game between only soy and native vegetation. Local communities and their views are excluded from the landscape governance agenda, even around sustainability concerns. Neglect towards alternative, inclusive development visions grassroots organizations have long espoused for the region.	International tourist flocks and conservation actors have yet to take full note of Chin State's natural bounty. Neglect through exclusive conservation-based activities in the hand of state authorities and private investors has already sprung, however.



**Fig. 3.** The four phases of neglect in resource frontiers. Neglect in resource frontiers typically goes through a sequence of four phases (black arrows). Yet, in line with heightened global environmental concerns, “green grabbing” increasingly leads neglect dynamics in resource frontiers to leap directly from Phase I to Phase IV (striped green arrow). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

seen as non-persons – uncivilized savages who should either be assimilated or make way (Russo Lopes & Bastos Lima, 2020). The frontier-making of Brazil’s Cerrado, while highlighting agricultural expansion and its potentials for increased food production and for bringing “development” to an “empty” place, has counted crucially on the imaginative neglect over pre-existing communities, local aspirations, and forms of social organization. Chin communities’

subsistence-oriented farming practices and deep-rooted cultural ties to the land are likewise relegated in maps and legal frameworks, which localize Myanmar’s greatest relative share of vacant, fallow, or virgin land in their state.

Second, economic neglect, too, often underscores the material poverty that makes resource frontiers possible and, later, serves to legitimize their creation. We concur with Erni (2015: 4) that

**Table 2**  
Forms of neglect across four phases at resource frontiers.

	Imaginative	Economic	Political
<b>Phase I:</b> Pre-frontier abandonment	Neglect of life-worlds, politico-economic arrangements and socio-ecological relations in a given place.	Markets, investors, and state authorities fail to support local economic development. No attention to community aspirations, unmet needs (e.g., food insecurity), etc.	Exclusion from political processes or legal ordering (e.g., tenure insecurity and no recognition for customary institutions or access rights).
<b>Phase II:</b> Selective support	Articulation of the frontier as a “place of not yet”, with the invisibilization of local actors and their traditional economic activities or forms of organization.	Investments, public credit and market access created for commodity chains and outsider enterprises, paired with continuous – but now more blatant – neglect of people’s needs and wants. Discrimination becomes more evident.	Selective political and governmental support for outsiders, coupled with discriminatory legal practices and obstructed institutional access for local actors.
<b>Phase III:</b> Overlooked harms	Under a façade of progress and newly created businesses, markets, institutions and political orderings, there is perpetuated ignorance of and disregard for local people’s altered or permanently destroyed life-worlds. Local worldviews and ways of life are violently eclipsed in silence.	No attention to hampered or destroyed local economic activities, or to undermined alternative development paths, as the focus is on the new, emerging forms of resource use.	Unresponsiveness towards local grievances and dispossession as resource commodification and large-scale resource appropriation gather pace. Lack of accountability for land and water grabbing or other harmful impacts on local communities.
<b>Phase IV:</b> Biased sustainability agendas	Local socio-ecological relations, political priorities and economic aspirations remain overlooked, and local communities are sidelined, as conservation actors following international sustainability agendas and – at times – ecotourism enterprises gain a foothold.	Predominance of sustainability agendas that privilege wealthier actors, commodified conservation, and international market mechanisms and integration, over bottom-up conservation initiatives, resource stewardship and local development priorities.	Exclusion of local and other critical stakeholders (including the ones most exposed to environmental change) from sustainability initiatives and landscape-scale governance arrangements.

indigenous peoples and other local populations are often not so much poor as “impoverished” by forces beyond their control. In both Brazil and Myanmar, we see that calls for improved infrastructure and locally relevant extension services – let alone credit or market access – have long been neglected until the arrival of outside interests, frequently associated with dispossession. Many locals also lack knowledge and tools (e.g., monitoring capacity, their own inscription devices, protection mechanisms) to defend their land against intruders (see Brofeldt et al., 2018). Such impoverishment makes local dwellers easy prey to top-down formal land zoning and purchase offers. It leaves them with little ability to promote alternative economic development paths, and in turn serves to legitimize the creation of resource frontiers as beneficial acts. Public or private actors can then comfortably argue they do a favor to regions that “produced nothing” and where “vacant land” is in ample supply (see Woodworth, 2017 for a relatable example on China and Inner Mongolia.).

Third, political neglect underscores the all-too-common legal vulnerability of local people at resource frontiers and their exclusion from landscape governance or land-use planning. Without tenure security or proper access to state institutions, villagers in Matopiba and Chin have been exposed to and threatened by legal or illegal dispossession, including outright eviction. Meanwhile, development plans or sustainability agendas are being made – sometimes allegedly to local peoples’ benefit – without duly considering their livelihoods or taking their views and preferences into account. Traditionally, frontier studies focus on the state as the primary agent behind pushes to enclose outliers or conquer new spaces. However, in contemporary economies the state arguably acts as an accomplice, a facilitator, an aide that creates legal, political, and sometimes material infrastructures to attract transnational capital while persistently ignoring the needs and wants of local people (Jessop, 1990). As a result, the state “offers[s] unequal chances to different forces”; it privileges certain interests while disregarding others, and both actions need attention (Jessop, 1990: 367).

Neglect is, in this regard, akin to the dark side of the moon, a half which is constitutive of the whole but typically remains unseen (see Fig. 4). Light is usually shed only onto the visible half of resource frontiers, on investors’ actions, what the state puts in place in terms of incentives, regulations, or international market demands and finance. Yet, as seen, neglect towards local communities may be just as critical for resource frontiers to emerge and evolve. While enabling certain actions through their presence, the state and private actors often simultaneously disenfranchise locals through their absence. Among others, such neglect is also chiefly responsible for the typical lack of accountability in resource frontiers (see Bastos Lima et al., 2021; Cons & Eilenberg, 2019).

### 5.2. Responding to neglect: Legitimizing narratives as Achilles’ heels of dispossession dynamics

Three grand justifications have come to the fore as legitimizing rationales with which public and private forces create frontier environments conducive to dispossession: development, global food security, and environmental conservation. Neglect operates as an unseen flipside in all of these cases and, if exposed, appears as a contradiction – or the Achilles’ heel – of grand narratives that thus suddenly become incoherent.

Development, perhaps the most common rationale for frontier making, serves as an almost altruistic framing that dates at least as far back as the classical “white man’s burden”. Often conflated with economic growth, the narrative of bringing development to frontier spaces only works because it is banally used, without regard to inclusiveness (Russo Lopes et al., 2021). What is promoted through frontier making becomes seen as the only alternative to stasis and persistent abandonment – something feasible so long as alternatives remain silenced or crippling undermined. As we have seen, local agency is usually overlooked and disenfranchised in such settings, as there is a need for making grievances or alternatives invisible. To some extent, community organization, networking and collective resistance can therefore counter invis-

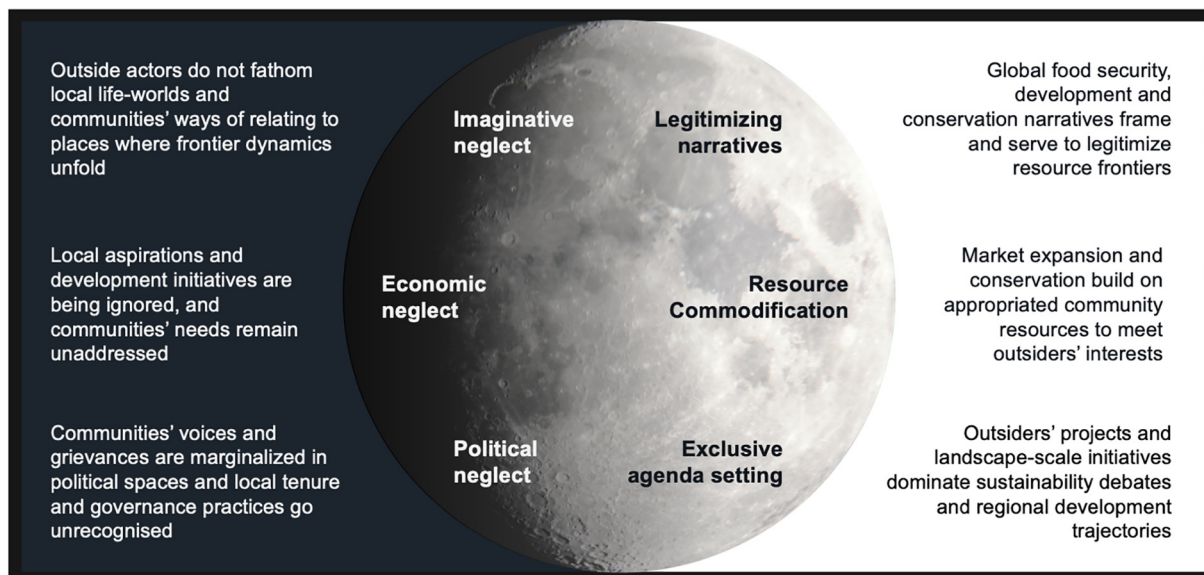


Fig. 4. Three dimensions of neglect as the often-unseen flipside of frontier assemblages.

bilization attempts. What Neville (2021) describes as “activated insider identities” has been witnessed in Matopiba (e.g., with Afro-Brazilian communities), that is, growing self-recognition as holding (more) legitimate rights to the land vis-a-vis outsiders. If neglect has a subjective dimension and indeed betrays a feeling of non-sovereignty from the part of the neglected (Taylor, 2018), bottom-up initiatives may also help overcome that self-perception besides making local actors more visible to the outside world.

The neo-Malthusian narrative of “feeding the world”, too, increasingly offers a convenient reason for pushes at frontiers (see De Schutter, 2017). A political project thus unduly gains the legitimacy that “emergency” responses afford (Lund, 2019: 22), akin to the way even climate change prospects may be used to justify atrocities (Paprocki, 2019). The Matopiba case demonstrates how powerful such policy discourses are in imaginatively reframing places of systemic violence into virtuous breadbaskets, while locals' very own food access needs may be neglected (see also Ito, Rachman, & Savitri, 2014). Nevertheless, such narratives can be challenged, as exemplified by a growing body of research into the local dietary impacts of landscape transformations (Ickowitz, Powell, Rasmussen, & Rhemtulla, 2021).

Finally, outsiders often reframe community territories as untouched places of precious natural bounty, not to be cleared or converted but conserved for ecosystem service payments or tourism (Neef, 2021). Chin State is but one example of where such dynamics may unfold with force. Critical to the effectiveness of such a mainstream narrative is to disregard convivial forms of conservation – often enmeshed in pre-existing traditions and livelihoods – as an alternative. Research that unmask the framing of places simply as vanishing wilderness can, therefore, be a useful tool to analyze outsiders' imaginative neglect and how inclusive their sustainability agendas truly are.

Myth-busting these powerful but self-contradictory narratives can help to challenge fallacious frontier imaginations. Still, outsider support to local initiatives and resistance movements may be required to overcome deeply ingrained dimensions of economic and political neglect. Not only do private investors and state actors need to be held accountable for their destructive actions in resource frontiers, but inclusive, bottom-up development alternatives are also critical. It is vital to overcome neglect over the pleas

and grievances of local actors as well as over their agency and potential protagonism.

## 6. Conclusion

As last frontier politics gain traction and hasten the pace of resource capture worldwide, analyses of their dynamics and legitimacy become all the more important. This article concurs that there usually are enabling conditions for a *process* of dispossession in resource frontiers. We articulate how frontiers are spaces of flows as well as spaces of marginalization. In assessing frontier assemblages in Brazil and Myanmar, we show that while neglect might not be the process of change itself, it paves the way for dispossession and exclusion. If music is not only in the notes but also the silence between them, the making of frontiers, too, resides in actions as much as in neglect.

Our conclusions around the importance of neglect for understanding resource frontiers are three-fold. First, neglect is co-constitutive of frontier dynamics and works throughout them in various phases. Neglect does not disappear with the emergence of outside interest but gains new facets, such as when sustainability agendas disregard local peoples' views. Imagining places “pregnant with possibility” requires neglecting what is already there, while material impoverishment and political exclusion leave local people vulnerable to dispossession and facilitates that territories be “de-peopled” both in a figurative and in a physical sense.

Second, although calls for greater responsiveness, public accountability and legal obligations toward local communities usually focus on the state, non-state actors are often neglectful, too. In our cases, communities especially resent being neglected by their governments but not only. They also feel neglected by markets, investors, and environmental NGOs. Public and private actors have framed these “last frontiers” as final spaces for resource use or protection, legitimized with narratives of development, global food security, or nature conservation.

Third, there are important multi-level interactions regarding frontiers that deserve further research. Given a growing perception of relatively little uncommodified land and nature left on the globe and planetary boundaries being crossed, individual frontiers have experienced growing pressure in the name of conservation. For the first time in history, global land dynamics may be reaching

what Phase IV of the neglect framework depicts for specific frontiers, where perceptions of scarcity lead to exclusive conservation. This phenomenon raises not only questions about the workings of neglect in resource frontiers but also on global decision-making arenas negotiating trade-offs between conservation and development objectives.

Lastly, we critique the common self-reliance bias that leads some outsiders to a *priori* regard local communities as necessarily better off alone, and external engagement mostly as suspiciously malefic. While likely accurate in certain contexts, our cases show that this assumption cannot be generalized. Communities do not always reject the state-space in favor of autonomy. On the contrary, they may rather welcome it if this improves their livelihoods and affords them access to desired services. Therefore, the question is not whether or not to engage, but who should do so, how, and when.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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