

We dedicate this report to U Min Thein with love and gratitude.



" PLEASE DON'T CONSIDER US AS CRIMINALS. WE GROW OPIUM TO SURVIVE AND TO FULFILL OUR FAMILIES' BASIC REQUIREMENTS, NOT TO DAMAGE SOCIETY."

FEMALE OPIUM FARMER FROM SHAN STATE

Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum is a nationwide opium farmers association advocating for the rights of opium farmers. (https://www.tni.org/en/profile/myanmar-opium-farmers-forum-moff)

Asia Catalyst is an international non-governmental organization, based in the United States and Thailand, that focuses on strengthening the capacity of grassroots organizations led by marginalized communities to advocate for their rights.

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INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's citizens represent a diverse array of ethnic groups, each with their own identity, culture and natural resource base. The country is also well known for its fertile soil and rich agricultural land. Despite these abundant resources, 70 years of conflict between ethnic armed groups and the military government has resulted in poverty and food insecurity through the country.

When the National League for Democracy won the 2015 election, the advent of a new civilian government raised hopes for an end to one of the world's longest-running armed conflicts. The military has remained the country's most powerful institution, however, and its autonomy from civilian oversight has stymied Myanmar's democratic transition while fostering cycles of abuse and impunity.



Myanmar's farmers face entrenched poverty, malnutrition, and security threats as internal conflicts continue to escalate. Although the country's overall GDP increased in 2017-2018 with improvements in crop production and growth in the industrial sector,¹ deforestation, diminishing water resources, and extreme weather conditions cause significant vulnerability for farmers who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.²

This report will examine livelihood challenges among opium farmers from various ethnic groups in Shan and Kayah States. It will address the traditional usages of opium, the impacts of opium eradication campaigns, and the effectiveness of alternative livelihood programs within these regions. Findings and policy recommendations are made based upon the life experiences of ethnic minority opium farmers as revealed through in-depth interviews.

OBJECTIVES

- TO PROVIDE A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF OPIUM FARMING, INCLUDING USES OF OPIUM IN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE
- TO HIGHLIGHT THE CHALLENGES FACED BY OPIUM FARMERS UNDER THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT'S OPIUM ERADICATION CAMPAIGNS
- TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMS AND RELATED SUPPORT
- TO PROMOTE THE ADOPTION OF EVIDENCE-BASED DRUG LAWS AND POLICY REFORM

² Myanmar's National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) to Climate Change 2012



¹ Myanmar Economic Monitor, May 2018



METHODOLOGY

This reported is based on research conducted by ethnic minority opium farmers, who worked in collaboration with communities in Shan and Kayah States to document the challenges facing opium farmers. Asia Catalyst and the Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum provided support for the research project. The policy recommendations at the conclusion of this report are based on the farmers' research findings.

Asia Catalyst (AC) is an international nongovernmental organization based in the United States and Thailand that focuses on strengthening the capacity of grassroots organizations led by marginalized communities to advocate for their rights. In 2018, AC partnered with Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum (MOFF), a nationwide opium farmers association advocating for the rights of opium farmers to set up a Capacity Building Program. The program aims to build organizational management skills, promote human rights knowledge and strengthen evidence-based advocacy strategies among ethnic minority opium farmers. MOFF was the key implementer of the documentation and advocacy program, and provided input on the selection of participants and curriculum development, while AC facilitated workshops and consultations, and provided technical support.

AC conducted a series of consultations and workshops with 12 leaders from opium farming communities and second-line leaders from Shan State and Kayah State, and provided technical and financial support over the course of the one-and-a-half year program. The aims of the first two consultations were to introduce the program, build an understanding of MOFF's objectives, and develop plans for future work.

At the first workshop, AC trainers introduced the basic principles of human rights, human rights frameworks, and drug laws and policies. Based on their understanding of human rights, the workshop participants identified the negative impacts of forced opium eradication programs in Southern Shan State. In Kayah State, workshop



participants expressed that they were not receiving sufficient support to engage in alternative livelihoods. They also identified the criminalization of traditional uses and cultivation of opium as human rights violations. During the second workshop, AC trainers introduced rights-based documentation methods to the opium farmers.

Following the second workshop, participants systematically gathered testimonies from their fellow opium farmers, and from community leaders in their local areas. To begin the research process, the farmer researchers conducted one-day sessions with other farmers, during which they shared their objectives and documentation plan. They then selected a total of six research assistants who were also opium farmers, had broad networks with other farmers, and could read and write in both ethnic and Myanmar languages.

A total of 71 men and 30 women who currently cultivate opium or have grown opium within three years were interviewed. The interviewees were selected based on experience of forced seizures of opium crops in Southern Shan State, and having received alternative livelihood support in Kayah State. For information regarding traditional uses of opium, the farmer researchers also interviewed religious leaders, traditional healers, ethnic leaders and community elders.

The farmer researchers conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in their ethnic languages, including Pa-O, Kayan and Lahu, from July through September of 2019. Most of the interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes at night when they were available after farming. Given the sensitive nature of the information discussed, interviewers and research assistants used a coding system to assure confidentiality. Data were recorded by both audio and written notes, and translated from Pa-O, Kayan and Lahu into Myanmar language. For data accuracy, the interviewers and research assistants reviewed the translated data together and followed up with interviewees as required. At the third and final workshop, the farmer researchers discussed their key findings, and worked together to develop advocacy strategies.





A risk assessment was conducted before the research project in collaboration with the opium farmers. Interruption or detention by local authorities and transportation difficulties during the rainy season were identified as key risks. To mitigate these risks, the farmer researchers informed village heads and religious leaders about the project to get their support. They communicated regularly throughout the process, and developed an emergency plan if detention occurred that included cooperation with village heads and religious leaders, and follow up with local authorities.







OPIUM CULTIVATION IN MYANMAR

The opium poppy has been in use since antiquity, originating around the Mediterranean and spreading to China by the 7th century.³ The poppy plant was introduced from China to Myanmar a century ago, and opium has been cultivated in the country's Northern and Northeastern highlands ever since.⁴ Opium is a major cash crop for ethnic minorities living in Shan, Kayah, and Kachin states, where weather and soil conditions are ideal for farming poppies,⁵ but present challenges for the cultivation of other crops.⁶



³ Opium Poppy Cultivation and Heroin Processing in Southeast Asia, Sep 1992 https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/141189NCJRS.pdf

⁴ Opium farmers in Myanmar: the lives of producers of prohibited plants, 17 December 2018 https://www.tni.org/en/article/opium-farmers-in-myanmar-the-lives-of-producers-of-prohibited-plants

⁵ Opium farmers in Myanmar: the lives of producers of prohibited plants

⁶ Statement of 7th Myanmar Opium Farmers Forum, 13 May 2019 https://www.tni.org/my/Statement-7th-Myanmar-Opium-Farmers-Forum-in-Burmese



The Myanmar government considers opium poppy cultivation the main cause of the country's drug problems. To address this issue, the government introduced a 15-year opium cultivation elimination plan, along with an opium eradication program beginning in 1999. As a result of this program and the ban on opium, ethnic minority farmers and their families who depend on opium cultivation face increased poverty, food insecurity and risk of human trafficking. Additional factors exacerbating the situation include human rights violations perpetrated by state authorities, lack of land title, official corruption in the form of illegal land taxes, and land grabbing. Although opium cultivation and related issues are directly related to peace and security, the issue was not addressed in the formulation of the country's peace development plan. Although opium cultivation development plan.

Opium farmers face a number of barriers in advocating directly with government agencies for solutions to their problems, including a lack of knowledge of human rights, lack of awareness of laws and policies related to opium cultivation, limited evidence of the impacts they face from opium eradication programs, and a lack of advocacy skills and strategies.

- 7 Efforts to eliminate narcotic drugs and combat drug-trafficking described during assembly debate 2000 https://www.un.org/press/en/2000/20000920.ga9776.doc.html
- 8 Myanmar's efforts to eradicate narcotic drugs 2008 https://www.drugabuse.gov/international/abstracts/myanmars-efforts-toeradicate-narcotic-drugs
- 9 https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/alternative-development/myanmar.html Accessed on 2020
- 10 Statement of 7th Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum, 13 May 2019, https://www.tni.org/my/Statement-7th-Myanmar-Opium-Farmers-Forum-in-Burmese
- 11 Statement of 6th Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum, 01 June 2018 https://www.tni.org/en/article/statement-from-the-6th-myanmar-opium-farmers-forum



BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO AFFECTED REGIONS

SHAN STATE

One of the largest states in Myanmar, Shan State is home to a large number of ethnic peoples, including Shan, Pa-O, Palung, Lahu, Kachin, Wa and Kokang. Long plagued by instability and conflict, the state remains one of the country's largest battlegrounds, and transportation is hindered by poor road access. With its long border with China, Shan State plays an important role in Myanmar-China trade. Self-administering regions within the state control much of this trade, while other regions are excluded from the economic benefits of border trade. Shan State faces a number of natural resource - and land - related issues. Coal mines, plantations, and large-scale infrastructure development projects have led to land disputes and adverse environmental and social impacts. Although opium cultivation in Shan State is decreasing, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that the state remains the largest source of opium in the region. 13



¹² **"ရှမ်းပြည်ကျောက်မီးသွေးစက်ရုံ ဆက်လည်ပတ်လို့ ထပ်ကန့်ကွက်**" BBCburmese, https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-44544023. Accessed 20 June, 2018

¹³ UNODC report "Myanmar Opium cultivation continues to drop as regional drug market changes" UNODC. Accessed January 11,2019.

https://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/myanmar/2019/01/myanmar-opium-survey-report-launch/story.html



KAYAH STATE

Kayah State is one of the least-developed regions of Myanmar, with limited road access and transportation. In addition to the majority Karenni ethnic group, Kayan, Padaung, Kayah, Yintale, Yinbaw, Gaekho and Gaebar, Karen, Shan, Pa-oh, Inn and Burmans make their homes in Kayah State. Kayah State has seen some of the worst fighting in Myanmar's decades-long civil war, and ethnic armed groups such as the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) continue to clash with the Burmese military. A large number of Karenni have fled to refugee camps in Thailand. The conflicts eased in 2012 after ethnic armed groups signed a ceasefire agreement with the government. Armed conflict, limited road access, poor education, and lack of good governance has led to widespread poverty in Kayah State, and the majority of ethnic people make a precarious living through subsistence agriculture.

¹⁴ Myanmar Peace Monitor "Ceasefire and Peace process" BNI. https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/1552





KEY FINDINGS

1. TRADITIONAL OPIUM USE AMONG ETHNIC LAHU PEOPLE IN EASTERN SHAN STATE

Over the course of its long history of cultivation in Myanmar, opium has come to be used for a variety of traditional purposes among the Lahu Ni (Red Lahu), Lahu Na (Black Lahu), Lahu Wah (Yellow Lahu), Lahu Parkayoe and Lahu Kulao people. Lahu history is replete with folktales, customs, traditional medications, and beliefs surrounding the use of opium.



LAHU FOLKTALE: HOW OPIUM EVOLVED

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess. Her father wanted her to marry an educated man. Having announced her eligibility, her father identified three candidates. However, each of the candidates expressed hesitation, preferring to first continue their studies in preparation for the marriage. Hence, the three of them went on a long journey in pursuit of knowledge. The first candidate learned to become a magician, while the second became an expert in medicine. The third learned to make a ten-day journey in only one day. When they reached the point when they were satisfied with their accomplishments, the three candidates began wondering about the princess' whereabouts. The second and third candidates asked the first candidate to check on her. The first candidate returned with news that the princess was quite ill. Immediately, the second candidate started formulating a medicine to treat her illness. The third candidate quickly took the medicine to the princess and treated her, and she became better.

The grateful king decided to let the third candidate marry the princess. When the other two learned of his decision, the three candidates began fighting amongst themselves. Though the princess was alive because of the efforts of all three, each claimed to be the rightful candidate to marry the princess.

In the end, the king decided to kill the princess to reign in the chaotic fighting. A month later, two medicinal plants were found blooming on the princess' grave. Opium poppy bloomed where her breast lay, and tobacco bloomed over her vagina. Thus, people became addicted, consuming opium like children drinking their mother's milk, and continuously spitting out tobacco juice.

It is a popular belief among the Lahu that the princess was reborn and returned to her lovers in the form of these medicinal plants. The plant that grew from her breast represents her love and purity, as the opium poppy produces a juice the color of milk.



The Lahu use opium in traditional social events such as harvest festivals, house warmings, new year celebrations, festivals of light, weddings, funerals, and important village meetings. A host offers raw opium to elderly or important guests to welcome them and show their respect. The typical amount used differs based on age and gender. Male elders over the age of 50 are the major users. Very few women use opium. For recreational purposes, approximately 0.5 g of opium is typically shared by a group of four, who smoke together.

Opium is also used to make offerings to the ancestors, and to guardian spirits. Lahu and neighboring ethnic groups commonly believe that offering opium to the spirits brings good luck in hunting. Opium is also the favored offering to the ancestors, as an offering of opium makes them happy so that they take care of their family members and ensure their health and prosperity.

Opium also serves as an important traditional medicine due to the lack of state-sponsored medical support in remote areas. It is used to cure colds, coughs, seasonal flu, diarrhea, breathing problems, hypertension, poisoning, wounds, joint pain, painful injuries and male genital problems. The amount and utilization differ according to the patient's symptoms.

To treat common colds, coughing and diarrhea, a very small amount of opium- similar in size to a paddy seed- is grilled together with a slice of garlic. It is meant to be swallowed, and is taken once a day for three consecutive days.

For sickness and joint pain, the grilled opium and garlic are either bound to the joint or close to the vein using a bandage. This treatment is administered until the symptoms completely subside.

For difficulty breathing, hypertension and male genital problems, a ball of opium the size of a corn kernel is grilled and the patient directly inhales the smoke. This is done three times a week until the symptoms subside.

For injuries, the opium is diluted with water and directly applied to the wound. If a venous animal bites a person, raw concentrated opium is similarly applied directly to the wound. It is believed that only one application is sufficient to be effective. The amount of opium used





may vary from the size of a paddy seed, to the size of a soybean seed depending on the severity of the patient's symptoms.

Opium is also used in animals to cure seasonal diseases, coughs, diarrhea and loss of appetite by adding a small amount of opium to the animal's feed. These usages have persisted for generations and have proven effective. Thus, each household typically plants at least 0.10 viss¹⁵ of opium for multi-purpose usage, to be shared among community members when necessary.

Raw opium contains alkaloids such as morphine and codeine that have pain killing, anti-cough and anti-diarrheal properties. Therefore, medical usage among ethnic people is appropriate for treating the illnesses mentioned.

However, there are cases of misuse of opium, especially among young people. Youth often smoke a mixture of opium and the locally produced methamphetamine, *yaba*.

"WE'VE USED RAW OPIUM SINCE LONG AGO. WE PASS THE SAFE WAYS OF USAGE DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION."

- MALE LAHU ELDER

¹⁶ Pharmacology of Opioids, 2007



¹⁵ A viss is a Burmese unit of measure for weight, approximately 1.63293 kilograms (3.6 pounds).

KEY THEMES

Customs and social usages

As mentioned above, opium is an important component of social events and spiritual beliefs that have been carried down in ethnic communities over generations. Opium is not only regarded as normal, but also as a cultural tradition. Opium use in ethnic communities is similar to the ago-old Burmese custom of offering betel nut to guests, and to the spirits as a symbol of love and welcoming. Like opium, betel nut is addictive, and overuse can result in oral and tongue cancer. Unlike opium, however, there are no legal restrictions on the use of betel nut, and its use is considered an important part of Burmese culture.

"We smoke raw opium at social events. Elderly people smoke it when we discuss village development."

- Male Lahu elder

"Similar to Chinese tradition, we offer raw opium to our ancestors because it is their favorite, so they will love us and ensure our health and prosperity."

- Male Lahu leader

Community awareness

Traditionally, opium use is controlled, with the amount set according to age and purpose according to indigenous knowledge passed down from generation to generation.

"We've used raw opium since long ago. We pass the safe ways of usage down from generation to generation."

-Male Lahu elder

¹⁷ The Study of Myanmar Chewing Culture based on the Myth of the areca nut, betel leaves and lime stone, May 2019





Traditional medicine

The use of raw opium as a traditional medicine is common in remote mountainous areas where modern medicine is not available. Nevertheless, users know that it is illegal.

"It is too far to go to town for medical treatment. Most of our illnesses are relieved by either eating or smoking opium."

- Male Lahu farmer

"Raw opium can counteract the effects of venom. It is applied directly on a snake or scorpion bite."

- Male Lahu traditional healer

Prevailing regulations and legal approval

Although opium is internationally recognized as a painkiller, it is not legally approved for use in Myanmar. According to the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substance Law, the use of opium, and growing and production of opium poppy, are criminal offenses, without consideration of cultural perspectives. There are no policies, laws or regulations to approve and protect traditional usages. Nevertheless, opium continues to be used according to custom and tradition.

"If we use or produce opium, we can be arrested under the current law. But traditional usage should be approved legally."

- Male Lahu opium farmer

"We don't mean to harm anyone by growing opium. Opium poppy should be considered as a plant that has medical benefits, and should be legalized."

- Lahu opium farmer



Regional economic development

In Myanmar, opium is considered an evil that destroys people's lives, and it is prohibited to plant opium poppy. Globally, 5.5 million people have limited access to opium-based painkillers such as morphine, particularly cancer patients and late stage AIDS patients in the Global South.¹⁸ In Turkey, the government provides a certain number of licenses for opium cultivation each year. Export of raw opium earned Turkey 60 million USD and traditional opium farmers also got benefits.¹⁹ If opium cultivation were to be legalized for morphine production, this would potentially benefit Myanmar, and improve the livelihoods of traditional small-scale opium farmers.

2. LIVELIHOOD CHALLENGES AMONG OPIUM FARMERS IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE

The lives of opium farmers are characterized by poverty, debt, and despair. In areas plagued by lawlessness, armed conflict, limited road access, lack of fertile land and limited market access, farmers in need of income have little choice but to cultivate opium poppies. Even so, with an average of 4 to 10 members per family, income generated from opium cultivation is barely sufficient to feed an entire family. The investment required to cultivate opium is 600,000 to 1,000,000 MMK for every 2 acres, and the price fetched for raw opium varies from MMK 300,000 to 800,000 MMK per viss depending on quality and region. Landless households typically rent land for 400,000 to 600,000 MMK per acre. Opium is the only cash crop that is purchased directly by traders, and farmers are able get income from the sale of opium for 3-6 months out of the year. Therefore, opium farmers are motivated to take out loans at high interest rates to countiue opium cultivation each year. At the same time, forced eradication of poppy crops and the bribes demanded by officials push opium farmers



¹⁹ Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2020) 'Turkey's Opium Trade: Successful Transition from Illicit Production to A Legally Regulated Market'





further into poverty. As a result, opium farmers and their families face difficulty accessing education, and minors must often search for alternative sources of income to help support their families. Migration to neighboring countries such as Thailand and Malaysia in search of work as day laborers is common. Most migrate illegally, doing low-paid, dangerous work under constant threat of arrest.

"PLEASE DON'T CONSIDER US (OPIUM FARMERS) AS CRIMINALS. WE GROW OPIUM TO SURVIVE AND TO FULFILL OUR FAMILIES' BASIC REQUIREMENTS, NOT TO DAMAGE SOCIETY."

- FEMALE OPIUM FARMER FROM SHAN STATE

KEY THEMES

Eradicating opium cultivation

Approximately 40-50 police, soldiers, and locally-based Myanmar government officials make up a typical opium eradication task force, in addition to civilians from other villages who officials force to contribute their labor to destroy the poppy crops. Eradication campaigns are typically conducted when the poppies are in full bloom, from November to December. Task force members cut the opium poppies from the base with long sticks or swords.

Corruption

Opium eradication campaigns are conducted without the consent of local communities. Upon entering a community, the officers typically destroy half the opium crop for show, leaving the other half untouched. They then set up a meeting with the village head or local administrator and demand a certain amount of money to spare the remainder of the opium. The amount is non-negotiable,



and the farmers have to pay whatever is demanded. The average amount is not less than 7,000,000 MMK per village, with a maximum of 100,000 MMK per household. There are no receipts provided, as the money goes directly into the officers' pockets. Opium farmers must make these informal payments each year. Even though farmers pay the amount demanded, in many cases, the officers still destroy their crops. Only those opium crops located in hard to reach areas are spared. Some portions of the harvest are occasionally spared due to the strong bargaining power of a village head or the ability of farmers to meet payment deadlines.

"The officers met with the village head and asked for money after some crops had already been destroyed. We have to pay whatever amount is demanded without negotiation."

- Male opium farmer

"If we can't pay within the timeline they specify, they threaten to destroy all of our crops. We have to collect money in every possible way. We paid the money to the village head, and then he paid it to the officers."

- Male opium farmer

The opium eradication taskforce stays in a village for an average of 15 days. During that time, each household must contribute to cover the taskforce members' expenses, including accommodations, food and beverages. At least five farmers interviewed said that field huts, agricultural tools, and other crops such as vegetables located nearby the poppy farms were also destroyed as part of the eradication campaign.

Threats

Opium farmers are threatened with arrest and imprisonment if they fail to make the informal payments to officials. They are banned from accessing their own farmlands during eradication campaigns, and are not able to meet directly with officials. The officials pressure village administrators and village heads to collect the requested money





from the farmers, and in turn, farmers face pressure and threats from both village heads and administrators, and from taskforce members.

"We were warned not to go to our farms, or we'd be arrested on sight. We had no other option but to stay at home and pray that all our crops would not be destroyed."

- Female opium farmer

Poverty and Hunger

The majority of farmers have to borrow money from wealthy people at high interest rates to invest in opium poppy cultivation. If the taskforce destroys their crops at the peak of the season, the farmers lose their entire investment. This situation drives farmers into an endless cycle of poverty and debt. Landowners often become landless in the process of paying back high interest loans. Having lost their farmland, they typically become day laborers to continue paying back the interest on their loans. At least one farmer committed suicide due to the huge interest payments he owed. The majority of families interviewed owed between 1,000,000 and 5,000,000 MMK.

"Once opium is eradicated, the entire family has to suffer the consciences of borrowing money at a high interest rate. Our family became landless, homeless and jobless. Eventually, my children left in search of work in neighboring countries. I am the only one left in the family and now work as a day laborer at any job available."

- Female opium farmer

Opium farmers do not have other opinions for sustainable livelihoods. Some opium farmers tried to grow other crops such as wheat, maize, beans, rice, garlic and avocados. However, productivity was low due to lack of agricultural techniques and unfavorable soil and weather conditions. In cases where productivity was good, farmers faced falling prices because of unstable markets, high supply and low demand. They grow their crops in remote, hilly areas inaccessible by road, and the only way to bring vegetables to market is by foot.



Many farmers work as day laborers to cover their basic daily food requirements, with nothing left over for education or healthcare.

"I experimented with growing maize and wheat between the poppy plants. The plants grew, but the seeds didn't develop properly."

- Male opium farmer

"The price of garlic was 2,000-2,500 MMK per viss in the beginning. Later, there was more garlic in the market than customers, and the price dropped to 400-350 MMK per viss. I lost a lot."

Male opium farmer

After eradication, opium farmers have difficulty feeding their children. When rice and other staples are scarce, meals are prepared with any available ingredients regardless of nutritional value. Most families cannot afford meat.

"We are worried about our daily meals. Sometimes, my children go to school on an empty stomach."

- Female opium farmer

"I borrowed rice from others because I couldn't afford to buy any."

-Female opium farmer

"I can only feed gruel to my children. I cry everyday with a feeling of failure."

Female opium farmer

Barriers to accessing education

Fewer and fewer children have access to higher education due to limited family incomes. When farmers can't afford to pay for their children's education, the children drop out of school. There is also a lack of resources to support schools and teachers in rural Myanmar.





If their opium crops were not destroyed, villagers might be able to contribute basic necessities such as rice and vegetables to local schoolteachers, and even save a bit for community development projects.

"I can no longer afford to support my children's education. My daughter had reached the 10th Standard (high school) when she had to drop out of school and go to work as a day laborer to support our family."

- Female opium farmer

"I borrowed money from some wealthy people to pay for my eldest daughter's education, but due to a lack of savings, my middle daughter had to drop out of high school."

- Female opium farmer

The majority of opium farmers' children of working age migrate either legally or illegally to neighboring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and China in search of work on construction sites, in factories and as domestic workers. The main reason for migration is to help their families pay off their debts. In addition, migrants must borrow money at high interest rates to cover the cost of migration, placing them even more heavily in debt, with no guarantee of job security.

"My son is in Thailand and my daughter is in Malaysia. They are working on a construction site and in a factory to pay back our debts. But going abroad for work creates debt on top of debt. I'm afraid that they'll have to work their entire lifetimes to repay all the money we owe."

- Female opium farmer

Delays in Infrastructure Development

All Myanmar citizens must contribute to community funds for the development of local infrastructure, especially roads, schools and religious structures. Each family must contribute between 47,000 – 60,000 MMK (30-40 USD) per year. After opium poppy eradication,



families are often unable to contribute to their community fund. As a consequence, important infrastructure in the community cannot be completed as planned.

"We couldn't contribute to the community development fund as we had hoped. Some contributed less, while some couldn't contribute at all."

Male opium farmer

"We couldn't continue building housing for local teachers or a dining hall for our monastery because the opium farmers couldn't contribute to the community fund this year."

Male opium farmer

Community conflicts

When opium eradication taskforces bring community members from nearby villages to destroy opium crops, this can lead to conflicts between local villages. Solidarity between villages is key to the success of peace building efforts following decades of civil war.

Support from Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and International Organizations

Only a few villages receive support from non-government organizations. Coffee seeds and agricultural extension services were provided to communities to replace opium cultivation. However, these projects had limitations. In one community, only 20 out of 180 households were able to access support through an initiative of this kind. In addition, support is only available during the project period. Coffee trees take over four years to produce. The coffee seed production rate and quality were not good. The cost of transporting coffee seeds exceeded the financial support provided. In the end, opium farmers had to continue growing opium to meet their basic needs.

"In my entire life, I have never heard of or received support for opium farmers."

- Male opium farmer





"I don't have any choice. I will continue to grow poppy on a small scale. It is the main income for my family."

- Male opium farmer

Government Involvement

The Myanmar government has no effective strategy to combat illicit opium cultivation except the eradication of small-scale opium farmers' crops. The key players at the top of the opium production chain are not targeted,²⁰ and there has been no effort to shift the focus to major producers and distributors. Eradication of small-scale opium farmers' crops leads to human rights violations, and government officials use eradication campaigns to solicit bribes from opium farmers who are unaware of their rights under the law.

Although alternative livelihood programs exist, villagers are not currently receiving sufficient support to abandon poppy cultivation. As the world's second largest opium producing country with over 3 million households dependent on opium farming, Myanmar needs an effective strategy to address opium cultivation without compounding human rights violations.

Farmers are generally afraid to complain to the authorities when they are charged corruption money, because as opium growers, they are considered criminals, and can be imprisoned for up to 15 years for growing restricted plants to meet their basic needs.

"We never inform the authorities because we are growing illegal plants and there is risk of being arrested."

- Male opium farmer

²⁰ နုနယ်သောဘဝများကျိုးပျက်ကြွေလွင့်ခြင်း၊ မျှတမှုကင်းသော မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါးနှိမ်နင်းရေးမူဝါ ဒများ၏မလိုလားအပ်သည့် နောက်ဆက်တွဲရလာဒ်များ



Ethnic Armed Organizations

In the context of Myanmar's on-going peace process, the government has stated that it will cooperate with ethnic armed organizations in opium-growing areas to suppress the cultivation of opium among ethnic minority communities.²¹ Reduction of opium cultivation is framed as part of the overall drive to eliminate the production and trade of illicit drugs. The main strategy to address opium cultivation within the peace process is thus suppression rather the promotion of development and security. Due to the policy of cooperation between the government and ethnic armed organizations, opium farmers are not able to seek help from their local ethnic leaders or officials of self-administrative ethnic regions when facing government suppression.

"Growing poppy is illegal, so we don't know who to inform when we have trouble. Our ethnic leaders don't like us to grow opium and are trying to eliminate it. We have no one to turn to."

Male opium farmer

3. IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE CULTIVATION PROGRAMS IN KAYAH STATE

The Myanmar government has been combating illicit opium cultivation for two decades with support from international organizations. Although the country has made statements claiming a decrease in the cultivation and production of opium, Myanmar remains one of the largest opium producers in the world.²² In the meantime, alternative livelihood programs initiated by the Myanmar government, international organizations and CSOs have had minimal impacts.



²² "Myanmar Opium Survey" UNODC. https://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/myanmar/2019/01/ myanmar-opium-survey-report- launch/story.html





Alternative livelihood programs have primarily focused on agricultural development, including raising livestock (chickens, pigs and cows), and promotion of coffee and other perennial crops. Government-led programs tend to be limited in number, with weak technical support. CSO support and programs initiated by religious organizations generally provide not only technical support, but also basic agricultural training, knowledge around the production of organic fertilizers, and environmental conservation techniques.

According to interviewees, the majority of government-led programs have been developed and implemented without sufficient consideration of regional perspectives, and suffer from a lack of management and monitoring. They also lack community consultation, and are often incompatible with regional conditions. As a result of these challenges, many government programs have now been replaced by projects such as *Mya Sein Yaung*, which focuses on providing loans.²³ Loan projects are also limited, however. For example, in one community, only 5 out of 150 households were able to access support.

Community-based organizations like Metta and faith-based organizations like the Kayah Baptist Association (KBA) have provided materials and technical support, as well as trainings on farming techniques, natural fertilizer production, and environmental management, including visits to demonstration plots and coffee farms in Yar Ngan. Farmers who received the trainings said that they were able to apply the knowledge they gained.

Loans and livestock projects were not making a significant difference in the communities visited, however. Although these projects seem effective in the short-term, they did not provide sufficient long-term support, and many were misdirected. A few examples follow.

Chicken Farming: Each household received 5 chickens, and was expected to return each chicken along with 5,000 MMK at the end of the project year. The project managers calculated the return on this investment as follows: each chicken produces 8 chicks, resulting in 40 chickens per household from an initial grant of 5 chickens.

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https://drd-myanmar.blogspot.com/2015/11/blog-post_4.html



However, 2 roosters and 3 hens were provided to each household at the beginning of the project. It is obvious that these calculations are wrong. In addition, the chickens provided were not well suited to the regional climate, and some carried diseases that harmed the native chicken species. In addition, some beneficiaries did not understand the project, and ended up selling or consuming their chickens. When the project officers returned to conduct an assessment, families who had received chickens were accused of misuse or improper management of the project support. In the end, the project led to conflicts between community members and project officers. The project did not appear to make a significant improvement in the livelihoods of community members.

Pig farming: In the first year of the project, each household received a loan of 100,000 MMK at an interest rate of 500 MMK per month, to be paid every 3 months. With the money, each household was to breed one pig at a cost of around 70,000 MMK. Upon reaching an age of one year and two months, a pig is worth 200,000 MMK. The majority of households were able to pay back the initial year loan, and to qualify for a second loan in the amount of 200,000 MMK. Although the project beneficiaries did not seem to have a clear grasp of the calculations involved, the project did provide support in fulfilling basic necessities.

Cow farming: The market price of a calf is around 260,000 MMK. If a household wants to get a cow from the project, they have to make a MMK 20,000 contribution, and the government will make up the difference. The recipient has to pay back the entire amount in yearly installments. Over the course of the three-year project, each cow farmer must make a yearly contribution of 30,000 MMK to a village development fund. As the calves received through the project were not good for breeding purposes, farmers had to sell the calves and buy better ones to breed, making it hard for the villagers to make a profit.

"I STARTED A COFFEE PLANTATION TWO YEARS AGO. I HAVEN'T GOTTEN ANY MONEY FROM IT YET. SO, I CONTINUE OPIUM FARMING TO SUPPORT MY FAMILY."

- MALE FARMER





KEY THEMES

Incompatible support

The support provided for alternative agriculture projects suffered from lack of quality, delays, and limited availability of seeds and agricultural extension support.

"The chicks were just born when the hen died from disease. The remaining four chicks are not in good health either. How is this going to provide support to my family?"

- Male farmer

"I got orange and coffee seeds as support from the government. The quality of the seeds was not good, so the plants did not grow very well. I couldn't do anything."

- Male farmer

Lack of understanding

Villagers often lacked a clear understanding of the purpose of the project or support received. They assumed it was just a normal loan program from the government or a local organization, which led to unsuccessful project deliverables.

"We received 100,000 MMK the first year to buy a pig. I bought a pig for 70,000 MMK and used the remaining money to buy some construction materials for my house."

-Male farmer

Limited capacity of project staff

Project staff often lack capacity, which leads to poor community engagement and failure to deliver project goals. There is also a lack of project management, poor follow-up support, and failure to do monitoring and evaluation at the end of projects.



"There was no discussion or evaluation before or after the project. There was just a meeting where chickens were provided."

- Male farmer

Lack of collaboration between the government and CSOs

There is poor collaboration between the Myanmar government and CSOs who are working on various alternative cultivation programs, though both share the same goals. Different approaches and scattered projects within each region lead to confusion. In general, however, the CSO-led programs showed better results, as the staff members followed a more systematic approach, with a higher level of skill and capacity.

"I got nursery techniques from the Metta organization. I started growing seedlings and gave them to my relatives. It was useful for me, and I am still using the skills I learned."

- Female farmer

Impacts on communities

Alternative cultivation and community development programs are not sufficiently supporting sustainable livelihoods in the region. No truly effective livelihood improvement measures were found to have been implemented in the communities visited due to lack of capacity and technical support.

Support was mainly focused on alternative livelihoods, but it is not well integrated with rural development. Apart from a pit latrine building initiative by the Red Cross and a road-building project by a Village Development Committee, there was limited support for infrastructure development, transportation, health, education and access to markets. Most opium farmers are poor, and they grow opium to meet basic needs such as food, health and education.²⁴ If development projects do not address the root causes of opium cultivation and do not take a sustainable long-term approach, farmers will have no choice but to continue growing opium to meet their basic needs.

²⁴ Myanmar National Drug Control Policy, 2018



"There should be support for transportation, health and education. We also need these things."

- Female farmer

Returning to Opium Cultivation

Regardless of the introduction of alternative cultivation programs, farmers returned to opium cultivation because the support they received was useful in addressing short-term food shortage problems, but not reliable as a long-term alternative income solution.

"I grew rice from the seed I received. The amount I got was enough for my family to eat, but not enough to make a living."

- Male farmer

"I started a coffee plantation two years ago. I haven't gotten any money from it yet. So, I continue opium farming to support my family."

Male farmer

CONCLUSION

"Please don't consider us (opium farmers) as criminals. We grow opium to survive and to fulfill our families' basic requirements, not to damage society."

- Female opium farmer from Shan State

For over a century, opium has been the main cash crop of ethnic minorities living in remote highland areas of Myanmar. Opium also plays a significant role in local customs and traditions, and is used widely in social events, spiritual offerings, and as a traditional medicine. Farmers grow opium to cover their families' basic needs because they lack other choices. Alternative job opportunities and sources of income are scarce in remote and insecure regions of the country. According to Myanmar's Amended 1993 Narcotic Drugs



and Psychotropic Substances Law, however, opium farmers are considered criminals, and the government aims to eliminate opium cultivation through eradication. Although the 2018 National Drug Control Policy mentions implementation of alternative development programs to reduce illicit opium cultivation, current development projects are severely limited, and lack the long-term focus necessary to address the root causes of opium cultivation. Therefore, opium farmers continue to depend on growing opium for their living.

Though conditions are still not favorable for farmers to engage in alternative livelihoods, the government implements opium eradication campaigns each year. Because of these forced eradication campaigns, opium farmers and their family members suffer negative consequences, including debt, poverty, and food insecurity. Their children are forced to drop out of school to work on the farm or migrate to neighboring countries. Many migrate illegally, placing them at high risk for exploitation and human trafficking. As opium farmers are not able to contribute to community development funds, community development as a whole suffers.

Myanmar has adopted a repressive approach to the opium problem. Although eradication programs have been implemented for decades, there is still a substantial amount of opium cultivation in several key regions. In 2018, Myanmar's illicit opium economy was valued at approximately 1.1 to 2.3 billion USD, but only 5% of this went to opium farmers. Organized crime groups take advantage of the political insecurity of remote highland areas to gain tremendous benefit from the opium economy through production, cross-border trade and trafficking.²⁵ Most attempts to reduce the size of the opium economy directly oppress small-scale opium farmers, leading to further violations of the socio-economic and cultural rights of this highly marginalized population.

According to Article 14.2 of the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, eradication "shall respect fundamental human rights and take due account of traditional licit uses." Myanmar signed onto the convention





in 1991, and as such, has a responsibility to prioritize human rights in all attempts to reduce the size of the illicit opium economy.²⁶

Neighboring Thailand, which once faced similar challenges in eradicating illicit cultivation, instituted policies that allowed farmers to sustainably transition away from farming opium. The Doi Tung Development Project, a 30-year plan initiated in 1988, consisted of three phases. The first five-year phase centered on healthcare and basic necessities and skills training. The second phase, from 1994 to 2002, focused on income generation, helping people "move into the processing steps that add value locally to the base product." The final stage, from 2003 to 2017, consisted of equipping local people to take over the project so that development would continue beyond the timeframe of the project itself. The project was successful because it recognized that people are best able to support themselves when they are healthy and have access to basic necessities.

Therefore, combating illicit opium cultivation requires adapting a human rights approach, including periodization of development and area security, with eradication only implemented after opium farmers have attained stable livelihood alternatives. Legalization of opium cultivation to produce morphine for medical treatment could be a good alternative income generation option. Traditional usage of opium should be approved according to the cultural rights of indigenous people. Moreover, opium farmers' rights to meaningful participation in the design, development, implementation, and reform of evidence-based drug policies and laws that reflect the actual grassroots situations must be recognized and respected.

In conclusion, the opium issue is driven by multiple dynamic factors such as trafficking and organized crime, political insecurity, and underdevelopment. A suppression approach to the opium problem that neglects the rights of opium farmers and labels them as criminals only creates a new set of problems. Opium farmers must be recognized as part of the solution to address the complex opium issue. As ethnic people born and raised in Myanmar, opium farmers

²⁷ http://www.maefahluang.org/?p=16



²⁶ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_ no=VI-19&chapter=6&clang=_en

must enjoy the full rights they are entitled to as Myanmar citizens. The meaningful participation of opium farmers is crucial to the development and effective implementation of a new rights-based drug policy in Myanmar.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The forced eradication of opium poppy crops and prohibition of traditional opium usage without development support is violating the socio-economic and cultural rights of small-scale opium farmers and leading to unwanted negative impacts. Therefore, MOFF recommends the following:

CENTRAL COMMITTEE FOR DRUG ABUSE CONTROL

- A rights based approach should be adapted, with full consideration of the socio-economic and cultural rights of opium farmers in the development and implementation of the supply reduction of opium.
- A transparent taxation system should be adapted to protect farmers from corrupt practices.
- Local area development initiatives should continue until farmers secure other reliable sources of income before implementing forced opium eradication.



MINISTRY OF LIVESTOCK, FISHERIES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, UN AGENCIES, INGOS AND CBOS

- Alternative livelihood programs should be integrated with rural development rather than focused mainly on changing livelihoods. Sustainable and long-term development in the areas of infrastructure, transportation, education, health and access to markets should be implemented at the same time.
- Support should meet the requirements of farmers and be suitable to local conditions. Farmers should receive sufficient and continuous support with long-term commitments.
- Technical support, trainings, skill-building programs and empowerment should be provided as part of alternative cultivation programs. There should be regular engagement and assessments with farmers before, during and after the projects.
- Government departments, UN agencies, INGOs, and CSOs implementing development programs should develop an effective mechanism for cooperation to maximize the reach and benefits of their activities.

MYANMAR GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS

- Opium farmers should be included as meaningful participants in the design, drafting and implementation of drug policies at the national and state/division level.
- Traditional opium usage should be studied and documented, and granted legal protection in line with international standards regarding cultural rights.



- Small-scale opium farmers should be not criminalized. The Amended 1993 Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Law should be reviewed and revised.
- Opium cultivation for medicinal production should be legalized to provide alternative income generation for opium farmers.

AUTHORITIES IN SELF-GOVERNED REGIONS AND ETHNIC ARMED GROUPS

- The problems facing ethnic minority opium farmers should be taken into account in negotiations with the Myanmar government.
- In the peace process and related discussions, opium cultivation should be framed as a consequence of conflict, and policies should aim to promote security and development rather than elimination and suppression.





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