

Introduction to the Special Issue on Poverty

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Poverty is a dominant feature of Myanmar, which was ranked 132nd out of 169 countries in the United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Report in 2010. The yearly per capita income of the average citizen is roughly \$1,144 USD.¹ Accurate data on poverty is not available, but the latest survey conducted by the UNDP in collaboration with the Myanmar government estimated that 26.3 percent of Burmese are living under the poverty line.² A new poverty metric, revised by the World Bank in 2014, found that there are more poor people, and almost certainly more at the extreme end of the scale, in Myanmar than its previous estimate had found.³ In addition, it found that many more Burmese are living close to the poverty line and are at

¹"Myanmar," UNData, <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=MYANMAR>, (accessed September 1, 2011). Various organizations provide slightly different data on the social and economic situation in Myanmar for a variety of reasons: differing methodological guidelines; bureaucratic deficiencies; an inadequate government presence in areas controlled by one of the various armed groups; residents' reluctance to cooperate with state authorities; official restrictions on conducting research in Burma; and residents' distrust of outsiders.

²IHLCA Technical Unit, "Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar 2009-2010: Poverty Profile Report," Yangon: United Nations Development Program Myanmar, 2010, 12.

http://www.mm.undp.org/ihlca/01_Poverty_Profile/PDFs/03percent20Povertypercent20Profile_Povertypercent20andpercent20Inequality.pdf (accessed July 20, 2013).

risk of falling into poverty.

The majority of Myanmar's population, an estimated 66 percent, is rural and depends on small-scale farming and fishing for subsistence and income.⁴ Half of the country's agricultural production, in terms of total crop area, consists of rice paddies cultivated by small farmers who are deeply in debt. Poverty is entrenched in rural Burma, where infrastructure is spotty or nonexistent, credit and agricultural inputs are scarce, financial returns are low, and crop yields are periodically ravaged by extreme weather events.⁵ Many of those who live in urban areas also have limited access to food, clean water, electricity, and opportunities to pursue their livelihoods.

The opening of the country to limited foreign investment since 1990 has resulted in greater economic inequality in a nation that was characterized by a relatively egalitarian distribution of material living standards not so long ago.⁶ According to a marketing survey conducted in 2010, the proportion of the population corresponding to upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, and lower class categories are, respectively: 1.5 percent, 11 percent, 20.2 percent, 25.1 percent, and 41.5

³In 2014, the World Bank reset its poverty line for the country based on a more comprehensive measure. The new poverty line, 440,345 Kyat/adult equivalent/year, exceeds the IHLCA 2009-2010 figure of 376,151 Kyat/adult equivalent/year. The World Bank, "Poverty in Myanmar: Revisiting the 2009/10 IHLCA," Yangon: 2014.

⁴The World Bank, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS> (accessed July 7, 2014).

⁵U Htin Aung Shein and U Kyaw Myint, "Supply Chain Development in Myanmar (Second Draft)," Manila: Asian Development Bank Institute, February 18, 2012.

⁶For instance, in 1982 David Steinberg argued that Burma's "overall income distribution, although not equitable in any absolute sense, is better than any of the non-communist states of the region." "Economic growth with equity? The Burmese experience," *Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 4, No. 2 (Sept 1982), 142.

percent.⁷ The World Bank's revised poverty guidelines indicate that inequality is much higher in urban than rural areas. The World Bank also found that a surprising number of poor people are living in urban areas, particularly in and around Yangon, which has a high cost of living and attracts large numbers of migrants and informal workers looking for new opportunities.⁸

In 2011 President Thein Sein publicly acknowledged the poverty problem and announced a series of anti-poverty initiatives. These include providing low-interest agricultural loans, building infrastructure, and allowing international governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide humanitarian assistance, technical know-how, and scarce farming equipment. The plan also involved setting up committees to investigate land grabbing from farmers, and offering a variety of channels through which the nation's poor can air their grievances.

Despite these measures, poverty has continued to pose a serious challenge to Myanmar's transition to democracy. Most of the nation's formal and informal investment goes into extractive industries (gas, oil, and hydroelectric power). In 2012, the total amount of investment earmarked for agriculture, livestock, and fishing enterprises (the sectors which employ most of the country's workers) amounted to only 1.23 percent of total investments in Burma.⁹ Meanwhile, the raising of restrictions on open political activity has lifted the lid on frustrations and tensions that have accumulated during

⁷Demographic Profile, Consumex' 2010.

⁸The World Bank characterizes these individuals as the "transition" poor: people with limited education and job skills who are employed as low-skilled and informal workers in towns and cities where high-paying jobs are in short supply and the cost of living is high.

⁹Aung Nang Oo, "Investment Policy Reform in Myanmar," United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 2013. <http://www.slideshare.net/CarlyAvery/investment-policyreformmyanmar> (accessed January 9, 2015).

decades of authoritarian rule. The result has been an outpouring of communal violence, a rise in land disputes, and a proliferation of protests and strikes for more rights, better wages, and improved living conditions. A common feature of these accelerating socioeconomic changes is that when they spark upheavals or violent incidents, it is the poor who are most likely to be negatively impacted because they are less able to protect themselves from physical injury, losing a loved one, or having their property seized or destroyed. Moreover, poor people have fewer resources to help them recover from such losses.

Armies of experts and academics have offered multiple reasons to explain why countries and people are poor.¹⁰ Many highlight structural conditions such as unfavorable political environments (e.g., civil war and communal violence) that prevent citizens from making a living, or official policies and practices and weak state institutional capacities that exploit the poor, fail to provide basic necessities and services (food, healthcare, education) and personal protection, and perpetuate inequality. Others highlight specific factors such as a lack of infrastructure (roads, bridges, electricity, water, low-interest agricultural loans, markets), climate change, and environmental degradation as the root causes of poverty. The finger has also been pointed at family illness and the coping strategies adopted by the poor. However, despite a wealth of statistics documenting poverty and deprivation, we know little about the lived experience or “texture” of poverty among the

¹⁰Most recent works include Banerjee, Abhijit and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011; Daryl Collins, Jonathan Morduch, Stuart Rutherford & Orlanda Ruthven, *Portfolios of the Poor: How the World's Poor Live on \$2 a Day*, New Jersey: Princeton, 2009; Dean Karlan and Jacob Appel, *More Than Good Intentions: How a New Economics is Helping to Solve Global Poverty*, London: Dutton, 2011.

majority Burmans, let alone the Kayin, Kachin, Mon, Shan, Lisu, Pao and so on.

The essays collected in this inaugural issue offer illustrations of the lived experiences of poor people in urban and rural areas across Burma's diverse geography—landscapes that range from coastal wetlands to the mountainous periphery and dry interior. The collection of essays in this volume is the outcome of a workshop held at the Central Hotel in Yangon between August 22nd and 24th, 2014. The workshop brought together scholars, educators, medical doctors, humanitarian activists, and staff from non-profit organizations, who gave presentations on poverty from multi-disciplinary perspectives. It was also attended by representatives of political parties, staff from international organizations, and farmers who offered their views and participated in the discussion. The topics presented and discussed included the impact of limited political reform on the poor under the country's quasi-civilian government of 2011-2015; the causes and consequences of poverty in Myanmar; an assessment of anti-poverty programs run by local NGOs; the healthcare behavior of poor residents in Mon State; and the activities of rubber tappers in Mon State, small-scale fishermen in Rakhine State, bus conductors in Yangon, and the urban poor in Myanmar's satellite towns, as these various groups all strive to make ends meet. A majority of the presenters were Myanmar citizens who were working as researchers or humanitarian activists on poverty issues at the grassroots level. However, not all of the presentations delivered at the workshop are included in this issue. Two-thirds of the presenters were unable to submit their papers for anonymous review due either to a lack of time or resources, or to adequate supervision to enable them to continue their research and present their findings in academic papers.

In this first issue of the *Journal*, we offer a glimpse into how ordinary Burmese cope with poverty in their daily lives. Saw Eh

Htoo's article sheds light on how small-scale fishermen in Rakhine State manage in an environment characterized by increasingly scarce resources and uncertain weather conditions, while Dr. Ne Lynn Zaw and Mollie Pepper report on the healthcare behavior of the poor in Mon State through the first author's first-hand experience as a medical doctor in the region. Using non-participating observation techniques and interviews, Ye Hein Aung has uncovered some little-known facts about the lives and daily activities of bus fare collectors, described as the "most detested" (by passengers) and the "lowest stratum of the population in Myanmar." SuiSue Mark's article highlights concerns over the impact of institutions relating to the market economy and private property on customary land-use practices in Chin State, the poorest area of Myanmar, while Eben Forbes identifies the push and pull factors that draw rural residents to urban areas and compares living conditions for poor residents in the inner city and peri-urban areas. Wen-Chin Chang's article demonstrates the possibility of overcoming poverty even in the most adverse situations through the story of Midi Z (aka Chao Te-Yin), who left Myanmar at 16 in search of a better education and a brighter future in Taiwan and later become a prominent movie director in that country. She demonstrates how Midi Z's migration and experience of living abroad has influenced the way that he portrays migrants and poverty in his films about Burma.

While the papers published in this issue attempt to cover a wide range of issues and regions, they are neither complete nor comprehensive in their scope. There are many other subjects that are worthy of consideration and research—such as poverty in conflict areas and war zones; the relationship between food, education, and drug addiction, on the one hand, and poverty on the other; or why anti-poverty programs carried out by government and non-government organizations fail or

succeed. This issue also fails to consider the ways in which the poor cope psychologically through a resort to supernatural forces, religion, and astrology, or politically in their dealings with the authorities. Despite these omissions, we hope that the articles in this issue shed light on some key topics in the wider study of poverty and will generate interest, critical discussion, and further research on a very timely and important subject that has thus far received very little attention from the policy and academic communities in Myanmar.