



Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis

Edited by
Chosein Yamahata
Bobby Anderson

palgrave
macmillan

This is the version of the chapter accepted for publication in Yamahata, Chosein and Anderson, Bobby, (eds.), *Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis*. 2022. Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 231-253.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6675-9_12

Re-use is subject to the publisher's terms and conditions

This version downloaded from SOAS Research Online: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/37295>

Difficult Development Trade-Offs Amidst 'Transition': Exploring Power and Politics in Post-2010 Myanmar

Patrick Meehan

INTRODUCTION

Definitions of development and the purpose of development studies as an academic discipline have been the subject of rigorous and ongoing debates. As a relatively new field of study that rose to prominence in the decades after the Second World War, development studies is often defined by its inherently cross-disciplinary nature-drawing upon "older" disciplines such as history, anthropology, economics and geography-and its perceived qualities as a 'policy science' able to generate applied knowledge for practical benefit (Bernstein 2005, p. 111). Indeed, many characterise the distinctiveness of development studies by its engagement with policy and practice: its value lies in its ability to shape policies and interventions aimed at economic growth and poverty reduction. For others, however,

P. Meehan

SOAS, University of London, London, UK
email: pm42@soas.ac.uk

this rather instrumental approach underplays the real value of development studies, which lies in its engagement with long-term historical processes of social change and its focus on the 'big' questions that shape societies—such as the nature of the state and state-society relations, the rise of capitalism, processes of agrarian transformation and industrialisation, integration into global economies, and how people have tried to make sense of these transformations. From this perspective, development studies draw upon a rich intellectual heritage within the social sciences and are animated by the same kinds of questions that underpinned the pioneering works of social science by the likes of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber.

The study of Development thus covers a vast 'spectrum' of analysis that ranges from 'intellectual analysis' of societal transformation through to a more practical focus on 'doing development' (Kothari 2005). For those who see development studies primarily as a 'policy science' defined by its engagement with policy and practice, development is essentially the realm of planned and intentional interventions, aimed primarily at promoting economic growth and alleviating poverty. However, for those who emphasise a more expansive intellectual approach, development is defined far more as an 'immanent' process of societal transformation that is shaped less by purposeful attempts to enact change, and more by complex social processes—and the conflicts, negotiations and power relations between diverse and competing interests that surround these processes—within which planned interventions play only a small part.

Bridging the 'theory/practice divide' continues to pose a profound challenge for development studies (Kothari 2005). In many countries— notably the UK— a significant amount of funding has been invested in development studies research and there have been efforts to integrate this scholarship into policy and practice. However, fundamental tensions continue to exist between development studies scholarship that draws attention to the messy reality of processes of development and change— typically underpinned by difficult trade-offs and 'losers' as well as 'winners'—and normative frameworks that seek to promote development as a realm of 'win-win' solutions in which interventions—if implemented correctly—can bring benefits to all. For those working in the development sector, the intellectual analysis of development processes can often appear remote and disconnected from the more immediate priorities of efforts to address poverty, inequality, vulnerability and violence. In turn, contemporary development discourses—with their promises of win-win

solutions through pro-poor and inclusive growth-often appear as naïve, ahistorical or disingenuous, and obstructive to the difficult questions and trade-offs that policymakers and practitioners need to grapple with.

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on these debates surrounding development theory and practice and how they relate to development discourses and interventions in Myanmar in the decade that followed the country's 2010 General Election up until the February 1st 2021 military coup that brought an end to the country's democratic transition and reinstated authoritarian military rule. After decades of military rule, Myanmar's 2010 General Election was seen as a watershed moment in the country's history. The country's previous election-in 1990-had been annulled after the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory. After decades of self-imposed isolation under General Ne Win's military government (1962 - 1988), the continuation of an oppressive authoritarian military regime and the repression of political opposition after the 1990 election led many countries to impose sanctions on Myanmar and to limit their engagement with the country. The global aid architecture, which grew considerably in the 1990s and 2000s, thus had a rather limited reach within Myanmar. However, the emergence after 2010 of a series of democratic political reforms, the decision by the country's new quasi-civilian government to launch a formal peace process in 2011, and Aung San Suu Kyi's 2015 election victory, inspired a rush to engage in Myanmar.

A combination of four factors soon led Myanmar to become a new frontier for development interventions. First, multilateral agencies, bilateral donors and NGOs wanted to be a part of the 'feel-good' morality tale of a democratic transition in one of the world's most oppressive states and the rise to power of the iconic Aung San Suu Kyi. Sanctions were lifted, debts were cancelled or rescheduled and inflows of aid soon followed. Second, there seemed to be huge potential to support economic growth and poverty alleviation in a country where more than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line after decades of military rule, armed conflict, and economic mismanagement. Third, since 1990-the period in which Myanmar has been largely isolated from international (or at least western) aid-the development sector had expanded significantly in terms of both the number of donors and NGOs and the issues upon which development agencies have sought to engage. This meant that as Myanmar opened to development aid flows, many donors and

development agencies looked to roll out programmes that were already well-established in other parts of the world. For example, Myanmar soon became the next destination for many conflict advisors who had worked in other parts of the world and peacebuilding programmes that drew upon conflict resolution models used in other conflict-settings. Fourth, the country's highly geo-strategic position as a resource-rich country bridging India, China and Southeast Asia ensured that many countries sought to extend their interests and influence within Myanmar, with development aid and programmes providing one such avenue.

All of these factors led to a vast expansion in development aid and programmes in Myanmar. In 2011 Myanmar received US\$357 million in development aid (Asia Foundation 2018, p. 6). By 2015 this had risen to US\$3.4 billion (ibid.). In 2013, Myanmar became the world's third largest recipient of aid, a meteoric rise from its 79th position in 2010. Aid per capita rose more than tenfold between 2010 and 2015. Development interventions in Myanmar after 2010 were largely framed around supporting what the World Bank dubbed the country's 'triple transition': transition from authoritarian military rule to democratic governance, from a centrally directed economy to a market-oriented economy, and from 60 years of conflict to sustainable peace in the country's border areas (World Bank 2014).

However, while the rhetoric of a 'triple transition' offered a vision of development that saw goals of democratisation, market-led economic growth and poverty alleviation, and sustainable peace as mutually reinforcing there was scant engagement with the fact that critical development studies scholarship shows that development rarely offers such 'win-win' solutions, but is instead a disruptive and conflictual process that confronts societies and governments with difficult trade-offs, creating winners and losers and new forms of precarity as well as prosperity.

This chapter argues that the rush to engage in Myanmar—a country in which it has been difficult to conduct in-depth research for many decades—made it particularly challenging to bridge the divide between development scholarship and development in practice. The focus on 'doing development' and designing effective interventions to capitalise on Myanmar's 'transition' far out-paced the ability-or willingness- to reflect critically on how insights from academic scholarship on the country and within the discipline of development studies offered a more cautionary tale surrounding the promises and pitfalls of transition in Myanmar post-2011. Consequently, much of the focus on development

in Myanmar concentrated on technical and managerial issues of how to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, value for money and results, rather than engage with more deep-seated issues of power and politics in shaping development processes and outcomes. Exploring these limitations, this chapter provides some brief and rather schematic reflections on how insights from historical political economy scholarship within the field of development studies offers several starting points for confronting questions of power and politics that are instructive for reflecting on the development challenges that faced Myanmar after 2010.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the trajectory of mainstream development theory and policy in the period since the Second World War. It aims to set out the lineage of the kinds of 'win-win' development narratives that have shaped interventions in Myanmar over the past decade. The second section of this paper offers four 'starting points' for how historical political economy scholarship can provide useful ways for engaging with the difficult trade-offs that surround development processes in Myanmar and other contexts. Section three then offers a brief case study of rural development strategies in upland ethnic minority areas of Myanmar. This case study explores how the political economy analysis set out in this paper offers important insights into some of the limitations, blind spots and misleading narratives surrounding agricultural development strategies that have been promoted by the Myanmar government and external donors over the past decade. In doing so, it shows the importance of centring questions of power and politics when assessing the aims, policies, and outcomes of rural development in Myanmar's uplands.

DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE SINCE 1945: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In the first two decades after the Second World War, doctrines of development were largely framed in terms of supporting 'developing' or 'Third World' countries to catch up with more advanced western countries through processes of 'modernisation'. Priority was given to policies aimed at promoting economic growth and efficiency, with the belief that this would provide the foundation for development and poverty alleviation in due course. The UN Measure for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries (1951) defined development in terms of per capita income. Much of the focus of western development interventions

was to provide the components that countries were missing in order to 'catch-up' with levels of growth in 'advanced' societies. This included capital for investment (through aid, concessional loans, and foreign direct investment), technical expertise, and technology transfers. Development economics surrounding aid and trade through the 1950s and 1960s was also strongly influenced by social democratic ideas and Keynesianism (Bernstein 2006, p. 53). The interventionist state was seen as the key agent for the development, in part because of its perceived ability to initiate societal and economic transformation and in part out of a desire to break the colonial ties that integrated many countries into the global economy on highly unequal terms.

However, the rise of neoliberal ideologies in the west (associated most clearly with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher) and the relatively poor record of state-led development in many parts of the developing world saw a profound transformation in the dominant paradigm of development economics through the 1980s. In what became known as the 'Washington Consensus', free markets were seen as the most important agent for development. State intervention was viewed as an impediment to the allocative efficiency of the market. Reforms were designed to 'roll back the state', deregulate markets and open domestic economies to international trade and investment, often enforced through US, IMF and World Bank conditionality attached to development aid and debt relief. These neoliberal approaches to development viewed the costs of state interference and regulation (for example, the protection of key sectors such as agriculture or nascent industries) as higher than the costs of deregulated markets. Neoliberal development discourses argued that the economic growth that would be unleashed by liberalising markets would benefit all—a trickle-down effect often likened to a rising tide that lifts all boats. Inequality was justified as a reflection of the impartial market distribution of benefits that rewarded efficiency and entrepreneurship. The disruptions created through the implementation of these reforms—for example, the end of agricultural subsidies and cuts to state welfare services and employment—were largely disregarded by policymakers who viewed such disruptions as a necessary evil on the pathway to prosperity, and warned that "crossing the desert" (i.e., addressing the transitional or frictional costs of adjustment to the poor) is made more difficult if the desert is artificially widened by failure to act firmly and decisively on badly needed adjustment measures' (Ribe et al. 1990).

However, the promised benefits of these reforms rarely materialised. Instead, they created huge social problems that disproportionately impacted the poor. Urban poverty rose steeply as public spending was cut and employment and wages fell. Global malnutrition levels worsened and the 1980s became known as the 'lost decade' for development. The clear failures of market-led reform packages to alleviate poverty in many parts of the world, coupled with growing inequality and the worsening marginalisation of the poorest undermined the triumphant claims that had underpinned the market fundamentalism of the Washington Consensus. However, these failures were blamed on the fact that markets were unable to operate in contexts lacking basic institutions (e.g., the rule of law to uphold property rights), services (e.g., basic education and health) and infrastructure (e.g., roads). Thus, the fundamental logic of the market as the key driver for economic development was not challenged. Instead, there emerged what Henry Bernstein and Carlos Oya have defined as a 'markets-plus' model, in which market liberalisation was accompanied by limited space for interventions aimed at strengthening institutions and services that could then enable markets to function properly and better serve the poor (Bernstein and Oya 2014). The 'markets-plus' model—often known as the 'post-Washington consensus'—sought to combine the economic dynamism of free markets with a commitment to poverty alleviation through mantras of 'inclusive growth' and 'pro-poor growth'. The fundamental priority has been to promote economic liberalisation alongside investment in basic services and the provision of 'safety nets' to enable the poor to manage sudden shocks or economic downturns.

Today, dominant development narratives claim that a 'markets-plus' model can simultaneously stimulate rapid economic growth and that this growth can, with the right institutional framework, be inclusive and be harnessed to benefit the poor. The focus on 'inclusive' and 'pro-poor' growth has been underpinned by efforts to widen definitions of development beyond a narrow focus on economic growth (measured by GDP) and to go beyond the assumption that the benefits of growth will trickle down to benefit all. Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach' had a significant influence on rethinking the meaning of development and contributed to the evolution of the UN's Human Development Index (HDI), which provided a composite measure of development that went beyond just per capita income to also include life expectancy and level of education (Sen 1985; Stanton 2007). The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provided an ambitious set of eight goals measured by 21 targets. These

have now been expanded into the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which comprise 169 targets across 17 goals, with the aim of providing a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all' and pledges to 'leave no-one behind' and to ensure that development can 'reach the furthest behind first'.

This 'markets-plus' development narrative has been particularly influential in Myanmar over the past decade. The priority for domestic elites, multilateral development agencies, and foreign investors has been to 'unlock the potential' of Myanmar's economy and to stimulate rapid economic growth through the standard neoliberal toolkit of liberalising markets, creating modern market institutions, deepening the financial sector, and creating an enabling environment for a thriving private sector (Asian Development Bank 2014). Economic growth has been viewed as providing the fundamental prerequisite to alleviate poverty and overcome the country's longstanding armed conflicts.

The prioritisation given to economic growth and liberalisation as the key to success for Myanmar's post-2010 reform process is rooted in various factors. For decades, the country has lagged behind its more successful ASEAN neighbours. There has been a strong desire amongst political and business elites within Myanmar to narrow the gap to countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, with this gap typically measured in terms of GDP. Similarly, China's meteoric transformation since the 1980s has been rooted in a relentless focus on prioritising economic growth, global competitiveness, and macroeconomic stability above all else. Although vast populations have been adversely affected by the societal dislocations unleashed by the unremitting push for sustained economic growth, this has been justified by the huge numbers of people that have been lifted out of poverty. As China's influence across Southeast Asia continues to grow, the rationale for large-scale development initiatives—whether major infrastructure projects or large-scale agribusinesses—has been predicated on the belief that the net benefits of such projects to improving levels of economic growth far outweigh the adverse impact that they may have on local populations.

Myanmar's post-2010 'transition' also took place in an era where neoliberal economic strategies had become the 'common-sense' approach to development (Bernstein 2006, p. 56). In Myanmar's case, particularly, decades of economic mismanagement and clumsy state intervention in the economy dating back to the era of General Ne Win provided further justification for the importance of market-led reforms in unleashing the

country's economic potential. The fact that Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, is strategically situated as connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia and China, and has vast natural resources have all been cited as evidence that with the 'correct' set of economic reforms, the country's high levels of poverty and internal conflict can be quickly overcome through rapid economic growth. Over the past decade, a powerful narrative also emerged linking Myanmar's longstanding internal conflicts to the country's poverty and underdevelopment.

Development narratives in Myanmar after 2011 were underpinned by claims that policies aimed at promoting aggregate economic growth would simultaneously alleviate poverty, strengthen democratisation, and provide a stronger foundation for peace. However, these claims impeded engagement with the difficult realities surrounding development processes and limited the intellectual space for critical development studies scholarship to engage in any meaningful way with those 'doing development' (Bernstein 2006, p. 56). This process reflects what James Ferguson (1990) famously termed the 'anti-politics machine', which serves to depoliticise development through the framing as development as a series of 'technical solutions to technical problems'. As Stefan Bachold (2015, p. 1971) notes in relation to the 'rise of an anti-politics machinery' in post-2010 Myanmar:

the consequence is a de-politicisation of development, where debate is restricted to improving technical 'solutions' in expert debates without revisiting larger, underlying assumptions, ideologies or world-views. Thus, although development discourse operates with broad, transformative notions of equal development, inclusiveness or even empowerment, it often focuses on narrow problematisations that stifle the broader changes these notions entail.

This has obscured the contentious politics of development, the difficult trade-offs that surround development interventions, the unequal distribution of the benefits of development and the subsequent fact that there are 'losers' as well as 'winners' of development processes.

ENGAGING WITH THE DIFFICULT
TRADE-OFFS THAT SURROUND PROCESSES
OF DEVELOPMENT: FOUR STARTING POINTS

Addressing the profound challenges of poverty, inequality and injustice requires a different set of starting points that can overcome the limitations of the 'win-win' narratives that surround claims of 'pro-poor' and inclusive development, and instead engage directly with development as a political process steeped in power relations. In the limited space available here, this section briefly sets out four starting points for how critically development studies scholarship can provide a way of exploring contemporary development challenges in countries like Myanmar.

Development as a Disruptive Process

Development is often conceived by policymakers as a set of deliberate interventions aimed at achieving specific goals through the implementation of distinct plans and programmes. However, development must also be understood as an immanent process of social and political change that is the result of ongoing processes of state formation and capitalist development and the multiple sets of interests, tensions, conflicts, negotiations and compromises that surround these processes, none of which can be easily controlled through project management. These processes of societal transformation—such as the transition from agrarian to industrial societies, urbanisation, the growth of modern states and globalisation—are invariably disruptive processes that can cause profound social tensions and dislocations. In an important contribution, Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton (1996) argue that the tendency to view 'development theory' as a colonial or post-colonial project designed in the aftermath of World War II to address the 'underdevelopment' of countries across Asia, Africa and South America is misleading. It overlooks the fact that debates surrounding the meaning of development originated in nineteenth-century Europe and were rooted in philosophical concerns regarding how to manage the social disruption created by the advent of industrial capitalism. This was a time when Western Europe was confronted with the social dislocations unleashed by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. It was a world where 'progress' (in terms of transitions to more 'advanced' or enlightened political systems and wealthier economies) had become separated from order and stability.

Cowen and Shenton (1996, p. 4) argue that the philosophical roots of development theory centred on how to 'compensate for the results of the development of capitalism'-which invariably included violent and hugely unequal social upheaval-rather than viewing capitalist development as means to achieve wider social goals. Development, they argue, was thus designed as a way to provide order and stability to more imminent processes of political and economic change that were inherently restless, disruptive and uneven. Development was needed to overcome the societal problems unleashed by 'progress'-unemployment, breakdown of social relations and general disorder-rather than as a means through which to facilitate such 'progress'.

Reflecting on the philosophical debates that surrounded the emergence of doctrines of development may seem far removed from the front-line of development work in Myanmar and other areas of the Global South. However, it draws attention to the kinds of tensions that have historically existed- and continue to exist- in societies undergoing rapid political and economic change. In countries like Myanmar, this warns that the kinds of rapid change advocated by policymakers after 2010 to 'unleash' the country's potential-in terms of structural transformations to the economy and the political system--were likely to be disruptive and contested rather than providing universal benefits. It warns that forms of economic growth may not necessarily provide a stronger foundation for 'pro-poor' development and declining social conflicts, as is often assumed. For example, claims that rapid economic development and stronger state institutions will necessarily offer an antidote to the country's decades-long armed conflicts, need to be assessed against the ways in which the societal disruptions created by forms of rapid economic growth have also served to reinvigorate the drivers of armed conflict in many regions. Difficult trade-offs will continue to exist between the quest for aggregate economic growth and the pursuit of peace and 'inclusive' development in contested and impoverished regions of Myanmar, as explored briefly in section three, below. These trade-offs have typically been ignored by the mantra that 'development and peace come together', which has been a key part of government and donor rhetoric over the past decade.

Incorporating Power Relations into Analysis of Development Processes

Tania Li's (2007) seminal work on development interventions in Indonesia explores how development interventions are often underpinned

by a tendency to 'render technical' the complex and contested challenges facing societies. The process of 'rendering technical' has a dual function. First, it frames development challenges-such as poverty, inequality or conservation-as problems that can be solved by 'technical fixes' through a series of planned interventions, which in turn empower the 'development expert' who has the knowledge to implement such fixes. Second, 'questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered non-political': complex development issues are de-politicised and the root causes of the challenges facing development-which typically relate to issues of politics and power rather than technical problems-are ignored. In Myanmar, the process of 'rendering technical' is clear in international efforts aimed at supporting the country's so-called triple transition and the development of a progressive liberal market state. Within this framework, promoting economic growth and tackling poverty has been presented as dependent upon the need to devise and implement the 'correct' set of political and economic policies. This has included liberalising the economy, expanding the role of the private sector, encouraging foreign investment, modernising agricultural, and implementing sound monetary policies to limit inflation.

There is no space here to debate the merits of such policies and their record of intervention; the point to emphasise is that the technical focus on 'getting the economics right' and designing the 'correct' interventions has often obscured the political interests and power relations that inevitably shape such processes. A political economy approach requires thinking more deeply about who stands to gain and who is likely to lose out from SLLCh reforms, and the relative power of these competing forces. This is neatly captured in Mushtaq Khan's (2010) work on 'transaction costs' and 'transition costs' surrounding institutional reforms. Broadly, transaction costs refer to the relative efficiency of different types of institutions or models for development. In Myanmar, for example, a liberal market economy may be viewed as a more efficient way to promote growth than the authoritarian state-managed economy that has been in place for much of the period since 1962. However, efforts to implement such reforms must also consider the 'transition costs' of change, namely 'the political costs which potential losers from a proposed institutional change can impose on the proponent' (Khan 2010, p. 17). In Myanmar's case, there were winners of the previous system-not least the country's military and business elites that enjoyed a privileged and protected position within the country's political and economic structures. Liberalisation,

democratisation and efforts to promote accountability and transparency inevitably threaten pre-existing power structures in Myanmar. There are thus powerful vested interests that have clear 'disruptive potential' to challenge reform processes. Any kind of development intervention is thus likely to be shaped by power relations and political interests and must be resilient to these pressures in Myanmar.

Although the example above suggests that taking power relations seriously may require a more cautious approach to the potential of Myanmar's ongoing reform process, incorporating power relations into analysis of development also offers important opportunities. It suggests that efforts to work towards greater social justice may be possible, but that this requires understanding the political impediments that often prevent justice. This provides a challenging but important reminder that efforts to address poverty and injustice are inherently political and must be treated as so. One of the most important foundations for efforts to address the challenges of poverty, inequality and injustice in Myanmar must be to engage with issues of power and confront the political challenges that often serve to actively silence and marginalise those whose voices need to be heard in debates surrounding development.

Engaging with the 'Distributive Impacts' of Development

A third starting point is to analyse not only the aggregate impacts of economic growth and of development interventions but also their 'distributive impacts'; in other words how the costs and benefits of growth and development are distributed between different groups in society, and the factors that determine this distribution of costs and benefits. In addressing this point, Mushtaq Khan gives the example of how to manage a common resource such as a fishing lake (Khan 2010, p. 19). For this resource to provide a foundation for sustainable economic growth, it is important that the lake is managed so as to prevent overfishing and to ensure that fishing can provide a foundation for stable income generation over many years. However, the management of this common resource can be implemented in different ways and with very different distributive impacts. The license to fish could be given to one individual or company, or an institutional framework could be established that offers fishing permits to a collective of local fishermen to all use the lake. Both approaches may serve to manage the risk of overfishing and provide fish for the market, but they have very different distributional

outcomes. Furthermore, as Khan's work shows, the decisions surrounding which approach to implement are rooted in power relations. Institutional frameworks will only be stable and work effectively if they are consistent with the underlying distribution of power. Development interventions thus need to be attuned to the likely 'enforcement costs' of attempted reforms. These relate to the costs required to overcome opposition to a particular policy or reform. Interventions that challenge the interests of powerful groups in society will entail higher enforcement costs and will thus be harder to enforce. Deals that align with the interests of powerful actors will have lower enforcement costs but will have less scope to deliver transformative change. In the example above, if the license is provided to the collective of fishermen, but the private company has greater power to mobilise pressure on the state and to inflict costs on others (for example, violence against the fishermen) then this institutional framework is likely to be inherently unstable. Engaging with the distributive impacts of economic growth-and the power relations that underpin them-requires moving beyond claims that development necessarily offers win-win solutions. It emphasises the need to engage with the tough trade-offs that surround development processes, especially who bears the costs of these processes and the very real challenges that exist between efforts to simultaneously pursue economic growth, social justice, poverty alleviation, and conflict reduction. It is these kinds of difficult-and highly political-trade-offs that need to be foregrounded in debates surrounding development interventions and reforms in Myanmar, but which were often overlooked in development narratives that promised win-win outcomes.

Such an approach also emphasises the need to think about how the distributive impacts of development are spread spatially. This is particularly relevant in a country like Myanmar where many of the country's most valuable resources are concentrated in regions of the country with histories of longstanding armed conflict, where the legitimacy and authority of the state remain contested, and which are home to ethnic populations who remain marginalised from the country's political and economic structures. For example, Myanmar's current electricity shortages, the country's high hydropower potential, and the government's ambitious plans for 100% electrification by 2030 have led to renewed focus on the potential of hydropower dams to address the country's electricity needs and promote development. However, the distributive impact of the costs and benefits of such schemes is hugely contested.

Dam construction has often been accompanied by militarisation, forced dispossession with minimal compensation, and the funnelling of energy to the country's major cities or sale abroad. The costs and benefits of electrification do not merely raise technical challenges in need of technocratic solutions, but relate to longstanding tensions surrounding the uneven distribution of power (in both senses) within the country, deep-seated distrust against the central government and the power relations that exist between the Myanmar state, private sector business interests, and non-state armed groups.

A Relational Framework for Analysing Poverty, Inequality and Economic Growth

A fourth analytical starting point for engaging with the tensions and trade-offs surrounding development processes is to take a 'relational' framework to analysing poverty and inequality. Poverty is typically framed as resulting from a lack of economic growth and development: the poverty of certain communities or regions is seen to be rooted in their marginalisation and lack of integration into states and markets, the antidote to which is the expansion of states and markets to incorporate 'lagging regions'. In contrast, a relational framework explores the ways in which persistent poverty and inequality are also rooted in processes of long-term capitalist development, rather than being a result of exclusion or marginalisation from these processes. As David Mosse (2010) argues, this relational framework challenges 'the habit of thinking of poverty as a "condition" understood by focussing on the characteristics of "the poor" themselves (low income, vulnerability to risk, weak networks and so on) rather than on the wider economic and social systems of which they are a part, and consequently of equating the study of poverty with studying poor people ... In this regard, poverty research needs reconnection to knowledge about the way in which socio-economic, political and cultural systems work'.

Indeed, as Mosse points out, '[b]y defining poverty reduction as the goal of development and economic growth as its means', contemporary discourses of development obscure and simplify the relationships that may exist between processes of economic growth and enduring poverty. As will be shown in the final section of the paper, a relational framework for understanding the drivers of poverty, precarity, and inequality in Myanmar is instructive in showing how the challenges and insecurities

facing many households and communities are not simply rooted in a lack of economic growth or their marginalisation from the state and markets; rather enduring forms of poverty and inequality are also embedded in the particular modalities of capitalism and state formation that were prominent in the decades prior to Myanmar's 'opening up' in 2010, and which became more firmly entrenched amidst the reforms launched after 2010.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN MYANMAR: A POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH

The final section of this chapter provides a brief analysis of development discourses that surround rural development strategies in Myanmar's uplands. It demonstrates how the four starting points, outlined above, offer important insights into the difficult trade-offs that surround agricultural reform, but which are rarely acknowledged. Myanmar remains a predominantly agrarian society, with agriculture employing more than 50% of the population. Poverty in rural areas—especially the country's Dry zone and upland and coastal areas—is significantly higher than in urban areas, with almost 40% of the country's rural population living below the poverty line compared to under 15% of the country's urban population (World Bank 2017).

Myanmar's agricultural sector has experienced decades of underinvestment and long been deemed as highly inefficient. A central component of the country's post-2010 development strategy has been to modernise the agricultural sector through commercial agribusiness-led development, and to instigate a structural transformation away from an agriculture-based economy to an industry and services-based economy (see, for example, Raitzer et al. 2015; FAO 2012; GORUM 2018). The Government of Myanmar made the agricultural sector a high priority and set out a vision that 'by 2030, Myanmar achieves an inclusive, competitive, food and nutrition secure, climate change resilient, and sustainable agricultural system contributing to the socio-economic well-being of farmers and rural people and further development of the national economy' (GORUM 2018). In order to fulfil this vision, the Myanmar Agricultural Development Strategy and Investment Plan (2018/2019–2022/2023) proposed 'a sequence of interventions that will pave the way to: commercial expansion of crops and livestock production, increased incomes for farmers

and better access to international markets, ultimately contributing to the country's food security and economic development' (GORUM 2018).

In Myanmar's upland regions, these policies have largely been framed in terms of improving market integration, encouraging commercial agricultural practices, promoting the cultivation of 'boom crops', such as rubber, maize and coffee, and encouraging agribusiness models of development. These reforms, it is argued, offer 'win-win', 'pro-poor' and 'inclusive' development solutions in two ways. First, policy documents make the claim that agriculture commercialisation can benefit the entire rural population, including both large-scale agribusinesses and small-holder farmers. Second, the country's development strategies claim that an expanding industrial and service sector will provide decent jobs for those who move out of agriculture once efficiency gains mean that a smaller proportion of the population is needed in farming.

In reality, however, both of these claims are misleading and fail to engage substantively with the difficult trade-offs briefly outlined in the previous section of this paper. In Myanmar, the country's legal frameworks have sanctioned the granting to agribusinesses of large-scale concessions of 'wastelands', defined as land that has no legal title that in reality includes all customary lands regardless of whether or not they were being farmed. The government has announced ambitious plans to develop four million hectares of 'wasteland' into permanent agriculture by 2030, much of it in the country's ethnic minority upland areas (TNI 2012). This has created severe land insecurity for large numbers of small-holders throughout the country. Furthermore, the kinds of agricultural intensification that have been promoted in the country's development strategies- such as use of high yielding seeds, fertilisers and pesticides-require significant up-front costs and have economies of scale (i.e., cost advantages are maximised from increased levels of production) that benefit better-off farmers or companies which have more land, more capital to invest and more resilience to fluctuating global markets. For smaller farmers, who produce on credit-often borrowing to purchase the inputs they need to farm-increased input costs (seeds, fertilisers, etc.) and the volatility of global markets can make them highly vulnerable to debt and dispossession (Woods 2020).

Development strategies emphasise the potential benefits of agricultural modernisation-in terms of higher yields, greater efficiency, cheaper food supplies and increased exports-but fail to engage with the likely *distributive impacts* of processes of modernisation, which are likely to

see the country's poor smallholders bear the adverse impacts of these reforms and concentrate wealth with larger-scale agribusinesses. In a country like Myanmar, where the majority of the population continue to rely on farming for their livelihoods, very real tensions may thus exist in a model of agribusiness-led agricultural development which promises greater production and efficiency, but through a process that benefits large-scale investment, rewards labour-saving technologies, and concentrates the means of production. The goals of economic growth and efficiency on the one hand and improved livelihoods for the country's poorest on the other may therefore be deeply conflicting. This raises important and urgent questions regarding how to determine the priorities of development and how to address the disruptive forces that are likely to be unleashed through the kinds of structural economic transformation advocated in national development strategies and donor policy papers. However, these difficult questions continue to be obscured in development discourses that claim that neoliberal agricultural reforms can benefit global agribusiness and smallholder farmers alike.

These underlying tensions are exacerbated by the fact that there is no guarantee that other sectors of the economy- such as industry or services- will necessarily offer viable 'exit options' for those unable to compete in the agricultural sector within Myanmar. In today's globalised economy, areas of industrial growth and expanding service sectors are often located far from areas where people are being pushed out of agriculture. This is especially the case in Myanmar in light of the fact that it is situated next door to the industrial powerhouse that is China. The supply of cheap commodities will make it difficult for small- and medium-sized enterprises, or a larger industrial sector to develop in Myanmar. As Tania Li's (2010) work has shown, in large parts of rural Asia this has created a situation whereby 'places (or their resources) are useful, but the people are not, so that dispossession is detached from any prospect of labour absorption'. Narratives surrounding 'exit options' from agriculture for rural populations also treat people as rational utility maximisers and ignore the powerful attachments that people have to land and place, which are likely to ensure that the kinds of agricultural reforms being advocated in Myanmar are likely to be very socially disruptive. In place of development narratives that claim to simultaneously offer agribusiness-led efficiency gains, opportunities for smallholder farmers, and viable exit options for those that leave farming, there is a need to address the difficult trade-offs that surround development processes and to assess the relative

importance of different development goals-such as economic growth, reduced inequality and sustainable livelihoods-which are often framed as mutually attainable, but that invariably are not.

A further limitation of current rural development strategies espoused by international donors and policymakers in Myanmar is that they largely ignore the experiences of rural populations in the previous two decades since 1988. Myanmar's relative isolation from western aid and development architecture in the period of military dictatorship between the 1990 General Election and the 2010 General Election created a tendency to view this period as one of economic stagnation and continuity with the previous decades of military rule under General Ne Win (1962 - 1988). However, this characterisation overlooks the fact that while there was significant continuity in the political system- continued authoritarian military rule, censorship, and opposition crackdowns-this period also saw significant economic shifts. The quasi-socialist policies of the Ne Win era were dismantled and replaced by a series of liberalisation measures, which reflected a wider post-Cold War shift in former socialist countries in Mainland Southeast Asia, notably Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (Taylor 2016). In the late 1980s, border trade with China and Thailand was liberalised, the country's land laws and foreign investment laws were reformed, and marginal conflict-affected rural areas were opened up to inflows of capital, increasingly integrated into regional economies and subjected to processes of agricultural commercialisation.

Consequently, there has been a failure in the rural development strategies being advocated in Myanmar to analyse how the drivers of poverty, vulnerability and livelihood insecurity work in relation to the processes of agricultural modernisation and market integration that occurred through the 1990s and 2000s. Instead, policy documents implicitly assume that rural poverty in upland areas is a function of the marginalisation of these regions from markets and commercial practices. A brief example of illegal opium production in upland areas of southern Shan State illustrates this point clearly. Illegal opium production is typically blamed on the marginalisation and 'underdevelopment' of poppy-producing regions, with agricultural modernisation and market integration deemed to offer effective ways to overcome illegal cultivation. However, this policy narrative ignores the fact that in some areas, poppy cultivation has become the alternative livelihood strategy for farmers who have been negatively impacted by debt, dispossession and land grabs that have accompanied

the expansion of commercial agriculture and increased inflows of investment into rural Myanmar. The vulnerabilities that have pushed farmers into the illegal opium economy—for example, in regions of Shan State south of Taunggyi—are not simply the result of the region's marginalisation and lack of integration into markets, but stem from new forms of insecurity facing smallholder farmers as a result of agricultural commercialisation (Meehan 2021). A relational framework thus allows researchers to consider how forms of poverty and vulnerability can become embedded in the kinds of economic development promoted by governments and donors, rather than indicating a failure of development. Importantly, it also reveals the hackneyed nature of much of the debates surrounding rural development in Myanmar after 2010. Although rural development policies are couched in a language of modernisation, innovation, inclusivity and pro-poor development they are, in reality, offering little that is different from the kinds of neoliberal pathways that rural populations have experienced—and struggled to grapple with—over the past two decades.

CONCLUSION

A major challenge for many of those working in the development sector is how to integrate a commitment to the ideals of social justice, inclusivity, and pro-poor growth with an awareness of the profound challenges that deep-seated power structures and the inherently uneven nature of development processes can pose to such aspirations. There are no easy answers but, as this chapter has briefly tried to sketch out, an important starting point is to better integrate critical development studies scholarship into development practice. The rush to engage in Myanmar in the years after 2010 often led the pendulum to swing too far towards a preoccupation with 'doing development' and a subsequent neglect of—or impatience with—the difficult and inconvenient questions that development studies scholarship poses. However, bridging the 'theory/policy divide' is a necessary starting point for addressing pressing societal issues in countries like Myanmar that experience widespread poverty and longstanding armed conflicts.

This requires an approach that is willing to confront the difficult trade-offs that surround questions of development and that acknowledges the importance of understanding entrenched political power structures that are often much slower to change than the kinds of rapid transitions pursued in countries like Myanmar. This emphasises the importance of

history and the value of deep contextual knowledge. It also highlights the importance of engaging with, and investing, in the development of such knowledge, rather than relying upon the kinds of external models, toolkits, and technocratic fixes that often underpin development work. For any such endeavour to be effective, engaging marginalised voices is essential to ensure development narratives do not simply reflect the interests of entrenched power structures. In Myanmar, supporting researchers to pursue academic careers and strengthening research institutes that are able to bring their knowledge of local societies to bear on the difficult and contentious debates on development offers one such starting point.

Following the military coup that took place in Myanmar in February 2021, aid flows and large-scale development programs have been scaled back, suspended, or cancelled entirely. Considering the protracted humanitarian crises facing Myanmar, the questions facing many donors now revolve around immediate concerns of how to navigate the new political reality, the vexed issue of sanctions, and whether and how to provide humanitarian aid (Slim 2021; Decobert 2021). Alongside these critical and immediate challenges, in time there will be important lessons to learn from Myanmar's experience of 'transition' and development interventions between 2011 and 2021. An important aspect of these reflections must be to assess how to better address the theory/ policy divide within development so as to move beyond 'win-win' narratives that underpinned development policies and programs over the past decade, and to instead confront directly the tensions, trade-offs, and power relations that surround efforts to address poverty, inequality, and insecurity in Myanmar and beyond.

FUNDING STATEMENT

Research for this article was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council: Grant number: ES/P009867/1: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war and Grant number: ES/ P011543/ 1 : GCRF-Dmgs and (dis)order: Bnilding SLLStainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war.

REFERENCES

- Asian Development Bank. (2014). *Myanmar: Unlocking the Potential*. Asian Development Bank.
- Bachtold, S. (2015). The Rise of an Anti-politics Machinery: Peace, Civil Society and the Focus on Results in Myanmar, *Third World Quarterly*, 36(10), 1968-1983.
- Bernstein, H. (2005). Development Studies and the Marxists . In U. Kothari (ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies* (pp . 111-137). Zed Books.
- Bernstein, H. (2006). Studying Development/Development Studies, *African Studies*, 65(1), 45-62.
- Bernstein, H. & Oya, C. (2014). Rural Futures: How Much Should Markets Rule? *IIED Working Paper*. London.
- Cowen, M. & Shenton, R. (1996). *Doctrines of Development*. Routledge.
- Decobert, A. (2021). Myanmar's human rights crisis justifies foregoing neutrality for a solidarity-based approach to humanitarianism. *Melbourne Asia Review*.
- FAO. (2012). Country Programming Framework 2012-2016. FAO.
- Ferguson, J. (1990). *The Anti-politics Machine: Development , Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge University Press.
- GORUM. (2018). *Myanmar Agriculture Development Strategy and Investment Plan (2018-19-2022-23)*. Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.
- Khan, M. (2010). Political Settlements and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions. *Draft Paper in Research Paper Series on <Growth-Enhancing Governance>*. http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political_Settlements_internet.pdf Accessed: 15/12/2019.
- Kothari, U. (2005). A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies. In U. Kothari (ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies* (pp . 111-137). Zed Books.
- Li, T. (2007). *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development , and the Practice of Politics*. Duke University Press.
- Li, T. (2010). To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations, *Antipode*, 41(1), 66-93.
- Meehan, P. (2021). "Ploughing the land five times": Opium and agrarian change in the ceasefire landscapes of south-western Shan State, Myanmar. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1- 24.
- Mosse, D. (2010). A Relational Approach to Durable Poverty, Inequality and Power, *The Journal of Development Studies*, 46(7), 1156-1178.
- Raitzer, D., Wong, L. & Samson, J.L. (2015). Myanmar's Agriculture Sector: Unlocking the Potential for Inclusive Growth. *ADB Economics Working Paper Series no. 470*. Asian Development Bank.

- Ribe, H., Carvalho, S., Liebenthal, R., Nicholas, P. & Zuckerman, E. (1990). How Adjustment Programs Can Help the Poor: The World Bank's Experience. *World Bank Discussion Paper 71*. World Bank
- Sen, A. (1985). *Commodities and Capabilities*. Oxford University Press.
- Slim, H. (2021). Humanitarian resistance and military dictatorship. *Humanitarian Practice Network*. 14 April 2021.
- Stanton, E. (2007). The Human Development Index: A History. *PERI Working Papers 127*. Political Economy Research Institute.
- Taylor, P. (2016). Frontier commoditisation in post-socialist Southeast Asia. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 57(2), 145-153.
- The Asia Foundation. (2018). *Supporting the Transition: Understanding Aid to Myanmar Since 2011*. The Asia Foundation.
- TNI. (2012). *Financing Dispossession China's Opium Substitution Programme in Northern Burma*. Transnational Institute.
- United Nations. (1951). *Measures for the economic development of under-developed countries: Report by a Group of Experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations*. New York: United Nations.
- Woods, K.M. (2020). Smaller-Scale Land Grabs and Accumulation from Below: Violence, Coercion and Consent in Spatially Uneven Agrarian Change in Shan State, Myanmar. *World Development*, 127.
- World Bank. (2014). Myanmar Overview. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/overview>. Accessed: 02/07/2015.
- World Bank. (2017). *An Analysis of Poverty in Myanmar, Part 02: Poverty Profile*. World Bank.