

Communities in the Balance:

LOCAL VOICES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE DAWEI SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE PROJECT



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Cover image: Fisher people unload their catch at a beach market in Dawei and a community member collects shellfish on the beach near Dawei SEZ.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	5
OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY	10
INFORMATION ACCESS	16
BOX 1: TERMINOLOGY	24
LIVELIHOODS	27
BOX 2: CLASS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY IN NABULE	36
RELOCATION	46
BOX 3: DISPLACEMENT THUS FAR	47
EMPLOYMENT	55
BOX 4: GROUP DISCUSSION WITH DAWEI MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK	62
GENDER	65
BOX 5: GENDERING INDUSTRIALIZATION TODAY	72
CONCLUSION	75



Dawei Special Economic Zone extends inland from the Kilometer Zero sign, near the site of the proposed deep sea port.

Executive Summary

In southern Myanmar, one of the world's largest infrastructure projects remains on hold. But for how much longer? The Myanmar government suspended the Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project in 2013 following funding deficits and community opposition. Recently, however, statements from the government and other project proponents have indicated the project might resume soon. This report takes that possibility seriously. It documents how community members living in SEZ project areas understand the SEZ and what it might mean for their lives and livelihoods. Although research on community members' perspectives on the Dawei SEZ has been carried out before, no such research has taken place in the years since the project's suspension. Here, we present the ideas, opinions, hopes, and concerns of those whom the SEZ will most directly affect.

What are community members' views, ideas, opinions, and expectations? This report shows that community members rarely hold positions fully for or against the SEZ. Their views are complex; their comments can be ambivalent, even contradictory. Disagreements within villages are frequent and can be heated, even when community members say they understand others' viewpoints. This report provides some findings as to which kinds of groups exist in the Nabule area villages (the main SEZ project area), and how these different groups hold various views and opinions regarding the project.

Nevertheless, some messages from community members are very clear. By and large, community members who participated in this research expressed desire for the jobs, infrastructure, and financial compensation that they believe the project will bring. However, there are doubts about whether or to what extent the SEZ really will bring such benefits to community members. In many ways, what community members want is arguably not the SEZ itself but all of those things they associate with it: employment, material progress, and economic security. However, there is some evidence that the project may worsen the insecurity of community members' lives and livelihoods and that it is possible, maybe even necessary, to achieve those things without the SEZ at all.

Put differently, as seen across the four key areas of research for this report - information access, livelihoods, employment, and gender - community members are calling for the following:

- › Clear, systematic, and equal access to information
- › Open, equitable, and fair compensation processes
- › No relocation without equal or better quality of life
- › Investment in jobs and in infrastructure that benefits community members themselves
- › Cooperation across lines of power, class, age, and gender – for a better future in Dawei

The findings for each of the four research areas are as follows, in brief. These research areas were chosen in order to: (a) elicit community members' opinions and expectations in general, yet also in relation to specific issues; and (b) better grasp how different groups in the villages of the project area have different relationships to and views of the SEZ.

INFORMATION ACCESS

Community members report an opaque information environment in which even basic elements of SEZ project plans remain unclear. This includes plans around relocation, for example, and what kinds of industries are set to be located in the SEZ area. People with more power and authority, who are more likely to be men than women, have greater access to information. Confusion reigns over the buying and selling of land in particular, as community members describe a lack of clarity over land acquisition processes and whether or to what extent compensation is or should be a part of them. Without clarity on the basics of the project and what it will mean for community members, many community members have found it difficult to develop clear opinions and expectations. Community members commonly expressed a desire for clear, systematic, and equal access to information.

LIVELIHOODS

Livelihood impacts from the early stages of the project vary from village to village, covering environmental degradation, farmland destroyed by quarry runoff, land confiscations, and more. Community members describe compensation as an essential livelihood question. With few having received compensation thus far, frustrations are running high about more powerful people getting higher rates, the dubious role of brokers, and the perceived blurry line between formal land acquisition and outright land speculation. Powerful people see compensation as a matter of potentially substantial private gain, yet the desire for compensation is widespread, and sometimes the result of serious livelihood difficulties sustained due to project activities that have already taken place. Nearly all people reached for this research called for a compensation process that would be open, equitable, and fair. Although little is known about relocation plans to date, community members repeatedly stated they could not accept relocation if it would mean being unable to maintain their current livelihoods and standard of living. Yet views on relocation are stratified by power, income, age, and interest in the history and traditions – social, cultural, and spiritual – of areas designated for relocation.

EMPLOYMENT

Job creation is the government's central justification for the SEZ, as far as benefits they say will flow to people in the Dawei area. This position resonates strongly with people living in the SEZ project areas, as high percentages of people from those areas have gone abroad as migrant workers. The desire to bring home migrant workers by providing employment is powerful, even though evidence from Map Ta Phut in Thailand, the Thilawa SEZ near Yangon, and historical examples in the region suggest jobs are more likely to go to migrants, high-skilled technicians, and managers. Community members living in SEZ project areas did express concern about the following: whether local people would be prioritized for job creation; whether wages would be the same for Thai and Myanmar workers doing the same work; how community members would access workplaces across the

vast SEZ area; and whether employment would be mainly for young people, for men or for women, and for educated or less-educated people. Older agriculturalists reported being worried that without access to land, they are not sure how they would maintain their livelihoods.

GENDER

Gender cross-cuts the other research areas. Comments from women living in SEZ project areas indicated the following: that men are more likely than women to have access to project information; that livelihoods associated with women, such as collecting and selling shellfish, may be particularly vulnerable if the SEZ project resumes; that boys are more likely than girls to finish their education, leaving them better prepared for a changing livelihood situation; that men have more power and influence over matters relating to land acquisition and financial compensation; and that men are more likely than women to gain employment opportunities if jobs emphasize technical skills and capacities. Positions of power in these villages are almost exclusively held by men in trade, administration, social welfare networks and activities, and religious activities. For community members in SEZ project areas, the SEZ stands to reinforce and exacerbate existing gender hierarchies.

Data collection for this report took place between August 2017 and February 2018, focusing on six villages in Nabule, the main SEZ area: Paradut, Hteingyi, Mudu, Wetchaung, Kamaungchaung, and Ngapidat. Further research activities took place in Dawei town and Yangon. In all, the research team reached 131 people through 17 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 17 focus group discussions (FDGs), 15 key informant interviews (KIIs), and 5 informal discussions (IFDs). Secondary, desk-based research complemented this primary data collection. The research team's sampling methodology centered on non-probability sampling, especially convenience (snowball) sampling and purposive (judgement) sampling, aiming for balance in diversity (gender, income, age, experience, expertise).



Many women in Dawei SEZ harvest palote worms from trees as a part of their livelihoods.

Introduction

Consider Ma Htwe, a farmer in one of the villages of Nabule, the main project area for the Dawei SEZ.¹ Like over forty others in her village, Ma Htwe's paddy land is located at the base of a hill that has been turned into a quarry to supply raw materials for SEZ construction activities. During the rainy season, runoff from the quarry flows to the paddy fields below, which are now heavily damaged after years of this cycle – despite the SEZ having been suspended since 2013. Unable to farm their land, Ma Htwe and others have struggled greatly. *“It’s been six years since I’ve been able to do paddy farming,”* she said one morning.² *“We’ve been starving for six years.”* For her, the project should not start again until after people like her have received financial compensation. Her hope, she said, is *“for the kind of help that can balance out our losses and sufferings.”*

Across the unpaved road running through her village, Ma Htwe's neighbor, U Phyo, said he believes something must be done to bring home all of the people from this area who have moved abroad as migrant workers. Like Ma Htwe, U Phyo is a smallholder farmer, but he raises cashew and betel nut

¹ All names of Dawei-based interlocutors in this report are pseudonyms.

² IDI, Nabule, female. Anonymity precaution.

trees rather than rice paddy. He smiled, imagining what it would be like for his own family to be reunited. He nodded his head. A safe, small industrial zone might be good, he suggested, emphasizing as well that he trusts the new, democratically elected government. At the same time, he insisted that people in their village would refuse to be relocated. *“Maybe the industrial zone could be built outside of the village,”* he proposed.³ *“We local people just want work,”* he said.

It has been ten years since the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that first formalized plans for the Dawei SEZ, eight years since the Framework Agreement that enabled construction activities to begin, and five years since the Myanmar government suspended the SEZ, citing only a shortfall in investment rather than the outburst of community opposition to the SEZ. Although people like Ma Htwe and U Phyo might have once opposed the SEZ more fully during that outburst, today they and other community members in Nabule maintain more ambivalent positions. This report documents those positions, exploring the complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory views of Nabule community members regarding the SEZ.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In southern Myanmar, the Dawei SEZ and the associated deep-sea port remain on hold. Government authorities suspended the project in 2013 following funding deficits and community opposition. Yet in the years since the suspension, rumors have persisted about the project restarting. In 2017, statements from government officials and company representatives increasingly suggested the project would begin again soon. While it is still not clear when the project might restart or exactly what that would mean for people living nearby, this report seriously considers the possibility that construction and other activities may resume in 2018. Moreover, although systematic research on community members' views about the SEZ project has been carried out multiple times since the project began, no such research has taken place in the years since it was suspended. This report fills that gap. It documents the opinions and expectations of community members living in SEZ project areas.

The Dawei SEZ project is one of the world's largest infrastructure projects. If realized on the scale at which it was first envisioned, its cost (up to \$58 billion) and size (almost 200 square kilometres) would make it Southeast Asia's largest

³ IDI, Nabule, male. Anonymity precaution.

and most costly industrial zone by far. The Dawei SEZ would be seven times the size of Thailand's Map Ta Phut, for instance, which is currently the largest industrial estate in Southeast Asia. Upon the project's formal announcement in 2010, the master plan included a deep-sea port, a vast petrochemical estate, a smaller industrial zone for lighter and more labor-intensive industry, a coal-fired power plant, a dam with a reservoir, a new township to house workers, dual oil and gas pipelines, and road and rail links to Thailand. Dating from the late years of Myanmar's military government, the Dawei SEZ project could hardly have been more ambitious. The model for the project, it was reported at the time, was no less than the Shenzhen SEZ in China's Pearl River Delta.⁴

It remains to be seen if this vision will come to pass. In early 2012, protests against the coal-fired power plant led to its cancellation by the Myanmar government. The main project developer, a Thai construction company called Italian-Thai Development (ITD), struggled to secure and maintain investment in the project, especially without the power plant as a power source. The Myanmar government suspended the SEZ project as a whole the following year. Project proponents, including the Myanmar and Thai governments, ITD and other companies, then reorganized the project's financing, management structure, and overall plan.⁵

Now formally a government-to-government project, overseen by several joint governmental committees, the near-term vision for the SEZ remains unclear. Following the reorganization of the project's structure and management, project proponents agreed to pursue an initial phase centered on an onshore gas terminal, a smaller multi-source power plant, the industrial zone for light and medium industries, the township for housing workers, and the road link

4 Aung Min and Toshihiro Kudo (2012), "Newly Emerging Industrial Development Nodes in Myanmar: Ports, Roads, Industrial Zones along Economic Corridors," in Masami Ishida (ed.), *Emerging Economic Corridors in the Mekong Region, Bangkok Research Centre Research Report No. 8*, IDE-JETRO, Bangkok; Dawei Development Association (DDA) (2014), *Voices from the Ground: Concerns over the Dawei Special Economic Zone and Related Projects*, Dawei, Myanmar, DDA; *International Herald Tribune* (11/26/10), "An Industrial Project That Could Change Myanmar," available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/27/world/asia/27iht-myanmar.html> (last accessed 4/23/18).

5 See Mekong Watch (2016), "Dawei SEZ Fact Sheet," available at <https://mekongwatch.wordpress.com/2016/12/23/dawei-sez-factsheet/> (last accessed 23/4/18).

to the Thai border.⁶ The cost and size of this initial phase is set to be a fraction of the earlier vision, at about \$1.8 billion and 27 square kilometres for the industrial estate. However, the Dawei SEZ Management Committee has more recently suggested that given project delays, they may opt to pursue full phase implementation alongside the initial phase. Media reports suggest a study being conducted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will determine what the implementation of the project in full will actually mean.⁷

Dawei-based CSOs such as the Dawei Development Association (DDA) and others featured prominently in the movement against the coal-fired power plant in 2012. “No Coal in Dawei” was the rallying cry of public events, pamphlets, stickers, and extensive journalistic coverage. Many observers saw the movement against the power plant as the second major victory for Myanmar civil society in the post-2010 reform period, amid a national political shift away from military rule and towards a quasi-civilian government.⁸ The first such victory was the movement that forced the suspension of the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State, in northern Myanmar.

But while the No Coal movement captured headlines locally and nationally, a series of less visible, less obvious activities were also taking place. Community members in Kalonehtar, the site of the proposed dam project, were holding meetings

6 Htoo Thant (29/8/17), “Further Delays Hindering Initial Phase of Dawei SEZ Kick Off,” *Myanmar Times*, available at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/further-delays-hindering-initial-phase-dawei-sez-kick.html> (last accessed 23/4/18); *The Nation* (31/1/15), “Initial Phase of Dawei SEZ to Begin This Year,” *The Nation*, available at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/Initial-phase-of-Dawei-SEZ-to-begin-this-year-30253050.html> (last accessed 23/4/18).

7 Su Phyo Win (1/24/18), “Dawei SEZ to Be Developed in Full,” *Myanmar Times*, available at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/dawei-sez-be-developed-full.html> (last accessed 23/4/18).

8 Soe Lin Aung (2013), *Towards Advocacy from Below: Democratizing Advocacy on Responsible Investment in Transitional Myanmar: Case Studies from Dawei and Kyaukphyu*, internal discussion paper for Paung Ku, unpublished.

at the village monastery where they repeatedly refused ITD's compensation and relocation packages, insisting they would not move for the dam. Karen community members along the road link were organizing a network of village committees that, among other things, held meetings to develop common strategies for upcoming negotiations over land compensation, including rates that would and would not be acceptable. In the lowland villages of the main SEZ area, an area known as Nabule, community members were forming committees that rejected relocation terms, pushed back on compensation rates, refused the housing in the resettlement area, and generally contested the displacement process.⁹

Dawei CSOs have supported and participated in these activities in various ways over time. But one constant feature has been attention to the voices of people living in the main SEZ project areas, principally Nabule, Kalonehtar, and along the road link. Two reports by Dawei CSOs attest to this commitment: *Local People's Understandings of the Dawei Special Economic Zone*, published in 2012 by a consortium of Dawei CSOs, and *Voices from the Ground: Concerns Over the Dawei Special Economic Zone and Related Projects*, published in 2014 by DDA.¹⁰ While acknowledging that the situation today differs from the situations addressed by these earlier publications, this report aims to maintain this commitment to closely addressing the views and experiences of people set to be directly affected by the Dawei SEZ. As the report seeks to make clear, this is only possible through attending to community members' opinions and expectations, especially those from these six villages in Nabule.

9 Ibid.

10 Southern Society Development Network (SSDN), DDA, and Loka Ahlinn (2012), *Local People's Understandings of the Dawei Special Economic Zone*, Dawei, Myanmar, SSDN; DDA (2014).

The Kalonehtar River is the site of the proposed dam project near the Dawei SEZ.



Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The following overall objectives have guided this research:

- › Document community members' current opinions and expectations regarding the project potentially restarting
- › Identify group dynamics in the SEZ areas that will impact access and mobilization opportunities
- › Situate community members' expectations relative to official claims by government and developers as well as relevant lessons from comparable projects in Myanmar and regionally
- › Identify gaps between the views and expectations of community members, government, developers, and experience from elsewhere

Following scoping activities in mid-2017, data collection for this report took place between August 2017 and January 2018. Data collection focused on six villages in the main SEZ area of Nabule: Paradut, Hteingyi, Mudu, Wetchaung, Kamaungchaung, and Ngapidat. All but one of these villages (Ngapidat) are designated to be fully resettled if the project resumes. Further research activities took place in Dawei town and Yangon. In all, the ERI research team reached 131 people through 17 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 17 focus group discussions (FGDs), 15 key informant interviews (KIIs), and 5 informal discussions (IFDs). Desk-based and secondary research complemented this primary data collection. It should be noted that the research team's sampling methods focused on non-probability sampling, especially convenience (snowball) sampling and purposive (judgement) sampling, aiming for balance in diversity (gender, income, age, experience) and expertise (including well- and less-informed participants). Given our timeframe and resources, developing a systematic, quantitative sample was not possible. Readers should be aware that the data gathered here comes from a partial, non-exhaustive sample of people living within the SEZ project area.

The research team chose to focus on villages in Nabule because community members in Nabule will, in many ways, be the people most directly affected if the SEZ project resumes: paddy farmers, orchard farmers, fishers, landless workers, people who collect forest products and shellfish, traders, shopkeepers,

monks, and other community members. It would affect over 10,000 people overall in Nabule. Nabule community members stand to be affected by the SEZ in many ways, including dispossession of land and resources, displacement of whole villages, narrowing livelihood opportunities, and environmental degradation. Yet given the scope and scale of this project, it has largely been the views and visions of government and the private sector, communicated using technical language, that have taken precedence in public debate. This report helps address this imbalance, detailing visions from below, in a different kind of language. As people living within one of the world's largest infrastructure project areas, Nabule community members deserve to have their voices heard.

Moreover, community members in Nabule deserve to be heard with respect – with some attention, that is, to the complexity and nuance of their views. As will become clear, few community members included in this research are directly for or against the project. Understandably, their comments are often laden with ambivalence, uncertainty, and sometimes contradiction. Their ideas about land, labor, and rural transformation are rarely one-dimensional. This must play a role in debate among those who work in and around Dawei – those who work conventionally, such as government and the private sector, and those pursuing alternative pathways to work with the Dawei communities, as in proposals increasingly put forth by social movements and civil society.

The data collection process was organized around four main areas of inquiry: information access, livelihoods, employment, and gender, which also cross-cuts the three other areas. Every IDI and FGD contained explicit questions in each of these areas, with additional broader questions at the end of every IDI or FGD regarding participants' overall opinions and expectations. Within each of these areas, the research team aimed to balance large, open-ended questions about community members' opinions with more targeted questions designed to elicit specific pieces of information. The overarching questions for each of these areas were as follows.

INFORMATION ACCESS

What (if anything) have community members heard, and how, about the SEZ project resuming?

Information access may seem less directly related to some of this study's overall concerns. However, CSOs' experiences with large-scale investment projects have shown that what people know about such projects – including who learns



Daw Myint Aye, a woman from Hteingyi village in the Dawei SEZ area.

what and how – greatly impacts how people view and understand those projects. It also impacts individuals' broad grasp of a given project as generally beneficial, damaging, or somewhere in between.¹¹

LIVELIHOODS

How or to what extent has the project changed people's livelihoods in these villages in the past, and how do people expect the return of the SEZ to further change their livelihoods in the future?

Livelihood-related questions constituted a plurality of all research questions in this study. They included questions related to community members' main income sources, land and land titles, past damages from the project and related

¹¹ Cf. DDA (2014), Aung (2013).

compensation issues, and knowledge of and expectations about potential relocation processes. Livelihood matters are essential for grasping the social and economic structures of these villages, which in turn are highly relevant to issues of group dynamics.

EMPLOYMENT

What are community members' expectations, desires, and/or concerns regarding potential project-related employment opportunities?

Government officials consistently claim the SEZ project will strongly boost employment opportunities for people living in the Dawei area. Employment is at the heart of state advocacy for the SEZ, despite strong evidence from similar projects in Myanmar and neighboring countries that the government's claims are, at best, exaggerated. Questions on this topic, often overlooked in CSO activities, were thus central to our data collection. Migrant labor questions were included here as well, given that many people from the Dawei area are now living and working in Thailand and Malaysia as migrant workers.

GENDER

How does gender cross-cut the topics described above, and how might the SEZ resuming affect women and men differently?

In IDIs and FGDs, gender questions were included in the inquiry areas described above, as information access, livelihoods, and employment are all matters that involve and affect women and men differently. Questions not related specifically to one of the other inquiry areas – such as more general gender questions, questions on gender and education, and questions relating gender to village power relations – were asked separately.

WIDER OPINIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Having considered these issues, what do people think, finally, about the project potentially resuming? Are there specific concerns – or alternatively, specific hopes – that people might want to raise more broadly about the project?

Given the relative specificity of the four main inquiry areas, the research team made sure to include these broader questions towards the end of each IDI and FGD. Here we included questions related to villages' history and traditions,

and what people might expect from CSOs, the government, and even private companies if the project does resume.

Working with data from each of these inquiry areas, the research team's data analysis process involved examining how these data illuminate group dynamics in these villages. Otherwise, asking directly about certain group dynamics can be difficult or sensitive.

For example, CSO experience and scoping activities for this research suggested that people with hesitations about the project tend to be older, have lived for a longer time in the village, have connections beyond the village that are less market-oriented, have more interest in and commitment to villages' histories and traditions, and not be among the very wealthiest members of the village. (See below for our re-evaluation of this expectation.) Therefore, group dynamics related to the following factors were of particular interest in this research: age, gender, income level, size of land holdings, type of livelihood activity, amount of time living in the village, level of interest in villages' customs, traditions, history, and religion, and type of connections to actors beyond the village, whether market- and/or migration-related or otherwise.

Two main shortcomings characterize this research. First, 88 men compared to 42 women participated in this research. Despite coordinating with village contacts to arrange IDIs and FGDs with women, including women-only FGDs, our contacts were frequently unable to assist us in this manner. More women-only IDIs and FGDs would have contributed to greater gender balance. Still, the research team is confident of its gender analysis in this report, having drawn on both primary data collection as well as strong secondary data, including existing published research and KIIs with organizations and individuals possessing relevant gender expertise.

Second, as noted above, this research relied on non-probability, purposive sampling rather than more exhaustive quantitative sampling methods. This qualitative approach means this report cannot claim, for example, that more people reject the project than support it (or vice versa), or that a majority of community members in the project area expect the project to bring greater employment opportunities (or the contrary). Instead, the analysis presented here is based on data drawn from only a small percentage of people living in the SEZ project area. On the other hand, the strength of qualitative research is its orientation towards depth, complexity, and detail. The research team holds that its qualitative approach is well in line with the study's overall objective of capturing the views and experiences of community members in the project

area. As this study makes clear, community members' ideas and viewpoints are often intricate, ambivalent, and uncertain. This study's methodology has been designed to capture the rich complexity of such terrain, the better to treat Nabule community members' views with the nuance and respect they deserve.

This report emphasizes community members' own ideas and understandings. However, this report also pays special attention to the intersection of political economy and rural livelihoods, locating the situation and experiences of Nabule community members within larger structural patterns of capitalist development and economic change. Research on agrarian political economy is thus central to how this study has been conceptualized and implemented.¹² Although ethnography and political economy are not always understood as complementary research methods, both tend to insist that individuals, families, and communities must be seen as deeply embedded in social, cultural, and political economic contexts, aside from which they cannot be adequately understood at all. On the verge of agrarian transformation, the Dawei area and its people shed light on the conflicts, contradictions, and desires for better lives that accompany capitalist development in Myanmar today. This report aims to amplify these visions from below.

¹² See Henry Bernstein (2004), "Changing before Our Very Eyes: Agrarian Questions and the Politics of Land in Capitalism Today," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4(1-2):190-225; Bernstein (2010), *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, Fernwood Publishing; Ian Scoones (2015), *Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development*, Fernwood Publishing. For work on agrarian political economy focused on Myanmar and Dawei, see Transnational Institute (TNI) (2015), "The Meaning of Land in Myanmar: A Primer," Yangon, Myanmar; and Elizabeth Loewen (2012), "Land Grabbing in Dawei: An International Human Rights Concern," Yangon, Myanmar, Paung Ku and TNI.

“IF THE PROJECT STARTS AGAIN, THE CLAMS, CRABS, AND SHELLFISH – THEY WILL ALL DISAPPEAR. WE HAVE TO GO LOOK FOR THESE THINGS TO SURVIVE. IF WE DON’T HAVE THEM, HOW WILL WE EAT?”

- A COMMUNITY MEMBER FROM NGAPIDAT

Information Access

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar CSOs working on large-scale investment projects like the Dawei SEZ have long highlighted the importance of information access as an area for programming and advocacy. In fact, in both Dawei and Kyaukphyu – the site of a deep-sea port and SEZ project in Rakhine State – civil society leaders considered information access to be one of the most important areas of activity in the period after both SEZs were announced. Fundamentally, the information people have or do not have and the knowledge they can or cannot access deeply affects how they understand a particular project, including how they might form concerns, develop demands, and build or join mobilization activities.

In and around Dawei, village networks and CSOs began to focus on information access almost immediately in the period directly after the Dawei SEZ was announced in 2010. Recognizing that building the SEZ requires at a minimum a power source, water source, and a roadlink to Thailand, CSOs joined with community members in three areas to distribute information and raise awareness: in Nabule, where the coal-fired power plant was planned

A woman in the Dawei SEZ area collects shellfish.



for construction; in Kalonehtar, where ITD sought to build a dam to form a reservoir; and along the roadlink, in mainly Karen villages. Between roughly 2010 and 2013, serious communication challenges hampered coordination efforts, especially due to limited mobile phone networks and limited phone ownership that made regular communication difficult. Still, activists, community leaders, and people from CSOs regularly circulated between these areas in person to raise awareness and share information, despite substantial distances and poor road infrastructure. Meanwhile, project proponents had begun conducting community consultations and assessments in each of these areas, if in very limited and uneven ways (see below). Project proponents, at this time, included mainly ITD, third-party research consultants, and several Myanmar business partners, with some participation from Myanmar government officials as well.¹³

As the following findings make clear, the information environment has changed substantially since the early 2010s. Limited access to information in recent years has led to anxiety and frustration, in some cases, and it has exacerbated village hierarchies tied to wealth, power, and gender. Moreover, currently low levels of awareness about the SEZ project have restricted community members' ability to imagine and plan for potentially significant changes to their lives and livelihoods, including but not limited to relocation, if the project resumes.

FINDINGS

Following the suspension of the Dawei SEZ in 2013, little formal distribution of information has taken place through either government or company channels. Some community members expressed frustration at this, while other community members described being disinterested regardless. Community members who were frustrated tended to be either people who were active participants in CSO activities at various points in time, or people who expected to receive financial compensation, and thus had a financial incentive to be aware of project implementation details. People with power and authority, particularly through village administration or through being relatively wealthy, sometimes shared those frustrations, insofar as they understood. Still, they also wanted to know more about how the SEZ would dramatically affect village life if implemented. Other times, such people were content to know that the project remained suspended, and confident that project proponents would

¹³ Aung (2013).

provide information as and when necessary if the project resumes. People who were not frustrated about limited information tended to be community members of relatively low power or authority, many of whom described not being interested in or knowledgeable about such matters, and untroubled about leaving them to others.

Across our interviews and group discussions, community members described remembering more discussion, debate, and communication about the SEZ project in the early 2010s. Since then, few community members described knowing about or taking part in any formal meetings related to the project, whether through village authorities, or consultations with ITD, other companies, or government officials not based in the village. Thus, our research suggests that only a small percentage of people directly affected by the SEZ project have received information about the project in recent years. Even when discussing the time before the project was suspended, in fact, when more information sharing was taking place, few respondents reported receiving any information about the project. These findings are supported by previous research by DDA, which found that 66% of households surveyed for their 2014 report had not received any information at all from the government or the company.¹⁴ Also in line with that research, our findings suggest the vast majority of project-related information circulates through informal discussions between friends, family members, and other community members, often in the form of unsubstantiated rumors. Community members also discussed accessing information through news journals and social media, albeit to a much lesser extent. Formal communication about the project from village administrators has been rare since the project suspension, with respondents indicating no knowledge of visits from official project proponents.

Comments from community members help to flesh out these findings. When discussing information access in Paradut, one of the larger villages in the center of the main SEZ area, one community member explained that *“When the project began, no one was informed.”* She continued: *“They (the company) arrived suddenly and, buying land for the project, paid 20 lakh [2 million kyat or 1,500 dollars] to some people, 30 lakh to some people, and 50 lakh to some people.”*¹⁵ For her, a lack of communication meant people had very different levels of knowledge about the project, with the result that some could benefit more than others from subsequent attempts by ITD to accumulate land in the

¹⁴ DDA (2014: 33).

¹⁵ IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

area. The process treated people unfairly. *"It's not equal,"* she said. In her view, *"Actually people who come from a democratic country – they don't do things that way."* This community member, a chanthama¹⁶ (a smallholder plantation farmer) who also worked in Thailand for several years, has participated in CSO activities with some consistency. On one CSO trip, she even visited Thilawa, the SEZ near Yangon, in order to be able to share information in her village about what to expect from the Dawei SEZ project.

She was not the only community member to call attention to the unexpected arrival of project proponents in the Nabule area. In Wetchaung, a village near a small artificial reservoir, built as a partial water source for the SEZ, a group of community members echoed her frustration with what they saw as the abrupt, disorganized approach of project proponents. *"If you're going to come and do a project,"* one community member said, *"you need to meet people and inform them. But if you come and do it suddenly, people won't accept it."*¹⁷ Another community member emphasized the need for more open and public forms of communication. He said, *"If they use posters to make announcements, we'll be able to know more systematically about the project."* In Wetchaung, project-related communication is critical, as there has been discussion by proponents about enlarging the reservoir, which may lead to early resettlement of some community members. These community members have heard about these discussions, but they said details have been elusive. *"We've heard they'll start work to expand the lake, but we haven't heard about having to move,"* one community member said.

However, not all community members who participated in this research expressed concern over limited access to information. In Paradut, a community member who owns a motorcycle repair shop expressed disinterest in knowing about whether the project would begin again, explaining that for his business, relocation would not necessarily pose a serious challenge. Unlike chanthama, lèthama, and fishers living in Nabule, someone who owns a motorcycle repair shop faces fewer obstacles in restarting his livelihood in a new place. Obtaining land is not an issue for him; he just needs the space he would likely already have around his new home. Still, he noted that communication should take place in an open and public way. *"If the people responsible for the project hold a meeting*

16 This report provides transliteration for Myanmar language according to the BGN/PCGN 1970 agreement, with some light modifications. Terminology is set out in more detail at Box 1.

17 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

to provide information,” he said, “that would be better” – as opposed to the disorderly information environment that has otherwise prevailed.¹⁸

One of the most significant results of limited information access is that community members who will be directly impacted by the SEZ have found it difficult to imagine and prepare for the substantial changes that would likely result from the project resuming. For example, for all of these villages but one, a resettlement process could greatly narrow community members’ livelihood prospects. Some respondents suggested that knowing little about the project also prevented them from formulating a strong opinion about it. Worryingly, this suggests that an opaque information environment may make it easier for project proponents to move forward with a project that may ultimately yield strongly negative social and environmental impacts.

In Mudu, a village on the edge of the project area’s southwest boundary, an older community member explained that without knowing what the project really entails, it is very difficult to develop an opinion about it. He associated the project with a top-down, hierarchical implementation process, which for him, tied into a lack of clarity around what it will actually involve. “For those of us at the bottom,” he said, “how can we know what’s happening at the top level? We don’t know what they’re going to do. For us, we don’t know how to criticize what the technical experts will do. Because we don’t know how they’re planning to do things, we can’t criticize it as being good or bad.”¹⁹ This problem of technical expertise is crucial. Seen as the most important form of knowledge, including by community members, it works to delegitimize other ways of knowing or understanding the project, leading to at least this community member’s sense that he cannot take a position on the project without that kind of technical expertise.

Indeed, a lack of certainty over whether the project will even go forward at all, and if so, in what form, makes it difficult for community members to take positions. “With the project not being sure,” said a community member from Wetchaung, “it has been difficult from our side to say what we want. Because we don’t know if they’ll continue, and how much they will do, it’s difficult to say what we want.”²⁰ Despite these comments suggesting limited information equates to difficulties taking positions, it is nonetheless clear that many community

18 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

19 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, male.

20 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

members have developed complex and nuanced views about the project. Such views rarely take the form of being for or against the project, whether developed in relation to livelihoods, employment issues, gender-based impacts, or other issues – as the following sections indicate.

Community members specified that if the SEZ project resumes, the main channel of official project-related communication would likely be village meetings featuring the village head, project proponents from government and the private sector, and community members themselves. Although few community members raised concerns about this mode of communication, it is problematic in a number of ways. Community members described meetings of this kind as being, in principle, open to anyone who wishes to join. However, in these villages, where population figures range from 500 to over 2000, information travels unevenly. Respondents acknowledged that some people hear about such meetings and feel they are expected and able to attend. Others

Dancers in Kalonehtar village celebrate the power of their community. Kalonehtar would be heavily impacted by a dam proposed as part of the SEZ project.



do not hear about such meetings, or feel they are uninterested or not expected to attend. In practice, meetings like these tend to heavily feature powerful men, thereby reflecting and reproducing hierarchies of power according to wealth, gender, age, proximity to or friendship with the village administration, level of education, and more. Although community members expressed confidence that information spreads quickly and easily in these villages, the risk is that unequal circulation may further entrench hierarchies of power and class. As the Paradut community member above suggested,²¹ information inequality can lead to very uneven distributions of material harms and benefits, such as farmers being paid very different amounts for their land when project proponents began buying it. Information access is an issue of early project implementation and yet at this level the SEZ project already stands to aggravate existing agrarian inequalities.

It is important to note that while most community members pointed to village meetings as the key sites for sharing information, spaces and mechanisms that are still less open and public are also apparently being used. In Kamaungchaung, a village larger than Wetchaung that is also near the small reservoir, a group of community members that included the village head described forming a small committee to handle compensation claims (equivalent committees have been formed in multiple villages in Nabule). When this committee was mentioned subsequently in a different group discussion in Kamaungchaung, one community member who owns no land, and survives through collecting and selling forest products, was angered, saying he had heard of no such committee. He felt strongly that compensation should not be handled in this way, sorely lacking in transparency. For him, there was serious concern that a committee of this kind would seek to shape the compensation process to privately benefit themselves. He was acutely aware, he worried, that even to raise this concern is dangerous – *“like walking on a knife edge,”* he said.²²

This group discussion raised another significant issue. Information access is typically understood, including in the formulation of this study, as a matter of vertical communication between project proponents, who hold information, and people affected by the project, who need to access that information. However, a community member in this discussion emphasized that community members need to pay a great deal of attention – they need to *“listen so much,”* he said²³ – to compensation figures being paid to other community members

²¹ IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

²² FGD, Kamaungchaung, 19/12/17, male.

²³ Ibid.

and in other villages. Such knowledge may enable community members to negotiate compensation rates from a position of more power, and hence secure higher rates. Yet this is not necessarily information that project proponents will be willing to share. Instead, this discussion indicates a need for more horizontal networks of communication between community members. This kind of information access is not commonly discussed among activists and CSOs. The comments of these community members suggest this could be an area to consider for civil society activities.

Finally, here, information and its circulation are not always seen as neutral. As described above, the circulation of information shows clearly how it remains subject to, reproduces, and even deepens existing hierarchies of wealth, power, gender, and other dynamics in Nabule. However, discussions with community members also indicate that information itself is not necessarily seen as simply neutral or objective. Rather, information is understood to be generally positioned in certain ways in relation to the project. For example, community members discussing CSO activities sometimes expressed frustration that CSOs only share negative information about project impacts, not positive information about potential benefits. This perception of a lack of balance in information suggests that an activity CSOs see as fully impartial – the sharing of information about likely project impacts – is seen by at least some community members as effectively biased, geared towards criticizing and opposing the project. CSOs, on the other hand, indicate that sharing information about harmful impacts does actually provide balance within the overall information environment, given that project proponents tend to provide only overwhelmingly positive information to community members affected by the project.

An industrial state is a key element of the plans for Dawei SEZ.



BOX 1: TERMINOLOGY

What is a **COMMUNITY MEMBER** in Nabule? For the purposes of this report, a community member is anyone living in one of the villages in Nabule. It is important to emphasize that these villages – and the community members who live there – are diverse and highly stratified. Research conducted by DDA found that 35% of community members cite chan farming - or orchard or plantation farming - as their primary livelihood, 31% cite paddy farming, 7% cite daily wages, 5% cite livestock rearing, and 19% cite “other” – a category that would cover further non-farm employment like fishing, motorcycle repair shops, beauty shops, shops selling food and cold drinks, trading activities of various kinds, and more.²⁴ Few community members depend on only one livelihood or one crop; most depend on a livelihood mix combining cultivation of different kinds of crops and sometimes on- and off-farm employment. Many people from these villages have also left and moved abroad as migrant workers – up to 50% of these villages’ working-age populations, according to one community member’s estimate. Thus remittance flows are also part of Nabule community members’ livelihood mixes. Stratification by power, income, age, gender, and other factors further differentiate the category “community members,” as this report makes clear. This report aims to show how different community members have different relationships to the SEZ project, shaping their likelihood of supporting or opposing it if it resumes.

What is a **FARMER** in Nabule? This report differentiates between two main kinds of farmers: chanthama and lèthama. In Nabule, chanthama, or orchard farmers, tend to cultivate smallholder plantations focused on cash crops like cashew nuts, betel nuts, rubber, seasonal fruits, and vegetables. Lèthama, or paddy farmers, are less common than chanthama in Nabule, but not necessarily by a substantial margin. As noted above, however, the two livelihoods together make up a strong majority of Nabule community members’ primary livelihoods. Larger landholders in Nabule might hold over ten acres of land, while smaller farmers are likely to hold between one and five acres. Larger landholders have been better positioned to contribute to and benefit from patterns of land consolidation that have accompanied the implementation of the SEZ, its years-long suspension

²⁴ DDA (2014: 19-20).

Betel nut farming is a key source of income in the Dawei SEZ area.

notwithstanding. In research conducted for this report, women and men both describe themselves as farmers, that is, as either *chanthama* or *lèthama*, despite research indicating a perception in Myanmar that terms for “farmer” imply a male subject.²⁵

What is **THE COMPANY** in Nabule? Community members in Nabule sometimes refer to “the company” in their comments. When they do so, they are typically referring to Italian-Thai Development (ITD), the Thai construction company that was the lead developer for the SEZ project until the Thai and Myanmar governments suspended and then restructured the project. ITD remains an important contractor today; its logo is still the most common one seen on construction vehicles and equipment in and around the SEZ project. However, ITD’s involvement now is through a joint venture with Rojana Industrial Park, itself a Thai-Japanese joint venture based in Thailand.²⁶ Furthermore, a host of third-party private-sector consultants have participated in project-related activities, for instance when conducting environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and other surveying, assessment, consultation, and research activities. To a large extent, community members’ primary point of contact with project proponents is through assessments and consultations of this kind. Thus, although community members may have ITD in mind when referring to “the company,” in fact it is often a smaller company hired by ITD or other proponents that is actually carrying out the activities being discussed. Regardless, it is worth noting that in contrast to Thilawa, for example, it is more difficult to identify the lead developer now for the Dawei SEZ – itself an impediment to organizing, advocacy, and mobilization activities. While the project is officially a bilateral, government-to-government project now, it is also the case that the ITD-Rojana joint venture, known as Myandawei Industrial Estate (MIE), appears to have taken on the role of lead developer in practice. Although the most obvious referent for “the company” is ITD, then, ITD is not technically the lead developer for the SEZ, nor sometimes the company actually implementing project activities on the ground.

25 See for example Hilary Oliva Faxon (2015), “The Praxis of Access: Gender in Myanmar’s National Land Use Policy,” conference paper, Chiang Mai University.

26 See Mekong Watch (2016).



Who or what are the project proponents? In this report, the term “project proponents” refers to actors and institutions in government and the private sector that are working on behalf of the project – in effect, trying to move it forward.²⁷ On the government side in Myanmar, the term would include government offices and officials at very local levels, in the regional government, at the national level, in the joint high-level committees featuring Thai and Myanmar government officials, and within the Dawei SEZ Management Committee. On the government side in Thailand, the term would refer largely to national-level offices and institutions, including the joint high-level committees, although more local government activities on the Thai side of the border in Kanchanaburi – where infrastructure upgrades are designed to link up with the Dawei SEZ roadlink project component – are relevant here as well. In the private sector, ITD is again the most obvious referent, although a more careful accounting would refer to MIE, or the ITD-Rojana joint venture, a host of third-party consultants carrying out research and assessment activities, and banking and financial institutions in Thailand and Myanmar that are providing support and investment for the project. Beyond Thailand and Myanmar, another project proponent is the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a Japanese government agency that is also involved in research and assessment activities related to the SEZ. JICA is currently designing a master plan for the development of the Tanintharyi Region as a whole in southern Myanmar.²⁸ This plan will shape how and to what extent the Dawei SEZ resumes, if it does so at all.

“WE’VE BEEN STARVING FOR SIX YEARS. IF WE DON’T HAVE MONEY, WE FARMERS CAN LIVE WITHOUT USING ANY. IT’S ONLY IF WE CAN’T EAT THAT WE CAN’T LIVE.”

- A COMMUNITY MEMBER IN PARADUT

²⁷ And should not be confused with the term defined under the 2015 Myanmar EIA Procedures.

²⁸ Su Phyo Win (28/6/17), “JICA Draws Up Development Plan for Tanintharyi and Dawei SEZ,” *The Myanmar Times*, available at <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/26576-jica-draws-up-development-plan-for-tanintharyi-and-dawei-sez.html> (last accessed 25/4/18); Zin Thu Tun (13/3/18), “JICA to Provide \$800 Million for Dawei SEZ,” *Myanmar Business Today*, available at <https://www.mmbiztoday.com/articles/jica-provide-800-million-dawei-sez> (last accessed 25/4/18).

Livelihoods

INTRODUCTION

The bulk of data collection for this research focused on community members' livelihoods in Nabule. Discussions with community members considered how or to what extent their livelihoods have changed in recent years in relation to the SEZ project, and in what ways they expect their livelihoods might change further if the project were to resume – including through processes of land confiscation, compensation, and resettlement.

A strong majority of participants in this research identified themselves as *chanthama*, or smallholder plantation farmers who, in Nabule, are most likely to cultivate a combination of cash crops, especially cashew nuts, rubber, and betel nut. Some participants identified themselves as or paddy rice farmers, while participants living in the coastal village of Ngapidat tended more towards fishing and the collection of shellfish as livelihoods. Significant numbers of community members also work in non-farm occupations, such as at beauty shops, motorcycle repair shops, market shops, shops that sell cold drinks and/or food, or as landless workers doing daily wage labor, collecting and selling forest products, raising livestock, and so on. Most people in Nabule engage in a mix of different livelihoods: cultivating both paddy rice and plantation crops, combining farm and non-farm employment, and thereby balancing seasonal planting cycles and fluctuations in crop prices. Migrant remittances sent by family members working in Thailand and Malaysia also constitute vital contributions to household incomes in Nabule.²⁹

There are many ways of defining what livelihoods are. A definition that resonates with this research holds that livelihoods refer to an “integrated, holistic, bottom-up perspective centered on the understanding of what people do to make a living in diverse social contexts and circumstances.” As such, livelihoods have been “central to rural development thinking and practice for decades.”³⁰ In adopting a holistic perspective, this study departs from recent work that sees livelihoods mainly in economic, technical terms. Rather, this research adopts a structural political economy perspective that asks, among other questions, who is rich, who is poor, and why. The key

29 See DDA (2014: 19-26) for quantitative findings regarding livelihood practices in Nabule.

30 Scoones (2015: 1).

questions raised by Bernstein et al. help to elucidate this approach.³¹ Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with it? These basic considerations guided our livelihoods data collection, helping us to critically situate agrarian social structure in Nabule within wider questions of political economy.

In rural Myanmar, as elsewhere, it would be difficult to separate a livelihoods analysis from a land analysis. Yet land, here, should be understood less as a single thing than as a connection between things – a locus of relations that are social, cultural, political, economic, and spiritual. Land is more than a basic factor of production. Land also brings together the ways that community members make meaning and sustain beliefs, build and maintain social and cultural life, and understand who they are, where they come from, and where they are going.³² In line with a political economic perspective, discussions for this research considered in particular the use and control of land in Nabule, including the questions of how, why, and for whose benefit control over land – and the relations it entails – has shifted in recent years. Thus although this section of the report does not have a specific land section, land should be understood as integrated into each subsection on livelihood changes, compensation, and relocation.

Indeed, this section begins with an overview of how livelihoods in the Nabule area have changed in recent years in relation to the SEZ project. Sections on compensation and relocation follow.

CHANGING LIVELIHOODS

In Nabule, the way that livelihoods have or have not changed in relation to the SEZ project depends greatly on the location of the different villages. Some villages, such as Wetchaung and Kamaungchaung, have not seen intensive livelihood impacts resulting from the project. The small reservoir in that area, built for the project, has not greatly affected community members living nearby. Other villages – like Paradut, near the quarry built by ITD, and Ngapidat, on the coast near the small port – have seen more significant livelihood impacts. Runoff from the quarry has damaged Paradut farmers' fields and the construction of the port has brought a road and a bridge that impede

31 Henry Bernstein, Ben Crow, and Hazel Johnson (eds.) (1992: 24-25), *Rural Livelihoods: Crises and Responses*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

32 Cf. TNI (2015).

Ngapadat fishers' ability to come and go with their boats. Hteingyi and Mudu are in a more ambiguous place with respect to livelihood changes. Neither have been subject to substantial direct livelihood impacts in recent years. In Hteingyi and Mudu, links between community members' livelihoods and their views of the project tend to result from community members' economic position, especially how much land belongs to a given community member.

Notably, there is not necessarily a correlation between the extent of negative impacts someone might have experienced and their level of opposition to or concerns about the project. Some people who have experienced some of the worst impacts from the project are those who would like it to resume as quickly as possible in order for compensation processes to restart. Among those who have experienced few impacts, some wish for the complete cancellation of the project in order to keep their land and maintain their stable livelihood situations. Some, especially wealthier community members, wish for the project to begin again swiftly, in order to benefit from their extensive land holdings and related compensation opportunities. As for the poorest community members – landless workers, tenant farmers, people who rely on collecting forest products, and fishers on other people's boats, among others – some oppose the project, given its potential to disrupt their already fragile livelihood situations. Others expressed support for it, suggesting they above all need the jobs and infrastructure they believe it might bring, not to mention a potential for compensation, which for impoverished community members is seen as a major opportunity.

Wetchaung and Kamaungchaung, two villages near the small reservoir towards the eastern end of the SEZ area, have seen relatively limited effects from the project. Community members report that the construction of the reservoir did not affect many community members, even if discussions about expanding it do give some cause for concern going forward. These two villages are also in the midst of two large-scale palm oil plantations, owned and operated by government enterprises until recently. These plantations are not operational now. They will be cleared to provide land for the SEZ project if and when the project resumes. Community members do not report any significant livelihood changes tied to these plantations being shut down. In Kamaungchaung, a group with relatively large land holdings, many of whom have a close relationship with the village head, expressed very strong support for the project. They even held a pro-SEZ protest in 2015. On the other hand, a landless worker relying on livestock and forest products offered strong

criticisms of the project, describing serious concerns over what his access to forest areas might be like in any resettlement area.

Not everyone in these two villages indicated a close relationship between livelihoods, livelihood changes, and views of the SEZ project. In Wetchaung, one community member, a chanthama cultivating mainly rubber, said she has not seen major livelihood changes related to the SEZ project. For her, the most important changes in recent years have been fluctuations in the price of rubber, as a result of which, with the price of rubber low, her children have moved to Thailand as migrant workers. If the project were to resume, she stressed she is not sure what kind of livelihood changes to expect. *“I can’t say whether there will be livelihood impacts,”* she said. *“I don’t know how much they (the company) will do.”*³³ Other Wetchaung community members, however, did report that as a result of the project, they have been instructed not to plant more or different kinds of trees. This directive is geared towards achieving an orderly compensation process, based on community members’ assets at the time the project began. These livelihood restrictions, this group said, did cause their incomes to drop. According to one chanthama, *“They objected to our planting. They asked us not to expand or diversify and just only to maintain the trees we already have. For us, we don’t have any permission to speak so we have to follow what they say.”* He continued: *“Income has decreased. We can’t plant trees for the long-term. If we’re going to get compensation, it won’t be for the long-term trees.”*³⁴

In Ngapidat, a precarious livelihood mix depends on access to fishing areas and tidal forests. Community members report that since the project began in the early 2010s, businesspeople from outside the village have been buying land in the area, in some cases converting tidal forest areas into plantation land and making access to tidal forests more difficult. The construction of the small port on the edge of the village – built to enable initial implementation activities for the SEZ project more broadly – has involved building a road and bridge that have impeded fishing activities. A poorer village than the others, overall, Ngapidat is a place where some community members object to the project’s expected disruption of their fragile livelihoods, while other community members welcome the employment opportunities and physical

33 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17, female.

34 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

infrastructure that they feel certain the project will bring, which they feel they greatly need.³⁵

Ngapidat, it is worth noting, is also the only village in this research where community members strongly recognized gender-differentiated impacts from the project. Collecting shellfish is a livelihood almost exclusively associated with women. To the extent that the project may restrict access to tidal forests, including, thus far, through leading speculators to buy up land in anticipation of the project, the project will also substantially narrow the livelihoods of women in Ngapidat. Already, some women in Ngapidat rely exclusively on migrant remittances sent by family from Thailand.³⁶

One of the Ngapidat community members who maintains her income through collecting shellfish is a daughter of the village head. In a group discussion, she worried that *“If the project starts again, the clams, crabs, and shellfish – they will all disappear. We have to go look for these things to survive. If we don’t have them, how will we eat?”*³⁷ A male fisher agreed: *“If the project restarts, they will clear the tidal area. There won’t be any more clams and crabs.”*³⁸ Another, older fisher emphasized the bridge as a key livelihood problem that has resulted from the project. *“Because of the bridge,”* he said, *“fishers have had some difficulties. During the rainy season, we went to talk to the main project engineer. They said they would get rid of the bridge but they haven’t done so yet.”*³⁹ The bridge, as community members repeatedly explained, prevents fishers from easily going out to sea in their fishing boats.

Still, some Ngapidat community members also expressed strong support for the project. Two women who survive on migrant remittances stressed that, aside from the bridge and impacts to the tidal forests, the project has also brought a road to the village. *“In the beginning, there was no road connecting to our village. They came and built one, so the road cuts through our village now. I’m so thankful. Because of this road, we are less isolated.”*⁴⁰ Later, another group of community members expressed a similar feeling, emphasizing that before the project brought a road through the village, barely

35 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17.

36 IDI, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, female.

37 FGD, Ngapidate, 28/9/17, female.

38 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

39 IDI, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

40 IDI, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, female.

anyone even knew the village existed.⁴¹ Put differently: here, where the project has in fact brought tangible negative impacts, community members still see the relationship between the SEZ and their livelihood changes as somewhat ambiguous – negative in some ways, positive in others, and resistant to generalization.

Unlike Ngapidat, Paradut village is not on the coast. It is nestled in among the larger villages at the very center of the main SEZ area. Of these villages, it is closest to the quarry built to provide building materials for project construction activities. Some 60 farmers with paddy land near the quarry have had their land badly damaged by water flowing down from it during the rainy season (the quarry is built into the side of a mountain above the paddy fields). Discussing the quarry, one farmer said *“There have been impacts. Since we can’t do paddy farming, we poor farmers have become very hungry. I would say it’s been about six years now.”*⁴² Yet this farmer, along with another who joined him in this discussion, made clear it is precisely for this reason that they want the project to resume as soon as possible. Having endured strongly negative livelihood impacts for years, they feel certain that only the project starting again will offer some reprieve, namely by giving them the option of moving elsewhere to rebuild their livelihoods with the compensation they expect to receive.

In a subsequent interview, a Paradut farmer whose paddy land was destroyed by the quarry runoff put the situation in stark terms. *“We’ve been starving for six years,”* she said. *“If we don’t have money,”* she continued, *“we farmers can live without using any. It’s only if we can’t eat that we can’t live.”*⁴³ Unlike the other farmers who had lost land to the quarry, however, she did not translate her difficulties into support for the project restarting. More ambiguously, she said only that if the project resumes, it should only be after farmers receive compensation for past damages. By contrast, another group of Paradut farmers reported having experienced essentially no changes in their livelihoods as a result of the project. This group – chanthama not lèthama and thus without paddy fields exposed to quarry runoff – expressed serious reservations about the project going forward. Among the best-informed respondents in this research, they were strongly critical of the project overall. Because they do not face livelihood strains such as those affected lèthama, these farmers were not as interested in compensation and struggled to find anything positive about

41 FGD, Ngapidat, 21/12/17, mixed.

42 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

43 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

the project. Paradut thus reinforces the notion that those who have endured the most difficult impacts from the project are now among those who most strongly desire its return. In particular, they worry that if the project does not resume, the compensation will not materialize. Among those who have not felt serious impacts, some simply prefer to remain undisturbed by a project that they view with concern.

Mudu and Hteingyi villages have seen few livelihood changes from the project thus far. Specific contributors to other villages' livelihood changes – namely proximity to the small reservoir, the quarry, or the small port – are absent in Mudu and Hteingyi. Community members' comments tended to lack some of the urgency of those in other villages. In Mudu, a group discussion with male youth was mainly neutral on the project, despite one participant's comment that *"Mudu village will be included if the deep-sea port project starts. So for people living inside the zone, there is concern about being able to continue farming."*⁴⁴ Later, an older male chanthama – a former village head, it should be noted – captured what he claimed to be the general sentiment of the village. *"Over time,"* he said, *"local people have come to welcome the special economic zone,"* especially, he explained, given Mudu community members' desires for employment and physical infrastructure.⁴⁵ Importantly, Mudu is located on a road that connects the SEZ area to Maungmagan Beach, a popular area for tourism and recreation near Dawei town. Until recently, however, the road was in very poor condition.

One community member in Mudu, a shop owner, did speak of the project in stark terms, in contrast to other community members' comments. *"If we have to suffer the project,"* she said, *"we will starve."*⁴⁶ But for now, she said, community members are simply continuing their lives and livelihoods as before. This includes planting more and different crops as necessary, against instructions given to farmers that they should not expand or diversify their holdings, as given to farmers in Wetchaung and elsewhere. Her comments describe community members defiantly maintaining their livelihood practices and reflect an almost stoic disregard for the project, combined with a keen sense of its ominous significance. *"We have no hope for the project,"* she said. In lieu of any certainty over whether the project might resume, it is better,

44 FGD, Mudu, 3/10/17, male.

45 FGD, Mudu, 17/19/17, male.

46 FGD, Mudu, 17/19/17, female.

she suggests – or even necessary, perhaps – to persist with the rhythms of everyday life.

Comments from Hteingyi community members similarly included both positive and negative views of the project, often within the same discussion. In one group discussion, two male community members described their feeling that the project stands to benefit the village by bringing infrastructure and jobs.⁴⁷ This is especially the case since in Hteingyi, increased land accumulation by wealthier community members and outside businesspeople has narrowed farmers' ability to maintain agrarian livelihoods. This reflects how the SEZ project drives land speculation more generally in Nabule. Later in the discussion, a farmer who was displaced earlier by the project and now lives in Hteingyi underlined the livelihood struggles faced by people in the area. "*The project will come back,*" she predicted, "*with activities starting up again little by little.*" Then she pivoted. "*It's difficult now,*" she said. "*The poor and the rich – it's been trouble for everyone. But for the rich, they're aiming for the project to restart, having bought up a lot,*" that is, land within the project area.⁴⁸ Unlike the male participants, she did not see the difficulties faced by community members – all community members, she stressed – as justification for resuming the project.⁴⁹ Rather, she understood hierarchies of wealth, or class fractions in the village, to shape different positions on the project, leading some but not all community members to wish for its return.

COMPENSATION

Compensation is perhaps the most explosive issue for community members in Nabule. Aware of the tensions and sensitivities surrounding compensation, the research team rarely raised the issue directly. It was not necessary to do so, however. In almost every interview or group discussion for this research, community members themselves brought this issue to the fore – often directly, and with a sense of great frustration.

This section considers the following: the situations in which compensation is offered and why, in different parts of Nabule; how changing control over land in Nabule ties into compensation processes; community members' concerns over

47 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

48 Actually less about rich/poor, haves/have nots, and more about who's bought up land or not (who has *that* or not) in advance of the project.

49 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, female.



A woman chanthama farmer in Dawei SEZ tends to her crops.

BOX 2: CLASS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY IN NABULE

Cashews, betel nut, rubber, and oil palm are the four crops most relevant to any summary economic history of Nabule. A more complete account is beyond the scope of this report. However, discussions for this research indicate that *chanthama* in Nabule have grown cashews and betel nut for generations, stretching at least as far back as the colonial period.⁵⁰ During that time, colonial rule in this southern region of today's Myanmar involved importing and trying to implement highly rationalized methods of land and resource management – most prominently in forestry, but likely in agricultural production as well.⁵¹ Trade patterns during the colonial period meant cashews and betel nuts grown in Nabule traveled up and down the Andaman coast, onwards into Thailand, and to some extent beyond into other locations in South and Southeast Asia, and possibly China as well. More recently, domestic markets have become by far the most prominent for betel nuts, while cashew markets center on domestic consumption, Thailand, and China, roughly in that order.⁵²

Nabule *chanthama* have also cultivated rubber for decades if not longer, but not in significant quantities until recently. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, smallholder rubber production has grown substantially. Key informants report that the government encouraged rubber production, and community members proved ready and willing to integrate rubber into their livelihood mixes.⁵³ By the mid-2000s, rubber was a central part of Nabule's agrarian political economy. Although rubber prices fell sharply in recent years – hurting poor, smallholder, lower-quality producers in places like Nabule the most – the price of late has stabilized.

Unlike cashews, betel nut, and rubber, oil palm has been cultivated only more recently in roughly the past two decades – in Nabule as elsewhere in southern Myanmar. Moreover, oil palm production is the prerogative not of smallholder *chanthama*, but of state

50 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17 male; KII, DDA, 17/11/17, male.

51 Cf. Raymond Bryant (1997), *The Political Ecology of Forestry in Burma, 1824-1994*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. Bryant's further journal articles are relevant here as well.

52 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17 male; KII, DDA, 17/11/17, male.

53 KII, DDA, 17/11/17, male.

A community member in the Dawei SEZ.

institutions and large corporations that confiscate vast tracts of land for agro-industrial production methods. Nabule features several oil palm plantations formerly owned and operated by state-owned enterprises. Today they are no longer operational. Community members assume they will be cleared to make way for SEZ project components if the project resumes. These plantations are much smaller than other oil palm plantations in southern Myanmar. In recent years, CSOs have criticized oil palm production for its linkages to land grabs, deforestation, and human rights abuses.⁵⁴

The mainly lowland areas within and abutting Nabule do have some history of mining, particularly tin mining, in keeping with the history of resource extraction in southern Myanmar more broadly. For example, a tin mine north of Nabule once provided a significant source of employment in the area, but its depletion has led people to move elsewhere for their livelihoods over time, including into Nabule. Boom and bust employment cycles, whether fast or more drawn out, are common in spaces of resource extraction, including many of Myanmar's resource-rich regions. Also common is the tie between precarious agrarian livelihoods and labor mobility to and from mines and mining areas. Unlike highland areas around Dawei, the history of resource extraction in Nabule, perhaps because it is relatively limited, does not seem to be a significant part of how community members there comprehend either the SEZ or what it might mean to oppose it. Another contrast with highland areas is the lack of a history of armed struggle in Nabule. Research on dispossession suggests that histories of armed struggle and resource extraction correlate to struggles against dispossession, while the lack of such histories correlates to conceding or accepting processes of dispossession.⁵⁵ These factors might help explain why highland community members in the Dawei area have developed positions more fully opposed to the SEZ project compared to the ambiguities and ambivalence often expressed by the lowland community members of Nabule.

54 Cf. *Green Desert: Communities in Tanintharyi Renounce the MSPP Oil Palm Concession*, a 2016 report published by a consortium of Tanintharyi CSOs, available at <https://eia-international.org/myanmar-communities-fight-back-palm-oils-impact> (last accessed 26/4/18).

55 Cf. Levien (2013).

A young community member looks out at the ocean at the proposed site of the Dawei SEZ deep sea port.



the different rates being offered and people's ability to manage, or not, any funds they may receive; and in contrast to processes thus far, what kind of compensation process community members would see as potentially just or legitimate.

First, it is important to note that only few people living in Nabule have received compensation thus far for any project-related damages – to their land, livelihoods, or otherwise. Community members report that of those who have received compensation, the rate has often been exceedingly low, unless the recipient is a large land-holder with ties to project proponents. Of the villages included in this research, Paradut the only one in which a formal compensation process is currently ongoing, and this process only began in late December 2017. In Paradut, paddy farmers are being compensated for land damaged by runoff from the quarry. Elsewhere, some compensation has been dispensed in relation to limited construction associated with the SEZ thus far, especially for road-building, some land acquisitions, and the construction of the small port. In general, community members associate the resumption of the SEZ project with the resumption of compensation processes, whether for past damages or for future relocation processes. For community members who explicitly support the project's return, this expectation is central.

When discussing compensation, Paradut community members stressed that the project should resume only after compensation has been paid to address earlier problems tied to the project – in their case, damages to their paddy fields. *“If the project starts again,”* a male paddy farmer said, *“it should only be after compensation is paid for paddy land that has been lost due to the rock quarry.”*⁵⁶ In fact, the company promised earlier that compensation would accompany their quarry activities. That was under the previous government. But under the current government, he said that despite requests for information, the situation hasn't moved forward. *“We haven't heard a thing”* (a formal process subsequently began in late December).

Another paddy farmer echoed his comments. The project should start, she said, *“only after we are paid compensation.”* But she was

⁵⁶ IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

skeptical about the process, and spoke with great frustration about the hardships she and other community members have endured. *"It's been six years since I've been able to do paddy farming,"* she said. *"For compensation, I'll believe it only once they pay it. We've been starving for six years. I'll believe it only once they pay. When it's just talk, I can't believe it."*⁵⁷ Without any compensation, she continued, the situation of farmers like her will only get worse and worse. With suitable compensation, she said, farmers should be able to move to a different place and buy paddy land.

Both of these farmers also emphasized an issue often raised by community members elsewhere: the problem of different people getting different compensation rates. *"There's no kind of designated rate,"* the male farmer said. However, *"Minister U Phyo Min Tun said himself that the same rate will be given for all three zones, whether Thilawa, Kyaukphyu, or Dawei. He came to the village himself."* He continued: *"It's better if we can get the same rate as them. What they should do is give everyone the same rate. If it's more for them and less for us, we won't be satisfied."*⁵⁸

Elsewhere, community members described compensation as both a promise and a prohibition: a promise that community members will be paid for their land and crops once the project moves forward, and a prohibition against planting more and/or different crops in the meantime, in order to prevent community members from strategically raising the amount of compensation they would receive. *"Our income has gone down,"* one *chanthama* said in Wetchaung. *"If we're going to get compensation, we can't plant trees for the long term. We won't get compensation for those."*⁵⁹ A shopkeeper in Mudu explained a similar situation. *"They will pay compensation,"* she said, but *"we don't know when they will pay. [Until then] they said not to plant more trees, more bamboo."* At the same time, *"If we live like they say, we will suffer. Therefore, we're continuing to live and work like before,"* including managing their crops as they need.⁶⁰

Discussions about compensation often overlapped with community members' comments about changing land relations in Nabule. People across these six villages described wealthier people – sometimes from the village,

57 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17 female.

58 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17 male.

59 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

60 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

sometimes from outside – buying up land in expectation of rising land prices due to the project. A paddy farmer in Paradut described one such situation straightforwardly. “*The broker paid 20 lakh , then sold it for 70 lakh,*” she said. “*But the farmer only got 20 lakh.*”⁶¹ Land speculation of this kind can be damaging to a community's unity, as it creates different groups of people with different relationships to the project. Often, speculation will create one group of already-powerful people who stand to benefit from the project moving forward.⁶² Forging unified opposition to a project, against supporters who tend to be wealthier and more influential becomes much more difficult, especially when such supporters are not necessarily outsiders viewed with distrust, but rather other people from the village. The village becomes divided against itself, often along fractures of wealth and power.

Community members' comments pointed to two key aspects of this process. First, community members report it is not always clear how to differentiate compensation processes from land speculation. The reason for this is that the company itself – that is, people understood to be associated with ITD – appears, at least to some extent, to have accumulated land for the project simply by buying it. Thus, a process that community members understand as a process of compensation – losing land to the project developers but receiving financial payment for it – is not easily distinguished from land speculation more broadly; both involve powerful individuals acquiring land as the project moves forward. This confusion is exacerbated by the role of people who community members describe as brokers (*pwèsa*), as in the paddy farmer's comment above.⁶³ When in the midst of negotiating payment for their land, community members report they are sometimes not sure with whom they are actually negotiating.⁶⁴ They often deal with brokers, but whether the broker is working on behalf of private individuals, as in land speculation, or on behalf of the company, which community members would understand in terms of compensation, is not always clear.

It is possible, indeed, that in lieu of formal compensation processes – perhaps even to avoid formal compensation processes – ITD has operated through

61 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

62 Cf. Michael Levien (2013), “The Politics of Dispossession: Theorizing India's ‘Land Wars,’” *Politics and Society* 41(3):351-394.

63 See again Levien (2013), who identifies a similar situation regarding brokers in the context of land dispossession in India.

64 Including whether is a government or company representative..

brokers simply to buy land for the project in certain areas. Absent an open and transparent compensation process, presumably government-mediated, land accumulation of this kind could enable the company to secure land more cheaply, benefiting from an opaque information environment whereby community members do not know whether or how to push for higher prices. Community members report that for some, the rates on offer have seemed extremely generous, even impossible to refuse. Yet in fact, especially given rising prices due to the project, the rates have often been exceedingly low. This raises the second key aspect community members pointed to in this context: some community members, especially poorer and less-informed community members, have been ready and willing to accept rates that are actually exceptionally low. The company may have taken advantage of this fact to accumulate land through brokers, without needing to operate openly through compensation processes, which can yield complicated negotiations and higher rates. Hierarchies of wealth and information access thus work to blur the line between compensation and land speculation.

Community members also discussed a further land issue that is relevant here. They report that since they live within the project area, they have not been able to register their land formally, which would require submitting a document known as Form 7. Community members have been refused this documentation,⁶⁵ with the result that most community members' only formal land documentation is receipts for paying taxes based on their land holdings (a situation not uncommon in Myanmar, it should be said). Unable to officially register their land, some community members become more willing to sell it, even for low prices. They feel that without formal registration, they cannot expect a high price for the land anyway, so it is best to take the opportunity to receive at least some payment for the land – land that they expect to lose regardless over time due to living in the SEZ area.

In a group discussion in Hteingyi, one *chanthama* put it this way: “*Our land is now project land, so we don’t get any support from the government,*” that is, the ability to register land via Form 7. “*The ministers said themselves,*” he continued, “*that our region is a cursed region.*” Yet he believes that “*if the project comes, the curse will be lifted.*”⁶⁶ For him, in other words, community members live in a liminal situation where they cannot even register their land,

65 The community members did not specify who was rejelectecting or obstructing their attempts to do so.

66 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male. It was not clear who “they” are (i.e. who is acquiring the land).

given the possibility the project may resume. He suggests that if the project does resume, the burden of that uncertainty will be lifted. He said further: *“In all of Myanmar, people can get Form 7 for farmland. Only our area is left out – since it is considered project land. I don't really know when they'll [resume the project] but we've been enduring this for a long time.”* In short, community members worry that without Form 7, their ability to maintain control over their land is precarious, unstable, and uncertain, especially amid processes of land consolidation by elites across Nabule. As a result, they become more likely to accept initially offered compensation rates, which are often quite low. They seek to cash in, as it were, while they still have the chance. These offers sometimes come from brokers, whose role and activities make it difficult to distinguish between outright land speculation and compensation from the company.

Compensation was not always believed to be a murky process. In Hteingyi, one community member suggested the process is fairly clear. *“They call the owners of the land they're going to buy,”* he said. *“If it's a hundred people, they call a hundred. If they need one person, they call one person. They call them to the office of the village head. If they're satisfied with the price they're offered, they accept.”*⁶⁷ His intention was to indicate that the compensation can be very straightforward. Yet even here, he describes a process that is specific to particular pieces of land, and which takes place at the village head's office rather than in a more open and public way. Rates for different pieces of land could vary, and different rates could be offered to different people. The pressure of the situation can also lead community members to accept rates that they worry are too low. Indeed, earlier in the discussion the same community member reported that in practice, compensation does not work the same for all community members. *“For compensation,”* he said, *“people who don't understand suffer more. People who get more compensation are people who come and go. People who just stay at home, who don't go around the village as much – they don't know how to negotiate. They're satisfied just to get paid, and just go ahead and sign.”* His comment points to uneven information access as a key determinant of how much compensation a person might receive. He also suggests a distinction between community members who, in effect, tend to circulate socially in the village and other community members who are less likely to do so.

67 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

Here again, this distinction may reflect differences of wealth and power in the village. Community members more secure in their livelihoods may have more available time for social activities, building and maintaining networks of family and friends in a way that increases their knowledge about how compensation works, how much their land is worth, and so on. Poorer community members may have less opportunity for such activities. They might be more likely to occupy free time by trying to augment their livelihoods, such as by going to collect forest products they can sell for additional income. In addition, men may be more likely than women to circulate socially in this way, reinforcing gender-based differences in access to information, with potential implications for how compensation works for different people.

A community member in Mudu, a relatively young farmer, emphasized that there is simply no standard rate for compensation.⁶⁸ *“In terms of compensation, there is no equality,”* he said. *“At first, they gave 5 lakh per acre. Later, it was 3 lakh. Eventually, it was 8 lakh. For people who got paid first, the rate was low, but for people who got it later, the rate was higher. So we are not satisfied.”*⁶⁹ He underscores how some farmers – likely poorer, likely less informed – accept rates early on that end up being lower than the rates paid later. He also stressed that people who receive compensation do not always know how to manage it well. *“If a person who gets compensation knows how to do business, then it’s fine,”* he said. *“If not, then everything will disappear, and that’s not good.”*

Other community members also drew attention to this concern, including another community member from Mudu. She said, *“If you’re someone who knows how to manage the compensation you get, then there’s money left over. If you can’t manage it, then it all disappears, and there are even people in debt.”*⁷⁰ In Wetchaung, a group of farmers reported hearing that in Ngapidat, where fishing is the main livelihood, community members received compensation, but it didn’t last. *“Compensation was given, but the money is gone,”* one farmer recalled. *“If they can’t survive living along the coast, these people will have serious trouble.”*⁷¹ Another community member said he heard the compensation lasted only one year before it was all gone. Community members say that compensation tends to go towards buying personal and

68 The view that different land could have different value was not raised.

69 FGD, Mudu, 3/10/17, male.

70 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

71 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

household items – motorbikes, home improvements, electronics – as well as to education costs and donations to monasteries. Relatedly, some respondents suggested that one area where CSOs or other outside actors could help would be in showing people how to better manage compensation funds.⁷² Examples might include programs or trainings in financial literacy and/or financial management. Moreover, it is necessary to work together in the community to develop activities that inform community members about what they are entitled to demand under the current legal framework, such as replacement land for re-establishing livelihoods; to assist with natural resource mapping so that community members fully understand what they may lose if they move ahead with compensation; and to share information on the risk that promised jobs may not materialize. This will help community members to make informed decisions about whether to oppose the project. Community members may choose to organize in order to establish spaces or platforms through which they could collectively consider compensation rates and assert their views on whether they are or are not acceptable. However, these strategies carry the risk that community members will be perceived as not fighting the project overall but rather beginning to adjust to a process (compensation) that is fundamentally a part of advancing displacement and dispossession, and the cycles of impoverishment that compensation often commences.

When discussing how the compensation process should work, community members emphasized the process should provide fair and suitable compensation – even if only as a last resort. In Wetchaung, one *chanthama* said, *“Including our village, our area in the project – I don’t want it to be like that. I’m worried about whether our village will be included. If it is, we’ll have to make sure we get suitable compensation.”*⁷³ A Mudu community member offered similar comments, tying resettlement to legitimate compensation. *“There are over 600 households,”* she said of Mudu. *“If all 600 households get appropriate and full compensation, then we’ll move.”*⁷⁴ In Ngapidat, a fisher focused more on the negotiation process, and whether project proponents would accept community members’ demands. *“If they accept the rate we negotiate,”* he said, *“that’s one thing. But if they’re not able to follow us, then I would say it’s better to leave things as they are.”*⁷⁵

72 FGD, Hteingyi, 15/11/17, male.

73 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17, female.

74 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

75 IDI, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

In general, community members envisioned an impartial process where everyone would get the same rate, as in the Paradut community members' comments earlier in this section about people even receiving the same rate as in Thilawa and Kyaukphyu. Suitability or appropriateness, alongside the notion of equal compensation, recurred across discussions with community members. A Mudu community member, for example, asserted that *"As for compensation, it needs to be given equally and suitably."*⁷⁶ In Kamaungchaung, poorer community members underlined the importance of compensation being handled equitably, fairly, and appropriately.⁷⁷ A group close to the village head, however, offered a rather different vision of compensation, unique among the interviews and group discussions carried out for this research. For this group, compensation could be a way of gaining partial ownership in the project. *"If they come to implement the project, we'll get compensation,"* one of them said. *"For this compensation, if I could give input – we could work together with the company side and the government side to get shares in the project. If we could contribute and work together like this, then for local people, it would be better – that's our view."*⁷⁸ This group's comments show again how people with power and authority in Nabule see compensation processes, amid changing land relations more broadly, as a desirable part of moving the project forward.

76 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

77 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 19/12/17, male.

78 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 13/10/17, mixed.

“IF THEY ACCEPT THE [COMPENSATION] RATE WE NEGOTIATE, THAT’S ONE THING. BUT IF THEY’RE NOT ABLE TO FOLLOW US, THEN I WOULD SAY IT’S BETTER TO LEAVE THINGS AS THEY ARE.”

- A COMMUNITY MEMBER IN NGAPIDAT

Relocation

Since the project's suspension in 2013, little communication has taken place regarding relocation plans and processes. This limited communication may be a matter of having little to communicate; it is very possible that limited planning has taken place due to the suspension. In addition, even if the project were to resume, project proponents indicate that early-stage implementation activities would focus on the roadlink rather than construction activities in Nabule. Thus it could be years before any resettlement of Nabule community members occurs, although planning – and then surely communication – around relocation would likely increase if the project resumes.

Given this situation, little is currently known about how relocation would unfold. Bawah, the resettlement site built on the coast north of the SEZ area, was originally intended mainly for community members from Mudu. No information has emerged to suggest this is not still the case. In Kamaungchaung, community members report hearing that a resettlement site may be created within a nearby area that is currently a palm oil plantation. Wetchaung community members commented that they have not heard any specific information regarding resettlement, but that if they ultimately must move, the best approach might be to create a resettlement site around Bagawzone and Yalaing. Hteingyi and Paradut community members offered similar comments. Ngapidat, on the other hand, is not one of the villages designated for relocation. However, it is located on the banks of a stream that will be the main channel for waste discharge from the SEZ, which indicates community members will have to relocate – through a planned process or on their own – if the SEZ does begin operations.

Understandably, community members' comments suggest relocation still seems an abstract proposition for many – less a certainty to prepare for, and more a hazy idea to be confronted as and when necessary. Many community members make clear that they have no desire to move whatsoever, and may even be willing to fight the process if it becomes a reality. Community members recognize the livelihood challenges that would result from relocation. They reject Bawah as an indication of what resettlement sites might look like and they see relocation as a threat to their ability to maintain and reproduce social and cultural life, especially the activities that center around the pagodas located in Nabule. Still, most community members admit that at least some people in their villages will accept relocation under certain conditions. They predict that disputes and disagreements will emerge as a result.

Comments from a group discussion in Wetchaung are characteristic. “*We don’t want to move,*” one *chanthama* said flatly. “*With what we get from our own chan, we can eat and drink, we can use everything, and we can give alms.*”⁷⁹ Moreover, they said they will not agree to move to Bawah. “*If we’re sent to the coastal area, people here will not accept it at all.*” From Bawah, they said, it would be too far to return regularly to the Wetchaung area to tend their fields and plantations. Like people in other villages, they also worried about the poor quality of the housing in Bawah. “*It’s not necessary for them to build housing for us,*” one farmer said. “*We wouldn’t dare to live in it anyway. What they built is collapsing. We would only want to live in appropriate housing. We’ll build it ourselves and then live in it.*” Regardless, they said, even if the housing were strong in Bawah, there are no livelihood opportunities there. “*If we have to move,*” a community member said, “*Bagawzone is closer, and Yebyu is closer – that’s how it should be.*”⁸⁰

Again, it is not clear that Bawah would be the destination for people displaced from Wetchaung, or even other villages in Nabule. Still, Bawah seems to register, for community members, as an ominous sign of what relocation may entail – and what community members should seek to avoid. In Paradut, a small group of farmers who were relatively sympathetic to the project overall singled out Bawah as an unacceptable relocation site. “*It’s difficult,*” one of them said. “*If we have to move, there aren’t even any trees in Bawah. We’ll have to buy everything we eat.*”

BOX 3: DISPLACEMENT THUS FAR

Estimates of the total number of people expected to be displaced by the SEZ have ranged from 20,000 up to 40,000 as project plans have fluctuated over time. Until today, however, only a small handful of families have been displaced. Most of these families are from a fishing village called Chaukkan that was located near Kilometer Zero in the SEZ area. Most of them have now moved to Thailand as migrant workers. Some have moved elsewhere within Nabule, including Hteingyi. Others have worked out a tenuous agreement with a businessperson to live on his land, in an area near the former Chaukkan location, until the project begins (if it does). Only one family now lives in Bawah, the official resettlement site.

⁷⁹ FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Some community members expressed quite strong opposition to relocation as such. A *chanthama* in Paradut was insistent on this point. He said, “*For us local people, our villages, our homes, the places we’ve lived for such a long time – we can’t accept them moving them.*”⁸¹ His concerns included not knowing the details of any possible relocation process, and not knowing how life might differ after resettlement. “*Their relocation plan – I’m not sure which area. In their plan, will it be the same as our current life? Or different? And in their relocation site – I’m worried about whether we’ll be able to survive in the way that we’re used to as farmers.*” For him, it was difficult to imagine how people like her would sustain themselves in a relocation site where, he expected, the basic necessities of social and economic life would be absent. “*The community members will not accept having to move,*” he said flatly. “*As much as possible, we will resist (ku kan hma beh). If we move away from here, where our situation is secure, to another place, then over there, what about all of the things we need? There’s nothing. There’s no plantation land, and there’s no paddy land either. If we don’t move and have to survive in our usual way, it’s better that way.*”⁸²

Not all community members shared his opposition to relocation. Some acknowledged they would consider relocation, but only if the process is carried out in a way that meets their expectations. In Hteingyi, one farmer said, “*We’ll move only if we’re able to get a better standard of living than we have now. But if responsibility is not taken,*” he continued, referring to project proponents and how they will handle relocation, “*then we will not move.*”⁸³ This concern over whether or how project proponents will take responsibility was common among people reached for this research. Moral notions of responsibility and suitability recurred across interviews and group discussions, suggesting that what community members want is not only certain political or material concessions – as in financial compensation, and a stake in decision-making – but also a sense of fairness, a feeling that the project is being handled correctly, a sense that proponents are pursuing the project in an honest and equitable way. Discussions for this research suggest that these ethical or moral themes are not necessarily separate from more direct political or material themes, but rather cut across them.

81 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, male.

82 Ibid.

83 FGD, Hteingyi, 26/9/17, male.

Some community members reported, quite understandably, that they do not know anything about what relocation may entail and so they cannot offer very much in the way of expectations or concerns about the process. In Paradut, one farmer said bluntly, *"They haven't designated the area for relocation. Therefore, we can't say which site we like or don't like."*⁸⁴ A farmer in Wetchaung said, *"About relocation – I can't say. It can't be decided by one person alone. It will have to be decided with a lot of input."*⁸⁵ Recognizing a need for broad participation in decision-making does reflect an unspoken concern that the opposite might happen, but overall, for this farmer, there is simply little to say about relocation for now.

While these two farmers implicitly held open the possibility of relocating, a group in Kamaungchaung was somewhat more explicit, saying that if basic expectations were met, they would relocate. *"If there's relocation, the whole village moves,"* one farmer said. *"We don't expect a lot. If we hope for the chest [yin laug] then we'll get the knees [du laug]."*⁸⁶ She suggests that, in general, community members will not get everything they hope for, whether in formal relocation negotiations or otherwise, and that is no surprise. *"It's not greed,"* she explained, referring to her willingness to accept the relocation process, along with its financial incentives. *"I don't have a lot of chan. I'm not talking about it for myself."*

This group is known for being relatively supportive of the project. Another farmer in this group said, *"As for us having to move, it's not like we really want to move. If our homes, chan, and our village are included though, we won't speak out in opposition. If we're treated suitably, we'll move. We won't be able to argue."*⁸⁷ Just in this comment, this community member moves between several registers. He suggests that under the right conditions – being treated suitably – they will either not oppose the process or not be *able* to oppose the process. Resignation of this kind was not uncommon among community members in Nabule. Being seen as essentially supporting the project, however, as in his comment about not actually *wanting* to move – implying others might see their position this way – was much less common.

84 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

85 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17, female.

86 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 13/10/17, female.

87 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 13/10/17, male.

These comments indicate a variety of positions: opposing relocation, being willing to accept relocation only under specific circumstances, and being willing to accept relocation with few expectations or conditions. Given this range, it is not surprising that in some discussions, community members reported that they expect serious disagreements to emerge if and when relocation plans solidify and move forward. A relatively young *chanthama* in Mudu, who had previously worked in Thailand for over ten years, emphasized this point. *"In our village, there aren't many people,"* he said, *"but negotiating is difficult. Only about one-third want to move. As for not wanting to move – in another place, there are worries it will be difficult. People who do want to move, on the other hand, when they get to the other place, will their living standard be better? I'm wondering."*⁸⁸ Even if the relocation process takes shape, it won't happen quickly, and it will be complicated. *"It's not just one village moving somewhere else,"* he explained. *"All 6 villages will have to move, so I think it will take some time. There will probably be difficulties. There will be a lot of disputes in negotiations with a lot of people."*

Like people in other community members, he also expressed concern that relocation would have serious implications for cultural and spiritual life in Nabule, including festivals that many people across the Dawei area value greatly as almost aboriginal expressions of what it means to be from Dawei. *"If we have to move,"* he said, *"pagoda festivals like the Buddha footprint festival, and the buffalo king festival – we're not sure we'll see them again. Traditional festivals (yo ya pwe dwei), nat festivals – they won't be around anymore."*⁸⁹ In Hteingyi, a farmer spoke of the importance of maintaining a sense of Nabule identity. *"I don't accept the Bawah New City project,"* he said, referring to the Bawah resettlement site. *"I don't want the Nabule name to disappear. We're Nabule people."*⁹⁰ Back in Mudu, an older woman spoke of the Buddha's footprint pagoda. It is *"a pagoda from ancient times,"* she stressed, *"and it's powerful. If we move, it will be abandoned."*⁹¹ Living around or in proximity to such important sites is something people worry about losing. In Paradut, a farmer was describing how hard it was to imagine living somewhere else. But here, he said, by way of contrast, *"we get to live close to Buddhism."*⁹² His neighbor, another farmer, also turned to this kind of contrast when describing

88 FGD, Mudu, 3/10/17, male.

89 Ibid.

90 FGD, Hteingyi, 26/9/17, male.

91 IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

92 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, male.

what she finds unsettling about the prospect of relocation. “*At our home,*” she said, in Paradut, “*it is calm and peaceful,*” almost like a place of refuge. “*Because we are near the Buddha’s footprint, we haven’t had to deal with any natural disasters.*”⁹³

Although community members commented often on Nabule as a place of cultural and spiritual significance, it may be worth noting that the research team usually had to solicit such discussions actively. Amid conversations on relocation and resettlement, it was not common for community members to raise these issues of their own accord. There could be numerous reasons for this. For example, community members may not see these issues as being directly urgent or as primary matters of concern, amid other more pressing concerns related to displacement and dispossession. On the other hand, community members may not have expected external researchers to know about or show an interest in “cultural” matters like these. However, regardless of how community members do or do not understand culture and religion to be urgently under threat, it is clear that these issues are a part of community members’ concerns around how the project might move forward and with what kinds of impacts.

Scoping activities and key informant interviews suggested that class structure in Nabule could provide clues as to who would be most likely to accede to the project overall, and relocation more specifically (given the financial incentive of compensation that relocation entails). The wealthiest people in the village – more likely to be male, and more likely to have market-related networks with people from outside of the village – would be those most likely to accept relocation processes. The other group likely to accept relocation, according to this information, would be the poorest people in the village. For them, compensation would be almost impossible not to accept, and the difficulties of their current living and livelihood conditions would lead them to be less attached to them. In the middle would be those community members who are relatively stable, who have seen few negative impacts thus far, and who are, nonetheless, not among the wealthiest people in the village. They would be least likely to accept relocation. For this group, compensation does not prove very attractive, the downsides of leaving a stable livelihood situation are clear, and in any new location, they may lack the networks and contacts required to restart their livelihoods effectively, unlike their wealthier neighbors.

93 | IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

Relocation must be considered not so much for its impact on isolated individuals, but rather for how it impacts groups of people who are located within larger political and economic systems. These systems, moreover, make some people rich, others poor, and leave others somewhere in between. Understanding displacement, dispossession, and how to organize in response requires exploring the making and management of class fractions in the village. In this sense, earlier periods of capitalist development, particularly the rise of market-integrated cash crop agriculture – which hardened existing hierarchies of wealth and power in Nabule – laid the groundwork for the possibility that the SEZ project will proceed.⁹⁴ This hypothesis came from initial research activities and interviews with activists and CSO leaders.

Interviews and discussions with community members themselves partially bore out this notion of a close link between class position and willingness to relocate. By and large, the wealthiest community members discussed a willingness to relocate under certain conditions. Larger landholders and people close to their village heads were the most likely to fall into this category of people who were relatively supportive of the project. In addition, community members who were less wealthy but not among the poorest community members – community members roughly in the middle, in other words – tended to be those who offered the most consistently critical comments about the project, including comments about being strongly opposed to relocation.

It is less clear whether or not the poorest community members in Nabule see relocation in positive terms, or at least as an opportunity to escape otherwise difficult living and livelihood conditions. In one village, for example, community members for whom wealth and power intersect closely – as in a group of landholders who have a strong relationship with the village head – were those who most strongly supported the project.⁹⁵ The most strongly critical comments, however, came not from people in the middle, but from a landless worker who would have been among the poorest people in the village. For him, moving elsewhere means being in a place where he and his family may struggle to re-establish some level of livelihood security, which has not been easy to attain in their current situation.

94 For more on how the rise of cash crop agriculture can shape intimate class relations that lead to dispossession, see Tania Murray Li (2014), *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, Durham, Duke University Press.

95 Anonymity precaution.

A comment from the Mudu *chanthama* who once worked in Thailand helps to clarify some of these issues, if only through providing points of contrast. He himself would be a person in that middle category, being neither among the wealthiest nor poorest community members in Mudu. “People who don’t get their income from chan – they want to move,” he said. “If they live here, it’s like this, and if they live there, it’s still like this. But people who are wealthy – here they have land. Their livelihood situation is fine. For these people, if they have to give up their land and go somewhere else, they won’t be able to find any paddy or chan land.”⁹⁶ At first glance, his comment reinforces the hypothesis of a close link between class position and willingness to relocate: people at the bottom might have few ties to the land, and so relocation might not be so disruptive to their livelihood situations. However, he does not specify who it is whose livelihoods do not come from having *chan*. In fact, it is not only landless workers and people relying on forest products, but also people who own motorbike repair shops, shops that sell food and drinks, beauty salons, and so on. Thus, the people most likely to accede to relocation plans are not necessarily a class fraction per se, but rather a group that would cut across social and class positions in the village. In this sense, it remains unclear whether or to what extent the poorest of Nabule community members should be included among those who would be relatively supportive of the project moving forward. Even if they would be in that group, they would be those with the least power and authority within it, that is, not a group that would be strongly pushing the project forward or undermining attempts to raise concerns about it.

The Mudu *chanthama* raises an additional point though. He also indicates that people who do have land – people he explicitly refers to as being wealthy – do have reason to be very anxious about the prospect of relocation. Will they be able to re-establish their livelihoods in a new location? How will they find land for doing so? His comment suggests that wealthy community members might have cause to be among those most opposed to the project, cutting against the relation between class and relocation that scoping activities and KIIs indicated. On the other hand, people who will struggle to re-establish land-based livelihoods after relocation are not only the wealthiest people in the village. This category includes people who would be approximately in the middle – people who hold land and gain their livelihoods from it, yet who may not have close relations with their village administration or the traders and brokers who link farmers to agricultural markets. In our other discussions with

96 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, male.

community members for this research – particularly in Kamaungchaung, but in Paradut, Hteingyi, and even Mudu as well – we found that the wealthiest and most powerful community members may have reservations over the project as a whole, or relocation more specifically. But they are the most likely to be interested in the project moving forward, while similarly land-dependent yet less wealthy community members are the least likely to wish for the project to resume.

In short, the class positions of community members at the top and middle of village social structures do seem to have a clear relation to their stance on relocation: relatively supportive and relatively less supportive, respectively. But it is much less certain whether or to what extent the class position of the poorest community members helps to determine their willingness to accept the prospect of relocation or not.

A spiritual leader in Dawei conducts a ritual using special local products specific to the Dawei area.



Employment

INTRODUCTION

When project proponents from the Myanmar government argue the SEZ will benefit local people, they argue it will do so by expanding employment opportunities in the area.⁹⁷ Job creation, in fact, is at the heart of the government's claims for how and why the SEZ is good for Dawei-area people. This is despite a glaring lack of evidence to support the idea the project will generate substantial, long-term, or good-quality local employment. Still, with many people from the Dawei area working in Thailand or Malaysia – half of one village included in this research, according to a community member's rough estimate – this argument resonates strongly among Nabule community members. By and large, community members believe the project will bring migrants home, reuniting families and reintegrating the social fabric of Dawei.

Two industrial projects elsewhere provide suggestive comparisons: Map Ta Phut, the large-scale petrochemical estate in eastern Thailand, which is among the largest industrial zones in Southeast Asia; and Thilawa, the SEZ near Yangon, which is currently Myanmar's only operational SEZ. In both places, people displaced and dispossessed have found very few employment opportunities. In Map Ta Phut, local communities and CSOs report that an unofficial ban on local employment has long been in place, in order to prevent information circulating locally about what is actually happening within the zone. Activists and community leaders make clear that workers in the zone have largely been migrants, and skilled workers, which is common for capital-intensive petrochemical projects like Map Ta Phut and Dawei.⁹⁸ In Thilawa, currently only 17 people of almost 300 people displaced for the SEZ's first phase have gained employment in the zone, despite promises of employment for people displaced. Community members describe these jobs as low-level, undesirable positions, such as cleaning, maintenance, and security. Even in Thilawa, which

97 See for example *The Myanmar Times* (22/4/18), "Dawei SEZ Is for the Few, Not the Many," *The Myanmar Times*, available at <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/dawei-sez-few-not-many.html> (last accessed 25/4/18).

98 This claim is frequently raised in cross-border and regional discussions of SEZs in Myanmar, Thailand, and the Mekong region more broadly.

is focused on labor-intensive light manufacturing, jobs have largely gone to migrant workers, as well as skilled techno-managerial workers.⁹⁹

History also casts doubts on employment claims by project proponents. From the colonial period to the present, in Southeast Asia, when states or businesses have sought to attract and concentrate large-scale labor forces – for example for monocrop plantations or export-oriented industrialization – the labor force has mainly consisted of migrant workers.¹⁰⁰ Migrants' wage demands are lower and they are more easily controlled as a labor force. In addition, states and businesses have long seen local people in such areas as lazy, uneducated, and unsuited to the demands of industry.

In Dawei, it is hardly clear that displaced people or other local people should expect stable, long-term jobs, beyond a short-term employment boom for construction. As a capital-intensive petrochemical project, its labor needs are low, tending towards skilled techno-managerial labor rather than mass, low-wage, “unskilled” labor. Indeed, there is has so far been nothing to suggest that Dawei will bring anything different from the failure of SEZs like Thilawa to provide significant employment for local people.

Furthermore, across rural Asia and Africa, a wave of large-scale land acquisitions has dispossessed rural producers of their land. Only a declining percentage of displaced farmers has been absorbed into formal industrial labor. Amid today's transformations in global value production, where labor-intensive production accounts for a falling share of value produced globally, employment growth has shifted from formal industrial sectors to informal sectors, where many displaced, dispossessed farmers end up. Scholars refer to this process as exclusion. In South and Southeast Asia, scholars have tracked the rise of informal, precarious labor, arguing that it marks a fundamental departure from the farm-to-factory, peasant-to-proletariat trajectory that characterized generations of developmental thinking in these

99 FGD, Thilawa, 20/1/18, mixed; FGD, Thilawa, 21/1/18, male.

100 See S.H. Alatas (1977), *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, London, Routledge; Jan Breman (1990), *Labor Migration and Rural Transformation in Colonial Asia*, Amsterdam, Free University Press; Tania Murray Li (2011), “Centering Labor in the Land Grab Debate,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(2):281-298; Li (2014); and Ann Laura Stoler (1986), *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. Li (2011: 286) and (2014: 170) provide the main citations here.

countries.¹⁰¹ In Myanmar, the formal industrial sector may have room for expansion that in other neighboring countries it may not. Still, the dominant regional trend is that farmers dispossessed increasingly cannot expect to find formal industrial employment.

This section testifies to the enduring strength of the local communities' desire for stable employment, even among rural producers who in many cases have never worked for a wage. Community members facing displacement and dispossession largely believe that employment opportunities await. Sharing information and raising awareness about the uncertainty of these opportunities may be vital.

PREVIOUS SEZ PROJECT EMPLOYMENT

As with information access and livelihood issues, employment functions or operates differently in different parts of Nabule. People from some villages – Ngapidat, Mudu, and Hteingyi – appear to have had opportunities to work on the project before it was suspended. In other villages – Paradut, Wetchaung, and Kamaungchaung – that was either not the case, or community members did not see reason to raise this experience in this research when discussing employment prospects going forward. People from Wetchaung and Kamaungchaung may not have worked on the project in large numbers previously. They are relatively distant from the central SEZ area where ITD has its offices and equipment, and where the hiring and processing of workers and their employment happened in early stages of the project. Paradut, Ngapidat, Mudu, and Hteingyi are much closer.

In villages where people did previously work on the project, experiences were mixed. Some felt the project had provided an important opportunity to work for a wage. In Hteingyi, an older community member reported that between 2009–2012, “*the youth from the village would go to work at the project site at daybreak.*”¹⁰² They become more disciplined, he said. Others spoke negatively of that time, sometimes due to wage discrimination that saw Thai workers get paid considerably more for the same work done by Myanmar workers. In the same discussion in Hteingyi, a different community member said, “*If a Thai*

101 See for example Partha Chatterjee (2008), “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(16):53-62; Li (2011, 2014); and Kalyan Sanyal (2007), *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality, and Post-Colonial Capitalism*.

102 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

worker got 5 lakh for a month, a Myanmar worker would get only 1.5 lakh. The work was the same, but the salaries were totally different.”¹⁰³

In Ngapidat, a fisher stressed that although project proponents promised to prioritize local workers for employment, in practice most people hired were migrants from upper Myanmar – especially for any work beyond low-skilled, manual labor. *“They said before that if they were going to do any hiring, they would allow people from other areas to apply only after prioritizing local people. But when they actually hired people, they did not prioritize local people. Just a few people who were able to go talk to them got work.”¹⁰⁴*

EXPECTED RETURN OF MIGRANT WORKERS

All villages included in this research are places from which considerable numbers of people have gone to work in Thailand, and to a lesser degree Malaysia. With some exceptions, community members generally reported a belief that if the project resumes, their friends and family members working abroad will come home. Broadly, community members understood current employment opportunities in Nabule, on-farm or off-farm, to be far too insufficient to maintain and reproduce family and social life without labor migration abroad.

A discussion in Hteingyi elicited a familiar series of comments along these lines. One *chanthama* said that if the project resumes, *“People who’ve gone to work in Thailand will come back. They’ll get to live together with their families again.”¹⁰⁵* Another community member, a migrant from Bago who has worked as a security guard at the project site, explained further. *“Over there,”* he said, referring to Thailand, *“they can definitely work. But here, they can’t even eat enough.”* Since he arrived in Nabule, he’s seen that *“Each year, a few more go to Thailand.”¹⁰⁶*

Sometimes people did attach conditions to their belief that migrants would return. In Paradut, community members did express belief that the SEZ would leave migrants to come back from abroad but one community member, a motorcycle repairman, suggested salaries would need to increase. He said, *“If the project starts again and people can get work with higher salaries, people will*

103 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, mixed.

104 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

105 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

106 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

*have a reason to come back from Thailand.*¹⁰⁷ An older community member, a *chanthama*, similarly commented that the SEZ could provide employment that allows people to stay in the area – but he indicated a need for any such zone to be safe. Some of his children are currently working in Thailand. *“For my sons and daughters,”* he said, *“there is no work in Myanmar, so they have to live and work in another country. If an industrial zone is built in Myanmar that is not dangerous, there will be no reason for my sons and daughters to leave.”*¹⁰⁸

In Mudu, community members echoed these concerns over a lack of employment. One community member whose daughters are working in Thailand said, *“They went over there to work because there is no work in the village. They want to live with their mother [in Mudu] but if they come back to the village, there’s no work at all.”*¹⁰⁹ Later, a former village head shared his belief that the project could address that shortage of employment. *“If there’s work,”* he said confidently, *“people will come back from Thailand. The company needs to be able to provide jobs. I don’t think the salary will be so different”* – from those on offer in Thailand. *“But even if it’s a little different, they’ll do it,”* that is, people will take the jobs.¹¹⁰

In an earlier discussion in Mudu, a group of young men, several of whom had earlier worked in Thailand for different periods of time, gave different accounts than the former village head. One had worked for over ten years in Thailand. He said people like him end up valuing the experience, the opportunities that come about, and the salary, despite the challenges emphasized by others who had also worked in Thailand: struggles with documentation and police harassment. As for his experience, he said, *“Over there, if you work hard, your situation improves. If you work hard, your daily wage will go from 300 [baht, or 9.5 dollars] to 310 – it’s like this: workers are given hope. After ten years, you’ll already have set aside ten years’ savings.”*¹¹¹ Like the others in the group, he noted that in Thailand, you can work inside, with electricity, but here, *“you have to work under the hot sun.”* In addition, no one asks for educational qualifications or character recommendations in Thailand, like they do in Myanmar. *“Here,”* he said, *“if you’re not finished with your education, it’s not good to look for work. So people will really think about whether to come back.”* In his view, ultimately, *“I think it will only be a few people who come back. They might not come back.”* He did say, however, that *“People over there are*

107 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

108 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, male.

109 IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

110 FGD, Mudu, 17/10/17, male.

111 FGD, Mudu, 3/10/17, male.

*asking us, you know? Are they hiring for the deep-sea port yet? Here they haven't started again yet, so they're not coming yet."*¹¹²

A group of Ngapidat community members, as noted above, shared reservations over who would actually get jobs if the project were to resume, especially since early implementation activities resulted in few people from Ngapidat gaining employment, despite promises to the contrary. Two women interviewed subsequently offered somewhat different views, however. One expressed confidence that *"If the project starts again, people who've gone off to Thailand will come back. Families and their children don't want to earn [their livelihoods] separately anymore."* In fact, she said, *"About half of the village is in Thailand."*¹¹³ In contrast to the other group of Ngapidat community members, she insisted that in its earlier stages, the project did actually create employment for people from Ngapidat. And she hopes the same will happen if the project resumes. *"Before,"* she explained, *"our village was prioritized [for hiring]. Almost the whole village got work. Therefore, if the project starts again, I really wish for our village to be prioritized."* The other woman described how her sons had been able to secure project-related work previously, but when the project was suspended, they moved to Thailand for work. *"About five years ago,"* she said, *"my sons worked on the site.. But now that the project is stalled, my sons have gone to work in Thailand."*¹¹⁴

For the most part, community members' comments did not directly tie early project implementation activities to high or increased rates of migration to Thailand. That is, although people tended to emphasize how many of their friends or family members are in Thailand, they did not often suggest that the project itself has caused significant or heightened mobility in recent years. The Ngapidat community member above does describe one dynamic that ties the project to migration: people who had project jobs in earlier phases lost those jobs upon the project's suspension, leading them to move to Thailand for their income.¹¹⁵ It is possible they would have moved to Thailand regardless, but community members sometimes described how the mini-boom in employment when the project began heightened expectations over earnings and lifestyles. To maintain these earnings required going to work in Thailand.

112 Ibid.

113 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, female.

114 Ibid.

115 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

In one discussion in Wetchaung, however, a group of community members did suggest a tighter link between the project and migration. One community member noted that the project had caused processes of land consolidation in the village, through either land speculation or compensation processes. He said, “*There are whole families who’ve moved to Thailand because they lost their plantation land.*”¹¹⁶ Although this relation between project-related land consolidation and heightened migration to Thailand does emerge with some clarity from community members’ comments, community members themselves did not always make that connection. This community member from Wetchaung is an exception in that regard. Like the Mudu community member who had worked in Thailand, he was also not quite convinced migrant workers would return home for the project. “*Whether or not they come back depends on hiring for the project. If they come back and there is no work, they will be in serious trouble.*”¹¹⁷

116 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

117 Ibid.

Throughout Dawei, the cashew industry provides employment for many people, from farming to processing.



BOX 4: GROUP DISCUSSION WITH DAWEI MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK

In Nabule, many discussions about SEZ employment prospects revolve around comments about migrant workers in Thailand: their salaries and working conditions, the reasons they migrated, and of course, whether or not they will return if the SEZ resumes. Thus, the research team arranged a group discussion with Dawei migrants during a visit to Bangkok.¹¹⁸ Three migrants were able to participate, all of whom work at relatively upscale markets in central Bangkok, near where they live. They are all young men who have lived and worked in Thailand for over ten years. This small sample is not representative of the many thousands of Dawei migrants engaged in low-wage, precarious labor in factory areas outside Bangkok, such as seafood processing in Mahachai, which is a common form of employment for Dawei migrants.

These three migrants expressed enthusiasm at the notion that the SEZ might resume. They all said they are planning to return to the Dawei area soon regardless, and that they themselves would prefer starting their own businesses with their savings rather than working in the SEZ. Although they do not see the SEZ in terms of their own potential employment, they do think other migrants will be interested. One of them, the oldest, has been in Thailand since 2004. He said he is ready to go back. As the others nodded their heads, he said he believes the SEZ will create jobs, which is needed for the region. One of the others said he agrees. People want jobs, he explained. And among migrants in Bangkok – including Mahachai, they said – people do discuss the SEZ project. People follow news about it on social media, and some have learned about things like environmental impacts. But their sense is that most migrants have a positive view of the project, hoping it may allow them to return home.

¹¹⁸ FGD, Bangkok, 29/1/18, male.

Maungmagan Beach in Dawei is a growing tourist destination and a potential source of employment that may be threatened by the SEZ.

CONCERNS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS

Although expectations are high for the employment people believe, rightly or wrongly, that the SEZ will bring, community members' comments also raised a series of concerns about how employment will take shape and for whom. One key issue has been discussed already: whether jobs will go to local people or migrant workers (workers from elsewhere in upper Myanmar rather than workers from Dawei). Community members' frustrations over wage discrimination between Thai and Myanmar workers during earlier project activities are relevant here too. A leader from a labor union based in Ngapidat said that if the project resumes, that is what he plans to address. *"From the union's perspective,"* he said, *"we'll help make sure that workers' salaries are equal if the project starts again."*¹¹⁹ He raised another issue as well that other community members pointed to: transport for workers, that is, whether or how people will be able to get to wherever they are working within the vast SEZ project area. *"Our workers have difficulties coming and going. Coming and going for work, I mean,"* he said. *"If the government can plan to make that more convenient, that would be good."*¹²⁰ An older *chanthama* in Wetchaung shared a similar concern, linking this issue to any potential relocation plans. *"If there's work, that's great,"* she said. On the other hand, *"If this village has to move somewhere else, it will be difficult to get to work. If work is here, but we are elsewhere, how will we make a living? It will probably be difficult."*¹²¹

Notably, few *chanthama* saw a future for themselves working in the SEZ. The *chanthama* who participated in this research tended to be middle-aged or older. In a group discussion in Hteingyi, several *chanthama* considered what would happen if the Dawei SEZ caused factories and industries to replace agriculture in the area. *"If Dawei ends up changing,"* one said, referring to such a shift, *"I can't yet imagine what I'll do. I think I'll only be able to say once that happens. Beforehand, I can't imagine."*¹²² In Wetchaung, another *chanthama* pointed to an age dynamic in who might get jobs in the SEZ. *"Older people like me,"* he said, *"won't be able to get work [in the SEZ]. Only young people in the village will be*

119 IDI, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, male.

120 Ibid.

121 IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17, female.

122 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.



able to work.”¹²³ His comment underlines a theme that emerged in discussions with community members. The employment that people hope for from the SEZ is largely imagined as something for younger community members and migrant returnees, not for older *chanthama* or other community members who have been working in agrarian settings their whole lives. The Wetchaung *chanthama* who explicitly stated this dynamic framed it as a concern. People like him, he worried, would have no real options if the project were to resume and he could no longer farm.

This age split was echoed by community members around the Thilawa SEZ as well. Few older farmers understood the SEZ as providing realistic job opportunities for them; that was part of their wide range of concerns over the project. However, several farmers in one group discussion did note that in their children's case, the SEZ could be a source of employment.¹²⁴

123 FGD, Wetchaung, 21/9/17, male.

124 FGD, Thilawa, 20/1/18, mixed; FGD, Thilawa, 21/1/18, male.



A woman in Dawei SEZ helps prepare for a local religious ceremony.

Gender

INTRODUCTION

In discussions of industrialization and mega-development projects in Myanmar, gender has not always been an area of in-depth research or activity among government, civil society, and scholars. In Dawei, concerns over land grabbing, displacement, and environmental impacts have been the main areas of focus for civil society groups. Still, a relatively small but steady stream of research has contributed to a strong set of conversations around gender: an early policy brief by the Gender Equality Network (GEN), research linking the Dawei SEZ to other gender-related industrialization patterns elsewhere in the region, and the Tavoyan Women's Union's (TWU) report *Our Lives Not For Sale*.¹²⁵

Gender is a cross-cutting theme that has already been discussed in some instances in relation to information access, livelihoods, and employment. This section moves to consider gender dynamics in each of these areas more directly, while bringing together some larger questions around power, authority, and the gender dimensions of industrial development.

GENDER AND INFORMATION ACCESS

As described previously, community members' comments indicate that information access in Nabule is structured by hierarchies of power, wealth, and gender, among other lines of stratification. People with more authority and income, who are more likely to be men, tend to have more access to information. People with less authority and income, who are more likely to be women, tend to have less access to information. Sometimes community members described information circulation in more voluntaristic terms. Several women interviewed in Mudu and Wetchaung, for example, said they are not very interested in project information in general, especially given the years-long suspension of the project.¹²⁶ Women also reported that men are more likely than women to be assumed and persuaded to follow project-related

125 Gender Equality Network (GEN) (2012), "The Dawei Development Project: Some Possible Gender Impacts," Yangon, GEN; Soe Lin Aung (2012), "Women and Gender in Dawei," *New Mandala*, available at <http://www.newmandala.org/women-and-gender-in-dawei/> (last accessed 25/4/18); and Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU) (2014), *Our Lives Not for Sale*, Dawei, TWU.

126 IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female; IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female; IDI, Wetchaung, 31/10/17, female.

news, and that this better explains a gendered information gap rather than simply differences in levels of interest.¹²⁷

Comments from community members suggest that an uneven information environment holds for both formal circulation of information and informal circulation of information. Formal meetings, such as project consultations or meetings called by the village head, are likely to be attended by more men than women.¹²⁸ Men also tend to have more access to informal information circulation, such as socially or through the activities of people like brokers, through whom a great deal of project information flows in ways that are not fully public.

Differences in the levels of community members' knowledge can lead to material harms and benefits. One community member in Hteingyi, a male, described information access in terms of compensation. "*People who get more compensation,*" he said, "*are people who come and go,*" that is, people who tend to be well-integrated in the public life of the village, whether through social or religious activities, business, or village administration. In contrast, "*people who just stay at home, not really coming and going – they don't know how to negotiate.*"¹²⁹ Whether or to what extent his contrast maps onto a gender contrast, between those who come and go and those who don't, may be debatable. But there is little doubt that structures of power and authority align with gender hierarchies in Nabule. Thus people who have stronger roles in public life tend to be men, and these are the people who have greater access to information, with beneficial implications for compensation processes among other issues.

Desk research and interviews with key informants supports these findings. According to TWU, "While there has been very little information provided

127 IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

128 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, female; KII, TWU, 10/11/17, female.

129 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

“IN THAILAND, HUSBAND AND WIFE CAN BOTH GET WORK. HERE, ONLY THE HUSBAND CAN WORK, AND THE WIFE CANNOT GET WORK.”

- A COMMUNITY MEMBER IN HTEINGYI

about the project to local communities, women have received even less information about the project than men. It was mainly men who attended meetings held about the project; some women only learned about the project when bulldozers began clearing their lands.¹³⁰ Although information “was generally provided through public meetings,” the report continues, “women were not expected or encouraged to attend.” The report echoes comments from one *chanthama* in Paradut, a woman who described very limited information provision until project proponents arrived to seize land. “*When the project began, no one was informed. [The company] arrived suddenly and, buying land for the project, paid 20 lakh to some people, 30 lakh to some people, and 50 lakh to some people.*”¹³¹

GENDER AND LIVELIHOODS

Most community members did not immediately report that livelihood impacts stemming from the SEZ have affected women and men differently. However, it is clear that in villages with access to tidal forests, collecting shellfish is a livelihood closely associated with women – and shellfish collection has been strongly impacted through land speculation and project construction limiting access to tidal forests. Community members also worry shellfish will simply become harder to find if the project goes forward. “*If the project starts again,*” one woman in Ngapidat said, “*the clams, crabs, and shellfish will disappear. We survive by going to look for all of these things. If we don’t have them, how will we be able to eat?*”¹³²

Aside from shellfish collection, community members did not describe other livelihoods as being strongly associated with women. Yet even for people with small-scale plantations, which both women and men described as equally distributing activities and responsibilities between women and men, certain elements of gender differentiation are clear. First, while men tend to do the work of harvesting and collecting cash crops from plantations, as well as most of the work required to clear and maintain the land, women tend to do the work of sorting, processing, and (often, if not always) trading these crops.¹³³ These are the broad

130 TWU (2014: ii).

131 IDI, Paradut, 9/10/17, female.

132 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, female.

133 KII, TWU, 10/11/17, female.

contours of the gendered division of labor among *chanthama* that community members described.¹³⁴ More research would be required to effectively locate where and to what extent possibilities for exploitation, as well as vulnerabilities to project impacts, exist along and within this division of labor. However, this structure does not itself address forms of reproductive labor – such as child-rearing, cooking, and cleaning and maintaining the home – which exist alongside this division of labor. Women are expected to take responsibility for these additional tasks, which are not always acknowledged as labor as such. Yet if any resettlement process moves forward, this kind of labor may be especially difficult to maintain and reproduce, particularly given community members' concerns over the familial and economic burdens that relocation is likely to entail.¹³⁵

Control over land and income is also an area where gender hierarchy cuts across the various livelihoods community members practice in Nabule. On documents related to land use and land titling, such as tax receipts and Form 7, men's names are more likely to be included than women's, and transferring land title from men to women – in cases of death, divorce, separation, or otherwise – can prove extremely difficult (it should be noted that Form 7 has also generally become very difficult for community members to obtain since the project began). Although not all women in Nabule reported these discrepancies in land control and one woman even directly contradicted this information, secondary research and key informant consultations suggest this is in fact the case, as it is in most of Myanmar today. Moreover, men have more access to information about compensation processes, and relatedly, are more likely to be a part of negotiations and decision-making over compensation. As a result, men are also more likely to be the ones who receive the compensation money itself.

Again, TWU research offers similar findings. Without their names on land documents, women in Nabule “were more likely to be excluded from decisions about their land.”¹³⁶ Although women might object to low rates being offered for land, “they could do nothing as their husbands decided to accept it.” In addition, for those who have received some compensation, the actual funds have tended to go to men rather than

134 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 19/12/17, male.

135 KII, TWU, 10/11/17, female.

136 TWU (2014: 13-14).

women. “Although very few people have received compensation so far,” the report finds, “the money that has been paid out has mostly been given directly into the hands of men, as they are the legal land users. This has led to wasteful spending by some men, who have not felt obliged to consult other family members about using the money.” TWU also points to uneven educational opportunities for women and men in Nabule, suggesting that with boys more likely to go farther than girls in their education, women may be less prepared than men to adapt or shift their livelihoods in any relocation situation.¹³⁷

GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT

Although it was not always possible to elicit detailed commentary about gender during interviews and group discussions in Nabule, one area where community members did have a keen sense of gender differentiation is employment, which is closely related to migrant labor. Many community members described being unsure about the gender proportion of migrants to Thailand from their villages. However, community members commonly held that women in particular face limited employment prospects in their home villages, even if the situation for men is not much better.

In Paradut, a motorcycle repairman said, “*Mainly it is women who don’t have work. For men, there is a little bit of work.*”¹³⁸ In a group discussion in Hteingyi, one community member said that “*In Thailand, husband and wife can both get work. Here, only the husband can work, and the wife cannot get work.*”¹³⁹ In Hteingyi, he said, there is very little that women can do. Two community members in Mudu offered further comments along these lines. A *chanthama* suggested that factory employment in Thailand is part of why so many women from Nabule migrate. “*There are a lot of women migrating,*” she said. “*At the factories, they only hire women.*”¹⁴⁰ A younger community member, one who had worked in Thailand for a number of years, said that “*Women in our village don’t have work. As for those who are really working, they are mostly in Thailand.*”¹⁴¹

137 TWU (2014: 16-17).

138 IDI, Paradut, 30/8/17, male.

139 FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

140 IDI, Mudu, 17/10/17, female.

141 FGD, Mudu, 3/10/17, male.

It is important to underscore that many of these comments turn on how labor is defined and understood. Discussions with community members suggest that reproductive labor in the home is generally not understood as labor, otherwise comments about a lack of work for women in Nabule might not hold. As with elsewhere in Myanmar and beyond, women's work tends to be undervalued, if it is grasped as work at all. "*Women's and men's work is not the same,*" the younger community member from Mudu said. "*For women, it's light or casual work [baw baw ba ba a-lok].*"¹⁴² Discussing why women might go to work in Thailand, he shared his perception that women in Thailand have better working conditions. When pregnant, he offered as an example, women can maintain their salary and do lighter work, which is not something that is common in Myanmar.

An additional element of migrant labor is remittances. Some community members commented that women and men face different pressures in remitting money. Women are more likely to send income home to help maintain their family's livelihood, while men might be more likely to save their income in order to get married, start their own household, and/or open their own business – as in one of the Dawei migrants interviewed in Bangkok.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, in Ngapidat, two women discussed being entirely dependent on remittances sent from Thailand by their children – in their case, their sons.¹⁴⁴ To the extent that women's employment in Nabule is in fact particularly limited, women might also be more likely to depend on remittances sent from abroad.

As for employment opportunities if the SEZ project were to restart, much depends on whether or to what extent proponents really pursue an initial phase with light industries. Insofar as industries geared towards labor-intensive light manufacturing tend to feature high proportions of women, it could be argued that an SEZ initial phase focused on factory-based, labor-intensive production could support women's employment opportunities in Nabule. Heavy industries requiring higher-skilled labor, which have long been at the heart of the full phase plan for the SEZ, tend to employ more men than women, and many fewer workers overall. As for community members' views of potential

142 Ibid.

143 FGD, Bangkok, 29/1/18, male.

144 FGD, Ngapidat, 28/9/17, female.

employment prospects, many welcome any trend towards job creation in the area. Still, community members shared concerns that the industries in the SEZ will require levels of skills and expertise – initial phase, full phase, or otherwise – that Nabule community members in general might lack.¹⁴⁵ Given gender hierarchies in education access in Nabule, this concern suggests men might be slightly more able than women to expect jobs from the SEZ. This concern might also indicate that men would be more likely than women to return to Nabule if the SEZ were to restart.

Nevertheless, it should be highlighted once more that the evidence base for claims that the SEZ will generate a high volume of local jobs is limited. Map Ta Phut, Thilawa, and other roughly comparable projects in the region, historically and in the present, show that projects such as this almost always rely on a large migrant labor force rather than employing local people.

145 FGD, Kamaungchaung, 19/12/17, male.

Many women in Dawei SEZ depend on collecting shellfish as a source of income.



BOX 5: GENDERING INDUSTRIALIZATION TODAY

Some Nabule community members report that more women than men have moved abroad as migrant workers, given what they see as a particular shortage of employment for working-age women in Nabule. They suggest that job creation as a result of the SEZ will thus especially benefit women, who will face less pressure to pursue work in Thailand or Malaysia as low-wage, undocumented migrants. It is essential to note, however, that labor-intensive, light manufacturing – the kind of production that has featured high proportions of women workers in Southeast Asia – is simply not the focus of the Dawei SEZ, regardless of misleading job creation promises from the Myanmar government. Aside from the initial phase of the SEZ, the status of which remains unclear, the focus of the SEZ is capital-intensive heavy industry, especially the storage, processing, and transshipment of petrochemicals, which centers on small, high-skilled, techno-managerial labor forces in which women are underrepresented. The view that the Dawei SEZ stands to “bring home” women migrants by suddenly producing a surfeit of factory jobs is misguided.

Relatedly, this report indicates that the Dawei SEZ needs community members' land but not their labor. Why? Because its overall orientation is towards capital-intensive petrochemical industries rather than labor-intensive light manufacturing. Few jobs can be expected, especially for people displaced and dispossessed by the project. Across South and Southeast Asia today, people dispossessed of their land, yet redundant to formal production processes – especially people displaced for crop production, resource extraction, or industrial infrastructure development, as in the Dawei SEZ – are contributing to growing employment in informal economies. Employment in informal economies looks very different for women and for men. Research on informal economies shows strong links between gender and poverty in the informal sector, as well as gender and vulnerability. One article cites the work of Martha Chen, an expert on gender in informal economies:

“Chen highlights that women in the informal sector tend to be own-account traders and producers, or casual and subcontract workers – as opposed to being employers who



hire workers for pay. She also notes that even within the same trade, women and men are often engaged in different activities: men tend towards larger operations dealing in non-food items, while women tend to work in smaller operations dealing with food. Meanwhile, while average incomes are lower for both women and men in the informal sector, the gendered wage gap is higher in the informal sector than in the formal sector; and segmentations of the informal sector tend to find men in positions of comparatively high wages (as informal employers or, moving down the hierarchy, informal employees), while women are a strong majority in occupations with lower wages (at the bottom of the hierarchy, as casual wage workers or industrial outworkers/homeworkers).¹⁴⁶

To grasp in structural terms the likely gendered impacts of the Dawei SEZ, it may be these trends towards informalization, including their gender-differentiated dynamics, that are most salient over the long term.

In addition, research shows that the scaling up and regularization of trade and investment in rural areas – through industrial projects like the Dawei SEZ – tends to narrow, restrict, or reduce economic spaces or practices in which women predominate, such as small-scale informal trading or certain roles within smallholder fishing and farming.¹⁴⁷ This dynamic pushes women towards precarious positions in labor hierarchies. Scholars and activists have recognized this trend in relation to rural and border-based SEZs in mainland Southeast Asia, which reorganize trade and production in rural areas in ways that favor larger-scale actors.¹⁴⁸

146 Aung (2012).

147 Kyoko Kusakabe, Prak Sereyvath, Ubolratana Suntornratana, and Napaporn Sriputinibondh (2008), “Gendering Border Spaces: Impact of Open Border Policy between Cambodia-Thailand on Small-scale Women Fish Traders,” *African and Asian Studies* 7(1):1-17.

148 Mekong Migration Network (MMN) (2013), *Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion: Resource Book: In-depth Study: Border Economic Zones and Migration*, Chiang Mai, MMN. Available at <http://www.mekongmigration.org/finalised%20BEZ%20pdf%20file.pdf> (last accessed 26/4/18).

Water buffalo are central to modern livelihoods in Dawei.



BROADER CONTEXTS

Discussions with community members have indicated that gender hierarchies exist with respect to information access, certain aspects of livelihoods, and employment opportunities. It is also important to note that at a more general level in Nabule – and not only Nabule – gender hierarchies also map onto hierarchies of power and authority. Positions of power in these villages are almost all held by men – from trading activities to village administration, social welfare, and religious activities.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, decision-making in each of these areas, at the heart of community members' public, political, and economic lives, is conducted largely by men. Though these hierarchies of power preceded the SEZ project, the project may deepen them, worsening existing inequalities. The SEZ project threatens to do so not only through information access, livelihoods, and employment, but in the context of broader power relations in these villages as well.

In addition, a gender perspective helps raise wider questions about expected employment prospects in Nabule. Research on the growth and expansion of manufacturing in Southeast Asia has shown that labor-intensive production networks tend to produce and maintain gendered wage hierarchies that have impacts far beyond the factory floor. Businesses chase lower production costs in part by hiring more women, whose labor continues to be under-valued and considered low-skilled. This feminization of low-wage labor tends towards the reproduction of gendered power differentials in the workplace and elsewhere, maintaining the exclusion of women from positions of authority, wealth, and decision-making.¹⁵⁰ Are these the kinds of employment opportunities Nabule community members really want? What is the cost of job creation if it means low-wage, low-valued, undesirable work that sustains existing hierarchies of gender oppression? Community members' comments on employment show a strong desire to reconstitute families and rebuild their social fabrics by creating jobs in Nabule. Industrialization through the SEZ, however, might tear those fabrics anew. This research suggests community members want employment opportunities that would nurture and sustain social and cultural life – not introduce logics of exploitation that will worsen existing hierarchies of oppression.

149 KII, TWU, 10/11/17, female; KII, DDA, 14/2/18, female.

150 See for example Jackie Pollock and Soe Lin Aung (2010), "Critical Times: Gendered Implications of the Economic Crisis for Migrant Workers from Burma/Myanmar in Thailand," *Gender and Development* 18(2):213-227. See also Soe Lin Aung (2012), "The Gendered Implications of Myanmar's Neoliberal Turn," *Gender Insights*, Singapore, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).

Conclusion

COMMUNITY MEMBERS' VISIONS

In the Introduction, we met Ma Htwe and U Phyo. Now meet U Myint Kyaw, a landless worker from another village in Nabule. U Myint Kyaw moved to his village from another village in the region, where the tin min no longer provides the employment it once did. Today, he and his family live on a plot of land belonging to an older woman. U Myint Kyaw and his wife support their family by collecting wood from the forest and raising livestock. A small solar panel provides enough electricity for two or three movies per day during the dry season, he said. A well provides fresh and clean drinking water. He maintains serious reservations about the SEZ project, criticizing it forcefully, especially regarding how he expects compensation and relocation processes to play out. Yet he says he understands why some community members express support for the project, particularly for the jobs, infrastructure, and compensation they believe it will bring. He too says he would like more job opportunities in the village.¹⁵¹

Finally, meet a group of people in a village near U Myint Kyaw's. One morning, they sat discussing whether the SEZ might resume, and what that might mean. One is a *chanthama* who has struggled in recent years to maintain his livelihood. Another is a migrant from upper Myanmar who works as a security guard at the SEZ project site. The group also included a farmer displaced from along the coast; she could not stay for the full discussion. She used to make salt and now has a small plot of land for agriculture. All of them worried about relocation, and they spoke bitterly about how compensation processes have worked so far. Still, the *chanthama* and the security guard said that overall, they want the project, especially for employment reasons. The security guard continued. *"If it's going to start,"* he said, *"I'd like it to start quickly. If they're not going to do it, they should leave completely. The suspension has made things more difficult for local people. If it starts again, then for poor people, it will be better."*¹⁵²

So what do community members want? What are their views and ideas, their opinions and expectations? This report shows that community members rarely hold positions fully for or against the project. Their views are often complex. Their comments can be ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory.

¹⁵¹ FGD, Nabule, male. Anonymity precaution.

¹⁵² FGD, Hteingyi, 24/10/17, male.

Disagreements within villages are frequent, and sometimes heated, even when community members say they understand others' viewpoints.

The report shows that the groups who support the projects are:

- › Those whose livelihoods have already been destroyed and who see compensation as the only remedy, which they will only receive if the project resumes.
- › Those who believe that the SEZ will bring jobs, infrastructure and economic security.
- › Those who bought land in an attempt to profit through land speculation

Nonetheless, some messages from community members are clear. Although this research did not proceed by way of a systematic sampling method, it is clear that many community members living in the SEZ area strongly desire the jobs, physical infrastructure, and compensation they believe the SEZ will bring. However, existing evidence indicates that compensation leads to cycles of impoverishment, physical infrastructure will be for factories and investors, not community members in resettlement areas, and jobs will largely go to migrants, high-skilled technicians, and managers. These issues could be raised among community members. Community members' actual concerns and desires must be addressed.

In many ways, in fact, what community members want is arguably not the SEZ itself, but all those things they believe the SEZ will bring: employment, material development, economic security. Community members should be made aware that the SEZ will not achieve those things; that not only will the SEZ not

“IF [THE SEZ PROJECT] IS GOING TO START, I’D LIKE IT TO START QUICKLY. IF THEY’RE NOT GOING TO DO IT, THEY SHOULD LEAVE COMPLETELY. THE SUSPENSION HAS MADE THINGS MORE DIFFICULT FOR LOCAL PEOPLE.”

- A COMMUNITY MEMBER IN HTEINGYI

achieve those things, it is likely even to exacerbate the insecurity of community members' lives and livelihoods; and that it is possible to achieve those things without the SEZ project at all.

Whether the project moves forward or not, government and development proponents must consider the best way to solve past problems and take responsibility to address the need for remedies for the affected community members.

Put differently, then, community members are calling for the following across this report's four research areas:

- › Clear, systematic, and equal access to information
- › Open, equitable, and fair compensation processes
- › No relocation without equal or better quality of life
- › Investment in jobs and infrastructure that benefits community members themselves
- › Cooperation across lines of power, class, age, and gender – for a better future in Dawei

Although the SEZ is highly unlikely to deliver on any of these demands, a formally democratic government, paired with heightened concerns over foreign investment, mean the current situation may be favorable to a collective movement of this kind.

OTHER FUTURES

Myanmar faces an historic moment. On one hand, the government can maintain the model of development practiced for decades under military rule, pursuing top-down, capital-intensive, resource-depleting projects geared towards further enriching a small handful of political, economic, and military elites. Some mainstream development institutions, the World Bank among them, argue for what they see as a reformed version of this approach. Some international organizations and Myanmar NGOs and CSOs now work within this framework. In this set-up, national and international elites remain free to

plunder the land and resources of the rural poor – but under conditions that are even more favorable for those who profit from these projects.

To protect the lives and livelihoods of people in rural Myanmar, it is time for a genuine commitment to developing alternative visions. More and more in Myanmar, activists, civil society groups, people's organizations, and rural people themselves are talking about how to protect and develop small-scale, labor-intensive practices like smallholder farming, fishing, livestock rearing, and customary forest use.¹⁵³ These practices can and do provide livelihoods and maintain the environment for the vast majority of people in Myanmar. These practices work towards a sustainable future in which the people of Myanmar control their own development and govern their own natural resources. In order to support people in Dawei in this regard, this research suggests that livelihood programs and sustainable agriculture in particular should be explored and promoted, especially if they can address some of the grinding material realities that community members point to: employment, basic infrastructure, and financial security.

In order to respect the voices of the Dawei communities presented in this report - including their call for cooperation across lines of power, class, age, and gender - governments, investors, and developers must rethink their approach to the SEZ project. Alternative policies and strategies for development, including sustainable agriculture, sustainable fisheries, and community-based tourism should be considered and promoted. With the first democratically elected government in generations, an opportunity exists to push these strategies forward, carefully yet urgently. Sustained and grounded community mobilization will be essential for this task.

Instead of top-down development and dirty megaprojects, Dawei society deserves support for a community-driven alternative vision based on securing and developing the existing environments and livelihoods of people in the region. As Dawei CSOs themselves have argued: we must all begin building sustainable alternative futures, not just for Dawei society, but for Myanmar overall.¹⁵⁴

153 Cf. TNI (2015).

154 Ibid.



A woman sells fish at a beach market near Dawei SEZ.



Community members in Dawei SEZ prepare food at a local festival.

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