FOOD SUFFICIENCY AT RISK

A commentary on the challenging situation of food sufficiency for both short and long term nation building in Myanmar.

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Food Sufficiency at Risk
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Land in Our Hands (LIOH)
16 October 2022
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INTRODUCTION

Fig-1 & 2: Foods destroyed by junta in Kunnar Klokhu village from Karenni and Letmon village from Magway.
In February 2021 the Myanmar military staged a coup, throwing the country into a deep crisis. This article looks at the impact of the coup on food production and people’s access to food. It is based on information gathered by LIOH from its own network members and confirms that many problems are currently plaguing the country’s food system – massive displacements; economic constraints; as well as pre-existing problems in the country’s food system. Together, these are driving the country toward a major food crisis.
EXISTING SITUATION

Fig-3: Villages under torching of junta during August 2022.
Massive displacements

Since the coup over 974,000 people from the rural population across the whole country have been displaced, based on the estimate from UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in September 2022\(^1\). This is an addition to over 1 million IDP population existing prior to the military coup located in Rakhine, Kachin, Karen, and Mon states. For some of the currently displaced people, such as those in the Sagaing and Magway regions, this may be the first time for them to experience displacement due to conflict (although this is not to say that they have not been subjected to state repression, dispossession, and human rights violations). For many others, however, this may be their second or third displacement, or even more, due to many decades of ethnic conflict even prior to the coup. In Karenni state, the number of IDPs currently make up as much as 86% of the state’s entire population. They can only watch helplessly from afar as their homes, farms and villages, and their means of livelihood and social belonging, are willfully destroyed by the Myanmar military, which increasingly targets villages where the people’s resistance is strong.

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Despite growing risks, people across the country resolutely continue to resist the dictatorship, taking up many forms of resistance, ranging from the daily practice of civil disobedience, to boycotting junta related businesses, to many kinds of more militant actions. Many rural people have joined either newly established local defense forces or well-established Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), in an unprecedented bid to finally end military rule. Despite being outgunned, armed resistances have become a big component of the Myanmar Spring Revolution, and increasingly a nightmare for the junta. The junta appears bent on destroying everything — torching villages, killing civilians, razing farms—by employing its historically heinous four-cuts strategy (cutting off food, fund, recruits, intelligence sources) with full force across the whole country, particularly in rural strongholds of resistance.

As a result, a huge portion of the farming population has been forced to abandon their homes, farms and villages and to leave behind their rice barns, standing crops and livestock. Some farmers could not harvest their crops before fleeing, and many would be risking their lives if they tried to return to their farms. Based on the rough calculation by current IDP numbers, nearly 2 million acres of farm will be fallowed without any other choice (See Figure-4).

“These [crops & livestocks] are the people’s assets, but cannot easily be carried when they have to run away. How can we protect their rice/paddy barn which is their only income??”

- A local humanitarian worker from Chin State -
Fig-4: Estimated farm acres directly affected by the military coup

Fig-5: Some of the IDPs from Palaw Township, December 2021.
Economic Uncertainties and Constraints

Farmers in some parts of the country remain relatively safe from armed conflict, but instead are facing huge uncertainties and economic constraints as a result of first the Covid-19 pandemic and then coup. Covid-related restrictions on the movement of people and goods created market uncertainties, which in turn affected the motivation of farmers. During the first year of the pandemic, although the civilian government provided small loans and free seeds to the farmers to help them overcome the crisis, this assistance was not enough. Nor could all farmers avail of it: only farmers with registered land titles were eligible to access such loans.

These attempted quick fixes by the government at that time also could not fix the chronic and compounding problems underlying Myanmar agriculture. One such problem is related to financing. There have been many rural financing programs facilitated by government departments and development organizations during the past two decades. Usually the success of such programs is measured by a program’s completion and by the sustainability of the organizations themselves, while the impact of these programs among farming communities is barely considered, except for in a relatively few showcases. In reality, farmers received a loan in order to pay back another loan. This is because many farmers were already deeply stuck in a cycle of debt, which worsened dramatically after the Covid pandemic struck.
And then—just a year after Covid hit—the coup happened. New additional restrictions on the mobility of people, food and farm inputs, along with commodity and market controls put in place by the junta, followed by hyperinflation, caused a dramatic increase in farming costs. The cost of fertilizer quadrupled within a year and fuel became less available and more expensive (fuel prices tripled). In addition, labor grew scarce as many young people scrambled to migrate abroad in search of work opportunities, which in turn meant that farmers who relied on hired labor to operate their farms at full capacity were not able to do so. Now, concern is growing over whether farmers who were able to plant will actually be able to harvest their crops as the armed conflict continues to expand.
Fig-7: Various vegetables picked from Taungya (Hill-side Cultivation).
Pre-existing problems in the country’s food system

In addition to intensifying conflict and economic processes brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and then the coup, another problem is the basic orientation of the country’s food system in general. Decades of state policies and programs have been shifting food and food production away from diverse local values and meanings, towards a commercialized commodity within a global value chain. The policies governing food and food production (including the Myanmar Agricultural Development Policy developed during the NLD era) have been pushing the country’s agriculture sector towards integration into global agro-food supply chains based on high-chemical input monocultures and mass production of export crops (destined for foreign markets), in order to promote foreign currency earnings. This has meant little to no care and support of the country’s majority population of peasant farmers, despite their historical role in feeding the country and their importance in keeping hunger at bay today. Instead of recognizing and valuing the country’s peasant farmers, indigenous farming practices, and local food markets, government land and investment policies and also agricultural policies have been undermining these and making them increasingly vulnerable and dependent on capital markets. There are many perverse implications.

Myanmar’s farmer increasingly grow less food crops for local (including their own) consumption. Instead, they concentrate more and more on growing cash crops, which require expensive inputs that they must purchase from dealers -- often having to borrow money to buy, and which crops they, now indebted, must then sell usually to traders at the lowest price soon after harvest as they do not have capacity to store their crops.
Instead of being self-sufficient and self-provisioning and free from agriculture related debts, Myanmar’s farming households are increasingly indebted and having to buy their food. Around Bogalay in the delta region, for example, the vegetables grown in the village can only cover about 10% of local consumption needs, and so the rest must come from nearby town markets, where most of the vegetables sold are not local varieties, but instead are imported from Thailand, China and India. Even the rice that Bogalay area farmers grow is intended only for selling, while they buy the rice they consume from urban areas.

What freedom farmers may previously have had to choose the crops (& varieties) they grow continues to shrink – not because of any legal restrictions, but because of economic pressures. Many have no choice but to focus on growing cash crops that may be in demand in neighboring countries such as China, India or Bangladesh. But border trade is controlled by big traders (not small farmers) and more fragile than local trade, and with no safeguards in place to protect small producers, the latter end up shouldering most of the risks. When China quickly closed its border to stop the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, farmers from all across the country whose livelihoods depend on border trade in watermelon, sugarcane, corn, pulses, and rice, lost income heavily. Comparing the two periods October 2020-March 2021 and October 2021-March 2022, the value of cross border trade with China fell by over 2 billion USD (ISP).

More importantly, diversified and traditional cropping practices are disappearing, which negatively affects local food sufficiency and the environment. Previous expansion of monoculture -- rubber plantations in Mon State, palm-oil plantations in Tanintharyi Region, CP corn in Shan State, and tissue-culture banana plantations in Kachin State -- had already wiped out huge areas of forests and orchards with precious native fruits and vegetables.
Monoculture plantations and industrial crops require use of chemicals fertilizers and pesticides, and deplete the soil, while hurting the environment and the health of farmers and farmworkers. There have been many cases of illness linked to chemical use in banana plantations in Kachin and of death of livestock linked to chemicals used in palm-oil processing plants in Tanintharyi. Monocultures are prone to pest and disease, while the effectiveness of chemical inputs tends to decrease over time, which means ever more needs to be applied to produce the same yield. The costs to farmers and rural communities of this kind of farming are immense and long lasting.

Food production is also compromised by mining. The people living around Chindwin River basin were food self-sufficient in the past, but not anymore, after the influx of gold mining on the banks of the river. Farmers in many parts of the country have been forced by land confiscations or compelled by economic pressures to abandon their lands and food production, thereby allowing mining activities to expand. In Shan State, Chinese companies have been trying to purchase land for coal mining, and since the coup land confiscations are increasing. Health issues and environmental problems are emerging as coal mining and power plants contaminate the soil and surrounding environment, and making local water undrinkable.

Last but not least, amidst all these challenges and problems, many farming families are losing more and more ground each year, while younger generations are leaving the farming life to go to urban areas or foreign countries to look for wage work. Many small farmers may increasingly have no choice but to sell their land (or portions of their land) and cross the border illegally to take up work as farm workers in neighboring countries. A declining farming population also contributes to deepening the vulnerability of the whole country to food dependency and hunger.
Fig. 8: Palm-oil nursery plots of MAC company in Tanintharyi Region. Palm-oil is one of the main causes of large-scale land grabbing and affecting customary land practices including hill-side cultivation.
“Of course, we know homemade [groundnut] oil is safe. But if we sell it and buy back [palm-oil] from the market, we can make some money from the difference – around 4,000 MMK per Viss, and it can cover some other household expenses.”

- a farmer from Sintgai -

Fig-9: A long-queue of people to buy cooking oil at discounted price (3,700 MMK per viss) in Tamwe of Yangon on 14 August 2022.
Fig-10: A place of farm-work from dry-zone.
Even after the double crisis engulfed the country – namely, COVID-19 and the coup – some still worry more about the drop in agricultural exports and its effect on GDP, than they worry about many other (more urgent) matters, such as the generalized humanitarian crisis that has emerged. The urgent question is how to feed both the displaced population, and the urban and rural working people who have not been displaced but are facing repression and hardship.
Challenges in the accessibility to food

Food sufficiency at all levels – household, village, township and region – is now at risk although the degree of it varies especially in accordance with the conflict intensity. People are helping each other by making small donations and sharing what resources they have. In some areas, however, it is almost impossible to procure food and basic supplies as the junta has blocked major roadways and key communication channels to get access to external aid. According to IDP communities from Chin Hills and Mizoram areas, humanitarian aid becomes extremely expensive due to the extra security measures and longer transportation routes that are required to deliver it. IDPs from Karenni State are receiving the support, but only one route of transportation remains to buy food. Getting enough food is becoming a major challenge for both IDPs and non-IDPs (even when villagers have not been displaced, they may face increasing uncertainty about being able to keep growing their own food in the future) in a context of prolonged armed conflict.
Threats of food control

Myanmar military is notorious for its heinous four-cuts strategy, of which one cut involves cutting-off the flow of and access to food, and relatedly, controlling the food and commodity trade (including transportation). Cutting off flow and access to food is a targeted military strategy, while controlling food trade is a broader strategy used most famously during the socialist era and may soon be replicated by the junta. It means all farmers have to supply their agriculture produce to the junta, at a fixed quota regardless of the actual production or the ability to farm. Also, specific types of produce (including rice) will not be allowed across township borders. The junta is reportedly interested to revitalize the cooperative system and related ministry (which had been dismantled by the NLD government.

The junta’s intention clearly is to hold onto power at any cost. Alongside its efforts to control access to food and to weaponize food shortages, the junta is diverting international food aid and humanitarian assistance to use in ways that will benefit its campaign to wipe out any and all resistance. The efforts of international governments and inter-governmental bodies to converge aid to Myanmar and course it through the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Center (AHA Center) or the junta (which named itself as the State Administrative Council (SAC)) will surely not benefit the people in need, but will only empower and legitimize the SAC dictatorship. As is already happening in some townships of Yangon, the junta does not hesitate to falsify and distort information in order to take credit for rice distribution by the World Food Programme (WFP). Nor does the junta have any qualms about blocking humanitarian aid from reaching places where it is most urgently needed, as part of its effort to quell resistance by starving people into submission, as is happening in many areas across the country.
Meanwhile, there is another way in which in which food sufficiency and people's access to food to live is currently being undermined – less direct than cutting supplies and blocking assistance, but important nonetheless. Many agricultural companies are interested to carry out contract farming with small farmers, while many small farmers see contract farming as a way to cope and survive in a context of chronic indebtedness (and no access to long-term loans), high cost of agricultural inputs and farm machinery, as well as other market uncertainties. Contract farming may appear as a life-line in the short-term, as it would loan inputs (and even cash in some cases) and create a place to sell the harvested produce. But it’s not risk free nor is it without costs to the farmers.

Important possible downsides include: the loss of freedom to choose what seeds, seed varieties, and seed suppliers to use; and the loss of flexibility regarding who, where, when and how to sell the harvested produce (which may be especially critical in situations of hunger and hyperinflation). In addition, in exchange for any short-term relief, contract farming usually puts a lot of the actual risks on the farmer – for instance, the contracted farmer, who probably paid more for the loaned inputs, still must repay the loan even if the crop fails due to some unforeseen weather event.

At the start of this year’s cropping season, some companies sought to make farming contracts with farmers in some townships in the Delta region. The companies said they would provide inputs and seeds and give immediately loans of one-third of the investment cost. Further, they assured the farmers that the yield would be up to 150 baskets per acre and that the company would buy back at 600,000 MMK per basket. The seed varieties are called “79”, “A-chan-may” & “Ahnan-tahtaung (1,000 spikes)”, each of which need 115-days term for harvesting.
The farmers are concerned about the new varieties, though – for example, in terms of how they well they will grow in the local area, how pest- and disease- tolerant they are, the marketability of the produce, and if they will be able to keep as seed for the next growing season. Another concern is that the price at which they company will buy their produce is fixed, and while it seems promising for the farmers at the moment, conditions may change – for example, perhaps the market price may go higher due to inflation. One concern is if the company has links with the junta, which would pose an additional risk for the farmers.

In the Delta region as elsewhere, farmers in many villages are compelled to sell their produce immediately after harvesting by one or more reasons – lack of storage facilities/inability to store, need to pay loans/debts, and lastly, fear of their harvested produce being destroyed by the junta. The situation is worse if the trade collapses or is monopolized. An example from Chin state shows that even if they have rice to sell, they may not be able to sell it if the routes to neighboring towns and border trade have been blocked by the junta.

“Previously, we used to sell our rice to big cities and to India as well; but cannot transport to Kalay or India anymore. There is rice, but no buyer.”

- a Chin farmer -
Cropping Practices

In the context of the double crisis, diverse cropping, subsistence farming and producing crops that are in high demand locally are all becoming increasingly important. Where possible, these practices are proving to be of great value and significance in providing sufficient fresh food for people living in towns and villages and in reducing their dependency on outside suppliers and markets. As a result, where such practices are possible, they are helping to shield villagers and townspeople from market instabilities and unfavorable trade policies. Farming communities in many ethnic areas (States) as well as in Mandalay & Bago regions, where traditional farming or shifting cultivation continues, are instructive examples. There, farmers are growing diverse crops and most of the varieties are traded for local consumption year-round. Although they do not make a lot of money from a specific crop per cropping season, they are getting income throughout the year by growing a diversity of crops. In addition, food sufficiency remains high even during the crisis: people living in these areas have stable access to almost every staple food for household and local consumption, including rice, oil, meat, fish, fruits and vegetables. Some basic commodities such as salt must still be sourced elsewhere, but they are relatively less dependent compared to the regions where the farmers grow less diverse crops.
Food provision for social cohesion and as part of resistance

Generously donating to people in need is a common act in Myanmar, and donating or sharing food in particular can be seen on a daily basis, even in the current crisis situation. During the Covid lockdown, so many individuals and groups initiated food provisioning activities to help people in need including in the big cities, and this has continued even after the coup and up to the present, despite the growing risks. Solidarity food sharing activities give hope to people suffering under the junta’s oppression, and help to strengthen social cohesion and camaraderie.

Community food aid and assistance efforts build solidarity and strengthen resistance among working people, families, households and communities in both rural and urban areas. Seemingly small actions – such as offering affordable and even free meals and basic commodities to maintain stable food prices; and saving and sharing seeds to grow food – have big significance especially for working people trying to survive the very difficult situation. These social networks also serve to alert and help prepare for a possible worsening food crisis, by spreading awareness and information about how to do home food gardening and native seed saving and sharing, and home food processing and storage in preparation for lean times.
Respectable actions of armed resistance groups

While the junta is burning down villages and destroying crops, the PDFs and EROs are actively helping farmers to grow and harvest their crops by avoiding military actions during harvest time, providing security to farmers while they work, and even helping farmers to do farmwork. They are likewise helping people who have been displaced to find shelter, food and health care.

Fig-11: Local defense forces helping the farmers while reaping rice in dry-zone during November 2021.
Fig-12: A food stage (sharing & donation) from Magway Region. (Left)

Fig-13: Sharing food intended for displaced persons, in Karenni State. (Right)
CONCLUSION

Fig-14: Farmers’ strikes from Yinmarbin and Salingyi Townships during December 2021.
The revolution is going on with solidarity and dedicated commitment of the people of Myanmar to end the dictatorship and build a genuine federal democratic union. It’s already almost 2 years for some communities and over 70 years for the others. Our progress, however, could be overwhelmed at anytime by hunger if we fail to anticipate and prepare well. Feeding the hungry and overcoming the food crisis is also a political concern. Food is one of the main decisive factors in the struggle as both daily need and strategic need. And food provisioning is part of the resistance as it could help building solidarity, resilience and bringing hope to the people.
Here are some things that people can start doing immediately:

- Conserving and improving the qualities of local seeds and species.
- Encouraging genuine small-scale food production and distribution for local food sufficiency.
- Promoting & supporting establishment/development of food gardens where the public can access the food and acquire the related knowledge.
- Ensuring the land use rights to practice small-scale food production, within land governance or management system of the specific area.
- Promoting the knowledge & awareness regarding local seeds (& species), food cultures, food safety, organic food and organic farming through formal & informal education and/or through specific policies.
- Identifying, promoting and supporting for processing (making products) local seeds (& species) those have market potentials.
- Promoting & supporting diverse cropping practice that helps sustainability of soil fertility, environment, ecosystem and living things.
- Controlling and regulating genetically modified organisms (GMOs), monoculture plantation and industrial crops.
- Preparing the policies & procedures that constitute the effective food provision, food production and related land use grants at time of food crisis and emergency situations (including natural disasters).
Yet there is also a need to envision and start laying the foundations for a food system that is pro-people and pro-farmer in the long run too. Building food sovereignty within a genuine federal democratic union should also be based on the following principles:

- Basic assets of food productions (seeds, land, water, fish resources etc) are for those whose livelihoods depend on.
- Peasants are the ultimate owners of all the species, varieties & seeds originated from their areas. Thus, the related rights including patent registration must go for the farmers who sow/breed, save, exchange and reproduce it.
- Everyone has the rights to food – safe, nutritious and in dignified means.
- Food is deeply related with culture, integrity and social norms of a specific society. In this regards, the future food system should value the culture and bring the people together. And the food system should value and dignify the peasants & their efforts.

All these immediate practices and basic principles should be recognized and valued by international organizations. At present and in the meantime, to the extent that a severe humanitarian crisis already exists and there are many people in different parts of the country currently in need of urgent food assistance, any and all international organizations working on livelihood assistance and humanitarian aid (including UN agencies) should redesign and redirect their assistances to reach remote areas without legitimizing junta. To do this they must work with local organizations, CSOs and EROs because these organizations know best the terrain, the resources, the communities in need, and the precise needs on the ground, and have the access and relationships of trust needed to operate effectively to deliver food aid especially under the current situation.
In sum, in many places, hunger is no longer on a distant horizon, but has arrived at the doorstep and because of the junta’s continuing efforts to hold onto power at any cost, the current food crisis is likely to get worse. One cause for hope though in such dire circumstances is the country’s farmers. Despite huge challenges and serious risks to themselves, many farmers are trying to find ways to keep growing food for the people and to sustain the resistance, and many working people in urban areas are also mobilizing to get food to those in need and to prepare for further hardship. However small they may seem, however invisible to outside observers, together these efforts in reality hold great potential to contribute to a fundamental reshaping of the country’s current problematic food system inherited from the past. They demonstrate working people’s resilience and a major revaluing of native seeds, local cuisine, community food production, food processing and food trading and sharing. These are fragile seedlings that, if protected and cared for and can survive the present crisis, are in a position, once the junta falls, to help the country to ‘build back better by moving’ away from capitalist food chains and toward people’s food sovereignty.
Fig-15: A young farmer participating in the Photo Strike of LIOH on the event of World Food Day, 16 October 2022.
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* Photos are retrieved from the respective Facebook Pages/Accounts of the mentioned sources.
Food Distribution

as part of

the Resistance
Our Land, Our Food, Our Victory