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Food Sovereignty in Rural Myanmar: A Case Study on Drivers of Agrarian Transformation and impacts on Small-Scale Farmers

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Abstract

With the economic opening of Myanmar the commercialisation of agriculture is one of the main goals of the government. Small-scale farmers in Myanmar are struggling with these commercialisation processes: Pro-business land reform and local power structures along with foreign investments in export-oriented, large-scale agriculture are undermining local food systems and customary land tenure rights pushing small-scale farmers into deeper poverty and wage-labour. The food sovereignty (FS) approach aims to return power and control over the food system to producers and consumers. This paper introduces the results of a field research which was conducted in two villages in southern Shan State and puts small-scale farmers and their struggles over land, food and rights at the centre of discussion by using the approach of FS to examine the factors which are pushing commercialisation. Moreover, it explores aspects of the academic discourse on FS and gives critical insights. Data was collected with a mixed-method approach. Qualitative methods were taken from the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tool box, including transect walks and seasonal calendars. The methodology also included gender-disaggregated focus groups discussions, semi-structured interviews with village residents and key-informants. A household survey (n=60) was conducted in both villages to back up the qualitative data. Data was analysed along three key factors, namely food security and farming situation, access to land and migration and labour. Through this broad perspective, the research identified a variety of interrelated factors negatively influencing the local FS. Results show that farmers are forced to stay in a “circle of poverty”: Food insecurity is fostered by pro-business policies introduced by the government and external stakeholders who increasingly control local resources. It was found that the commercialisation of agriculture (e.g. through hybrid crops and large-scale cultivation) plays an important role in the struggle of small-scale farmers. It is argued that although the academic discourse on FS has to be deepened on some levels (e.g. the relationship between FS and capital-state power relations), it is an important contribution to somewhat radical thinking on development as it puts those at the heart of discussion who are undermined by neo-liberal policies and state-driven power relations.

Keywords: Agrarian Question, capitalism, contract farming, food security, food Sovereignty, hybrid crops, Myanmar, small-scale farmers