What We Need Now

Exploring Communal Desires for Justice Among Post Land Confiscation Communities in Eastern Bago Division



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Introduction

and conflict is a pressing issue in Myanmar. The nation has undergone a number of reforms to its land legislation, and investigations of land dispute claims have been conducted by the Farmland Investigation Commission. Despite this, a significant portion of the nation's smallholder farmers continue to fight for ownership of land confiscated from them by the previous administration for incomplete, or often cancelled, national projects.

This report details the cases of three communities who have lost ownership of their land in this fashion, detailing their stated needs and desires for change. By identifying and recording these grassroots level needs and desires, the report hopes to engender a clearer understanding of the challenges that communities in Myanmar who have lost access to land face. Furthermore, it seeks to identify to what extent these challenges are related to, perpetuated by, or may be ameliorated by current land legislation. The report will also reflect on what role the recently released draft National Land Use Policy may play in resolving these disputes. Respondents from three villages attended the Researcher's Focus Group Discussions (hereafter FGDs) and individual interviews. While three village communities are represented, the second and third village are separated only by a small creek and the land of residents of both villages was confiscated by the same party at the same time. Thus the second and third villages are presented as one case study (with the consent of the respondents). For the sake of anonymity and security the names of the villages will not be given, but instead referred to as 'BG' (the first village) and 'KP' (the second and third village).

Methodology

Research was conducted over two field visits to Padaung Township, Bago Division in September 2014. The first field visit, conducted over two days, consisted of two FGDs with respondents, and an informal interview with local Community Based Organisation (CBO) the Civil and Political Rights Campaign Group(CPRCG). The researcher also conducted an informal interview with one of the residents of the village-tract who is currently working as a paralegal supporting the claims of respondents from both case

study groups. The paralegal is part of a paralegal network trained and supervised by Namati and CPRCG under Namati's *Developing a Community Paralegal Program* (http://namati.org/resources/developing-a-community-paralegal-program/). The second field visit consisted of individual interviews with respondents from both case study sites, and two further informal focus group discussions. Field access, interpretation, and translation were facilitated by Namati and CPRCG.

The FGDs took a three stage approach. In stage 1 the researcher and respondents discussed some open questions to clarify the history of the land confiscation and the community's representation of it. Stage 2 was a ranking exercise where community members were asked to identify all stakeholders in the land, and any party that holds any power or influence over it. Respondents were asked to rank these bodies (people, organisations, ministries, etc.) in terms of authority, and in so doing created a map of the local land-related power structure which they may use when planning their approach to advocacy. Stage 3 consisted of a needs-based analysis. Respondents were provided with eleven pre-prepared statements related to the confiscated land and their livelihoods (eg. "Regain ownership of confiscated land"). They were asked to look through these statements and select the ones they viewed as desirable outcomes. Respondents were then asked to add any other statements to address important issues not covered by the original eleven statements. Finally, they were asked to rank these statements into short-term (1-2 years) and longterm (3-5 years) goals, and by importance to them as a community (a number scale of 1-3 with 1 representing most important and 3 least important). This was done to help both the researcher and the respondents clarify their community's needs, and to identify in which order these needs could ideally be addressed. These needs, compiled in Table 1 and Table 2 (see annex), can be used to help the respondent community and any supporting parties identify priorities when pursuing advocacy. The researcher is exploring the possibility of compiling these stated desires into a one page statement (one for each respondent group) that respondents may use for their own advocacy. Research and fieldwork was conducted with the support of the Land Core Group (LCG), Namati, CPRCG, and a local paralegal, and funded by Namati and LIFT.

Case Studies

Case 1: BG

In 1968 the A Kyee Sar Pyin Sin Yay 5 (hereafter KaPaSa-5), a military unit responsible for the repair of heavy machinery, began to survey 3000 acres of land in the village tract, 200 acres of which consisted of farmland, predominantly rain-fed paddy with some uplands, belonging to residents of BG. The KaPaSa-5 informed the residents that the military would claim use of the land for the construction of a heavy machinery repair factory. The land was officially confiscated for military purposes in 1989 under the 1953 Land Nationalisation Act, although interviews with older respondents suggest that three waves of land confiscation already occurred in the 1970s. In 1996, the land was transferred from the KaPaSa-5 to the A Kyee Sar Sat Hmu Se Man Kane 12 (hereafter KaSaSa-12), a unit of the military's heavy industry planning department. The 200 acres of confiscated farmland is the former property of 49 households.

Although areas of the land were deemed inaccessible, cordoned off for the construction of a factory, respondents were allowed access to a number of acres of land per household. Respondents were allowed to continue to cultivate their remaining land via a verbal agreement between the villagers and a Colonel of the KaPaSa-5 made in 1968, but lost all ownership of the land.

On receiving the confiscated land from the KaPaSa-5, the KaSaSa-12 instituted a harvest tax (akin to the government paddy procurement system) with households required to pay in the form of bushels of paddy. From 1998-2003 the tax was 5 bushels of paddy per acre, reduced to 3 bushels of paddy acre between 2004 and 2012. From 2007 onward respondents stopped paying the tax, but members of the KaSaSa-12 visited households in the village tract and took the required paddy. Since 2012 the KaSaSa-12 have ended this practice and the respondents no longer pay them tax. No tax receipts were issued to respondents from 1998 onwards.

When questioned, respondents stated that they do not recollect ever receiving compensation

for the confiscated land, as was required under the Land Nationalisation Act, in force at the time [Land Nationalisation Act, 1953, Chapter 18 Article 41(1)]. When questioned about this by a local paralegal the KaSaSa-12 claimed that compensation had been paid and provided a list of the names of all household heads that had received said compensation. Thus far the names on the provided list can be linked to neither current nor former residents of the township.

"In their evidence documents, when they confiscated and who received the compensation are described. But actually, the names described in the list are not from this village. And here these uncles also don't know about them. Just the names are included in the list. But they showed it as evidence with exact date."

Local Paralegal

Respondents in this village tract retain access to and use of their ancestral lands, but hold no official ownership of the land. Their access to the land is also tenuous, reliant solely on a verbal agreement made almost 40 years ago. Furthermore, as yet there is no concrete evidence that village tract residents received compensation for the land confiscated. Respondents reported that a significant portion of the land cordoned off for the construction of the factory has not been used by either the KaPaSa-5 or KaSaSa-12 since its confiscation, and continues to sit idle.

When the lands were confiscated we went together and watched the heavy machineries working on that confiscated area. We were teenages [sic]. We observed how the land was confiscated, how they did. We didn't know how much compensation they gave. Our parents already passed away. Now they are behaving like they are giving compensation and inflation rate is increased. After they confiscated the lands, no compensation they gave. And they claimed to charge specific amount of paddy bushels from us.

Male Respondent BG

Case 2: KP

In 1990 around 100 acres of farmland was confiscated from four villages by a unit of the Ah Myaut Tat13 (hereafter AhMaTa-13), the artillery section of Myanmar's Air-Defence Force. Nearby forest land was also cordoned off, and respondents have been forbidden to enter. 30 households were displaced by the confiscation. Respondents were not provided with an official letter, and information collected in the FGD suggests that the land confiscation happened without permission from either the State Peace and Development Council (hereafter NaWaTa) or Township Peace and Development Council (hereafter MaWaTa). The AhMaTa-13 also confiscated all of the respondents' tax receipts, and any other documentation that could be considered proof of ownership.

"As far as I know, they seized 100 acres from 4 villages [...] But they reported to their superior level that they expropriated only (50) acres. The rest, 50 acres, is for their [own] use"

- Female Respondent KP

While many residents relocated after the grabbing a number of villagers continued cultivating the land until 1993, with the AhMaTa-13 levying a tax of 6 bushels of paddy per acre cultivated per household. Alongside the harvest tax respondents were forbidden to enter the lands to collect bamboo shoots, formerly an important contributor to their livelihoods, and were threatened with violence should they trespass.

Respondents reported that they were often called upon to perform free labour for the AhMaTa-13, both as a form of punishment for cases of trespassing on the confiscated land and as a way of 'strengthening ties between the military and the community'. Many of the remaining villagers abandoned the land after 1994 and moved away to try and find alternative livelihoods in the surrounding towns and villages.

At the time of the grabbing, respondents from four of the affected villages started working together to try and get their land back. They held meetings with the military and various other bodies to try and clarify the situation, and set a meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture to report that their land had been taken without official notice. On learning of this planned

meeting, a Major of the AhMaTa-13 reportedly threatened violence should the meeting take place.

"they threatened me that they will shoot me if I don't stop the process. So I [told] them to kill me."

Female Respondent KP

Respondents in this village tract no longer have access to the confiscated land. While some have been able to purchase small plots to work on, this does not provide enough to support their families and most are living in poverty. Those that could not afford to purchase more land are mostly surviving off odd jobs, and have no secure source of income. The majority of the confiscated land has not been used by the AhMaTa-13 for over a decade.

Te worked on these lands peacefully since 1950. At those time, we provided all the tax for these lands and specified amount of paddy to be provided. Here we kept all the tax receipts, paddy sale receipts and landowner receipts. [...] in 1990, The Air Defense Artillery Force has arrived and invited with command letter that all farmers to come to their office. It is Ah.Ma.Ta 13, Air Defense Artillery Force. In the command letter, they also added all farmers to bring all certificates and documents related to farmed-lands. So, we had to bring all documents we have. When we arrived at there, Major A. M. T. and U M. S. [ed.] said that government seizes our lands officially. Then they said to leave our documents at there. So, we had to give and they ordered to leave within 3 days. [...] Later, they called and let to work on their fields of pigeon pea (MM-Pae Sinn Ngon) [without pay]. If we didn't go to them, they came and called directly to home. We had to work from 6 am to 6 pm. [...] At that time, they didn't say any words to give compensation for the lands they seized. Now, they are using 30 acres out of total acres they seized. They don't use the rest lands. [...] Because of that Artillery, our socio-economic and educational situation were destroyed. Even though we submitted the complaint letters to upper administrative bodies, there were no news and changes.

Male Respondent KP

Respondent Desires and Challenges

During the FGDs respondents were presented with eleven pre-prepared statements regarding land ownership and use rights. They were asked to discuss these statements and identify which ones they viewed as desirable. Respondents were then invited to contribute any other desirable statements, and organise these into long- and short-term goals.

There were, as expected, differences between the priorities given to certain statements and the statements considered desirable by the two case study groups. Looking at the statements given highest priority in the short-term column of both tables, though, three themes become apparent. Both case study groups seek (1) to have the land confiscated from them returned, (2) issues of debt, and easier access to agricultural loans, and (3) a clearer understanding of current laws and policy surrounding land ownership and confiscation. A fourth issue, relating to a local government controlled dam, was also discussed both in an individual interview and in private conversation with the aforementioned local paralegal.

Getting Their Land Back

One of the key desires identified by the respondents' statements was for the return of their confiscated land. During both the FGDs and individual interviews respondents stated that loss of ownership of their land had significant socioeconomic impacts on them. The second group of respondents stated that their lives would be markedly improved if they were able to regain ownership of and the right to cultivate on the confiscated land. Although the first group retain the right to cultivate their land, they stated that they felt insecure in their tenure and feared for the future of both themselves and their children, as their entire livelihoods are dependent on an unofficial verbal agreement.

The respondents face a number of challenges in their endeavours to see their land returned. One of the largest of these is current land legislation. Under the 2012 Farmland Law, it is permissible for individuals who define themselves as famers (and are recognised as so by the relevant government bodies) to apply for a

land title, the coveted form 7. Their application hinges on key information, though, namely "strong evidence" [Farmland Law, 2012, Chapter 2 Article 6(a)] of ownership of the land. What qualifies as strong evidence is left vague in both the Farmland Law and its by-laws. In both case studies, respondents do not have any contemporary documentation that could prove their right to ownership, respondents from Case 1 only having tax receipts from two decades previous and earlier, and respondents from Case 2 having been forced to give their documentation to the AhMaTa-13.

There is also the issue that the land in the first case study was officially confiscated by the army, meaning that even if the land were to be given to the respondents, it would first have to be officially given up by the KaSaSa-12. How the district/state/country level bodies are to approach this remains somewhat unclear. A process is lain out in the GAD's Procedures on Redistribution for Confiscated Land, stating that the former owner of the land may apply to have it returned at the Village Tract Land Administration Task Force, and should the applicant be recognised as the former owner then the land may be restored to them. This process cannot be started until the ministry responsible for the original confiscation applies to voluntarily return the land [Procedures on the Redistribution of Confiscated Land, n.d., Chapter 1 Article 4(a)[1]]. Said ministry must also provide a copy of the original land seizure order for the request to be processed [ibid.]. Thus, the decision of who owns the land remains firmly in the hands of the confiscator, in this case the KaSaSa-12.

In terms of the second case study the challenge is somewhat larger. As the original land confiscation was performed without official notice, and seemingly without the permission of the local administrative bodies, it is possible that there is no original land seizure order and thus the land cannot be returned under the GAD procedure. It is true that the land was confiscated without official notice, and that no compensation was provided, which is in breach of the Land Nationalisation Act. That the land lies fallow, and the project that the land was originally confiscated for remains unfinished also contravenes contemporary land legislation. Respondents have been unable to get this officially recognised, though, members of the village tract farmland administration body (FAB) having stated that the lands are still in use by the military and that the FAB does not have the right to report these issues.

Furthermore, the AhMaTa-13 has stated on multiple occasions that it is unwilling to return the land to the community members, and that it does not recognise the authority of current land legislation. Respondents reported that during a meeting in which they presented a 2nd Battalion Commander with a letter from MOAI illustrating that the AhMaTa-13's actions contravened contemporary land law, the Commander stated that the AhMaTa-13 would not return the confiscated land "even [if] U Thein Sein and his father come to here". [Male Respondent KP]

Both cases indicate issues with the current legal framework on land. The issue of what can be considered strong evidence of land ownership remains vague, and places the responsibility primarily on the applicant. The process for the return of confiscated land also leans to the advantage of the confiscator, requiring their voluntary release of the land (providing the confiscation took place according to legislation in force at the time). Furthermore, the respondents' experiences illustrate that in cases where land legislation is broken, it is not necessarily enforced. This suggests a need for change in the way that land transfers, both current and previous, are monitored in the region. Some changes have been seen in this area, with some positive provisions in he latest draft of the National Land Use Policy, and the recent arrest of two accused land-grabbers in Bago Division. The extent to which these may offer hope for change will be discussed further in the following section.

Debt and Access to Agricultural Loans

Both respondent groups reported that they have suffered many financial issues since losing their land and a number of respondents have built up debts, including those who are still allowed to cultivate their land. Respondents in Case 1 stated that, until the previous year, they had received loans to pay for agricultural inputs from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB)of up to 100,000 kyats every six months, repayable every twelve months. They reported that they had used these loans to support their livelihoods for many years, and stated that none of the community had faced problems of loan repayment.

When applying for the loan this year, though,

respondents were informed by the bank that they would not be able to apply for the loan without form 7. A number of respondents now face financial difficulties due to this, as they had already made the necessary purchases for this year's cultivation expecting the costs to be offset by the regular loan. With the MADB loan unavailable to them respondents have been forced to turn to other sources of finances, borrowing money from other, more well-off, village-tract residents at high interest rates.

While respondents stated that they would rather not rely on the MADB loans to support their cultivation, preferring the return of full title to their land, they explained that the current economic climate makes it "very difficult to survive without their supporting for the farmers like us" (Male Respondent BG). The high cost of agricultural inputs like fertilizer and seeds, coupled with the current low market-value of paddy have a significant impact on the respondents' finances, which in times of bad harvest may prove difficult to offset. The MADB loan plays an important role in this by ensuring that respondents are able to both afford the necessary inputs to cultivate in all seasons of the year, and gain a high enough profit margin to both repay the loan and support their livelihoods.

Many of the respondents in Case 2 do not have access to agricultural land, and thus do not qualify for or rely on agricultural input loans. The loss of their lands and, in many cases, property, and the subsequent destruction of their livelihoods has left many of them destitute. They want to focus on efforts to regain their land, but claim that due to irregular employment and lack of both compensation for the confiscation of their land and of any form of external financial support they are too occupied with day-to-day survival to be able to work together to get their land back. Furthermore, respondents from both groups stated that, due to financial issues, they have been unable to afford education for the majority of their children, and in the majority of households most of the children have received only elementary-level education.

Lack of financial support, then, is a pressing issue in both respondent groups. Monetary aid, while no permanent solution, may offer a short-term stop-gap allowing respondents to focus more of their energies on finding more secure livelihoods and on regaining

access to and ownership of their land. Both respondent groups firmly believe that regaining ownership of the confiscated land will greatly improve their socioeconomic situations.

Clearer Understanding of the Legal and Policy Framework

Respondents have received support from a number of local CBOs, political party representatives, and an INGO. One of the key aspects of this support is a network of paralegals in the region who are working to understand the history of the cases and help the respondents regain access to and ownership of their land. While these paralegals are currently providing excellent support to the respondents, they have to spread their efforts over a large area and may benefit from further support. The cases of respondents from both of this report's case studies, comprising three different communities and totalling over 100 separate claims, are all being handled by one paralegal.

During the FGDs respondents expressed their appreciation for the support they have received thus far, and a desire to become more engaged with the process of getting their land back. While they are better informed of the history surrounding the land's confiscation, a number of respondents expressed the desire to know more about the current legal framework surrounding land ownership and the processes through which land tenure may be achieved. The Land Core Group has produced a number of learning materials geared at providing this information, and has already performed a series of 'Training of Trainers' (ToT) workshops on the subject in a number of regions of Myanmar. Providing these materials to local CBOs and paralegals, and offering ToT workshops in the region may be an effective way to contribute to this respondent desire.

One further method, proposed by a member of INGO Namati, could be a clarification of the process required to apply for land title under the current legal framework. The current process is both complex and expensive, and requires a number of steps and interactions with different levels of Myanmar bureaucracy. Compiling a one page document detailing step-by-step the necessary actions to be taken by those

applying for land use title, and the costs attached to each of these actions, could prove an effective form of support.

Irrigation Issues

A final problem highlighted not in the FGDs but in individual interviews with respondents pertains to control over irrigation in case 1. Respondents state that under the previous government they were unable to decide which crops to cultivate, and were required to follow cultivation cycles proscribed by the state. While there is still some control over crop choice under the 2012 Farmland Law, respondents state that they are predominantly able to make their own crop choices. There remain limitations on their crop choice, though, not due to legislation, but due to continued government control of water supply in the area.

The majority of the community's water used for cultivation is supplied by a river that flows through a government constructed dam. The government have agreed to release the necessary amount of water from the dam to allow respondents to cultivate their crops according to traditional methods. Respondents claim that this is rarely the case, though. They claim that irrigation water is often released too late, and their plots of summer paddy do not receive enough water to produce a profitable yield. The amount of water released, though, is also too large for respondents to cultivate other more profitable crops in the area, such as beans or pulses.

Respondents claim that they are actually losing money by cultivating summer paddy, but that their lack of control over when and in what quantity water is released from the dam makes the continued cultivation of summer paddy the safest option. This lack of control over nearby water sources only contributes to their aforementioned financial concerns.

Hope for the Future?

The Draft National Land Use Policy

The recent draft NLUP, released for public consultation on October 18th 2014, contains both potentially positive and negative possibilities for change. The policy states that ancestral land claims, and pre-

viously unrecognised land claims may be investigated and recognised, allowing those removed from their land to regain access to it, an exciting prospect for both case study groups [Draft National Land Use Policy, 2014, Chapter 5 Article 22(e)]. Much like in the current Farmland Law, though, the matter of exactly how claims to ancestral land are to be proven remains vague. In their preliminary assessment of the draft NLUP, the Transnational Institute have also highlighted that the language used expresses a desire to include and consult with all concerned stakeholders in land conflicts, but there is no clear indication of how stakeholder power differences will be approached when a claim is made [Pro-Business or Pro-Poor?, 2014, p.17]. If a company and a smallholder make a claim to the same plot of land, whose strong evidence will be accorded more weight?

A new system of land classification has also been included in the draft NLUP. Within these 10 classifications of land is land ascribed as National Defence and Security Areas [Draft National Land Use Policy, 2014, Chapter 4 Article 19(j)]. As the land in both case studies was confiscated by the armed forces in the name of national development it is not unthinkable that the confiscated land may be re-classified, changed from Farmland to National Defence and Security Areas, something that could hinder community efforts to get their land back.

A further issue, highlighted by both the Transnational Institute and Landesa in their preliminary reviews of the draft NLUP, is the distinct absence of any discussion of the resolution of conflict emanating from military land confiscation under previous governments [Pro-Business or Pro-Poor?, 2014, p.20; Commentary on the Draft National Land Use Policy, 2014, p.1]. The only reference that the policy makes to land under military control is the aforementioned category of National Defence and Security Areas. While this aspect may become clearer as the policy is developed further via negotiations between the government and civil society during the ongoing consultation process, its absence at this stage is not promising.

A Recent Development

Recent weeks have seen positive developments in terms of action under current legislation, with the recent indictment of an Attorney-General and former village administrator in Bago Division for land grabbing [Regional Attorney-General, ex-village administrator charged under Anti-Corruption Law, 2014]. Both are accused of confiscating a smallholder's land without official notice, and their case has been referred to the Union Attorney-General's office under current Anti-Corruption legislation. While the results of the accusation are yet to be seen, the elevation of the case highlights another possible method for respondents to regain control of their land, or to reduce the influence of the KaSaSa-12 and AhMaTa-13 over it.

Concluding Remarks

Despite changes in Myanmar's land legislation, respondents continue to face a number of issues related to the ownership and use of their confiscated land. The stated respondent desires indicate a number of key issues related to local infrastructure, financial support, and current land legislation. Three of these stand out:

- Insufficient compensation, lack of provision of alternative livelihoods, and the requirement of proven land ownership to qualify for MADB loans has forced many respondents into both poverty and debt.
- water resources, and are thus reliant on the actions of administrators of the nearby dam when choosing which crops to cultivate and when. This lack of control over irrigation water has a negative financial impact on both respondents and the surrounding communities.
- There remains no clear and effective pro-poor recourse to disputes over land confiscated by the military under former governments. Current legislation centres power in the hands of the confiscators, and puts the burden of proof on the evicted. The draft NLUP may offer some positive changes, but also provides no clear solution to the problem.

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Appendix

Table 2: Respondent Desires From Needs Based Analysis BG

	Short Term		Long Term
	Stop arresting farmers	<u>~</u>	Right to own the land and be recognised as the land's owners
	Apologise for the land confiscation and recognise farmers as original owners		Long-term bank loans
	Get form(7) easily	0	Compensation/benefits in kind for lost land
	Get loan without form(7)	<u> </u>	Get financial support for socioeconomic rehabilitation of villagers
,	Get loan on time for the planting season	,	Cash compensation for lost land
-	Get land back and the right to cultivate as its original owners		Career opportunities for farmers' children
	Education about legal framework surrounding land rights		
	Proper protection of farmers' rights		
	Meet with SLRD and other departments to clarify land ownership		
	Form farmers union to represent farmers		
	Rice to be sold at the international standard price	0	Get individual land registration
r	Affordable fertilizer		
7	Cheap farming equipment that can be paid for in instalments	7	
	Cheap or free healthcare for farmers		
	Receive proper compensation for lost land	ш	Electricity for farmers
3		3	Punish accused grabbers
		<u> </u>	Alternate livelihoods training

Table 2: Respondent Desires From Needs Based Analysis KP

	Short Term		Long Term
	Right to own the land and be recognised as the land's owners		Rice to be sold at the international standard price
	Stop arresting farmers		Affordable fertilizer
	Apologise for the land confiscation and recognise farmers as original owners		Cheap or free healthcare for farmers
	Get form(7) easily		
	Long-term bank loans		
,	Get Ioan without form(7)	,	
- 1	Get loan on time for the planting season	-1	
	Get land back and the right to cultivate as its original owners		
	Receive proper compensation for lost land		
	Compensation/benefits in kind for lost land		
	Get individual land registration		
	Proper protection of farmers' rights		
	Cash compensation for lost land		Alternate livelihoods training
	Compensation for fish pools		Cheap farming equipment that can be paid for in instalments
2	Career opportunities for farmers' children	2	
	Education about legal framework surrounding land rights		
	Meet with SLRD and other departments to clarify land ownership		
	Get financial support for socioeconomic rehabilitation of villagers		
က	Replacement land for the land grabbed	8	
	Form farmers union to represent farmers		