



Customary tenure in Myat Latt village, Magwe division, Myanmar

Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT)

Background

This field research was conducted by Mr Ling Huang in 3 trips (6 days in May, September 2015 and January 2016). Focus group discussions were organized with 11 villagers (6 women, 5 men), and in depth interviews with 4 key persons, including village chief and Community Forestry leader.

Myay Latt is located in Nga Pe township, in Magway division. Founded 400 years ago, it is a very old village inhabited by "Acho Chin" people. The total village population is 110 with 22 households. It lays in a mountainous area.

The total area of the village territory is about 1428 acres. 1000 acres are forests where Sal tree is predominant. 214.2 acres are used as orchard, 114 acres of the land is rotational farming (including fallow areas) and 100 acres of the land is community forest.

Photo presenting forest, paddy cultivation and rotational farming fallow areas



Livelihoods, land and natural resources

Traditionally, the villagers depended on rotational farming for their livelihood. Over last three decades, all villagers gradually dropped rotational farming and came to plant permanent crops (orchards). This was due to government restrictions on shifting cultivation and the influence by a well-known agronomist. Also, the construction of the Arn-Mimbu road in 1993 improved the access to markets. This provided a strong incentive to villagers to plant banana, coffee, lime, and other fruit trees.

Only 3 households continue today to practice rotational farming (within the 114 acres of shifting cultivation land) using only 3 acres per year (for paddy and vegetables). The traditional fallow period is of 6 years after 1 year cultivation.

Villagers can also collect firewood from the forest, and can cut timber for their own housing construction needs. NTFP (such as bamboo, bamboo shoots, honey, wild animals, mushrooms, Sal tree resin, orchids, yams and other medicinal plants) are important for their livelihoods. Villagers only have small livestock such as pig and poultry so no grazing lands are needed.

Customary practices

The elders originally gained rights on the land by slashing primary forest as a *du-ma chap* principle: Those who slashed the primary forest first became the owner of the land, passing rights onto their descendants.

Before 2006, village-tract meetings were carried out every year with all villagers to decide the location of new blocks within which to clear for rotational farming. The

plots were shared among the clans and families based on household size and labor force. If extra land remained, these plots were lent to other clans or immigrants. The village allowed immigrants to settle (4 families from other Chin village), but this is not authorized any more.

According to Customary Law, the villagers own the land communally even though some plots are claimed as family own lands, especially orchards and some rotational plots. The village forests are managed communally. Cutting trees and farming is forbidden in protected forests, which are found along the streams, watershed areas and mountain ridges. These regulations are ecologically very sound practices but are not sufficient to control illegal logging. They established a community forest in 2004, with the help of JICA.

Key findings

There is no landlessness in the village and the land is shared equitably. The land cannot be sold and belongs to the community. It is the basis of their livelihood and the future of their children.

The forest outside community forest area in Myay Latt territory is being logged by outsiders. The villagers tried to tackle illegal logging but due to corruption and lack of law enforcement, this is still increasing. Recognition of these customary forest areas and of the community's good practices is important so that the community can continue to manage the forest sustainably.

The community is worried that government projects or companies could confiscate their lands. They have already lost some lands to a Gas pipe line and electric power line infrastructure, and were not satisfied with the compensations received.