
VILLAGE CHANGE IN MYANMAR: HOW TRANSITION AND DONOR PROGRAMS ARE AFFECTING LIVELIHOODS

The Qualitative Social and Economic Monitoring of Livelihoods in Myanmar (QSEM) research program is an in-depth panel study of 54 villages across Myanmar. It examines people's livelihoods strategies; land, natural resources, credit, and labour; problems and shocks; coping strategies; social relations and institutions; village governance; and external assistance. The fourth round of QSEM was conducted from March to May 2014. Researchers conducted 485 in-depth interviews and 200 focus group discussions with 1,474 respondents. Since early 2012, researchers have spent almost six months in villages in each of the states and regions covered by QSEM: Ayeyarwady, Chin, Magway, Mandalay, Rakhine, and Shan.

The latest round of the Qualitative Social and Economic Monitoring (QSEM) research program identified a number of changes:

Villagers experienced better returns on their livelihoods than in previous years, though underlying structural constraints persisted. Farmers in most areas benefited from more favourable weather conditions and better prices for key crops. These returns were more indicative, however, of a good season rather than any structural changes in agricultural production. Farmers continued to be vulnerable to risk and faced difficulties recruiting peak season agricultural labour.

Non-farm diversification and migration increased. A lack of employment opportunities at non-peak times led to increased diversification to non-farm opportunities, particularly among landless and small landowner households in the dry zone. Migration levels also continued to increase. Strategies for livelihood programs need to consider how people in different regions and socio-economic groups prioritize opportunities across agriculture, non-farm pursuits and migration.

Certain poorer households were not able to benefit equally from such positive trends; there were risks of inequality. For a small number of groups, economic prospects declined. Most noticeable among these were subsistence fishers. There are also risks of rising inequality as poorer households are more constrained in changing agricultural patterns or investing in nonfarm opportunities.

There were small but important shifts in how people interacted with local government officials. People felt better placed to raise grievances and, in response, officials were more cautious in performing their functions. These are positive trends in accountability. The reform context will require increased attention to be focused on developing appropriate governance mechanisms to manage expectations of villagers.

The village governance landscape is changing. Local village institutions play a crucial role in facilitating the interaction between villagers and government. The role of village tract administrators continued to expand compared to that of village administrators, as a result of new village governance laws. Work needs to continue on finding the right balance of powers for village level officials, including through identifying adequate and representative auxiliary bodies to the work of village tract administrators.

Government assistance in villages increased almost three-fold, providing opportunities for ensuring effective service delivery. Although perceptions of government assistance have been positive to date, implementation issues arose. Opportunities exist for donors, drawing on their experience, to assist government to deliver these new services effectively.