



# DAM DISPLACEMENT AND LOCAL POWER:

Ruptured Villages and Widened Inequalities  
in the Localized Resettlement and  
Compensation Process of the  
Upper Paunglaung Dam

Than Than Soe & N Khum Ja Ra



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Canada 

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The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD),  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University  
239 Huay Kaew Road, Tambon Suthep, Amphur Muang,  
Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand

Telephone: 66 (0) 5394 3595/6  
Facsimile: 66 (0) 5389 3279  
Email: [rcsd@cmu.ac.th](mailto:rcsd@cmu.ac.th)  
Website: [rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th](http://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th)

## Foreword

Since 2012, the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) series, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, has sought to enhance knowledge of Myanmar's development processes, strengthen the capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to actively engage the study of development policy and practice. In this first phase of the series, fellowships were given to midcareer researchers to support their work and publication in their respective areas of expertise. In the second phase, though we are continuing to publish under the UMD series banner, the research outputs have emerged directly from a long-term capacity building initiative held at the University of Mandalay, still under the support of IDRC.

In this research, Than Than Soe and N Khum Ja Ra examine local power relations as an important determinant of livelihood outcomes in a dam resettlement context. Centred on three villages impacted by the Upper Paunglaung Dam, the researchers conducted fieldwork some five to six years after their forced displacement. Through the lens of time, they were able to engage with how the processes of resettlement and compensation - precisely which actors were involved and who had power in different forms - led to divergent living standards and an exacerbation of inequalities. An ethnographic approach was able to blend together the stories and experiences of people across these communities. This extended method revealed how accounts of these processes varied widely, yet it became evident that dishonesty, corruption, and the self-serving actions of both government officials and village elites contributed to the rupturing of communities.

This rupturing and the inequalities that followed are familiar outcomes of hydropower dams and state led development plans in Myanmar and across Southeast Asia. However, this research is useful in not only adding to our understanding of how large developments affect the environments, economies and societies where rural people live, but in providing a deeply local perspective of how power plays out beyond the grip of central state actors. With the construction of more dams continuing to seem likely in Myanmar despite the brave resistance efforts by local civil society, this is a timely contribution to help caution against elite-capture of these crucial local processes.

*Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD*  
*Director, RCSD*

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In addition, we would like to give thanks to Dr Edgard Rodriguez from IDRC for placing trust in us to conduct research for improving knowledge for democracy in our country, and IDRC and Canada for supporting this great project. Dr Thida Htwe Win, Head of Department of Anthropology, University of Mandalay, further gave us motivation to participate in a multidisciplinary team. Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen and the team at RCSD also provided essential practical support to us throughout.

We would like to express special thanks to Elliot Lodge, the coordinator of the capacity building project, for his help with all parts of this study, from Shan State, to Mandalay, to Chiang Mai and then online in the time of Covid-19. Without his effort it would not have been possible to complete this work.

Above all, we would like to give thanks to the all the people who participated in this study. This includes several key informants who gave information and facilitated our fieldwork. In particular we are grateful to poor villagers from resettlement sites in southern Shan State who shared valuable insights, were willing to open up their lives and homes to us and share often quite personal feelings.



## About the Series

### **Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar**

Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar is a five-year partnership that nurtures a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar.

### **Capacity Building in Knowledge Production**

Since 2018, RCSD at Chiang Mai University has coordinated an intensive research and teaching capacity building project with the University of Mandalay. The project was conceived as part of IDRC's larger Knowledge For Democracy Myanmar initiative, and our goal is to support the long-term professional development of researchers at the university through regular critical engagement. We have provided exposure to ideas, methods and research processes in the social sciences, and given them practical tools and opportunities to put learning into action. The project has successfully emerged from a foundation of shared experience and knowledge between the participants and our diverse team of mentors and support staff affiliated with RCSD. It has also been built on the legacy of Ajarn Chayan's long and continuing commitment to empowering young Myanmar researchers, providing a strong case for potential benefits of academic collaboration across the 'global south'.

The first phase of the project focused on the building blocks of qualitative research, with workshops introducing selected concepts in the social sciences which are applicable to the changing

development context of Myanmar and Southeast Asia. We then worked on improving their ability to build towards conducting research by targeting capacity in fundamental skills in research design and methods. This was achieved through specific workshops on several tools, such as writing a literature review and conducting ethnography in the field. RCSD invited this larger group of participants to submit research proposals by harnessing their growth in these research tools. Eight projects were then chosen by a committee to receive research grants and intensive academic support through the second phase of the programme.

These eight projects involve seventeen researchers from a range of academic backgrounds and disciplines, all of whom are women. Throughout 2019 and 2020 the researchers were closely mentored through their data collection and analysis, with RCSD's team in frequent contact to help shape their skills and approach as they worked, including visits to their field sites, workshops in Mandalay and Chiang Mai, and regular online engagement.

Their research covers a range of important academic endeavors across urban and rural settings—from the dry zone to highland ethnic areas—seeking to give thorough accounts of local people's and communities' experiences amid Myanmar's social, economic and environmental challenges. While the program will produce tangible output in the form of eight research reports published in the Understanding Myanmar's Development series, we are more proud of the growth we have seen in the research skills of our irrepressible group of committed *sayama*, and the small contribution we have made to restoring Myanmar's university research culture.

In 2021, in spite of the dual challenges of Covid-19 and the tyranny of the Myanmar coup, we have continued to work closely to finish putting together these monographs. RCSD remains committed to continued engagement and collaboration with our colleagues in Myanmar's universities, civil society, and beyond.

## Abstract

In recent years, the government of Myanmar has undertaken the construction of hydropower dams to fulfil the country's growing demand for electricity; among them is the Upper Paunglaung Dam in southern Shan State, home to mostly small Bamar villages. As construction was completed, 23 villages and around 8000 people were relocated and promised government compensation. Despite a supposedly uniform approach from the government, each village had distinct and complex compensation and relocation processes. Three villages of different sizes, ethnicity, and varied resettlement impacts were selected to study local perceptions on compensation and relocation, and how several years later they felt it had impacted their livelihoods. The research relies on extensive qualitative methods, mainly interviews with a range of actors involved – village committees, government officials, activists, and most importantly a representative cross-section of local farmers.

The research uncovered complex power relations between government, village representatives, leaders, and villagers throughout this process. While specific dynamics in each locality vary, we found that powerful, asset-rich people were largely the decision makers at the local level. Those with less power had little chance to engage in decision-making and a lack of knowledge and capital to shift to new livelihood activities. Inequality in these communities has been exacerbated by these unequal processes, and in many cases has led to devastating impacts. This monograph is a new critical perspective on dam projects and their impacts in Myanmar, laying bare local processes where corruption and privilege remain rife.

Keywords: hydropower, livelihoods, power relations, state projects, Shan State, Myanmar

## စာတမ်းအကျဉ်းချုပ်

**ဆည်စီမံကိန်းကြောင့် နေရာဖယ်ရှားရွှေ့ပြောင်းမှုနှင့် ဒေသခံ စွမ်းအား၊** အထက်ပေါင်းလောင်းဆည်စီမံကိန်း၏ ပြန်လည် နေရာချထားခြင်း နှင့် နစ်နာကြေးပေးလျော်ခြင်း လုပ်ငန်းစဉ် များကြောင့် သဘောထားကွဲလွဲပျံ့နှံ့သွားသောရွာများနှင့် ကျယ် ပြန့်လာသော မညီမျှမှုများ။

လက်ရှိနှစ်များတွင်နိုင်ငံ၏ ကြီးထွားလာသော လျှပ်စစ်စွမ်းအား လိုအပ်ချက် ကို ဖြည့်စွမ်းရန် ရေအားလျှပ်စစ်တမံများ တည်ဆောက်ခြင်းကို မြန်မာ အစိုးရက တာဝန်ယူဆောင်ရွက်ပါသည်။ ထိုတမံများအထဲမှ ဗမာရွာငယ် အများစုရှိသော ရှမ်းပြည်တောင်ပိုင်းအထက် ပေါင်းလောင်းဆည် ဖြစ် ပါသည်။ ၎င်းဆည်တည်ဆောက်ရန် ကျေးရွာပေါင်း(၂၃) ရွာ၊ လူဦးရေ ၈၀၀၀ ခန့် ကို အစိုးရက နစ်နာကြေးပေးမည်ဟု ကတိပေးခဲ့ပြီး နေရာရွှေ့ပြောင်းစေ ခဲ့သည်။ အစိုးရထံမှ တူညီသောကိုင်တွယ်ဖြေရှင်းနည်းဟု မှတ်ယူ သော်ငြားလည်း ရွာအသီးသီးတွင် မတူကွဲပြားပြီး ရောထွေးမှုပုံစံအမျိုးမျိုးရှိ နေသော ပြန်လည်နေရာချထားခြင်းနှင့် နစ်နာကြေးပေးအပ်ခြင်းများ ဖြစ်ပေါ် လေ့ရှိနေပါသည်။ နှစ်များစွာကြာလာသည့်အခါ သက်ရောက်မှုများရှိခဲ့သည့် ၎င်းတို့၏အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်းမှုအပေါ် ဒေသခံများ မည်သို့ခံစားခဲ့ရ ကြောင်းနှင့် နစ်နာကြေးပေးခြင်းနှင့် ပြန်လည်နေရာချထားခြင်းအပေါ် ဒေသခံများ၏ သဘောထားအမြင်များကို လေ့လာရန် မတူညီသော အရွယ်အစား၊ လူမျိုးစု နှင့် ပြန်လည်နေရာချထားခြင်း အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှု အမျိုးမျိုးဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသည့် ကျေးရွာ(၃)ရွာကို ရွေးချယ်ခဲ့ပါသည်။ ဤ သုတေသနသည် ကျယ်ပြန့်သောအရည်အသွေးဆိုင်ရာ နည်းလမ်းများပေါ် အခြေပြုထားပြီး အဓိကအားဖြင့် လေ့လာရာအကြောင်းအရာ၏ အခန်း

ကဏ္ဍအသီးသီးတွင် ဆက်စပ်ပါဝင်သူများကို တွေ့ဆုံမေးမြန်းမှုများ ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ပါသည်။ ကျေးရွာကော်မတီများ၊ အစိုးရဝန်ထမ်းများ နှင့် တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများကို မေးမြန်းခြင်းများပြုလုပ်ခဲ့သကဲ့သို့ အရေးကြီးဆုံးအချက်ဖြစ်သည့် မတူညီကွဲပြားသော ဒေသခံလယ်သမားများ၏ အခြေအနေပေါင်းစုံနှင့် စကားသံများကို ညီမျှစွာကိုယ်စားပြုနိုင်ရေးအတွက်လည်း မေးမြန်းမှုများကို သေချာစွာ ရွေးချယ်ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ပါသည်။ ဤ သုတေသနသည် ယင်းဖြစ်စဉ်တစ်ရပ်လုံးမှတစ်ဆင့် အစိုးရ၊ ကျေးရွာကိုယ်စားလှယ်များ၊ ကျေးရွာ လူကြီးများ နှင့် ရွာသူရွာသားများ အကြား ရောထွေးသော စွမ်းအားဆက်နွှယ်မှုများကို ဖော်ထုတ်ခဲ့ခြင်းဖြစ်ပါသည်။ ထိုကဲ့သို့ စွမ်းအားနိမ့်ကျမှုနှင့်အတူ ဆုံးဖြတ်ချက်ချသည့်ကိစ္စများတွင် ပါဝင်နိုင်ရန် အခွင့်အရေးနည်းပါးခြင်းနှင့် အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်းမှုအသစ်ကို ပြောင်းလဲပြုလုပ်ရန် ပညာနှင့် အရင်းအနှီးချို့တဲ့ခြင်းများ ဖြစ်လာစေပါသည်။ လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း မညီမျှမှုကို ထိုမညီမျှသည့်ဖြစ်စဉ်များကြောင့် ပိုမိုဆိုးရွားစေခဲ့ပြီး များစွာသော အခြေအနေများတွင်လည်း ဆိုးရွားသော အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုများကို ဦးတည်လာစေခဲ့ပါသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ထူပြောသော အခွင့်ထူးခံနှင့် ချစားမှုတို့ရှိနေသည့် ဒေသ၏ဖြစ်စဉ် များကို လှစ်ဟပြခြင်း၊ ဆည်စီမံကိန်းများနှင့် ယင်း၏အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုများအပေါ် ဆန်းစစ်ဝေဖန်သော အမြင်သစ် တစ်ခုဖြစ်ပါသည်။

#### အဓိကစကားစုများ (Keywords)

ရေအားလျှပ်စစ်၊ အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်းမှုများ၊ စွမ်းအားဆက်နွှယ်မှုများ၊ အစိုးရစီမံကိန်းများ၊ ရှမ်းပြည်နယ်၊ မြန်မာ

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## INTRODUCTION

This study provides a new perspective to research on hydropower dam displacement in Southeast Asia and the impact of state-led relocation and compensation schemes, by accounting for how power dynamics at the village level influenced subsequent livelihood outcomes. By taking an in-depth account, from a variety of perspectives, of the process through which the government negotiated with village leaders and how the leaders then engaged with their community, the research traces the circumstances in which generally powerful, wealthy and well-connected leaders and their friends benefitted at the expense of their fellow villagers. Women in particular experienced greater exclusion and subsequent hardship. Through the perspective given by conducting this project in a period five years on from the forced relocation, the study is able to connect these processes to lived human consequences across the resettlement sites.

Our work is based on three villages who were displaced as part of the Upper Paunglaung Dam project, forming a representation of 23 displaced communities. Though the dam is located in the Southern part of Myanmar's Shan State, it mainly impacted small ethnic Bamar villages. Under the country's successive decades of military-dominated dictatorships - which despite a period of quasi-civilian rule seems to have reasserted itself in 2021 - the state implemented a series of large-scale development projects. The devastating impact of these projects are largely well-documented, both in environmental studies and in the flawed and inadequate resettlement and compensation schemes. But,

particularly in Myanmar, there is little account for how local dynamics may also influence the forms of inequality that follow. The priority of government officials to empower certain village actors at the expense of others seems to have been part of an effort to avoid both scrutiny at the official level, as well as the inconvenience of directly confronting those whose lives were about to be upturned as their homes were left under water.

With this in mind, this study hopes to add value to the existing knowledge on dam displacement and how the impacts of mega-developments are played out through complex dynamics at the local level. The authors were only able to provide this account because of their close commitment to the field site and the people involved. By regularly travelling to the three study villages and forging close ties with communities and families, the study benefited from the trust and openness of so many impacted people who were willing to tell their stories. These testimonies are presented alongside an investigative account of how power was used and often abused.

In the following pages, some attention is paid to the dam project and existing literature, which helps define something of a research gap in the absence of understanding of local dynamics at the village level, while also helping define the concept of local power relations in the constantly-evolving development context of rural Myanmar. However, the primary value of the research is in the chapters that follow the short introduction, where local accounts have been compiled and analyzed. It tells a contrasting story of those thriving through greed and corruption, others barely coping with displacement, grief and loss, concluding with only a faint trickle of hope.

## **The Upper Paunglaung Dam and the Displacement of Villages**

The Upper Paunglaung Dam was one of the final projects to gain approval and be constructed under the country's full military regime before the stalled transition to civilian government commenced - though it was not fully operational until 2015. Several years prior, General Than Shwe's military authority justified the plans by

claiming there was a need to implement hydropower dams to raise the standard of living of the population and support the economic development of Myanmar. Despite the transition to U Thein Sein's nominally civilian government in 2011, the state continued to implement the mega projects which had been planned under Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) rule. This particular project was implemented to partly serve the growing electricity needs of Myanmar's new purpose-built capital city, Nay Pyi Taw.

The Ministry of Electrical Power (MOEP)<sup>1</sup> with financial and construction support from the Chinese government, had previously completed the Lower Paunglaung Dam on the Paunglaung River, which flows through Shan State before joining the Sittaung River in Mandalay Division. The Ministry then set their sights on exploiting the further resource upstream, and so in 2005 commissioned the construction of this new dam. The feasibility and design process was overseen by the Swiss company AF Colenco, part of the AF group based in Sweden, while the Yunnan Machinery Export Company agreed to provide machinery and equipment, with British and German firms also involved in the project (Aung Shin, 2015).

With Nay Pyi Taw home to large numbers of bureaucrats, grossly underutilized highways, empty infrastructure and state-run resorts, the government demanded that an expanded grid was required to cater to the needs of this sparse new patch of concrete in Central Myanmar. The dam itself is located on the Paunglaung River around 26 miles from Pyinmana Town, between Nay Pyi Taw and the hilly Shan and Kayah states, home to diverse ethnic groups. The location of the dam at the southern end of the Paunglaung Valley was previously one of the only fertile plains along the valley area. There was little or no visible public consultation before the project went ahead. This was because hydropower projects in the past in Myanmar have had no real

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1. In 2016, The Ministry of Electrical Power (MOEP) merged with the Ministry of Energy to form the Ministry of Electricity and Energy (MOEE). To avoid confusion, we will continue to refer only to MOEP or the 'Ministry' throughout the paper, even when referring to the new ministry.

need to attain the consent of the population, despite the fact that they had gradually been declining in the degree of legitimacy afforded to them, with the recent rise in civil society opposition highlighting the limited extent to which current energy policy is legitimated (Foran et al., 2017).

Prior to construction, the Tatmadaw sent in troops to occupy some of the land which had formed part of a ceasefire agreement with the Kayan New Land Party, with one report documenting this increased militarization in the construction period, including forced labour (Kayan Women's Union, 2008). But in spite of small protests by some locals supported by a network of NGOs, project construction was underway by 2006, finalized in 2013 and connected to the grid in 2015. The opening of the 140 MW dam formed a 61 square kilometer reservoir, flooding the entire valley that was home to 23 villages of around 8000<sup>2</sup> ethnic Shan, Kayan and Burmese residents. These residents were all forced to relocate.

The immediate environmental consequences were apparent with 6,100 hectares of forest land and cultivated rice fields completely drowned and the delicate river ecosystem facing further deterioration. In the years that followed, the 23 communities faced upheaval, dislocation and livelihood insecurity, much of which has been documented in a report compiled by Physicians for Human Rights (2015), which provides a strong account of forced displacement and the human rights violations associated with the Upper Paunglaung Dam. The report traces how basic principles and guidelines were ignored in the construction of the dam, with locals having limited knowledge about the structure and functions of the different levels of government, human rights principles or an avenue to contest decision-making. They documented how the flawed displacement process led to the loss of jobs and income, as well as increased food insecurity, poverty, and limits on access to water.

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2. There is some conjecture over this figure. The figure of 8000 was used by the government, but local sources suggest it might be as much as 15,000. Likewise, household numbers recorded in each village are also quite unreliable, due to different census methods and some numbers including those who have temporarily migrated out of the community.

Most critically, the report concluded that the compensation programs were ‘inadequate’ as they ignored sustainability of livelihoods. The government moved most of the 23 villages to a large settlement and each village was allotted a section of land, but without formal ownership documents. Though villagers received plots to build new houses, and limited money to assist in their relocation, the government did not follow basic principles of transparency in explaining their plans for relocation and compensation. The limited agricultural land that was received was of notably poor soil quality and unable to come close to compensating for what was lost.

The report traces how the villagers attempted to forge livelihoods in new industries and create new sources of income, but employment was less stable, incomes were lower, and no vocational training was provided by the government to overcome the challenges of livelihoods in the resettlement areas. With the drowning of areas that had traditionally been used for farming, fishing and foraging, livelihood security was weakened across almost all households. The paper also found high rates of depression and suicide among the displaced population, most likely caused by the struggles of households after relocation. Despite this reality on the ground, officials from the MOEP seemed to unanimously consider the project a success and necessary for ongoing electricity demand.

The core findings identified by the report closely aligned with what was found in our initial scoping visits and interviews, and these challenges are uncovered in greater detail in this research. However, while the negative livelihood impacts of the dam were well understood, there was limited accounts of the local dynamics and processes which influenced where villages were to be resettled and who in each village was to access different amounts of compensation. Across the affected communities, local people often immediately reflected grievances not just with the government, but with their own leaders and committees and what they perceived to be greed and corruption.

With the relative lack of understanding of this both in regard to the Upper Paunglaung Dam more specifically, but also dam

implementation programs across Myanmar more broadly, this research set out to provide an account of these processes. The hope is that not only is this relevant for understanding injustice and inequality in the Paunglaung area, but it can lead to a more vigorous debate on how state and civil society engagement with local politics is a crucial part of achieving more equitable outcomes following displacement from mega developments – this is a necessary exercise in spite of the overwhelming evidence that there is no such thing as a sustainable dam.



**Figure 1.1** The Upper Paunglaung Dam under construction in 2008.  
*Source: Irrawaddy News*



**Figure 1.2** The Upper Paunglaung Dam upon completion.  
*Source: Mizzima News*





**Figure 1.3** The dam was built to partly support Nay Pyi Taw's surging demand for electricity. *Source: Business Insider*

## Research Questions

- What were the major social and livelihood impacts of forced resettlement as a result of the Upper Paunglaung dam?
- In processes of relocation and compensation, what were the respective interactions between government officials, village leaders/committees and regular villagers, and how did this lead to distorted power relations at the village level?
- Five years after displacement, with respect to this power divide between village committees, village elites and regular villagers, how did this lead to divergent livelihood and social outcomes?

## **Literature Review**

### **Dam displacement in Southeast Asia and local power relations in Myanmar**

As an initial basis for exploring debates on hydropower dams in Southeast Asia, the academic literature is almost unanimous in condemning dams as environmentally destructive and the cause of significant long term social and economic dislocation, despite efforts by state or private actors to conduct relevant impact assessments. Cernea (1997) provides a thorough account of the social impacts of investment in hydropower infrastructure, the associated displacement and resettlement, and the severity of impacts to communities. Throughout the 1990s, the World Bank was a major actor in supporting these projects in the region, and it is clear that in spite of attempts to support livelihood transitions, the core problem in involuntary displacement has been people's loss of livelihood and the potential for impoverishment. In spite of the poor social and environmental record of the proliferation of dam projects in that era, dams seem to be in the midst of a resurgence in the minds of state actors in the Mekong region, with the "shifting geopolitics of river and region" meaning strategic imperatives are largely behind their construction, rather than material necessity (Hirsch, 2016).

Across several decades, communities continue to face a familiar pattern of forced displacement, where existing production systems are dismantled, valuable land, trees, and other income generating assets are lost. Most notably, dams affect the livelihoods of fishing communities, as many local traditional fishermen have seen their sustenance reduced or destroyed by dam construction (Cernea, 1997). Though there is a tendency among critics to view the nature of Chinese-supported dams such as the Upper Paunglaung as inherently more insidious (Lamb and Dao, 2017), there is not much evidence to suggest those funded by the World Bank were somehow less destructive to local communities.

The work of Blake and Barney (2018, p. 21) considers the long-term social ruptures and structural injustice caused dams as a form of "slow violence" in which "every day, non- spectacular forms of suffering, oppression and neglect" continue to be present

after the construction of the dam. This research supports this framing through showing how it is not only the immediate material consequences of displacement, but the long, drawn-out economic and social ruptures which prevail as a result of state action, discourses and often quite open intimidation.

Kuezner, Campbell et al. (2012) discuss the impact of hydropower developments in the context of upstream-downstream relations in the Mekong river basin, providing strong justification for why issues related to hydropower policy can be viewed through a similar lens across Southeast Asia. The authors argue that geopolitical and socio-economic conditions, and the impacts of upstream dams and downstream localities with respect to water flow and sediment flow, unilaterally bring benefits to elites and urbanites while adversely impacting populations both at the site of the dam and also downstream. Hydropower development along the mainstream of the Mekong River and its tributaries cause transboundary effects across the Mekong basin, with dam projects across the Mekong river basin also impacting local communities across Myanmar.

With this cross-boundary geographical relevance, some studies have followed a similar approach to this project in seeking to use the perspective provided by time to understand villagers' perceptions towards projects several years after completion. Delang and Toro (2011) looked at two communities affected by dams 13 years later to explore the lasting divide between the state and villagers. Villagers had lasting dissatisfaction with the government because they did not want compensation in the form of money for their land and did not want to relocate to a new site where there was no farmland and as is the case in this study. Villagers yearned to return to their old places to grow paddy rice. The trust deficit caused by these broken promises has persisted to this day. Further, the lack of organizational or knowledge capacity to contest government decisions and actions remains a relevant issue, limiting local awareness both at the time and in the present. However, it is not only states who are the subject of complex relations with its citizens regarding these megaprojects, but also civil society and NGOs who through their interactions may sometimes serve inadvertently to strengthen the proponents of dam building and weaken community resistance (Baird, 2016).

One major factor which is often overlooked in dam construction and is unable to be accounted for in compensation schemes are the cultural impacts of displacement. In Laos, state dam building plans have neglected ethnic sensitivities, leading to dam displacement where people suffer 'cultural trauma' through the severing of social networks and ties and the forced disconnect from their traditional lands (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004). In this study similar issues surfaced, with locals not only facing the material consequences of displacement but also a sense of cultural loss from no longer being able to cultivate their traditional lands using traditional methods, and also the rupture of established cultural systems.

Another key theme that emerges in the literature on Southeast Asian hydropower developments is the inherent tension between the state desire for economic development, and local power as mobilized through civil society groups. Simpson (2013) traces how environmental movements have combined an activist diaspora with an expanding domestic civil society, where cultivated forms of expertise and international networks have been an effective counter to state hegemony. This dynamic is also explored by scholars who argue that a socio-historical approach can be used to examine how ongoing interactions between the military-state and local groups shape the forms of resistance that are present in upper Myanmar (Foran, Kiik et al. 2017). They argue, using the example of the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State, that policy legitimization is more influenced by 'elite argumentation' rather than more rational policy governance perspectives.

However, Kirchherr (2016) argues in the case of the Myitsone Dam, the success of civil society groups in forcing the government to suspend construction seems to have been primarily achieved through the success in framing the dam as threatening to national cultural heritage, rather than through appeals more explicitly to the impact on the surrounding community. In Paunglaung, despite some presence of civil society prior to construction as well as some negative press coverage as it got underway, there was never a sufficiently widespread movement nor the knowledge networks for opposition efforts to form a viable counter to state power.

While the discussion of power dynamics in dam megaprojects is thus primarily conducted in the context of pre-construction

imperatives and state-civil society contests, there is also some research which has looked at power relations in resettlement and compensation which has some relevance to this study. Brown and Xu (2010), for example, examined state-community relations in the resettlement policies along the Nu River in China. They examined how the state's commitment to a top-down approach completely disempowered local communities, failing to provide resettlement assistance programs or livelihood transition trainings, while highland agriculture suffered due to the physical displacement but also the failure to issue land certification.

Some research, such as one article based on resettlement in Central Vietnam, argues that there are cases where governments have actively included local actors in the process of defining their own resettlement strategy which led to improved livelihood outcomes several years later (Nguyen et al., 2015). However, in the Myanmar context, Hnin Wut Yee (2017) examined resettlement issues for communities along the Salween River affected by large scale hydropower, finding that these development projects lacked any form of real public participation as local people were systematically excluded from any part on planning their transition to new sites and livelihoods.

Primarily the literature on resettlement and compensation negotiations centers on the interactions between state actors and community leaders, rather than exploring more nuanced dynamics within affected communities. The work of Katus, Suhardiman et al. (2016) is one major exception to this. In examining state-local tensions and the shaping of resettlement processes along the Nam Gnouang River in Laos, the paper explores how both powerful and less powerful actors direct and influence resettlement processes. In discussing how potential resettlement sites were negotiated locally between relevant villages, it explores how the different village heads participate in the actual negotiation processes with close attention to how village power relations in determining resettlement processes and outcomes reflect the existing 'power geometry'. According to the authors, this is manifested in the villagers' relative level of agency in negotiations around the resettlement site, which stems from their own socio-economic, cultural and political conditions. Hydropower

development and resettlement thus forms a sort of ‘technology’, they argue, through which the power relations between different actors such as villagers, local authorities, and dam developers determine processes and outcomes of dam resettlement.

The article represents a rare attempt by scholars to place villagers themselves at center stage relative to the more common protagonists and antagonists in dam resettlement research – state actors and civil society. However, while the article provides interesting insight into how different agencies and power structures play out in determining resettlement sites, it is still mainly focused on village elites as negotiators relative to other actors. There is thus a significant gap which this research aims to fill in exploring how power relations within local village social hierarchies lead to divergent outcomes within the village, rather than viewing the village as a homogenous whole.

Finally, to help provide a degree of conceptual framing amid this dearth of research on inter-village power in dam resettlement, it is appropriate to briefly consider how other scholars have approached engagements with local power dynamics amid other research contexts across rural and upland Myanmar. On Myanmar, recent studies have found that decision making around land use remains centered among those with greater means, while smallholders are consistently denied much agency. Lack of access to knowledge and financial capital consistently limits the space for equal access to decision-making processes in situations where their interests may be different from more powerful actors (Lunsgaard-Hansen et al., 2018). Also, in the context of land governance, which is closely related to issues of land displacement, researchers have found that social relations remain power laden, leading to policies and legal frameworks continuing to be dominated by elite actors (Suhardiman et al., 2019)

A study by Woods (2019, p. 10), while concerning land grabs in the context of uneven agrarian change in Shan State, provides useful insight into the role of village elites and local strongmen through the use of violence, coercion and consent. The hierarchies of power which exist, notably town money lenders and elites which exist at the local level in these small communities and are

framed as ‘silent strongmen’, are seen as playing a major role in the “distribution of dispossession”. While the context is not identical, there are striking familiarities with the setting of this study, whereby these complex power structures directly lead to uneven forms of livelihood change and increased inequality in land access.

While this exclusion of smallholder farmers and less powerful actors is therefore apparent in land and livelihood contexts, the historical foundations of village relations and social hierarchies provide further support to many of the patterns which emerged in this study. Khin Zaw Win (2006) describes a set of historically formed institutional arrangements across village/ward localities across Myanmar, including local election systems and state managed organizations to which villagers hold strong obligations. While they are not identical across the diverse landscape, the authority embedded in village level hierarchies and reciprocal relationships leave little room for household agency or direct involvement in decision making. Further, in assessing land inheritance transmission, Huard (2019) shows how, more than institutional frameworks, it is local relationships forged over time which are used to stake claims on things, but which also carries conceptions of both authority and responsibility with it.

Huard’s work also shows how in central Myanmar the *lu-gyi* (village headmen) craft their position and use relations to legitimize political order in the village (2019). While perhaps not directly relevant to this context, this ethnography can help provide an appreciation for how village level social and political structures have deeply embedded forms of local understanding and attached forms of obligation, which help explain the challenge for ‘regular’ villagers in dam-affected communities to challenge or stake their own claim amid negotiations led by powerful headmen. These understandings help situate local power in Myanmar as something with strong social and cultural norms and customs, and deep historical foundations which limit genuine forms of agency.

This breadth of literature therefore helps situate the challenges of communities affected by the Upper Paunglaung within broader trends associated with dam displacement in Southeast Asia. We then identified how this research might fill a particular research

gap in providing a grounded study of how interactions between local elites and villagers are a crucial part of the resettlement and compensation process and the consequences that follow, while the short analysis of how other studies have identified influential village hierarchies in rural Myanmar provides a crucial foundation to launch into this research.

## **Research Sites and Methodology**

We selected three villages with the intention of forming a representative sample of the entire 23 villages displaced by the Upper Paunglaung Dam. These villages were selected for their diversity in their experiences of displacement and also their varying sizes and ethnic and religious compositions. While it is impossible to capture the whole experience of affected villagers, by conducting fieldwork in three villages we were satisfied that we were at least accounting for a multitude of perspectives and experiences. We also decided to spend more time in one of these villages, Htein Pin, as this was our initial introduction to the field, and it contained a strong range of actors willing to speak openly about the process and subsequent outcomes. The other two selected villages, Lien Le and Kan Hla, served as a way of countering and solidifying the ideas and narratives that emerged in Htein Pin. The chapters that follow explore the changes in the community structures and livelihoods in greater detail, so this section contains just a brief overview of the field sites.

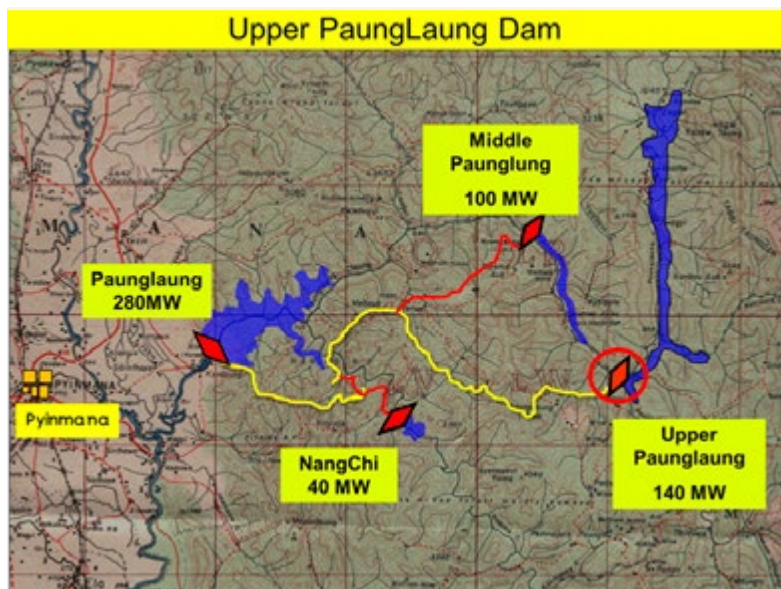
Prior to its relocation, Htein Pin was a village of 333 households (according to local records) where the vast majority of households were engaged in agriculture. The main agricultural activities were cultivating paddy rice, ground nuts and turmeric. Paddy rice was grown both on farmland and on the mountain slopes through shifting agriculture. Some farmers owned their own land, while some paid rent to others to engage in agriculture, though all villagers were able to freely engage in shifting agriculture. All households in Htein Pin are ethnic Bamar and practice Buddhism. Following relocation far away from the old site where it was largely inappropriate for continuing their livelihoods, the village underwent quite dramatic social and economic changes. The majority of households



struggled to continue engaging in traditional agriculture and were forced into unreliable forms of income and debt cycles. Due to these forms of livelihood insecurity, large numbers of households abandoned the relocation site and set up small communities back near their old land. These processes and the social and economic ruptures are covered in detail in chapter three.

The second study site is the village of Lien Le, a community of 170 households in which 49 households first had to move in 2006 for the construction of a bridge, before moving a second time in the dam relocation process. This situation created distinct displacement dynamics in the community and two phases of economic and social rupture. Like Htein Pin, all households are ethnic Bamar and practice Buddhism. Before relocation, villagers in Lien Le also had the ability to engage in shifting agriculture and largely had self-sufficient livelihoods. Following the second relocation most families faced increased livelihood insecurity due to the poor location of the resettlement site, although some wealthy villagers thrived with access to the main road, causing significant social disunity which chapter three likewise examines.

The final study site is Kan Hla, a village of 92 households with a population of 482 at the time of resettlement. Unlike the other two study villages, Kan Hla is a predominantly ethnic Kayan village where most households practice Christianity. The village had relatively prosperous livelihoods compared to the surrounding Bamar villages, with most households enjoying self-sufficiency through rotational farming and good access to land. The village relocated to an area not too far from their existing agricultural land and so while their paddy fields were destroyed, many villagers were able to make a trip by boat across the reservoir to access good quality mountain land for cultivation. Despite most households facing increased livelihood insecurity, Kan Hla remained relatively unified throughout this resettlement and compensation process due to increased community cohesion and social inclusion.



**Figure 1.4** Location of Upper Paunglaung dam and the flooded areas.

Source: MOEP



**Figure 1.5** Map showing old villages and new resettlement sites.

Source: MOEP



# 2

## LOCAL POWER DYNAMICS IN PROCESSES OF COMPENSATION AND RELOCATION

This research found that the processes through which people in communities along the Paunglaung River were compensated and relocated have a close relationship with subsequent livelihood outcomes. In order to later analyze these outcomes, this chapter pays close attention to the dynamics and interactions between different actors in the process. These interactions, and the relationships and establishment of structures in the compensation/relocation processes, can show the presence of power, or lack thereof, among the various actors; notably government officials, village chiefs and leadership committees, and 'regular' local people.

First, the chapter focuses on interactions between government officials and village chiefs in the processes of negotiation, which provides insight into how the government managed their process of local consultation. The chapter then explores how relocation and compensation committees were formed in each of the villages, who was involved and how they conducted their work, revealing how these committees were generally made up of powerful village elites, rather than truly representing the interests of the majority of poorer farmers. Building on these notions, the chapter examines how these relations played out in the processes of negotiation in determining the location where each village was to resettle, and how compensation was determined at the local level.

## **Interactions Between Officials And Village Chiefs in the Formation of Village Committees**

### **Absence of transparency and clarity in the early stages of dam development**

Government officials from the Ministry of Electrical Power for the most part consulted and engaged only with village leaders, rather than directly with local people. This section traces these interactions, highlighting the absence of transparent communication at the local level, and the processes through which power initially became centralized among village elites.

In 2006, preparations for the construction of the dam got underway, but initially the government did not formally make any statements or announcements to local communities. Designs for the project had been prepared as early as 2002, and the environmental and social assessment surveys were completed in advance. Though this was well known among the top level of government officials, it was not communicated to the local community until much later. This was recounted by one community elder:

I heard about the dam construction and remember hearing back all those years ago that we would have to move. But it was not from an official - I am not even sure who said it to me. Before construction, no government officials notified us or held meetings, and they did not negotiate with local people.

Village leaders were not notified until much too late, and so community members likewise had no knowledge of anything that was happening, and no urgent concerns for their future. U Maung, a committee member, said that his friends in the city told him, “One of the dams was being constructed, and it may be in some part of the Paunglaung region. Your village may be included and come under the reservoir.” In 2010, a General from the Shan State government held an official meeting with local people, but just to give information to the township chairman and some select village leaders. Without negotiating or consulting with local people, it was clear the government had already made a decision and were to promptly proceed with the project.

Before the dam construction, there was likewise no state General Administrative Department presence across the dam watershed area, with the only bureaucratic presence being local administrative structures in the impacted villages. Although the area is not numerically dominated by Pa-O people (who only form a small minority among the affected villages), Pinlaung Township is one of three townships that falls under the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone. The consequence of this, it seems, is that governing authorities in Shan State have a less active presence in these areas, meaning there was minimal oversight and an absence of familiar avenues for local people to approach. U Win , a hundred household leader who was also part of the local government staff, reflected:

The government should talk transparently to local people about the consequences of the dam construction, but they forced villagers to move without saying anything when the relocation process was already underway. If villagers clearly knew what was going on, they would not agree with this project and would not allow it to continue.

By 2012, getting closer to the time that had been slated for relocation, the government decided to formally arrange a committee with members from impacted villages to manage the compensation and relocation process. Officials and engineers from the MOEP held a meeting to discuss the steps that would follow, but they did not invite all levels of village leadership. One of the village's ten household leaders (a locally elected representative) said: "I was not invited to attend the meeting but I really wanted to know what was going on so I demanded to the chairman that I participate in every meeting." Many villagers expressed a strong feeling that these meetings were clearly lacking in transparency. It was essential for the government to discuss the impact of the dam, they said, but instead they sought to avoid face to face encounters with local people and intentionally turned a blind eye to the sacrifices they would have to make, not giving them a chance to consult directly.

This meeting was, in essence, used to commence the process of organizing relocation and compensation committees for each



village. The officials directed the elected chairman of the 23 villagers to request from each village chairman that they conduct this process as an immediate initiative. This overall elected 'chairman' represents the two village tracts<sup>3</sup> which comprise all the villages included in the resettlement zone, as well as an additional handful of villages who were located at higher elevation so weren't required to move – 12 of the 23 affected villages were in Htein Pin village tract, with 11 in Tha Pyae Gone village tract. According to the organizational structure mandated by the central government, the village chairman is given full authority to select the committee members for each village, and he is the chief decision maker in the whole process. However, while U Saw was the present chairman, there were also two former chairmen who had significant background influence and commanded certain loyalties in this process; U Kaung and U Pe.

After the officials had directed the chairman to manage the process of forming the committees, the officials promptly left the monastery, seemingly satisfied that their duty was complete and responsibility had been passed over to 'local' leadership. The present chairman and the two former chairmen then gathered together all 23 village leaders and some senior villagers to select the committee members for each village. According to a local villager who attended and observed the process, the chairman then proceeded to shout with a loudspeaker, essentially initiating a process where the committee members for each village were chosen on the spot, without any formal discussion or vote. Some villagers were interested in the selection of committee members and dropped by to observe this process, but most were unaware or uninterested.

Based on the chairman's own knowledge and connections, witnesses recall how he would first call a prominent village leader from each location to begin the process of forming a group of men together, anointing them to take responsibility for the process in each village. Rather than following any sort of systematic process,

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3. A village tract is the smallest formal unit of rural governance above a village in the official national structure, generally comprising of several villages covering a particular area. Several tracts form a township.



the chairman and the leader would then call together a group of well-known people to form a 'committee'. Interviews with those present, and our subsequent enquiries, show that the men who were called to come forth were generally wealthy and well-connected, with no attention paid to ensuring a diversity of voices in the village were included. One villager who attended this rather frenzied affair observed that the "selection of the members did not follow any sort of voting system. They just selected people who had a good relationship with village leaders, and powerful people who they believed would follow the leader's interests".

While this process played out for each village, government bureaucrats also went about strategically wooing U Saw through personal favors so that he would sign off on the final overall compensation agreement. A local activist who attended this meeting provided evidence that, at first, the chairman was reluctant to sign the compensation agreement due to concerns over details, but in the period that followed officials from MOEP then brought him to Nay Pyi Taw where they treated him with various luxuries. He claimed that the chairman became close with them which led to him agreeing and signing off on all the arrangements put in place. The activist also claimed, controversially, that part of this wooing effort involved the Ministry constructing the chairman's big new house - totally free of charge.

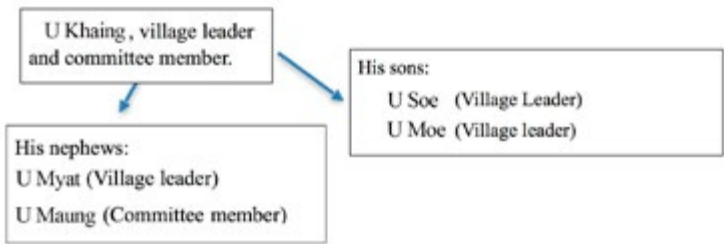
### **Village committees and the concentration of power, wealth and male control**

Following this rather haphazard meeting and process, each village had appointed a group of at least five people to take charge. This section briefly describes the groups of exclusively male community members in the case of the three study sites, and how they are connected through family ties, wealth and power.

In Htein Pin village, a committee of five was chosen through the unstructured meeting in the hall, but the village leader and former leaders were also involved. The chosen committee members were U Htwe, a high school teacher, U Kyaing, a 70-year-old village elder who was a part of village affairs since he was 24, U Ko Ko and U Maung who were wealthy landowners and previous village

leaders, and U Kyaing’s nephew. U Wai Yum Phyto, A Htein Pin local who was also the current village tract leader, was chosen to lead the process at the village level, while U Kaung, a former leader, was also to be included in arrangements. In Htein Pin, the village leader is selected once every four years through a vote, but the former chairman also retains much influence and respect in the community.

In interviews with village leaders, they openly admitted that they were handpicked, rather than selected through any formal voting process. The committee members and village leaders were all closely connected, either through family ties or other connections, and they would all reasonably be considered among the wealthiest in the community. At the time, this did not cause much concern among other community members, as they assumed that the committee was acting in all of their best interests, but after relocation poorer villagers became more aware of how their voices were excluded. The diagram here gives an examples of the close family connections between five of these leaders and committee members:



**Figure 2.1** Family connections between village leaders and committee members

When we approached U Maung about this process, he reflected the prevailing sentiment among committee members that they were entitled to act on their community’s behalf:

On the recommendation of the chairman, I was chosen as a committee member, so I had to participate in the compensation and relocation processes. When the chairman mentioned my name as a selected committee member, the villagers who attended the selection meeting did not say anything. The chairman

showed the list of committee members to the MOEP who accepted his recommendation. So, the chairman had full authorization to form the committee and select members, and the government gave us the authority to negotiate with villagers through the whole process.

He further said that the government knew that the relocation and compensation processes were complex, and that if they had to communicate with villagers directly it might lead to conflict. In the interview, he was eager to frame this as a dynamic of the committee members acting as 'interpreters' between the villagers and government officials, which gives an indication of the intentional distance placed between authorities and the community.

Poorer villagers said that they were not surprised by the formation of the committee, because the members were all previous leaders, current leaders and those who generally influenced village affairs. Initially, there was no conflict between village leaders and villagers, so the majority of villagers did not worry and did not expect there to be issues relating to unequal amounts of compensation and difference in land plot allocations. Some villagers told of how they initially trusted and respected the committee, believing they would act only in the best interest of the whole village. In the early stage of the process, villagers therefore did not discuss these issues with the committee members. Only after the relocation and compensation processes were underway did they realize the injustice that was taking place. A 41-year-old woman said:

I heard that according to the government's instructions a committee had to be formed, but I did not know when and how the committee was formed. I have no doubt that the committee was formed only through the actions of the village leader rather than through a voting system. We had no input whatsoever.

The committee members, when approached, tried to downplay their role in this process. They claim that they were simply in charge of collecting data, rather than making any decisions, and given the size of the village, they had also asked younger villagers to help them collect information from the households. However,

as the following sections show, the committee had significant influence in determining where the community resettled, and who accessed appropriate compensation.

Meanwhile, in Lein Lee village a similar pattern unfolded. The headman U Aye told of how the government directed him to choose committee members, so he then “selected the members and managed the committee”. After his leadership term was completed, he authorized his successor, U Lay , to take on leading the compensation committee. In his words it was clear that full authority was given to the leaders to manage all stages of the local process.

One local woman, who now considers herself an activist working to claim justice for those impacted by the process, told of how

village leaders selected committee members only among each other. All the leaders were rich and connected to the previous village leader and the current leader. They selected themselves and formed a secret agreement among themselves, allocating responsibility among members such as accounting, measuring and checking-off lists.

Across the three sample villages, no women were selected as committee members, reflecting a gender bias that existed throughout the area. The activist was keen to point this out:

There were no women members in the compensation and relocation committee. The village leader did not want women to participate in the committee, especially those like me who are outspoken. Simple female villagers were not interested in the process and they themselves think the event is not concerned with women, but this is an attitude I did not accept. Women should also have a chance to participate and communicate with local authorities. According to Myanmar culture, most households are headed by the male, and wives have to follow their husbands' lead. Village leaders do not like me because I can point out the biases among the committee and weaknesses of their compensation scheme.

In response to the absence of women in the committee, U Aye was unapologetic in his remarks, reflecting the degree to which women were dismissed in this process, as well as prevailing attitudes towards women which exist among these more powerful men:

I selected committee members hurriedly because the officials instructed us to form it urgently, so I did not ask women to participate in the process and I also did not consider women to be involved in the committee. In my opinion, the committee members must be men because women are only interested in looking after the home and taking care of their children.

In Kan Hla village, the small community of Kayan households, a similar process was followed to the other two villagers. Officials from the MOEP directed the headman U Naung to form a committee. He himself selected the committee without consulting anyone, and the members consisted entirely of male current village leaders and elders who were respected by most of the village. The main Kan Hla committee members were U Naung, U Kyaw, U Kyaw Win and U Ni, with other elders also unofficially involved. It is clear that, while inequality of opportunity and outcome very much existed in Kan Hla, the village remained more cohesive with less visible division than the other places of study. Most of the community respected their village leaders due to the influence they had before the project was underway, and so, for the most part, they followed and accepted the voice of the village leader.

The committee members at Kan Hla claimed that this process was uncontroversial, and that in reality there was not much work for the committee to do other than collect the necessary information. In fairness, the presence in Kan Hla of a community youth group and a women's group gives some evidence to the cohesiveness that existed at the time, and largely still does to this day. However, there was likewise an absence of women involved in the actual process, with one committee member making it clear that no women had told him that they wanted to participate. The prevailing dismissiveness towards women's concerns was clear: "women were not interested in the committee's responsibilities and women cannot be asked to decide these complex issues" he told us.

While the nature of the relationships between the village committees and their communities undoubtedly varied in different localities, it is clear through the tracing of this process that the government authorities made an intentional effort to distance themselves from managing or interacting with local people. A mechanism was created whereby the government could avoid responsibility for individual injustices or inequalities across each village, but these mechanisms were dominated by wealthy, connected men. The following sections show how this led to interactions which empowered those households at the expense of others.

## **Interactions between Village Leaders and the Community in Determining Relocation Sites**

### **Htein Pin Village**

Although most Htein Pin villagers wanted to relocate to the northern part of the old village because it was better equipped to continue practicing shifting agriculture, village elites determined otherwise. The commanding officer from the No.122 Army Battalion, which is situated just above the village, had a close relationship with the village chairman and some village leaders during that time and they frequently socialized together. According to a local woman, he told them that as their village has the greatest number of households among the 23 villages, they should relocate near the main road instead of the northern part of the old village. While most villagers did not want to move near the main road, the village chairman and many wealthy elites agreed with the officer, saying that it was beneficial for the village to be near both the main road and the Township hospital. This issue caused a lot of tension during this time, and many villagers said that they complained and were angry with the village chairman and village leader, but their protests were to no avail.

The new village site was chosen only with the input of three or four village leaders, giving no attention to dissenting perspectives. Daw Thaung, an elderly woman who has since moved back to near the old site, told us that:

The rich and more powerful villagers chose the location for Htein Pin village to be near hospitals, schools and good roads, but very far from our old village. If they chose the area to the north of our old village, our livelihood would not be as difficult as it is now as we could still practice our traditional agriculture.

Indeed, almost all of the villagers did not want to relocate near the main road, realizing that they would not substantially benefit from such proximity relative to the challenge of continuing to farm. Many locals said that their suggestions and complaints were not listened to or taken into consideration, and that only the rich and the village chairman decided by them without consulting regular villagers. It is clear that the issue led to a much greater sense of division within the community, and a feeling that the powerful were ignoring the rest of the community. U Aung , a young local villager, said:

I really did not want to move to the new village. Before relocation, we were united, we worked together, and we joined forces in conducting village affairs and village activities (social, economic, religious affairs). This was not the case after this all happened.

The physical relocation started in April 2013, with the government providing transportation to carry villagers' belongings. As Htein Pin village was the largest household among the 23 villages, it was the last village to move from the old site to the new village. Some claimed that the government used deceptive strategies to attract villagers to move to the relocation site, with U Hlaing saying that one strategy was to promise that those who moved first would be supported with additional cement in their new construction - but in reality, this never eventuated.

Even though the government had strategies to entice villagers to move, upon arrival the majority of them were left bewildered at being stuck somewhere without appropriate agricultural space for them to resume their livelihoods. Many of them claimed that

together they thought the village had already collectively made the decision to move to the north of the old village and they preferred to resettle there. In fact, people had already cleared the land there and were ready to rebuild and they even though the village committee agreed with them until this late change in decision. While nobody wanted to move, at least, they said, moving to that site meant they could keep using much of their existing farmland which had been cultivated for generations. It was only towards the end of the process when the village chairman and wealthy people expressed that they were eager to relocate near the main road, despite full knowledge of the desire of the majority of farmers.

Forced to follow the committee and chairman, villagers who were reliant on agriculture and wanted to settle near shifting cultivation areas were powerless to oppose the more powerful who had upended their decision. According to U Thar, a local farmer, the decision to choose the location was:

based on better access to transportation, schools and hospitals in the new village, but the poor did not want to relocate to these places because there were no farmlands in the new place. We were not able to influence or contest the decision of the rich. If we continued to stay in the old place, our livelihood would no doubt be better off.

After initially moving, U Htun was among the villagers who found their livelihood so difficult that they moved back to near the old site, which will be discussed in the following chapter. For those farmers who disagreed, there was no recourse available. A 74 year old woman said that:

We couldn't respond or fight and we did not dare to say anything because it was a government project. The village leaders announced that we had to move out of the reservoir area. All villagers destroyed their houses themselves and moved to a new location so I had to follow. I am really not happy in the new village.

Supposedly the government was officially meant to allocate land plots for each household area using a 'lucky draw' system. However,



in Htein Pin the villagers had limited chance to receive one of the more preferable spots in the new village. Instead, the village leaders and committee members determined a numbering system and plotted and arranged it using a housing plot map. Village leaders determined the plot numbers and recorded the names of each household's head, before assigning the number on the land plot. The villagers accepted the plot number with no ability to choose where they would be relocated. For example, often parents had lived together on the same compound as their children and their families, but they were then placed on opposite ends of the new village.

Some villagers found their new plots so impractical that they actually bought new land plots near the road. One villager said that their new place did not have easy access to water, so they had to buy a new area with easy access to water and pay 20 lakhs<sup>4</sup> for it. "At the beginning, we planned to move to a new area near Yay Soe village and planned to start our new life there" she said, "most of the villagers agreed with this initial plan." However, they were promised that the new place would be better in terms of education, health, transportation and infrastructure needs. She said they were promised that this place was going to become a city in the future, and the price of land was expected to rise which would make it easier to sell. The committee warned them that life would be harder if they moved to the agricultural site rather than near the road.

Most significantly, even from the perspective of the village leaders, the local people were not listened to, and the decision was made without discussion or consultation. U Maung, a committee member, former village leader, and owner of significant areas of land, made it clear to us that he thought the committee knew better than the majority of the villagers:

We had to find a new area. Htein Pin villagers wanted to relocate to the north of the old village but the committee members and the chairman did not accept what they said, and so we chose near the road. The

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4. A lakh is a common way term to refer to 100,000 kyats in Myanmar currency, and is equivalent to around \$70 USD

commanding officer from No.122 army suggested that this place is better for Htein Pin village because of the size of the village. So, we decided to follow his recommendations and find new agricultural land for each village, but the upland areas they were allocated could not grow paddy.”

U Thant Myint is reflective of a village committee that refused to engage with the perspectives of the villagers, believing they were not knowledgeable enough on issues of relocation. It is clear here, from the perspectives of many local villagers, and the committee members in Htein Pin, that the relocation site was determined by a group of wealthy and relatively powerful landowners with connections to other figures of authority. As chapter four will later show, those with sufficient wealth who could access greater compensation benefited more from this proximity to the road, while poorer farmers struggled to re-establish sustainable agricultural livelihoods.



**Figure 2.2** In Htein Pin, several wealthy villagers now have large concrete houses



**Figure 2.3** Villagers were also able to invest in vehicles and open shops



**Figure 2.4** In a stark contrast, poor villagers have rebuilt bamboo structures near their old land

### **Lein Lee village**

In Lein Lee village, located in a particularly hilly part of the valley, the case of how people were relocated to different sites due to various decision-making processes is best understood in two parts. First, a large section of the community was forced to move further up the mountain to allow for the construction of a bridge across the valley (which they suspect was a part of the preparation for the dam building plans that would follow). Second, the whole community was forced to move as one of the affected villages in the dam watershed. In both of these cases, while the government was undoubtedly influential in the dislocation of people, powerful village elites - those with access to financial and social capital - were important figures in determining relocation outcomes.

In 2006, 49 households were in the area where the Ministry of Construction decided to build a bridge at Lein Lee, giving households just two days to immediately vacate the construction site. Incredibly, the government did not give any advance notice, only informing residents that it was necessary for road building, although it suspiciously seems with hindsight that the bridge was built to assist with transport of dam materials and to deal with the rising water levels. Many villagers requested officials from the Ministry of Construction for more time to deconstruct their houses because they were made of brick, but the officials refused and ignored concerns about their belongings.

The government did not give any compensation to the 49 houses forced to initially move, and at that time they did not give any determination on where they were to resettle, simply demanding them to move from the construction site. All the households urgently needed to move from under the bridge to upland areas and build new shelters. Many said that in the past their houses were large and well-constructed, but now their houses were small and of low quality. Government officials determined land compensation using a lucky draw system. However, it was clear that rich villagers still had a chance to choose another plot if they did not like their drawn plot. Daw War, a 55 year old woman discussed this process:

Our land drawn by the government was very far away and on the top of the hill, and we could not build a house there because the land was filled with stone. So, I did not want to resettle there and I complained to the village leaders and the relocation committee. The committee replied that only if you hire a bulldozer with your own money you can change the plot. So, I hired a machine for 3 lakhs and cleaned a new plot beside the main road for me and my children's families.

Those who could afford to hire a machine had access to a better location. Knowledge and the willingness to confront the issue seemingly led to a better outcome, something that was beyond the reach of poor people who were allocated to impractical and poorly located plots and were afraid of causing issues with government officials. Illuminating this point is the case of a school teacher who did not own land or a house, but lived in a shelter provided by the government and was able to access compensation. An educated person like her had the willingness and connections to complain to the compensation committee, and as a result, she was given compensation. The teacher said that she benefitted from a close relationship with the committee in being able to come to a better arrangement.

While the government dictated the movement of the village, nonetheless village leaders were key decision makers and main actors in the processes concerning relocation. As the new site was on top of a stone mountain, many of the plots were located on the slope, making extraction of the soil and construction very difficult and often impossible. One of the villagers, Daw Yee, said:

I complained to the village leaders and the committee that the land I got was full with stone so I couldn't build a new shelter, so I asked to choose another one. The committee looked at my plot and decided to change us to another place. I asked the committee if I could settle in my agricultural land. During that time, the village leaders had great power in village affairs and the compensation and relocation processes. If

they said “yes,” it would happen - if they said “no” then it meant no. The village leaders are powerful men. I asked about my problem to village leaders and the committee but the committee could not help us. They replied “no, it was not possible”. Our family frequently explained and requested to village leaders and their committee with no success.

However, while most villagers were understandably fearful of raising the issue directly to the government, those who chose to defy the village committee actually had some degree of success. Daw Yee explained that she “did not give up and again complained to officials from the Ministry of Electrical Power, and finally they allowed my family to resettle in my agricultural land. So, in my opinion, officials from the Ministry are the main decision makers in relocation processes.” They were even successful in getting electricity connected to their new land. This particular family, although not exceedingly wealthy, had been more involved in village politics, and the male had previously refused overtures to become the village leader. This background enabled them to understand how to negotiate the issue and raise it to the government, whereas less politically involved villagers believed that absolute power was held by the committee

The majority of the villagers are simple and they do not dare to talk and complain to village leaders and committee, and they lack knowledge to take contest the decision even when they do not like the plot that they got with the lucky draw system. They simply accept and follow whatever the village leader says.” said one villager.

While this first experience with relocation was a textbook case of the reckless nature of state development plans under the SLORC regime, it nonetheless revealed how those with greater knowledge of local politics and connections to government and leadership could achieve a degree of recourse, while poor farmers were left to re-establish livelihoods on unfamiliar and unfavourable ground. By the time that the entire Lein Lee village had to move for a second time because of rising water levels from dam construction,

similar trends of wealth and access to power in determining relocation outcomes would come to the fore again.

The process for allocating land plots is a cause of much consternation in Lein Lee even to this day. While officially there was a supposedly random lucky draw system, as in Htein Pin there are widespread suspicions that this process was unfair and rigged in favor of the powerful. Daw Sein, a local activist, claimed that the housing draw system was entirely managed and arranged by the village leaders, who attempted to create a veil of fairness, but in reality, proper transparency was lacking: "All the village leaders took better plots located along the main road. I wondered if that could really be possible. It was not transparent at all. The plots that were assigned to us simple villagers were located on a steep mountain slope, full of stones." Likewise, she was skeptical about how the sizes of the plots were formulated:

The government determined that each plot should be 80x100ft, but the committee arranged plots of only around 40, 60 or 70 square feet. The land size of committee members and those who have a close relationship to the committee was often over 100 ft. This was totally unfair for us who didn't get along well with them.

As for her own case, Daw Sein said that the land she received was on such steep and rough terrain that she could not build. She then complained to the committee about how to build the house and told them that if they did not improve it, she would complain to the government, so they budged and gave her a better plot again near the main road.

Another farmer complained that he had no choice or input into where he was being moved, and after he bulldozed the plot it was rough, full of rocks and impossible to build on. Now he has moved to his agricultural land where he has built a temporary hut to live in, but he has not received official land title documentation yet, and so is afraid the government can move his family out.

The feeling of the activist and the complaints of several locals is supported by an observation of the large, well-constructed houses



that have assembled along the main road, while those with plots up the mountain clearly have fewer resources. While some of the villagers were afraid to say too much about what happened during this relocation process, others reflected the same sentiment as the activist. This similar tendency of people to simply accept the decisions of the village leaders without taking the issue to a higher level is also seen here. The village secretary, who was a member of the committee during that period, told us that he was very satisfied with his new relocation site as his land plot is beside the road, which has enabled him to build a big house, open a grocery store and sell petrol. He feels that his business has improved in the new relocation site, compared to the old village. He said that some land plots are very far from the road and on the slope of the mountain and so are not good for business activities, as business potential is mainly dependent on the relocation site. It is clear in Lein Lee that the relocation process, on two separate occasions, was controlled by those with access to power. This subsequently impacted the potential opportunities of people in the village.



**Figure 2.5** In the distance is the bridge which led to the first relocation, while the large reservoir in a result of the dam flooding





**Figure 2.6** A hut sits on the slope of the rock-filled mountain at the relocation site

### **Kan Hla village**

In Kan Hla, a small Kayan settlement that has primarily relied on shifting cultivation, the situation appears more complex. Unlike the previous two villages, Kan Hla has remained relatively unified as people have encountered greater livelihood challenges in the new site. To an extent, the villagers can be seen to have power structures that are more even and more representative, with people deferring to the decisions of the ethnic village leadership. The process of relocation was done with a higher degree of transparency with a clearer criterion used to determine the viability of the new site. However, during this process the people lacked the ability to make decisions for them and had minimal ability to be involved in the process - women in particular. Partly this was due to what appears to be a more cohesive community structure with close kinship and familial ties connecting people. As this section will

show, Kan Hla does not feature the obvious tension in the process as in Lein Lee and Htein Pin, and while the outcomes are far from successful, at least transparency, representation and unity remained somewhat present.

As early as 2007, the Kayan youth group secretary heard rumors of the dam project. This caused great concern among local villagers who were settled in their community and had a strong agricultural economy. It was not until 2012 that their removal was officially announced and Kan Hla village only had one year until relocation. The Kan Hla committee justified their decision to choose the relocation site based on three factors: water access, a residential land area which can contain the whole community together and good quality agricultural land. The government met the village leader and some villagers at Kan Hla monastery to discuss relocation. The committee was aware how difficult this process was for the community, with U Kyaw saying:

I knew that villagers did not want to move but we had no ability to refuse because this was a government decision. Who wants to move? Homes and villages would be relocated and our farmland would become flooded - who wants that? Our local people were upset. Some villagers complained to us that now is the rainy season where we need to plough and grow paddy, but the government directed us to destroy all the houses. We needed to maintain our livelihoods at the same time as finding a way to move and destroy our houses. The committee complained to officials from the MOEP about the people's problem with the timing and forcing of them, but It was unsuccessful.

In Kan Hla there certainly appeared to be a stronger community-based response to the predicament, and it is clear that the committee really did try to best represent the plight of the farmers who were forced to move with such little warning. However, while the community had a more active youth organization than the others, they told of how they were afraid to raise the issue to the government, with one committee lamenting the ability for youth to present their case, which he believed may have made a difference.

After the village moved to a more upland area, they could no longer grow paddy and were forced into cultivating turmeric as their main source of income. To reach their new agricultural land, villagers also needed to use motorboats, with one farmer lamenting to us how life was much easier when the river was narrow and easy to cross to access land for cultivation. Further, what was previously a more condensed residential community was now more spread out, with Ma Htar, a 34-year-old woman, reflecting that: “At first, I felt very strange to live in a new place, and the houses were also a bit far from one another so I felt very lonely. I was worried whether they could or would help me if something happened to my friends.”

While the residents were almost exclusively left unsatisfied with their relocation outcomes, the blame attributed to the committee was minimal unlike in the other study villages. An elder on the committee told us:

Actually, we, the villagers, did not know what we could ask for or how to ask it. We did not dare to say anything against the officials because we have been under the military government for so long. We are used to having no power and no ability to talk back or even to discuss. We had to just be content with what we got. We could not say anything freely. On the other hand, the villagers are naive and ordinary farmers. They do not know or understand the law. We cannot imagine what will happen if they say more.

While he himself was a committee member, he was up front about the absence of strong leadership to confront the issue, saying there was no one with the courage or experience to speak up. While unequal power relations are less evident here on face value, the dominance of male village elders in managing this process was nonetheless problematic.

### **Interaction between Village Leaders and Community Members in the Compensation Process**

The significance of local power dynamics throughout this process was also influential in how compensation sums were determined and signed off. The distance created between government authorities and affected villagers led to the concentration of authority in the hands of these unelected compensation committees at the village level, and the absence of any avenue through which households could directly engage with a process of deliberation on what they were entitled to. To varying degrees across the three study sites, this created an atmosphere that was ripe for both unintentional mismanagements, and in worse cases clearly corrupt practices.

The compensation processes started in 2013 as officials from the MOEP determined the 'official' compensation rate for farmland and houses. Following the process described at the beginning of this chapter whereby this was signed off by the overall committee, village committee members were put in charge of surveying and collecting data concerning belongings. In some cases, village leaders and committee members organized young groups to help with surveying. The rates of compensation were not publicized among regular village people and they were given no ability to be directly part of a negotiation process. Only village chairman and village leaders were given precise details on the compensation rate, with villagers left to guess the amounts they may be entitled to. Even as the compensation processes were completed, villagers were left in the dark, unable to self-evaluate or determine what their possessions and assets entitled them to.

The MOEP reported compensation schemes for the Upper Paunglaung Dam project to the national Hluttaw (Parliament) in Nay Pyi Taw, and they were disclosed only to village committee members. Some villagers wanted to know the compensation scheme, but officials and village leaders did not disclose anything. When we showed the official list to one villager, this was the first time he had seen it and he was shocked by its contents. Across the whole project, villagers had no ability to estimate how much they could get for both their farmlands and their houses, and they only knew the total figure when they received the sum. It was not until the amounts were allocated that they were aware of who received

what, and naturally some villagers were not satisfied because the compensation did not appear to be consistent.

**Table 2.1** The official compensation rate. *Source: MOEP's report to National Hluttaw*

Item eligible for compensation	Compensation rate (Kyats <sup>1</sup> per Unit)
Annual crops (coconut, betel)	30,000
Cost of preparation for new paddy land per acre	600,000
Cost of preparation for new Ya (mountain) land per acre	300,000
Paddy per acre (30-bushel x 3000 ks) for five years	450,000
For Ya Land (one third of farm land) 1000 Ks x 30 bushels for five years	150,000
Exploitation cost for new Ya land for casual labour (2 acres *150,000 Ks)	300,000
Bamboo House (fixed price regardless of size)	630,000
Wooden House (per square ft)	8,820

In the whole affected area, villagers were left disappointed at the amounts they received, and by the time the reality became clear they were already on the path to resettlement. Even before exploring local cases of corruption and mismanagement, the unfairness in these official processes were clear. For example, regardless of size or quality, all bamboo houses received a single sum. Some houses were made of bamboo but had a metal roof, some were big and some were small, while wooden houses likewise varied widely in quality. It is clear that some villagers had knowledge of which assets were needed as part of their submission to make the most of these often-arbitrary calculations. Some poor villagers, who owned small bamboo houses, did not know how much they would receive until they accepted their compensation amount.

According to the chart above, the compensation rate for perennial crops such as betel and betel nut, coconut and guava is 30,000Ks for one unit. The preparation cost provided to cultivate new farmland was 3 lakhs for paddy land and 6 lakhs for *Ya* land<sup>5</sup> per acre for every year for five years. In addition, compensation was provided to farmers for paddy plants that had not yet reached the stage of harvest. It was assumed that one acre of paddy would yield 30 bushels and be compensated 450,000 kyats; while the 30-bushel yield of one acre of *Ya* land was officially to be compensated 150,000 kyats. Of course, these stipulations created many problems when implemented by local village leaders, as some villagers had their land and crops recognized, or were able to exaggerate the scale of their land and crop yield and were able to take advantage of this, with others with no knowledge of the calculations left behind.

As both knowledge of compensation and the processes of measurement and data collection was controlled by those who possessed local power, unequal practices became rife across all 23 villages. The following sections break down how village leaders exploited authority handed to them by authorities for their personal gain. Those with knowledge, connections and power were able to maximize their compensation, while the majority of poorer dwellers were left with little to compensate for their forced movement.

### **Htein Pin village**

Government officials, officers and engineers from the MOEP managed and arranged the compensation process and dealt directly with the village chairman and leaders. The village committee themselves went about collecting data concerned with villagers' housing and farmland and compiled a list to send back to the ministry. Although the government compensated villagers' belongings, their perception of the unfair processes through which the information was collected was the cause for disputes among village leaders and villagers. Poorer villages saw that those villagers

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5. *Ya* land refers to mountain land used to cultivate crops. The term is used to distinguish it from flat paddy land.

who were already wealthier and had a good relationship with village leaders and government officials could get better outcomes from the compensation processes. This section details the different types of unfair and corrupt practices that played out in Htein Pin.

A local villager, who has since become an outspoken activist working to expose what they consider to be the unfair practices of the government and community leaders, was particularly vocal in identifying cases where those with close connections to committee members claimed compensation they were not entitled to. “One person even did not stay in the village and did not own anything in the village, but as they were the committee member’s relative, they were included in the compensation list,” he exclaimed. The activist told of how the son and daughter of committee members who stayed in other places were all also included in the list. This committee member had previously only had one house on his compound but, after learning of the compensation process, he urgently built temporary houses which he received compensation for, including other benefits such as electricity licensing. One of the committee members’ sons possessed minimal farmland, but exploited the compensation scheme to receive over 400 lakhs. Several accounts from villagers complained that the measurement of the farm size also relied upon the committee’s decisions. Staff from the land department, for instance, would record 9 acres, but the committee was able to adjust it on the list to 11 acres.

The person who received the highest compensation amount in Htein Pin village was a committee member, who made the most of his knowledge and access. He was previously a school teacher but had opened a small grocery shop and a small video-player business in the old village. He made the most of the money available in the compensation scheme, boasting that he received “116 lakhs for 11 acres of farm lands, 7 lakhs for his betel plantation and video-playing business, and 250 lakhs for one land plot in Pho Gone village - totaling over 400 lakhs!” The claim of the farmland was the most suspicious of these amounts. The adjacent Pho Gone village was not required to move because it was not in the reservoir area. His land plot was beside main road and was never flooded, but he still received compensation for this land plot. No other villagers with land in Pho Gone received any compensation. The

activist told how many villagers knew of this, but were afraid to create an issue out of it; “he was rich and also a committee member so he had more chance to increase his compensation amount using knowledge that others could not access”.

As was typical throughout the watershed area, the culture of the village dictated that villagers showed respect to their village leaders, which enabled the committee to generally conduct their work of evaluating compensation amounts, without suspicion or question. As MOEP had empowered these committees with the freedom to draw up their own compensation lists, they could freely engage in corrupt practices. One villager told us of how one committee member only owned 2 acres of farmland, but was able to list it at 10 acres - “the more authority they had, the more the power they had, and the greater chance they had to get a higher compensation amount.” he complained. Some villagers knew about how to access compensation rates for attached buildings, so they quickly built other buildings near their main house. Although committee and village leaders knew what they were doing, they too were exploiting these loopholes.

U Myat, a 59-year-old man who was a former village leader, expressed anger and regret at having left his leadership position prior to this process, which meant he couldn’t wield the corrupt powers of those who formed the committee:

I was no longer a village leader so I couldn’t express my grievances. I had no chance to take issue with the compensation amounts I was entitled to. One of the committee members, for example, had a very small collection of betel trees, but he got compensation of about 50 lakhs. If a regular villager owned this tree, they would get at most 9 lakhs. If I still had power as a village leader, I could demand 50 or 60 lakhs. If I knew about the power the committee would have, I would not have retired as a village leader.

He was appalled at how the committee had misused their power, holding a deep sense of regret that he had ceded his position prior to this critical period for the village.



While those close to the committee were able to profit, others without such connections were unable to receive what they were entitled to. The case of a 60-year-old man was a good example of this. Despite owning two houses, he only received compensation for one. Although he had lived with his mother-in-law in adjoining houses in the same compound, the village administration only counted them as one unit that would receive compensation for a single house. While other wealthy villagers were urgently building adjoining buildings to claim more money, he was left without sufficient compensation. When I interviewed him, he was carrying a turmeric basket and complaining of back pain, and he told how he “dare not talk about why I didn’t get compensation. The village leader knew about me, but he did not care. Many friends also complained to the committee about me, but I received nothing to compensate for my losses.”

Remarkably, seven whole households were also initially left off the compensation list altogether. They were left bewildered why they were not compensated like the other villagers. They reported the issue to the committee and MOEP and were asked to pay three lakhs to have their things included in the compensation lists. One villager said that it was “very surprising that somehow 11 households got compensation without even living in Htein Pin village, while other long-term residents were somehow left off the list entirely.” Only after one of the households stubbornly refused to pay the money was the issue rectified.

While these practices were more overtly considered to be suspicious, in other cases compensation was unfairly determined simply through a disparity of access to knowledge. Some poorer villagers owned small bamboo houses and did not know the exact compensation rates for their dwellings, belongings and fruit trees. Many of them told us how these were often left unaccounted for. A 74-year-old woman described how her 80 betel trees were not counted because the trees were not bearing fruit at the particular time they were counted by the surveyors, so she received no compensation for what was no doubt an essential livelihood asset for her family.

Villagers who had the ability and confidence to directly confront the committee were sometimes successful in getting more compensation. A 34-year man said that:

there were unfair relations between the villagers and committee members. If you complained to the compensation committee concerning your compensation amount, the committee would add more compensation. But if you did not complain, they gave nothing more.

He also queried as to where this extra money could possibly have come from. As the money for each village's compensation was pre-determined according to the government list, he was perplexed as to where this 'extra' money to silence those who were unhappy could have come from. Likewise, the aforementioned activist vociferously argued that his large bamboo house was worth more than he has received. The committee first told him to wait, before months later the amount was adjusted. He was baffled as to how they could suddenly access these extra compensation funds after the process had concluded.

Similarly, a 71-year-old woman was very surprised about her compensation amount compared to her neighbor's amount. She thought that she would get more compensation because her house was bigger than her neighbors. When officials distributed compensation, she complained to the committee and officers from MOEP, after which she received additional money. "If I did not complain, I would not get any more compensation. Where did these funds suddenly come from?" she questioned.

However, others were less successful in taking issue with these unfair processes. One villager expressed dissatisfaction with the compensation amount received for his relatively large farm, saying that him and many of his neighbors all believed that the village leaders and committee members had biases towards their relatives and wealthy people. Several villagers pointed out that the committee was unfair in measuring farm size and inflated the land of those close to them at the expense of others. A 34-year-old man told how he argued with the committee that his farmland was bigger than they had recorded, but the leader responded with anger, saying "do

not complain about this. You are a lucky man that you even got compensation for three acres. Do not say complain about the measurement.” He gave up on raising the issue further.

This is not to say the government were without responsibility for what happened. There was a clear sense among the community that the promises made to them were false. For example, villagers recounted that in 2010, the Division Commander General promised 50,000ks and a rice bag for each household as further compensation when they moved, but “none of this really happened. It was a false promise” they said. Concerning farmland, government officials also promised that they would replace their lost land with similar plots in the high lands where the soil is fertile, but that too did not materialize.

Nonetheless, while compensation amounts and livelihoods transition arrangements may generally may have been inadequate, it is clear that at the local level the village leaders were responsible for the unequal processes that unfolded. The local activist, along with another villager who has since become a community leader, explained that the committee was the main actor and were empowered by officials from the MOEP to control the process. They were so dissatisfied by the unfair and corrupt practice of committee members that they began to collect evidence to showcase what was happening. They told of how they respected their village leaders in the past before they saw the way they were handling the compensation processes:

In the past, I thought all village leaders acted in the best interests of the community. But we have found that now money is involved, they are not honest people. I no longer believe or respect them. There are so many different examples of corruption and they have no answer when we raise these issues. Now, most of the villagers can see the way they have acted.

### **Lein Lee village**

As in Htein Pin, villagers in Lein Lee had no access to or knowledge of the compensation rates, and the committee had minimal communication with most villagers about the process and what they

could expect to receive. One particular dynamic that played out in Lein Lee, was how households who were forced to move for the bridge construction were disadvantaged for a second time. These 49 households had their woes compounded when the second process played out in a similarly unfair manner, but this time largely through the corrupt, opaque actions of the village leaders.

After receiving no compensation and being forced to immediately bulldoze their houses to make way for the bridge, many villagers told of how they had previously put all their resources into building new houses with improved materials in their original community area under the bridge, so they were forced to build cheap, temporary bamboo shelters in the first relocation site. When the government provided compensation, they only received 9.5 lakhs for their bamboo temporary hut, and their pleas to have their old assets recognized were ignored. The sense of double injustice haunted many of these households. "I feel so aggrieved. If I had stayed in my new brick house, I would receive the same compensation as others in the village. They have hurt me two times," said one man who was affected in this way. The committee provided no support to these villagers for their claims.

Likewise, the government did not compensate these villagers for the farmland in the area that was taken over for the bridge construction. One man talked with sadness about his 81-year-old father who lost five and half acres of farmland which was completely excavated by the Ministry with no compensation. His father complained about for the whole period since he lost it, and then had to face losing more land when the dam project began.

When the second relocation became a reality, most villagers in Lein Lee were generally deeply dissatisfied because the compensation was not even enough to construct a new house and many of them were forced to sell their animals, gold and jewelry just to build a house like they had before. If there were no crops and plants in the field, the government would not compensate them for the farmland - many reported that they were not growing paddy and groundnut in 2013 as they thought they would have to move.

However, while this process negatively affected the majority of villagers, as in Htein Pin it was the unequal treatment and access

provided by the village leaders which led to more injustice. Most villagers had no access to the compensation listings, as committee members kept this to themselves and those close to them, which many villagers claimed prevented them from knowing what they were due to receive. One of them said “I wanted to know the compensation scheme clearly so I could ensure I received the right amount, but I was afraid of the Military government and I had no way to speak or be involved in village affairs”

According to several people who have become more active in village affairs in the years since relocation, during that time they observed many discrepancies between the actions and words of the committee members involved. Daw Sein was a prominent female voice for justice during that time. She claimed that the committee said that one person from each household would be listed in the compensation scheme, but in reality, many villagers in and close to the committee put down two names, which ensured they received more money. She collected evidence of these cases, claiming she knew exactly who had cheated the system. When she tried to raise it directly with the Ministry of Electrical Power she was threatened to be put in jail unless she kept quiet.

According to interviews with many villagers, there were strong feelings within the community that the process was unjust. Villagers would compare compensation amounts with their neighbors, and feel hurt and that their friendships were broken when they saw what was happening. Many people who previously respected the village leaders lost all trust in them, and in the years since some of those who raised these claims of corruption have tried to restore faith in the village leadership. Daw A Mar claimed directly to the Ministry that her house had been incorrectly measured. When they came to measure it again, they found she should actually receive more than three times what had initially been determined. She recalled;

But I had no chance to complain because they just shouted the household head's name and the compensation amount with a loudspeaker. I could not refuse it at that time because they were all people of authority. I am a woman and I had no power to speak about the compensation process, so I just gave up.

"The source of the problem was the village leaders" Daw A Mar continued to argue, "but we didn't want to create more tension in the community so most of us just stayed quiet". Many villagers without close ties to the leaders did not even know how to properly evaluate their belongings. They did not know until after relocation how much they should get and whether the amount the government compensated was correct. As in Htein Pin, those with more knowledge urgently built attached shelters, while the poor were left with their modest houses. U Htin, a 37-year-old male villager, said that "I received only 9 lakhs. I couldn't build an attached shelter like the other villagers. I had no knowledge to improve my situation as others had. The village leaders just allocated compensation through their own process without informing the poor among us."

Villagers generally felt aggrieved that the committee members had used the process to give advantage to their relatives. One case in point was how in the past Lein Lee village was near a gold mining site where migrants came to work, and villagers had opened grocers to serve them. One man recalled that the village leaders had made it clear that there was no compensation available to the owners of these grocers. However, the leaders' nephew somehow received nearly ten lakhs for his shop, in addition to a large amount for his house, while the other owners received nothing. He was then able to build a large new house and business in a land plot beside the main road, and has clearly been enriched by the process while others suffered. When we raised this controversy with him, he said with glee that "Because this was a government project, I fulfilled my responsibility to move. I did not face any difficulties and the committee served all processes for the community"

### **Kan Hla village**

While the previous two villagers saw increased tension emerge between the village leaders and poorer villagers as a result of the unfair compensation process, in Kan Hla village the community remained much more unified with fewer complaints of corruption or any observable acts of injustice on the part of the village leaders. Nonetheless, knowledge of the compensation process remained concentrated among male village elites, while the whole community suffered the consequences of inadequate compensation.

While the committee was dominated by male elites, they did at least discuss the compensation process with the whole community. A villager who works as a local teacher told us that “regarding compensation rates, the government did not say anything directly to us villagers. The headman arranged a meeting and one person from each household had to attend and discuss the compensation process”. The committee said that they had no ability to change the compensation rate, and they simply followed the processes set by the government. While many villagers were left upset with what they received, they understood this was not the doing of the committee.

The Kayan Youth Organization, who had experience in dam resettlement issues, also came to Kan Hla village where they discussed the compensation process and advised the community to refuse to move until the government met particular conditions. Some villagers said that this guidance gave them the confidence to take up compensation issues directly with government officials, often with some success. A 55-year-old man said that “the government initially allocated compensation five lakh per acre, but us villagers did not agree with this so we argued with them until the government had to increase the compensation rate to more than ten lakhs”. Nonetheless, most of the villagers were not satisfied about their compensation amount but lacked the knowledge or confidence to raise this with the government. There was no real avenue for direct communication with government officials, and they were afraid of those who had authority which could make the outcome even worse for them.

However, this process at the village level still excluded women from involvement. A few of them complained that only their husbands knew the compensation amount as they were deemed in the local Kayah culture to be the head of the household, while the women had no authority to be involved in evaluating their properties of receiving the funds. A 34-year-old woman said she “had no chance to attend assemblies and the committee did not invite women to anything. Most women simply thought that these processes were not concerned with women, thinking that this was men’s work”. These women were simply left to see what was received by the household when they relocated. One woman remarked:

I thought that compensation would be fair according to what each house had. But sometimes I heard of the high amounts of compensation that other people got and I was surprised. Those people knew how to talk to those in power and how to get more out of the process. I don't have those skills and I don't know whether I should be satisfied or not because I had no way of being part of this process.

In Kan Hla, there was more community unity throughout this process, primarily it seems because of the dominant Kayah culture that was present there and the relative sense of community cohesion compared to other villages, in spite of the inadequate compensation amounts. Still, forms of inequality were present in their various forms, but without the widespread community upheaval that seemed to take over elsewhere.



**Figure 2.7** The new Kayan church in Kan Hla, where villagers have faced relatively less division compared to elsewhere





**Figure 2.8** A wealthy villager's large new concrete house. In spite of increased unity, there is still a clear class division in Kan Hla



**Figure 2.9** The well-connected in Kan Hla have convenient access to roads and transport



# 3

## UNEQUAL LIVELIHOOD OUTCOMES AND THE EXACERBATION OF INEQUALITY IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING COMPENSATION

In the years that followed the compensation and resettlement programs, communities across the Paunglaung River valley experienced drastic changes to their former livelihoods. In the three sample communities, the majority of people struggled to adapt to the changes that were forced upon them. Despite generally having access to improved community infrastructure, household compensation amounts were inadequate, there was no training in employment transition, and chosen relocation sites had insufficient regard for the livelihood imperatives of large proportions of the community. This variety of negative impacts on the total 8000 households across the dam site, in a more general and quantitative sense, were accounted for by Physicians for Human Rights (Brown, 2015). They identified the devastating economic and social impacts of the project, with loss of income, poverty and food insecurity widespread.

This section builds on this, but focuses in on how these outcomes were closely connected to the unequal power relations in the processes explained in the previous chapter. In all three villages, livelihood inequalities were undoubtedly exacerbated by these unequal processes. Wealthy and well-connected villagers were often able to take advantage of the changing economic

structures and the location opportunities of their new villages, while the majority of villagers were instead left behind, falling into poverty and experiencing deep livelihood insecurity. The chapter again begins in Htein Pin, where these dynamics are the starkest in how they have subsequently played out, before the latter sections identify similar patterns in Lein Lee and Kan Hla.

### **Htein Pin Village**

The old Htein Pin village was far from the main road, deep into the forest and surrounded by agricultural land. Most villagers owned their own farmlands and lived what they referred to as simple lives. They never thought about the prospect of moving to another place or engaging in a different livelihood. When the hydropower project forced them to move, they faced severe troubles and their lifestyles were drastically altered. They were very clear that they did not want to move to a new place because they had a settled livelihood, family history and a cultural connection to the land going back many years. Left without a choice, poorer villagers reluctantly accepted their fate.

Before relocation to the new village was to take place, the government provided the first disbursement of the compensation money. Prior to completely moving to the new site, most families sent men to first build temporary shelters there, while women collected their materials in the old village. They were afraid of being flooded in the old site if they refused to go, and they didn't receive the final compensation money until they had left. Although villagers had already built new houses, around one month later they quickly realized that there were no reliable income sources in the new village, they told us. Within a few months they had no money and no viable employment prospects in the new village.

The area of the new relocation site was a mountainous area far from the old village. Although there were some available shifting lands plots around the new Htein Pin village, these were owned by members of neighboring villages and so there were no vacant lands for Htein Pin villagers to resume their livelihoods as farmers. The Government had determined that the newly assigned

agricultural lands for Htein Pin village were to be situated to the north of the old village – a significant distance from where they had been told to settle. Powerful people and the wealthy, who held more sway in the relocation and compensation processes, could effectively adapt to more flexible and advantageous livelihoods in the new location. Some of them were able to buy land plots near the new village to grow crops, and they were also able to open shops in front of their conveniently situated houses on the main road. With more compensation, they could invest in new business, while the poor struggled to survive and faced significant livelihood hardships. Most of the poor only received 9.3 lakhs, and after building their new shelters had no more compensation. At the new site they were without their old farmlands and without access to any shifting land for cultivation.



**Figure 3.1** Htein Pin's fertile agricultural land before the valley was flooded



**Figure 3.2** Houses large and small in the new Htein Pin village

### **Livelihood dislocation experienced by the powerless**

Within a short period of time after relocation, more than a hundred poor households had chosen to relocate near to agricultural land around their old village. It began as a trickle of families realizing their new reality, before many more followed. Families locked up their new concrete houses in the new village, and built simple bamboo huts a two hour drive away in an attempt to resume their livelihoods as farmers. In the past, families owned farmland and also had cows and buffaloes, but in the new site, these were wasted as they had no pasture land anymore, so they had sold their animals. Regularly commuting from their houses to the farmland was prohibitive because of the distance and considerable expense. One of the villagers said that:

I decided to go back to the north of the old village to grow turmeric because our shifting lands were there. The new village was only for housing. The old place takes two hours to drive to from the new village, and so petrol costs 1500 kyat per day. I have no income source in the new village, so I was not able to even pay for this daily petrol expense. The road is rough too, and some poor people who don't have motorbikes

had to walk there. So, I couldn't return home and also didn't want to return to the new site.

In the past, people from Htein Pin village did not need to buy rice and vegetables as they could grow enough themselves, but now they had to buy everything. As they were traditional farmers, they had no capacity to change to other livelihood activities and the government refused to provide vocational training for impacted people. These villagers, even if they had small excess compensation, could not afford to take risks by starting new businesses in unfamiliar industries. Those who owned only bamboo houses had received just 9.3 lakhs, all of which was used up in building new shelters in the new village. A 53-year-old man said that

I received compensation of about 930,000 MMK for my bamboo house in two installments, but I had to spend it all on my new house. While moving, I could not work at all and our money was spent in the process of settling in the new village. In the past, our main livelihood was growing paddy and groundnut through shifting agriculture, but now our main livelihood is shifting turmeric crops. So, I had to return to the old place to grow turmeric. In the rainy season, I collect bamboo shoots and sell to traders. In the past, I was a farm owner but now I am just a general worker.

This was a familiar story among many households in Htein Pin; former landowners suddenly forced into working as daily wage laborers just to get by, which is a direct result of the decision by wealthy community leaders to settle away from agricultural lands. A 41-year-old farm-owner said "I have no skills except farming. I have no assets left at all. I cannot stand without farming". He said he returned to north of the old village to find vacant land to resume agriculture, noting "I soon knew that the place which could give us food and income was the old place, not the new village". He became sad when asked of the effect of this on his family:

My family cannot eat nutritious food. Even six years later we still face severe livelihood hardships. Before I was a farm owner and had no need to worry about



food, but now I am unemployed. I worry about my children, what they will eat and how they will grow up.

Some villagers who were given better locations in the new village were able to sell their land plots to wealthier villagers who could afford to stay and move to live in a small bamboo hut near Nan Kha stream, by the old village site. For them, there was no point in staying in the new village as there was no livelihood activity which they could partake in. In some cases, families left their children and elderly family members in their new houses, while working age household members went to live in the land only to return occasionally to send food or when they were unwell.



**Figure 3.3** One of the temporary bamboo huts erected in a new small community near the old village

Inequity in land access was worsened by the government's mishandling of farmland allocation processes, which created a situation in which farmers with excess capital could extract land at their own expense, rather than following an orderly distribution. The Ministry had promised to allocate 2 acres of upland farming space for each household, but they did not carry out any formal land titling process. Farmers therefore had to find vacant land for their turmeric plantations, so the more a household could quickly



extract, the more land they came to functionally own it. The allocated land was high in the hilly areas, so it was difficult to explore and excavate, so only those with the means to hire equipment could access the prime land. Previously the government had assigned on a map agricultural areas for each village, but in reality this allocation quickly descended into a scramble. Some villagers were lucky because their paddy fields in the river valley were not flooded so they could continue to grow rice, but most were left without any arable land as the wealthy staked their claims.

In the past, villagers could grow paddy rice, groundnuts and corn in their farmlands, as well as turmeric on shifting lands around the village. They therefore had a stable source of income throughout the whole year, with sustainable crop yields across different seasons. Now they could grow only turmeric in two acres of shifting land and after turmeric was harvested, and they had no other work opportunities. U Htein, a 40-year-old villager expressed frustration at not being able to work enough; “I really want employment opportunities. I face hunger everyday, real hunger. I am strong but yet I can’t work. I am a skilled farmer but where are my farmlands? I feel so sad about all of this. I never expected my life would be like this”.

Without any knowledge of capacity to change their livelihoods, they knew that their sources of income and sustenance were in the forest. Most young people would therefore go to the jungle near their old village to find forest products, including firewood, bamboo shoots, elephant foot yam, and raw plants used to make brooms. Their livelihoods have become totally forest-dependent. “I have to find food and forest products inside the jungle the whole day. As I have no skills other than farm work, I totally depend on the forest”, said U Htein.

Another area that gives evidence to the scale of economic struggle in the village are recent inward and outward migration patterns. In the past there were many work opportunities around the Paunglaung valley, so there was significant internal migration of labor to fill necessary jobs requiring different forms of labor. Now, the opposite effect is occurring, with people of working age forced to migrate to neighboring countries, generally Laos, Thailand and

Malaysia. U Htein himself went down this path, going to Laos to work. "I could send about 8 lakhs to my family within four months of working in Laos. The cost was not too much to travel there and I worked on a construction site. I did not want to be a migrant worker though, as I hated being so far from my family." He expressed his anger at there not being any plans by the ministry to support new livelihoods or training for those who lost their farmland, which forced them into working as laborers abroad. Older members of the community had never before witnessed migration on this level, and one of them remarked in dismay, "All of our young people are leaving. This never happened in the past."

The long-term impacts of this livelihood dislocation perhaps have an even more disproportionate effect on women from poorer households. In the old village women would engage in farm activities along with men, but women were unfamiliar with how to earn a living in the hilly areas around the new village. In the past, they got rice and vegetables from their farmlands and water resources were plentiful because of their proximity to the Paunglaung river system. Women told of how they would find many vegetables along the Paunglaung river valley and in the neighboring forest. In the new place, however, the land was excessively hilly, lacking in fertility and filled with rock and pebble. In many ways, women's dual responsibility to work and also manage the household led to even greater pressures being placed on them.

They expressed great worry about their livelihoods and their household expenditures, and, unable to grow any vegetables, they had to buy from vegetable sellers who ventured there from other towns. Daw Nway, 55 years-old woman, recalled:

In the hot season, most villagers had to return to the old place because in the new village there was no food and no water. As a woman, I cannot collect bamboo shoots, Wa U, or anything from the forest like men can. I am uneducated and I have a lack of knowledge to change to another livelihood. Before, I could help support the household by doing different kinds of work, but now I have no money and I cannot help my husband. There are no sources of income for me.

Some women reflected a deep sense of sadness and resignation about their livelihood. They not only are without money, but also bereft of ideas to escape the hardship. They never thought that they would face troubles like they did after the dam was built. They miss their farmlands, their old communities and even the old pagodas which gave them meaning and a sense of belonging. A 41-year-old woman reflected this prevailing sentiment among these women:

I am sitting here thinking the whole day about how to escape from these challenges. I am 41 so I am still strong and I can work, but I have no idea how to change to any new way of work. My husband works hard but his income is very low. He gives me his wage to support the family, but it is not enough. According to Myanmar culture, the husband gives his wife his income, and she looks after the family's expenses. This means wives must worry more than men about every family problem.

Some younger married women are desperate to work to help their husbands. Two sisters, aged 29 and 27, returned and settled with a temporary bamboo hut on the north of the old village to try to support their families. Their current sources of income are from collecting bamboo shoots in the rainy season and from digging turmeric. The elder sister said "I had no money to help send my husband to Lao as a migrant worker. I want my husband to migrate because my friend's husband could send money and they are now doing quite well".

Some villagers had previously owned and earned a lot from tree plantations, but they were now all under water. The government provided compensation for plants, but this was minimal compared to their losses in future earnings. A 71-year-old woman received a lot of compensation because she owned a good house and a betel plantation before relocation. She rebuilt her house in the new site but she could not grow more betel trees. "If the trees were still growing, I would not need to worry about my livelihood. Now I cannot grow anything". She missed her old village, her betel trees and her prosperous life.

I always think about my betel trees. Now I cannot work well because I am getting old. I want the government to support impacted old people. Although the government compensated 30,000 kyats per betel tree, they can't be replaced. How can I grow betel trees here when there is no water? How can we get water for agricultural land in these hill areas? My house is good but I have no money for basic things.

The new site further disadvantaged those who relied on agriculture as the government failed to provide adequate water supply for planting trees or growing crops. The older women reflected:

In the hot season we face water shortages to the extent that we have to forego basic hygiene. The government arranged water supply from the mountain through a pipeline, but it is not enough for all households and the pipeline does not even reach some households. We cannot buy clean water, and instead we have to drink water from the reservoir. I know this water is not totally clean, but I cannot buy clean water forever.

The foreseeable issues with the resettlement site combined with the inability to fully access what was available in compensation schemes upturned the lives of farmers across the village. While the rich were able to invest in assets such as cars, boats, restaurants, guesthouses, big grocery shops and new fruit plantations, regular farmers had no funds through which to support their transition. For many, they internalized this struggle, with one man describing himself as a “backwards person” with “poor knowledge”, compared to the wealthy who had thrived. His description, however, highlights how much of this was beyond his control:

I never thought that my native town would be relocated to another place. I was an easygoing person because I owned farmland and I did not worry at all about my future. I was happy physically and mentally in the past. But now the situation in my life has totally changed. Suddenly I became unemployed....I did not know that

I had the right to respond to the government, the committee and village leaders. I was afraid. I had no experience with directly communicating with them.



**Figure 3.4** For young families, it is difficult to contemplate the resumption of a stable livelihood



**Figure 3.5** Though forged of desperation and modest bamboo huts, there are new small communities emerging near the better agricultural land

### Relative livelihood security and thriving village elites

The village leaders, those with more existing assets, and those who took advantage of the resettlement and compensation processes as

described in the previous chapter, generally thrived on the new village site. In stark contrast to the majority of regular villagers, they were able to claim land plots to access new markets, use their compensation to invest in assets which increased their income, and in some cases act in a ruthless manner to exploit the livelihood challenges of their fellow villagers. Within a short space of time after resettlement, Htein Pin became visibly divided across class lines.

In general, these wealthy villagers stayed in the new village satisfied with how the relocation had given them plenty of opportunities to expand their businesses by utilizing the improved transport options living beside the main road, while poorer villages were forced to move out to access agricultural land. One of the committee members, who received the most compensation among all of Htein Pin, was able to open a big grocery store and a large brick house right on the main road. In the past he was relatively wealthy, but now he is much richer and talked of his improved standard of living as compared to the old village. He was able to make loans to the poorer villagers, and they paid him back in turmeric. These sorts of loan arrangements, according to poorer villagers, were often a source of intense pressure as they were often unable to repay on time and were forced to pay back more. The former committee members were ideally placed to benefit from the struggles of their neighbors.

U Myat, the brother of the committee member, whose success in exploiting these connections is detailed in chapter three, was typical of this class of villagers who were delighted with the 'improved conditions' of the new village:

I think our village now is much better than in the past. Now our houses are better than in the old village and we have a higher standard of living. Before we used firewood but now we can use electricity and we can watch TV and sport programs. I want our village to be like a city.

The contrast in his outlook as compared with the poorer villagers was stark, but at least he was somewhat aware of the shortcomings of government support efforts:

the local government should support livelihood activities and help create markets for local people. I could sell our local products, but the government compensated land but they did not register it for each household, which makes it more difficult for us to access loans and invest in new markets.

Predictably, many of this wealthy group did not see themselves as benefitting at the expense of their fellow community members, instead blaming villagers for their 'lack of knowledge' which got them into such a predicament: "I owned a good house, car, motor boat and farming machines. I got 200 lakhs for my farmland and house, which I spent on my children's education and invested in horticulture. I bought some land plots near a new village and I grew fruit trees such as coffee and avocado," said U Than, a former committee member. He continued:

I suggested to some poor villagers to grow fruit trees but they were not interested in it. I warned them not to rely on government support. I am disappointed that they have a lack of knowledge. The government has already supported us as much as they can...I served as a village leader for many years. Before relocation, villagers and all of us were united. They respected the village leaders and they were interested in village affairs. But now villagers did not want to accept my suggestions.

Not all of the wealthy villages continued to stay in new Htein Pin, but unlike the poorer villages they moved for improved opportunity, rather than as a simple means of survival. A 38-year-old former village chairman who was a key actor throughout the relocation and compensation processes, in both the selection of committee members and the location of the new village, and he had a close relationship with some officials from the Ministry of Electric Power. He first was assigned a property near the main road in new Htein Pin, and benefited from improved road access. He wouldn't discuss how much compensation he received, but he has now sold his land in Htein Pin and he lives in Pho Khone village, owning, among other investments, a restaurant, local product store and a motorboat

rental hiring business. He has evidently done very well and made a small fortune out of the whole process.

As wealthy villagers enjoyed life in their modern houses in locations where they could benefit from improved community infrastructure and roads, the village became increasingly divided. Even the former village leaders reflected that the disparity in livelihood outcomes between the poor and the rich had led to less village unity and less respect shown to village leaders. However, many of those former leaders did not show much sympathy for those who had been forced to return to the old place. “After relocation, it was very difficult to organize village affairs. If there was something that needed discussing I just had to use loudspeakers to ask people to meet in the monastery.” It is clear to the poorer villagers that their leaders no longer represent them or hold their interests at heart. But as chapter five describes, after this galling experience, many of the voiceless began to speak up.

### **Increased incidence of suicide among the dislocated poor**

While carrying out fieldwork in Htein Pin, the level of suffering across large parts in the community quickly became apparent. The community experienced an unusually high level of suicide and attempted suicide, which was attributed by local people to the sense of economic helplessness that followed their relocation. It is important here to account for the tragic human consequences that resulted from these unequal processes.

Seven people committed suicide in the initial years following relocation, and a further eight people attempted suicide – by all measures an unusually high number for a small community. Tragically all of them were younger members of the community, with villagers attributing the high suicide among the young to the lack of employment opportunities and income streams, which had also in some cases resulted in them falling into debt traps to the wealthier villagers.

Daw Khin, a woman aged 42 whose son was among those who had committed suicide, was in tears when she described what happened to her family. Although she was a single mother of seven children, with her husband having passed away several years before relocation,



in the old village they had a good house and five acres of farmland. She described her family life as comfortable without any livelihood difficulties. When they moved to the new site, their income suddenly dried up, so her two daughters and one son became migrant workers to try to support the family. They incurred debts when they sent them overseas, so she had to pawn her land to settle the debts. She returned to the old village and tried to re-establish agriculture. She tearfully recalled what happened;

Last year my son killed himself...one day, he locked himself up and drank pesticide...it was caused by the pressures that mounted up due to the stresses that came with moving to the new village. Our economic situation and financial situation worsened, and we became desperate and his girlfriend's family also didn't like him and refused to approve of their marriage because we were in debt.

The parents of another victim recalled how their son killed himself when his farmland flooded and was destroyed by rising dam waters. Although all villages relocated, the water levels rose at staggered times throughout the opening of the dam. This meant that for a while many farmlands were not under the reservoirs, so some farmers continued to grow crops and stay in their paddy fields. However, before they had harvested their paddy, the hydropower stations started to operate and the water level had suddenly risen about 376 ft, putting their land and paddy fields under the reservoir. Among them was this man, aged 37. His parents recalled:

He was our second eldest son and he was a hard worker, always interested in improving our farming. While all villages were already relocated, he continued to grow about four acres of paddy rice. When the harvest time was near, all his paddy fields were suddenly flooded. There was no warning. He said to us that he no longer wanted to be a human. He got severely depressed and became suicidal. He would stay alone, drinking silently in the old village in a temporary bamboo hut. One night, he drank pesticide with his alcohol.

When talking about her son, the mother became so upset that she could no longer participate in the interview, so the father continued:

My son felt so hurt about his paddy field, which was nearly ready for harvest, and didn't know how to make a living anymore. I got compensation of about 1,100,000 kyat but I had to buy wood to build a new house. I had to sell my fifteen buffaloes because there were no pastures in the new village. If we lived near the old place, there was no need to worry about livelihood. In the new village the houses were good but there was no way for us to live.

These cases of suicide seem to present just the tip of the iceberg for the sorts of suffering that was particularly felt by young people who no longer saw a bright future. Many of them migrated as it was the only way to earn some sort of living. Many young men in particular turned to excessive drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism, which often led to addiction and depression. While a minority of villagers were advantaged by the process of relocation and compensation and thrived in the new village with its improved infrastructure and transport access, everyday farmers became poorer. Trauma and suffering was widespread and the village was divided beyond repair.

### **Lein Le Village**

Prior to the construction of the dam, Lein Lee village was a well-known and frequently busy village - primarily because the location of a large gold mine brought migrant workers, traders and officials to the area. Some in the village had benefited from this, opening restaurants, beer stations and grocery stores to service the influx of workers, but many were still largely reliant on agriculture. The two periods of relocation experienced by many of the villagers had the effect of dislocating most of the community from their livelihoods. Groundnut fields around the Paunglaung valley, a large source of income in the village, were completely flooded. The closing of the gold mine, as water levels rose with the opening of the dam, impacted people across the village. One woman recalled how she

used to sell vegetables in a small market under the old bridge, but when the workers stopped coming she had no more business. These regular farmers who were generally excluded from the compensation processes were left trying to salvage their livelihoods in upland agriculture on soil that was far from ideal for farming. As in Htein Pin, only those who effectively used their power and wealth were able to emerge successful from this haphazard process.

Though the government had technically arranged two acres of farmland for each household, these plots in reality existed only on the map. The highlands were not sufficiently fertile for growing crops and were filled with rocks and pebbles, leaving villagers from Lein Lee village having to find new land for shifting agriculture across the mountainous terrain. The new village was situated along the main Nay Pyi Taw - Pinlaung highway, so those who received land plots beside the main road had the opportunity to engage in new forms of livelihood, seeking incomes through opening grocery stores, rice shops, restaurants and tea shops along the main road. However, as the previous chapter investigated, the supposed 'random' allocation of plots was far from fair or transparent, and those households with plots away from the main road had little chance to engage in other livelihood activities in the new village.

Many poorer villagers were exasperated that somehow village leaders and most of the rich had received plots besides the main road, some of which they put to use in businesses, but in other cases they were able to sell at a hefty profit. A local woman, aged 29, said:

There were no poor villagers beside the main road, so we all moved to our agricultural land and near the jungle. Most land plots in the downtown area of Lein Lee were bought by people from the city. The land price is high here and the village leaders were able benefit from buying and selling plots.

The existing class disparities only increased after the period of relocation. While the wealthy households had big new bricked houses, owned grocery stores and luxury cars, the poor struggled. People from other villagers often said that the villagers from Lein Lee village were rich because of their proximity to the gold mine,

and because almost all of them villagers had groundnut farms and paddy fields. However, this impression belied the reality of livelihood challenges felt by those who could no longer benefit from the mine, and had their farmlands submerged without any replacement forms of income. A 52-year-old reflected these lasting challenges:

I am still not confident with how to live in this new place. We are not experts in fishing because it was not our traditional livelihood, and we are afraid of the deep waters because we never learnt how to swim. In the past, every villager owned groundnut fields of at least 4 or 5 acres and did not need to worry about basic food. Now, all the groundnut fields are under the reservoir, so many of us have livelihood struggles.

Those poor villagers who were fortunate to receive better plots generally decided not to build houses and instead sold their land to the village leaders and people from the city, who were eager to invest in businesses along the main road. The poor moved to shifting land on the slope of the mountain, which was very far from the new village. A male villager, aged 47, described how he sold his village land for eight lakhs and instead lived in a bamboo shelter near some farmland, while also saying he would readily sell the assigned farmland too if there was a buyer, as it was far from ideal for agriculture. Other poorer villagers said that the wealthy were able to rent large machines to excavate the soil and improve its fertility for planting crops.

Still, six years on, villagers describe their continued struggles to survive because turmeric has become the only crop they can reasonably grow at a scale to sell. Turmeric is a seasonal crop, and so most of the farmers are left without income for large parts of the year. Moreover, villagers complained that the government did not properly assign agricultural land or arrange land titles, as had been promised. An outspoken villager noted:

The government still did not fulfill their promises for agricultural land, and nearly seven years later we still have no land title or land certificates. If we tried to extract just one agricultural plot, the forest department

and the village administrator would warn us not to, saying it is a protected forest area that cannot be cultivated...For us poorer people, whom could we poor depend on? Whom could we believe?

Though turmeric was for many their sole source of income, it was itself also quite a problematic crop. As it could only be grown once a year, turmeric farmers were forced to borrow money from the rich when they ran out of money, which they would then pay back in turmeric. So, although farmers grew turmeric, they would not receive any money - leaving large numbers of villagers unable to escape the debt circle that emerged. The rich who acted as turmeric traders could claim the crop as repayments and resell them at a higher price. Many villagers remarked that they had no knowledge of the real turmeric market and the fair price, leading to the emergence of this exploitative two-tier economy or poor, debt-ridden farmers, and wealthy turmeric brokers.

While the poor were left in debt, with their livelihoods destroyed, without farmland and trying to survive on the arid mountain slopes, many village leaders and their wealthy friends benefitted from the relocation. The current village secretary is one example. He owned a small grocery shop under the bridge in the past, but now his wealth has swelled through the use of his assigned land plot beside the main road. He built a large brick house and sells expensive commodities at a high margin, as well as petrol and engine oil, while also acting a turmeric broker. Given his elevated position, the previous village leader recommended him to manage village affairs.

As in Htein Pin, most poorer villagers lacked any alternative livelihood skills and were given no transitional support. In many cases, after losing their farmland, their livelihoods became almost entirely dependent on the resources of the forest. Daw Sein is a more vocal local woman, who said she found the necessary knowledge and courage to confront these issues after attending media events in Taunggyi, Shan State. She was able to access opportunities that others were unaware of:

As for me, I was not satisfied with the compensation of the process for my house and plot, and I was very tired of complaining about not only me but also other

poor villagers only to get ignored. Now for my livelihood, I have begun to grow teak trees. I asked an officer from the forest department what opportunity I can get from growing teak trees, and I was told that if you register your name you can sell to the government at the official rate. So I am growing 200 teak plants instead of turmeric.

As livelihoods became unsustainable, many working aged villagers migrated to Thailand, Lao and China in search of income. Many parents said that they did not want their children to become migrant workers as they hoped to stay together with unity as in the past. But they also realized that the prospects in Lein Lee were bleak for young people, and so they had to pursue opportunities elsewhere. U Wai and Daw Yee, a middle-aged couple, reflected how his own worsening livelihood predicament had forced their children to migrate:

Things have been very difficult in recent years. We have no farmland but now we grow turmeric on the slope of the mountain. In the old village, we could grow betel trees, paddy rice and groundnut. We had plenty of food and didn't need to buy anything. Now, we have to buy everything, and even electricity costs 6500 ks for one month, which shocked me. Our life is too hard to just survive. Before, my father owned five acres of farmland so we never needed to worry about our livelihood or our household expenditures. Because of this my son and daughter had to become migrant workers, so we are really upset as they had to leave and we cannot be together.

A woman, aged 22, also said she had to pawn her motorbike to get cash to help send her husband to China as a migrant worker. She said: "I want money to try to escape from this life here as it is so hard to survive. My husband first went to China and I hope to join him if it is possible, but first I need to pay back our debts".

As seen in Htein Pin, the livelihood struggles caused severe straining of the family unit and sometimes had tragic consequences, with

many couples splitting up and seeing an uptick in domestic problems. In February 2019, there was a suicide case of a 29 years old man who had many hardships and no income. Someone close to him said he didn't have enough money for his family and every day he would quarrel with his wife about money. One day he got upset and he drank herbicide. He left behind a wife and two children.



**Figure 3.6** The larger house of Lein Le's village leader, ideally located near the busy road



**Figure 3.7** Many poorer villagers now rely on turmeric cultivation, but face precarious livelihoods and debt traps





**Figure 3.8** For many villagers the flooded landscape is a striking representation of their struggles

### **Kan Hla Village**

In the majority Kayan village of Kan Hla, the livelihood impacts were also significant, but the community had less of an increase in the existing dynamics of household livelihood inequality because of the more inclusive process of relocation and compensation. Nonetheless, traditional livelihoods were almost universally weakened, and women and youth seemed to be more severely impacted. Prior to relocation, almost all villagers depended on shifting cultivation and use of the forest, with farmland ownership spread throughout the community which quickly became flooded under the reservoir.

In the past, Kan Hla village was located beside the Paunglaung valley, with most villagers owing farmlands near the river. Their main livelihoods were in agriculture with their main crops being paddy rice, groundnut and turmeric. Rice, groundnut and small vegetables were grown in the farmlands, while turmeric was grown on the nearby mountain slopes beyond the river using slash and



burn methods. The villagers recalled how they had plentiful food for consumption and sale and did not have to ever worry about their livelihood. After the hydropower station came into operation, all their farmlands were under water. As with the other villagers, the government allocated a large land area for the whole village, which was supposedly enough for each family to have two acres. The land was rocky, arid and on a steep slope. There was no formal land title and they could only grow turmeric using shifting cultivation methods. Many families tried growing paddy on the mountainous land, but it was not successful because plots needed more preparation to grow paddy, and the fields were also damaged by rat infestations.

Therefore, most families became solely reliant on shifting agriculture to mainly grow turmeric, and the income received was often barely enough to purchase basic food. In this case, the new village lands were actually not far from their old land, but they could only be accessed through the Paunglaung stream. Before the stream was narrow, but as the water rose, the stream became wider and so they needed a motorboat to travel to their lands - this became expensive and inaccessible for some. One man said: "I had no money to buy a motorboat so I immediately faced difficulties. The rich families could buy boats and some of them even opened boat rental services". Some villagers have tried planting betel trees and rubber around their residential lands, but they do not know if it will be successful or not. Other villagers have tested out planting *ga mone*, a Burmese medicinal plant. With the exception of those who were able to successfully start new businesses, villagers in Kan Hla faced a tough time to re-establish their livelihoods.

While these divisions existed between rich and poor households, the women of Kan Hla who were not involved in the process seemed particularly upset about the impact of relocation on their lives. Ma Phaw, a woman aged 40, discussed her feelings about relocation:

Before relocation, my family lived in a brick house and we had farmland. But now we have no farmland, so the main problem is that we had to start buying rice. Also, in the new village the houses are far from

each other so that if you don't have a motorbike you can't get around the village. I spent all the compensation on a new house but it is still not finished yet. I stopped constructing it because we ran out of money. My husband has grown betel, banana and rubber, but I do not know whether the crops will be successful.

A different woman, aged 60, was also left unsatisfied with the compensation amount received for her house. While she was generally unhappy with what she received, she was noticeably more vocal about the impact of losing farmlands that were part of her parents' own history, which she had hoped to pass onto the next generation. In recent times her husband had passed away, compounding her difficulties. As she could not speak the Myanmar language confidently, her son translated for us about the impact on her livelihood, recalling with sadness her sense of loss. However, the women had managed to transition to growing *ga mone*, which had lessened her reliance on turmeric as a single source of income.

Because of their reliance on slash and burn methods, villagers' entire livelihood became dependent on finding suitable vacant land which could be prepared for cultivation every year. They had to burn the forest and clear the land each dry season. Many villagers reflected a feeling of insecurity at this becoming their main form of livelihood, feeling that it was unsustainable as a long-term farming activity. A 26-year-old woman said "I always worry about agricultural land because I search for vacant land to do shifting agriculture. If I still owned farmlands, there would be no need to find vacant land and life would be easier".

Ma Htar, a local Kayan woman aged 34, was similarly challenged by the new situation; "my job is working in the turmeric plantations. For the hill plantations, I cannot go there as it is very far away. Only my husband can go and I am now just the babysitter. There are about 2 acres of turmeric plantation and uphill plantation." Despite this, she saw some positives in the new village:

compared to the old times, it is much more modern.  
The phone connectivity is better and electricity access

is stable and other technologies have also developed. In the past, there was no electricity. Now we can cook rice and curry using electricity. However, if we look at our job opportunities and income levels, since we do not have land to plough anymore, we have to go to very far places to grow crops. Since I have only 2 acres, I cannot survive just on that. The hill plantation is not the same as farm plantation.

Like Htein Pin and Lein Lee, the economy of Kan Hla village depended on shifting cultivation, but while those villages had improved road access, the government left Kan Hla with a poor quality of road which left three hours' drive from the main road to the village. This compounded their challenges; "I know that if we relocate, our life will have struggles and we will face difficulties, but this is worse than I expected" said one woman... "My husband searched for new work in Yangon but struggled to find anything. I want to learn another livelihood activity as this life is so hard". Some villagers attempted new forms of income streams, but the poor transport options further limited their opportunities. One woman said: "In the new village, although I built a shop, people were not really financially stable so they didn't have money to spend and so I didn't have enough customers. So I had to close the shop."

One of the rich villagers, U Ba, aged 50, had a strong influence on the villagers and, while his family continued to be wealthy, they seemed to have the support of the community. He owns a big grocery shop and a modernized house, and his main business is timber production. He claims that he hasn't gotten richer because of the relocation, and that the village was no more unequal than in the past - they all supported each other. The Kayan villagers appeared to respect him and also his wife Daw Nu, who created employment opportunities for Kayan women in making beautiful Kayan baskets using cane plants. The villagers do not talk negatively about their committee members and leaders, and they still show them respect, unlike elsewhere. There was a prevailing sense that the government was ultimately to blame, and that the community would stick together. One of the committee members reflected this:

There were some families who did not want to move. As a committee, we also couldn't do anything. It was just an order from the government officials. We all felt really saddened that the whole village had to move to another place and that we couldn't do farming. We lost our livelihoods and also we lost our farmlands. We became jobless. We felt sad but there was nothing we could do.

The community undoubtedly continues to have more of a culture of cooperation and a continued sense of unity, meaning it avoided the large disparities and ongoing disputes seen elsewhere. This was emphasized in how knowledge seemed to be shared in the community, with one example coming in the form of a women's collective. Shwe Kan Baw Za, an NGO (non-governmental organization) from Shan State, joined with the Kayan women and shared knowledge about savings and bank loan processes, and how to use natural fertilizer and natural pesticides. Some of these women formed a community support group which has at least 20 members. At first, they determined how much they could save, with poorer members contributing 500 kyat per month. Gradually they have saved money which can be used to give loans to struggling community members.

Members of the group can borrow more than three lakhs at a low rate of interest compared to other private savings organizations, which they can repay within six months or a year. If they have already repaid, they can borrow again. Ma Pu, a woman aged 24, said,

the group can help women. Before I depended entirely on my husband. Now I have money. I can stand by myself and I can contribute to food costs. I borrowed from the group and invested in a small business. Now I also have some power in decision making in our family, such as in the children's schooling and buying decisions. Before my husband did not agree with me attending this training, but now he agrees.

Unlike the other villages, there were no reported suicides in the years since relocation, and in Kan Hla village, there are youth support groups and women's self-help groups which meet frequently, discuss their future challenges and try to operate in the best interest of their fellow villagers. At least on a superficial level, Kan Hla does not seem to feature the stark levels of inequality seen elsewhere. While they continue to struggle to replicate their more abundant livelihoods of the past, the livelihood outcomes seem to have impacted the whole community in more-or-less equal measure, and villagers retain an outward sense of unity and pride.



**Figure 3.9** Despite relative community unity, the impact of the dam on livelihoods is unescapable



# 4

## CONTESTING POWER STRUCTURES: RESPONSES AND TENSIONS AFTER RELOCATION AND CONTINUED EFFORTS TO SEEK JUSTICE

Though the widespread suffering and depleted livelihoods experienced across villages impacted by the dam reflected the reality of the powerlessness of most villagers, these wretched experiences had the effect of sparking the pursuit of knowledge and power among previously passive parts of these communities. As the previous chapters showed, the villagers had minimal knowledge about what they were facing and the rights which they could fight for, let alone the space to push back against the government and against their own supposed representatives. However, through the interventions of some small civil society actors, combined with a broader sense of betrayal, community members achieved a level of empowerment as a result of their experiences. This chapter therefore concludes the narrative on something of a positive note, tracing how villagers found their voice and began to question to actions and words of those in power. Despite this, material benefits of this for the villagers themselves have not been forthcoming due to overwhelming structural impediments and the increased centralization of authority. But if one considers power to be a product of knowledge, then they have at least used their experiences to be able to begin calling out injustice when they see it.

## **Activism and Knowledge Sharing in the Face of Injustice**

Although government officials from the Department of Hydropower had already seen themselves as having fulfilled their roles in compensating and managing the resettlement process, the villagers were left deeply unhappy with the outcomes. As the previous chapters showed, villagers could not express their dissatisfaction because of a deeply engrained fear of what they described as “people in uniform”. They were simple villagers, they said, and they lacked knowledge about the right to sustainable livelihoods and the right to free expression, and so they remained outwardly passive while their lives were upturned and injustice was rife.

In December 2012, before relocation, the Kayan New Generation Youth Group (KNGY) from Loikaw, Kayah State visited Kayan villagers in Kan Hla village after hearing about this Kayan village that was impacted. They came to share knowledge and provide experience on human rights issues in the context of resettlement. “They explained to us that all of you have the right to ask compensation for your properties without losing anything. They explained the land law and property rights”, one villager recalled. The leaders of KNGY selected 10 villagers from across the resettlement site, including several women, who had all expressed interest in matters of law and human rights. They supported them with a three-day training in Yangon and a two-day training in Taunggyi, Shan State. Capacity building training workshops were further held in Pangkum village, Kayah State. Other NGOs such as the Myanmar People’s Alliance, based in Shan State, and Shwe Kanbawza, based in Pin Laung, also shared some knowledge to the impacted villagers. Through the knowledge gained from this training, KNGY claimed that the trainees shared ideas with their relatives and friends across the area, to groups in tea shops and by moving door to door throughout their communities.

In addition to providing this training, the organization focused on spreading awareness about what was taking place in Paunglaung. In 2014, a press conference was called by KNGY at the Diamond Condominium in Yangon, where they invited about 30 multimedia groups including journalists from popular news outlets such as Seven Days News and the Weekly Eleven journal. KNGY and



other NGOs joined forces to talk about the devastating impact of the dam on villagers, while publicly claiming that their rights had been violated by the government. In 2015, the Myanmar People's Alliance coordinated with KNGY to hold a one day assembly on human rights law at Lae Pyin Gyi monastery in Thapyaekone village, which was attended by around 70 villagers. Following this initiation, over several months a group of lawyers from Yangon visited village monasteries across the affected area to discuss their legal rights and talk through their problems, such as the lack of highland agriculture and the inequity in compensation. A member of KNGY said: "We gave practical legal and advocacy training and provided a space for villagers to report their cases so we could provide suggestions and advice to them on how to proceed".

Continuing this push for more justice, in 2015, KNGY coordinated with Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) and Land in Our Hands (LIOH), to publish a report concerning the impacts of the Upper Paunglaung dam on local livelihoods. These three groups selected data collectors from impacted villages and trained them how to collect and organize information and data. The report provided a comprehensive assessment of the widespread dislocation and livelihood insecurity of the project (Brown, 2015).

Through the same period, they also coordinated and helped local people to learn the significance of land law and property rights. When LIOH became aware of the unjust government relocation schemes and the suspicious allocation of land plots, they joined with KNGY organization and helped local people understand their rights to push back. Though LIOH had not yet been fully established as an organization, they said they were already active in engaging with these communities with the support of a US funding agency. After relocation, LIOH provided capacity building training, seeking to motivate local people to understand when their rights had been breached, and giving them the courage to defend themselves with a particular focus on land dispossession.

Through these activities, villagers expressed to us that many of them grew in their willingness to speak out against injustice and oppose corruption and unfair practice. They said that in the past they simply believed that the state was the most powerful force in

the country, they were afraid of government officers and they did not dare to oppose the implementation of infrastructure plans which they were told were in the best interests of national development. A representative of KIOH reflected that they did not engage with these villagers simply for them to oppose the government, but so they were more aware of their rights: "...we wanted them to understand the concept of human rights, and have the ability to identify and pursue violations in their own lives and that of others".

### **Empowered Villagers and the Paunglaung Yaung Chi Committee's Fight for Justice**

Following the compensation process, villagers became aware of the injustices that had taken place, and the tangible, visible anomalies in compensation amounts and resettlement sites made corruption and prejudice clear for them all to see and identify. In addition to the increased awareness brought about by the work of the NGOs, some aggrieved villagers became emboldened and took it upon themselves to organize to share experiences, collect evidence and make plans to pursue claims.

The Paunglaung Yaung Chi committee spawned out of a meeting which took place at the house of U Lwin, a villager from the town of Taline Ma who had lost his mountain agriculture land without receiving any compensation. At the meeting, villagers from across the dam area each talked through their own predicament, identifying the various ways in which the process and outcome was unjust. One of the women from Lein Lee village, for example, told of how her house had been incorrectly measured to be much smaller, but the committee had ignored all of her complaints. Villagers recalled a sense of unity and dismay at the unfair practices of local committees, and a feeling of total neglect by the government.

In time these meetings led to the formation of a committee founded with the vision that they could form a united voice to express their problems and challenge the authorities. The committee was formed with 21 members, including 6 women, and they selected a chairman, secretary, coordinator, and treasurer

under the name of Paunglaung Yaung Chi committee (*Yaung Chi* translates as light or sun rays). Though still outnumbered by men, women villagers were actively involved in the development of the committee, which was a notable shift from the complete male dominance of village compensation committees. In short time, the number of committee members increased to more than a hundred members and the committee had established strong rules, regulations and a structure.

According to the committee members, they shared knowledge in all impacted villages using the training approaches many of them had learned from KNGY, LIOH, and MPA. They guided local people, especially the poor, to be able to express their loss and their difficulties. They encouraged and showed people how to complain to the compensation committee and how to ask for the chance at justice.

After a few years the former chairman moved on, frustrated at his own loss of land and in need of a new life somewhere else, passing over responsibility to a new chairman, U Toe Aung. He said that the committee “wants to explore the causes of the problems among government officials, village leaders, committee members, and villagers. We organize events and create a forum to discuss these issues, document and collect evidence of the villagers claims and report them the Shan State government. We hope to one day help recover the livelihoods we all had in the past”.

Government officials, meanwhile, remained hostile to the committee, with villagers reflecting that they were angry towards villagers who were outspoken. In the face of this hostility, villagers were aware of the need to be unified in their actions calling for justice.

The momentum continued to build as a result. The committee and civil society were able to bring attention to the issue on a broader scale and receive national attention. Through 2017 and 2018 there was significant media coverage. In one instance, the Yaung Chi committee joined with KNGY and their civil society partners for a media event in Taunggyi. A committee member gave forthright responses to media enquiries, with some daily journals publishing remarks which admonished the authorities for their incompetence

including the words that “there was no farmland, water was scarce, they have no livelihoods and not enough compensation to survive. The committee’s practices were unfair and corrupt”

This media attention finally attracted the ire of officials from the MOEP. They met with villagers at the monastery, with the senior official demanding to know who was interviewed by the media. According to villagers who were present, the government officials threatened villagers who had expressed their grievances, repeatedly exclaiming to them “Why are you not satisfied?” Another village activist who was present at the meeting had taken out his phone to record the actions of the officials. When the officials saw him filming them, they forced him to delete the video file. They continued to threaten him and other activists, and he was detained by government staff and police until midnight that evening.

The Yaung Chi Committee Chairman told of how these events served to galvanize them and reinforce their commitment to speak truth to power: “This event motivated the committee to keep facing the challenges concerning our region and our people. We know now that we need to be united to contest the government if we want to achieve truth and fairness”.

The committee then drew up its priorities in how it would approach the government at both regional and national level in seeking to serve the people of the area. The first priority is employment opportunities for local people, the second is for roads to connect each village, and the third is support for highland agriculture. Despite this ongoing commitment to justice and accountability in the face of hostility from those in power, it has proven challenging to achieve any sort of substantive outcomes with these structural impediments in place.

### **Community Participation and Upturned Dynamic of Power Relations**

In the years that followed, community members who were previously silenced found their voices. The village committees described in chapter three no longer served as viable political vehicles and no longer had a mandate from the communities they

purported to serve. Instead, poor and disadvantaged villagers, including women, sought ways to bring their own voice into the forefront. And while substantive achievements largely remain beyond reach, not least due to increased centralization of local governance, in their hour of desperation these dispossessed farmers have at least achieved what appears to amount to a complete upturning of the power relations that formed an influential part in their own losses.

The Paunglaung Yaung Chi committee busily went about collecting data and preparing detailed reports on these key livelihood issues. The most common issues discussed were ways to reclaim access to highland agriculture, and processes of land titling or land certification. Though the government promised that they would replace their lands with the new highland areas for all impacted villagers, this remained an empty promise unfulfilled. This period was marked as a highpoint in village political participation, with locals discussing feeling that they finally they had a structure that represented them and was genuinely engaged in trying to solve these critical problems. In time, the committee also began to be a place where people would discuss more general concerns too, such as electricity outages, flooding, problems in the turmeric market and most critically, how to create opportunities for their young people so they did not need to move overseas for work.

One output from the committee was a report distributed to agents of the Parliament of Shan State, the General Administration Office of Pinlaung Township, and Paunglaung Town, which provided a clear account of livelihoods before and after the dam construction. Using data and accounts from across their communities, the report traced these devastating impacts. The report emphasized the rise in job scarcity, and the failure of government officials to fulfil their promise to provide opportunities to replace highland agriculture. It also highlighted the challenge of keeping young people in school with them forced to work to support their families amid this widespread insecurity and the struggles in the turmeric market where workers were beholden to loan sharks. It also traced the rise in mental health issues, drug use and alcohol addiction among young people while also arguing that this led to a rise in domestic and sexual abuse. They also reported illegal timber harvesting

with evidence and proposed a collaboration with the government to stop the trade, but the government was unwilling to cooperate even on this issue of mutual interest.

One major advantage of the committee was its ability to place themselves as an agent between the people and the officials. For people who retained fear of the government, they were able to act as a conduit through which their claims could be expressed all the way up to the national level government.

Villagers and Paunglaung Yaung Chi Committee members also responded when reports emerged of the potential construction of another dam on the Paunglaung River, which they feared would have the same impact on others that they had faced. It now seems that the Middle Paunglaung dam will inevitably be constructed and villagers will likewise face forced relocation. The committee members travelled there to share knowledge about their experiences and give advice on how to ensure compensation is fair and follows a transparent, systematic process. They urged villagers to not be afraid of government officials or of powerful people in their communities, but to stand their ground and defend their rights. One local woman activist reflected on her own experience when she was deeply unsatisfied with the compensation amount she was due to receive, but signed the form anyway under fear of the government officials. She said;

I want to help those who will suffer the impacts of the dam. I gave them information on how to ensure they do not lose everything that we lost. I also made sure they understood the compensation process and how things are measured and accounted for.

Even beyond their own area, these experiences have forged a new generation of activists who, they said, were “no longer afraid of those in power”. This has brought greater opportunities for empowerment beyond the immediate locality of the Paunglaung region. Some of these activists have travelled across other parts of Myanmar to share their experiences with those facing similar dangers in the face of reckless dam construction. Under the support of the Pang Ku group, some of them travelled to Myitkyina to share

their experiences with local people potentially being displaced by the Myitsone dam. They also went to Mawlamyine to share how they experienced injustices in the compensation processes.

Despite this emerging culture of activism, the committee have expressed in their reports and in our subsequent interviews an overwhelming sense of frustration that government refuses to listen to the people, reflecting a great sense of dismay at the impotence of the NLD government. The new officer in-charge of MOEP, for example, met with villagers in Htein Pin in 2016. Rather than seeking to address these issues, the official said that relocation and compensation had been completed under the previous government and there was no recourse he could enact to improve their situation.

In the years since, those who were responsible for these injustices and the corruption that took place have moved on and sought to absolve themselves of responsibility. Officers who implemented these unequal compensation and relocation processes had been transferred to other regions or had been retired from their duties. When we contacted an electric power engineer from the hydropower department, he said he was assigned elsewhere and had no involvement.

Still now, the government has continued to stall in fulfilling their promise to allocate land for highland agriculture. In the time of resettlement, officials said the department of land affairs would take charge of this and allocate two acres per household, and yet seven years later this failure to deliver on this fundamental promise has devastated so many lives and livelihoods. We contacted an officer from the relevant department, and he gave a vague response, clearly seeking to obfuscate rather than respond to the needs of the people.

Therefore, in spite of all these efforts, there is a sense of resignation that has swept through the committee. After many years of fighting back, they are without much reward and without money and land and with little prospect of making progress under an increasingly centralized governance structure.

While the material benefits have largely not arrived, villagers should take heart in the efforts of the committee and in their own

political engagement. It certainly appears that local power relations have been fundamentally upturned. The former committee members described in chapter three have been banished from local politics. Some of them have left the village entirely, seeking new opportunities elsewhere, while others have kept to themselves, well away from the new leaders and the villagers who suffer. Village representatives are now generally regular people who typify the average household and have faced the same forms of injustice, left behind by governments and the village committees that betrayed their interests. Many of them are women too, who are represented as they never were when the dam was built.



**Figure 4.1** For many women, they have found their voice and a ray of hope through activism





**Figure 4.2** The reality of destroyed livelihoods and unequal access to justice persists



# 5

## CONCLUSION

This research has attempted to bring a new dimension to continued debates on the politics of dam building and the challenges of achieving equitable and just compensation and relocation processes. The negative impacts of large-scale dam building and big development plans is well-recorded throughout Southeast Asia, and particularly the damage that has been wrecked on local communities by state-private partnerships under Myanmar's recent military regimes. Likewise, the inadequacy and mismanagement of state compensation and resettlement programs has also been looked at in depth by researchers and civil society actors. In the case of the Upper Paunglaung dam, further evidence is given to support both of these inevitable, sad realities – any benefits of dam building are unquestionably outweighed by the social, cultural and environmental consequences, while government efforts to support the transition of affected communities to new livelihoods are almost never well-conceived or appropriately implemented.

As this monograph shows yet again, the jury is no longer out on either of these fundamental points. However, the main value in this research has been its capacity to go deeper into the local politics of resettlement and compensation, to provide a thorough account of how local power relations in these processes – more often than not – lead to a gross exacerbation in wealth and livelihood inequality.

This was achieved by first tracing in clear detail using an array of first-hand accounts how decision-making structures were formed, whereby state actors sought to absolve themselves from any responsibility by empowering village elites. In most cases, the poor majority – mainly farming households relying on land they had cultivated for generations – were completely excluded and left unaware that decisions were being made which would impact them for years to come. These tight webs of interconnected leaders and elites made decisions on resettlement sites that they knew would benefit them at the expense of fellow villagers. In most cases, they intentionally kept information on compensation schemes tight to their chest, exploiting vagaries in the system to ensure that a larger chunk of village-designated funds would flow into their pockets. In other cases, their actions were more blatantly corrupt.

Then, the research centered in on how these elite-dominated processes had clear and direct links to divergent livelihood outcomes. The village of Htein Pin was the most obvious example of this, as many wealthy villagers thrived in the new resettlement site with large plots situated near the road where they could engage in new, more lucrative livelihoods. For most villagers, they were forced to abandon the infrastructure of the new site and instead build bamboo shelters some two hours away just so they could forge a precarious existence in agriculture. The human consequences of this have been tragic, with substance abuse, spiraling debt traps, and increased rates of suicide all becoming unfortunate features of the community in recent years.

In Lein Le, many of the same trends and consequences were also seen, with the community now more divided in both wealth and social divides than at any point in recent memory. The situation has been somewhat better in Kan Hla, with the community remaining more unified in spite of weakened livelihood outcomes and increased inequality. We cannot assume then that all these experiences were equal or followed exact processes, but the general trend is irrefutable in the clear relationship between flawed and corrupt processes and an exacerbation in existing inequalities.

Though this reality is undoubtedly grim, the findings discussed in chapter four have at least given hope to the possibility of

empowerment and an upturning of the structures of power which hindered these communities. Through NGO interventions and the commitment of activists, reporters and newly formed community groups, regular people have found a voice and are no longer afraid to speak their truth. This has not yet brought about substantial improvements to the consequences of resettlement, but it has at least given them the chance to work to ensure their experiences are not repeated elsewhere.

Compiling this research was only possible through taking an ethnographic approach, spending significant time with different actors in the community over an 18-month period. Gaining trust was a crucial part of this, but so was a grounded understanding of how local politics operated. This was possible through our positioning as Kachin academics working in economics – having an awareness of state practices as well as the workings of rural, upland communities. We are indebted to the communities who shared intimate testimonies with us and were willing to put themselves and their experiences on record.

There is an unfortunate inevitability that Myanmar will continue to build new dams across the landscape. While we must fight to prevent these damaging development plans where possible, we must also be prepared for communities to face displacement and look at ways to improve how power plays out at the local level. The blame for these failures cannot simply lie with these village leaders, but instead with the state structures and systems which allowed these entrenched power structures to be the biggest influence in determining outcomes.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Than Than Soe is an Associate Professor of the Department of Economics, University of Mandalay. She has been teaching in educational setting for 23 years. She first received her Bachelor Degree B.Econ(Economics) from the Yangon University of Economics in 1991, before she had to return to her native town of Banmaw in Kachin State to live with her mother at a time of great instability in Northern Myanmar. She then moved back to Central Myanmar after being appointed as a tutor to the University of Mandalay in 1998. She completed her Master of Economics Degree at the Yangon University of Economics in 2003, after which she continued to work in Economic Departments across several universities in Myanmar. She has also completed a Diploma in Research Studies (DRS) from Monywa University of Economics and also a Diploma in Tourism and Management Studies (DTSM) from the University of Mandalay. Among her diverse research interests are educational development, local and gendered decision making, and livelihood systems. Her current PhD thesis is on community forestry programs and their complex relationship to poverty reduction outcomes in rural Myanmar. Than Than Soe is an enthusiastic learner and researcher, and a passionate advocate for local empowerment. She has reveled in her involvement in the capacity building project and has excelled through this chance to produce research alongside international colleagues.



N Khum Ja Ra is a lecturer at the Department of Economics, University of Mandalay. She received her Master's in Economics from Yangon University of Economics in 2008, and also a received her post-graduate diploma in International Trade from the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in 2018. She began working as a university teacher at the University of Myitkyina in Kachin State in 2003, and has been teaching across Myanmar since. N Khum Ja Ra is a native Kachin from northern Myanmar and she grew up in Moe Nyin, Bamaw, Putao and Myitkyina Townships across Kachin State. She is therefore strongly interested in conducting research on socio-economic development in underdeveloped and rural areas in Myanmar, and has excelled in this opportunity to build her qualitative research capacity.





# DAM DISPLACEMENT AND LOCAL POWER:

## Ruptured Villages and Widened Inequalities in the Localized Resettlement and Compensation Process of the Upper Paunglaung Dam, Myanmar

The government of Myanmar has begun building hydropower dams to meet the country's growing demand for electricity; among them is the Upper Paunglaung Dam in Southern Shan State, home to mostly small Bamar villages. As construction was completed, two dozen villages and around 8000 people were relocated and promised compensation. The research uncovered complex power relations between the government, the village chairman, village leaders and villagers throughout the process of compensation and relocation. While dynamics in each location varied, powerful, asset-rich people were the decision makers at the local level in almost all cases. Those with less power had little chance to join in the decision-making processes, and lacked the knowledge or capital to shift to new livelihoods. Inequality in these communities has been exacerbated by these unequal processes, and in many cases has led to devastating impacts. This monograph is a new critical perspective on dam projects and their impact in Myanmar, laying bare these local processes where corruption and privilege remain rife.



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