Title:
Precarity, poverty and poppy: Encountering development in the uplands of Shan State, Myanmar

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Abstract:
In recent years there have been growing calls for "development-oriented drug policies" to tackle illicit drug cultivation in the global South. Calls to integrate drugs and development have been important in demonstrating the damage caused by the war on drugs to marginalized communities and in drawing attention to how drug cultivation is inextricably linked to wider development challenges. However, this paper argues that the emerging policy agenda to 'developmentalise' drug policy is founded upon a simplified and misleading conceptualization of the relationship between poverty, development and illicit drug cultivation. Most problematically, it overlooks the fact that people who cultivate drugs because they are poor are not just those who have been 'left behind' by development. They are also those who have experienced new forms of immiseration and precarity as a consequence of processes of economic liberalization, market integration and agricultural 'modernization'. Confronting this blindspot, this article analyses the drivers of rising illicit opium cultivation across parts of Shan State, Myanmar, since the late 1990s. The paper argues that if the current agenda to developmentalise drug policy is to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of the rural poor in drug-producing regions in Myanmar and beyond, it must confront the fact that for many households the decision to cultivate opium has been a response to the very processes of market-led rural development that policymakers claim will alleviate poverty.

Keywords:
rural development, drug policy, opium, agricultural frontiers, rural livelihoods

Introduction

> "Opium production is a result of poverty. But policymakers ignore what is causing poverty"
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> – Shan researcher and political activist[1]

In recent years there have been growing calls to move away from treating drug cultivation as a criminal and security issue, and to instead approach tackling cultivation as a development challenge (Buxton, 2015, 2; Brombacher & Westerbarkei, 2019; Alimi, 2019; Gillies et al., 2019; GIZ, 2013). Efforts to promote "development-oriented drug policies" (UNODC, 2016, 25) and to link drug policy to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emphasized the need to shift drug control policies away from forced eradication and the criminalization of drug cultivators. Instead, they have called for rural development strategies aimed at promoting secure and sustainable livelihoods, thereby removing the drivers of poverty and vulnerability that are perceived to push farmers into the illegal drug economy.

In many ways, the burgeoning policy agenda to 'developmentalise' drug issues is welcome. Many studies have demonstrated the huge damage wrought on poor and marginalised communities by the war on drugs, and have drawn attention to how drug cultivation is inextricably linked to wider development issues related to insecure livelihoods, land tenure insecurity, economic marginalization, and armed conflict. However, this paper warns that the emerging policy agenda to 'developmentalise' efforts to tackle drug supply in source countries is founded upon a simplified and misleading conceptualization of the relationships between poverty, development and drug cultivation. Most problematically, this agenda overlooks the ways in which processes of capitalist development and market integration create new forms of vulnerability and livelihood threats for the rural poor. It ignores the fact that people who cultivate drugs because they are poor are not just those who have been 'left behind' by

[1] Interview conducted by the author in Chiang Mai, Thailand. 12th November 2012.

development, but are also those who have experienced new forms of immiseration and precarity as a result of their 'adverse incorporation' into markets (Hickey & Du Toit, 2007, 7).

Confronting this blindspot, this article sets out a more rigorous and critical analysis of the relationships between poverty, rural development strategies and illicit opium cultivation in Shan State, Myanmar. Myanmar is the world's second largest producer of illicit opium after Afghanistan and more than 90% of the country's opium crop is cultivated in Shan State. Opium grows well on steep hillsides at high elevations and is thus well-suited to Shan State's rugged landscape. Opium is cultivated almost universally by smallholder farmers and the crop also generates significant wage labour. The UNODC (2019) estimates that 130,000 households are currently involved in opium cultivation in Shan State, meaning that the crop supports the livelihoods of more than 600,000 people in Shan State.[2] The vast majority of opium is refined into morphine base or heroin within the country's borders by illegal drug businesses that purchase the opium from farmers through a network of buyers. China is the primary market for Shan State's heroin, although local drug use has also risen in recent decades (Drugs and (Dis)order, 2020).

The rest of this article comprises three sections. Section 1 develops the paper's overarching arguments by drawing upon a rich body of literature that has explored the relationships between poverty and development, and explores how this literature has important implications for current drug policy debates. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the rural development

[2] According to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, the average household size in Shan State was 4.7 people. The total population in Shan State is estimated to be 5.8million. The accuracy of data on the opium economy in Myanmar is highly questionable and the UNODC acknowledges that its figures are merely estimates. In previous years, the UNODC has estimated that as many as 380,000 households in Myanmar could be involved in opium cultivation (UNODC, 2012).

strategies and main opium substitution programs that have been implemented across Shan State since the 1990s. It shows how these strategies have promoted economic liberalisation, market integration and agricultural commercialisation as the most effective way to improve agricultural efficiency, achieve inclusive growth to alleviate poverty, and reduce levels of poppy cultivation. Section 3 then provides a brief analysis of two regions of Shan State that have witnessed significant increases in drug production since the late 1990s: the hill ranges across Lashio, Kutkai and Namkham Townships in northern Shan State, and the hill ranges south of Taunggyi in southwestern Shan State. This paper reveals how the decision by smallholders to cultivate opium in these two regions has been a response to both longstanding drivers of poverty and livelihood insecurity *and* new forms of precarity that are the result of market-led rural development and counter-narcotics strategies. The paper demonstrates that by framing illicit opium production solely as a consequence of a 'lack' of development, involving those who have 'missed out' from economic integration, post-2010 rural development programs in Myanmar have overlooked the ways in which opium cultivation in parts of Shan State has become the alternative livelihood for those who have lost out from development strategies enacted over the previous two decades. The paper's conclusion reflects on the wider implications of this analysis for policymakers seeking to promote "development-oriented drug policies". This paper is based on a decade of fieldwork and desk-based research and draws upon the findings from interviews conducted with farmers, agricultural merchants, village headmen, researchers, journalists, civil society organizations, government officials, private companies, INGOs, multilateral donors, and members of various armed organizations.[3]

[3] The majority of these interviews were conducted by the author between 2011 and 2019. The paper also draws upon the findings of interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 by a team of researchers at Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) and Kachinland Research Centre (KRC) as part of a four-year research project, entitled Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war. The project is funded by UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund [Award Reference: ES/P011543/1]. The Myanmar research in this project has been co-led by the author, Dr Mandy Sadan, Sai Aung Hla and

1. Poverty, rural development and illicit drug cultivation

Those advocating for the integration of drugs and development policy have typically conceptualized drug cultivation as "a consequence of development deficits" (Brombacher & Westerbarkei, 2019, 89). The poverty that drives farmers to cultivate drugs is conceptualized through what Bernstein (1992, 24) terms a "residual framework". Drugs are understood to be cultivated in regions and by people who have been 'left out' of development. The framing of the relationship between poverty, rural development and drug cultivation in this way creates a clear and seductive narrative for policymakers: Farmers cultivate illicit drugs because they are poor and have few alternative livelihood options. They are poor because of a lack of development. Rural development strategies predicated on market integration of 'marginal' regions and agricultural modernization will overcome poverty. Development will thus address the causes of drug cultivation by providing opportunities for secure and prosperous livelihoods in the licit economy.

However, conceptualising the relationships between poverty, economic development and illicit drug cultivation through a residual framework is problematic for a number of reasons. Treating poverty and drug cultivation as resulting from a *lack of* development – i.e. by focusing on what is missing in drug-producing regions – detracts attention from the social relations of power and structural forces that *are* present in these regions and that are responsible for creating and reproducing poverty even amidst processes of economic growth. Residual approaches thus lead to a rather "placeless and ahistorical account of how poverty is caused in particular contexts" (Green & Hulme, 2005, 873). Furthermore, as Mosse (2010, 1158) argues, approaching poverty

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Dan Seng Lawn. The paper has benefited from ongoing discussions with Drugs and (dis)order team members, especially Jonathan Goodhand, Mandy Sadan, Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, Dan Seng Lawn, Ajarn Khuensai Jaiyen, Sai Aung Hla, Sai Kham Phu, Shan Malay, and Muai Oo.

through a residual framework encourages "the habit of thinking of poverty as a 'condition' understood by focusing on the characteristics of 'the poor' themselves (low income, vulnerability to risk, weak networks and so on) rather than on the wider economic and social systems of which they are a part, and consequently of equating the study of poverty with studying poor people". Efforts to address poverty thus typically focus on integrating the poor into state and market institutions, rather than assessing how these institutions actually work to ameliorate or exacerbate poverty (Green & Hulme, 2005).

The tendency to analyse poverty through a residual framework is evident in much of the policy literature and advocacy work on integrating drugs and development. This literature has focused almost exclusively on depicting the conditions of poor cultivators and the role that development interventions should play in providing what they lack (for a paradigmatic example, see UNODC, 2019). It has largely been silent on how development schemes, processes of economic growth and capitalist social relations may serve to also create poverty traps and magnify the importance of drug cultivation to the livelihoods of the poor. This silence is particularly problematic in light of a growing body of work that shows how the expansion of illicit drug cultivation in many of the world's major drug-producing countries has been as much a consequence of past development schemes and the emergence of market-based economies, as it is a story of isolated or lagging regions left behind by the forces of modernity and development (Gootenberg and Davalos, 2018; Bradford, 2018; Morris, 2020; Le Cour Grandmaison et al., 2019). Gootenberg and Davalos (2018) show how the areas of Bolivia, Peru and Colombia where coca production expanded most rapidly since the 1960s were regions that had experienced major state-led modernization programs through the middle of the twentieth century. These development schemes motivated mass peasant migrations into newly colonized regions of the Amazon, while the subsequent failure of these schemes left populations without services and security. Coca cultivation subsequently became a way of mitigating the poverty and livelihood insecurity that had been *produced by* modernization schemes. Bradford (2018) demonstrates how the transformation of Helmand Province into the epicentre of global illicit opium production cannot simply be attributed to the legacy of the Soviet-Afghan War and recent decades of insurgency, but has its roots in the US-funded Helmand Valley development projects that were implemented in the decades after World War Two. These development schemes gave farmers greater exposure to – and understanding of – global markets and instigated a transition away from subsistence livelihoods towards a cash economy. These changes provided the foundations for the vast expansion in opium production in the 1970s when the fall in global markets for wheat and cotton coincided with an uptick in global demand for heroin and the opium bans implemented in Turkey and Pakistan. Recent work on Mexico has also shown how many of the country's opium cultivators are from rural communities that were devastated by cuts in agricultural subsidies and increased price competition on crops such as maize and coffee following the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (Le Cour Grandmaison et al., 2019). As Morris (2020) argues, they are those who have been "partially integrated into national and international markets, but have failed to see the benefits of such economic 'development'".

This paper builds on the insights of this recent body of literature by problematizing the ways in which mainstream development policy conceives the relationships between poverty, illicit drug cultivation and development. In doing so, the aim is not to deny that in many cases the poverty that drives farmers to cultivate illegal drugs is rooted in longstanding marginalization from processes of development. Nor is it to deny that capitalist development has generated sustained economic growth that has lifted large numbers of people out of poverty. Rather, the purpose is to warn that using a residual framework to explain why poverty pushes people into illegal drug economies offers only partial insights into the relationships between development, poverty and drug cultivation. Furthermore, it creates a set of simplistic and misleading assumptions of what a 'developmental approach' to drug policy reform should entail and obscures some of the most telling insights from recent scholarship.

In order to develop this argument, I draw upon Rigg et al.'s (2016) useful distinction between 'vulnerability' and 'precarity' as a way to differentiate between different poverty-making processes and forms of livelihood exposure. Vulnerability defines longstanding forms of livelihood insecurity and marginality caused by physical isolation, climatic hazards, limited resources, decades-long armed conflict, lack of market access and/or deep-seated unequal social relations (such as patriarchal structures or caste systems). These forms of livelihood insecurity are often experienced as "inherited exposures" spanning generations and, Rigg et al. argue (2016), can be defined as "old poverty". In contrast, precarity denotes new forms of livelihood insecurity and vulnerability that are *produced by* contemporary processes of development, especially market integration and long-term processes of capitalist transformation. Precarity arises from the "adverse incorporation" of certain populations into modernization projects, as opposed to their exclusion from these projects (Hickey & Du Toit, 2007). This approach confronts the issue of whether some are poor because others are rich (Bernstein, 1992, 24). It emphasizes the need to address the ways in which the same processes that generate aggregate economic growth and pathways to prosperity for some also serve to produce forms of durable poverty for others.

Throughout upland regions of Southeast Asia – including the opium-producing borderlands of Myanmar – contemporary development discourses have espoused a "markets-plus model" (Bernstein & Oya, 2014). Policies have focused on 'opening up' 'marginal' spaces to markets and capital, and consolidating state control over territories where state authority has historically been weak. These programs have included roadbuilding, liberalization of border trade, expansion of cash crop production into upland areas, and efforts to attract investment and agribusiness development through business-friendly land and foreign investment laws (Castellanet & Diepart, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Hall et al., 2011; Li, 1999; Nevins & Peluso, 2008). At the same time, there have been targeted efforts to make markets work better for the poor. These interventions are typically technical fixes, such as pro-poor value chain development through improving the poor's access to information on markets, training in more efficient agricultural practices, and better access to inputs and credit. Typified most clearly in the World Bank's 2008 World Development Report, a 'markets-plus' model is thus claimed to offer win-win solutions by simultaneously facilitating efficiency gains through agribusiness-led economic growth, while also providing opportunities for smallholders and overcoming rural poverty (Li, 2009; Oya, 2008). However, this narrative ignores the fact that market-led rural development creates new forms of precarity as well as prosperity (Bernstein, 2010; Bernstein & Oya, 2014; Li, 2002; Li, 2010; Rigg et al., 2016). Examples include: growing land tenure insecurity in contexts where communal land tenure is not recognized and inflows of capital generate heightened competition for land and resources (Buchanan, Kramer & Woods, 2013; FSWG, 2011); worsening levels of debt and debt-induced dispossession as farmers struggle to manage market volatility (Woods, 2020); environmental degradation caused by more intensive agricultural practices and deforestation (Bradford, 2018, 195); erosion of coping mechanisms and food security as subsistence food crops are replaced by production for the market (Bernstein, 1979).

It is important to emphasize that the distinction between vulnerability and precarity is a heuristic device, and in reality these forms of livelihood insecurity are often overlapping and can be difficult to separate out. Households often continue to experience longstanding forms of vulnerability while facing new forms of precarity and thus become “doubly exposed” (Rigg et al., 2016, 67). Vulnerability and precarity can also oscillate. For example, declining levels of armed conflict in parts of Myanmar’s borderlands in the 1990s and 2000s allowed for increasing inflows of investment and development, removing some of the physical isolation previously experienced by marginalized communities, but exposing them to new forms of risk created by market forces, such as land grabs. In turn, the resumption of armed conflict in recent years has meant that the primary threats to livelihoods are once again from violence and isolation from trade networks and markets disrupted by war.

However, while acknowledging these caveats, I argue that a framework of analysis that confronts how poverty can be produced by market-led development processes – rather than only seeing poverty as residual to development – is instructive for current debates surrounding drug policy reform. Amidst efforts to present drug policy reform as a development issue, there has been little critical reflection on the meanings of development or how to conceive the relationship between poverty, development and drug cultivation. ‘New’ forms of precarity and livelihood exposure inherent in capitalist development have largely been ignored and the potential for rural development interventions to tackle poverty has been treated as self-evident. Those calling for “development-oriented drug policies” have instead concentrated their efforts on how to confront the vested interests that continue to advocate forced eradication and criminalization of cultivators, and the challenges of how to ‘do’ development effectively in drug-producing regions. In part this may be on grounds of pragmatism. Debates on precarity are highly “politically charged” because they question the very logic and feasibility of the contemporary neo-liberal development agenda (Rigg, 2018). The challenge facing drug policy reform advocates in encouraging policymakers to view drug supply as a development issue rather than an issue of criminality or security no doubt makes it particularly challenging to also confront dominant discourses of development.

However, as a consequence current drug policy reform debates replicate the blindspots of mainstream development policy. There is a danger that efforts to 'developmentalise' drug policy will succumb to what James Ferguson (1990) famously termed the 'anti-politics machine', which serves to depoliticise development through the framing of development as a series of "technical solutions to technical problems". As Stefan Bächtold (2015) warns in relation to the rise of an 'anti-politics machinery' in post-2010 Myanmar, the consequence is a narrow instrumental focus on 'doing development' more effectively and a subsequent failure to question the assumptions, ideologies and world-views that underpin interventions. These insights, briefly sketched out above and explored in greater detail in the rest of the paper, draw attention to both the current limitations of efforts to pursue development-oriented drug policies, and offer useful departure points for those seeking to overcome these limitations.

2. Drugs, rural development and counter-narcotics programs in Shan State, Myanmar

After decades of military rule, Myanmar's 2010 General Election appeared to be a watershed moment. The transition to a nominally civilian government, the launch of a formal peace process, and Aung San Suu Kyi's subsequent landslide 2015 election victory inspired hopes that Myanmar was embarking upon what the World Bank (2012) dubbed a 'triple transition': from authoritarian military rule to democratic governance, from a centrally directed economy to a market-oriented economy, and from 60 years of conflict to peace in the country's border areas. Myanmar's post-2010 reforms paved the way for renewed inflows of western investment and aid after decades of economic sanctions (Asia Foundation, 2018). Agriculture and rural development have been an important focus of aid flows. This is hardly surprising in a country where agriculture still employs approximately 70% of the country's population and the government estimates that 85% of those below the poverty line live in rural areas (FAO, n.d.; Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018, 8). In 2018, the government launched an ambitious ‘Agricultural Development Strategy and Investment Plan’ – backed by multilateral donors – aimed at transforming Myanmar from a predominantly agricultural economy to a modern agro-industrial and service-based economy through a process of agricultural modernization and wider structural economic reforms (ibid).

Myanmar’s Agricultural Development Strategy crystallises the government’s “markets-plus” model. It advocates a capitalist transformation of the country’s agriculture sector and stronger integration into global agricultural commodity chains as a way of stimulating rapid GDP growth and promoting the country’s importance to regional food security. Since 2010, the government had already implemented a series of land laws and foreign investment laws to facilitate this approach (Woods, 2015, 17-21; U San Thein et al. 2018; SiuSue Mark, 2016).[4] Alongside the promotion of agribusiness-led development, government and donor policy documents have also pledged to protect and support smallholders, who comprise the vast majority of the country’s rural population. For example, the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT), which is the main donor mechanism for supporting rural development, promotes a three-part strategy aimed at supporting rural households to ‘step up’ the value chain through increased productivity, ‘step out’ of agriculture into better-paid non-farm jobs, or ‘hang-in’ where they have no “commercial potential” and few viable livelihood options outside of agriculture (LIFT, 2019). Rural development strategies have thus claimed to offer win-win

[4] For example, the 2012 Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management (VFV) Law empowers a Central Committee under the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation to allocate uncultivated land (in practice land without legal title) for commercial development, and allows concessions of up to 50,000 acres for industrial crops. The Farmland Law, also passed in 2012, has effectively created a private market for land by allowing all land with official Land Use Certificates (LUCs) to be bought and sold freely.

solutions as way to fulfil the government's need "to facilitate capital accumulation, while keeping social legitimation" (TNI, 2016, cited in Bello, 2018, 22).

Efforts to transform the rural economy through a toolkit of economic liberalisation, market integration and agribusiness expansion have also influenced efforts to tackle illicit opium production in Myanmar's borderlands. Donors claim that "developing…local communities" in the country's drug-producing borderlands – through market integration and capitalist agriculture – will overcome the poverty and marginalisation faced by smallholders and will thus "help stop opium growing and drug smuggling" (Asian Development Bank, 2014, 152-3). This approach can be seen most clearly in China's Opium Replacement Program, which was initiated in the mid-2000s and has continued ever since. The program encourages Chinese companies to invest in northern Myanmar and Laos, with a particular focus on large-scale agriculture. By participating in the scheme, Chinese companies are able to obtain much-coveted licenses to import agricultural products into to China (subject to quotas), as well as exemptions from tariffs and import VAT (TNI, 2012; Shi, 2008; Su, 2015). At least 200 Chinese companies have been involved in the scheme and have developed agricultural plantations on more than 200,000 hectares of land in Myanmar and northern Laos, a figure that far surpasses the amount of land actually under poppy cultivation (Su, 2015, 79). China's market-oriented approach does not provide direct support to opium cultivators to grow other licit crops. Rather, it seeks to reduce opium cultivation through wider processes of borderland transformation predicated on agricultural modernization, infrastructure investment and state consolidation in border areas (Lu, 2017). This is intended to facilitate sustained economic growth and create new licit employment opportunities that will alleviate poverty and draw people away from illicit opium cultivation.

On a much smaller scale, there have been an array of western donor-funded 'alternative development' schemes implemented in Shan State that have sought to support poppy farmers to grow licit crops including potatoes, fruit trees and in particular coffee. Both UNODC and USAID have launched coffee substitution programs in southern Shan State since 2010. These programs have sought to directly support poppy farmers to increase their competitiveness in the legal economy by providing them with training, technical support and subsidized inputs. By its own admission, the UNODC does not claim that boutique alternative development programs will significantly impact levels of illicit opium cultivation; rather through these "demonstration projects" they aim to show what can be achieved and to attract further funding and government support for similar projects on a larger scale.[5]

Significant differences exist between China's 'top-down' business-oriented approach to rural development and opium substitution in Myanmar, and western 'bottom-up' approaches that focus on 'pro-poor' and 'inclusive' development (Cohen, 2009; Nyiri, 2006). However, both approaches share many of the same assumptions in terms of how they conceive the relationship between poverty, rural development and opium cultivation in Myanmar. They assume that drug cultivation is concentrated in areas that have been left behind by development, and that economic liberalization, market integration and agricultural 'modernization' will provide the necessary antidote to the poverty and marginalisation that has pushed people into cultivating illicit drug crops. They also reflect a wider blindspot that is inherent to many rural development schemes now being rolled out in Myanmar: these development schemes claim to offer transformational solutions to alleviate rural poverty, promote agricultural development, and reduce drug cultivation, but fail to acknowledge that the policy toolkit they advocate is not particularly new or innovative. Indeed, although economic sanctions through the 1990s and

[5] Interview with UNODC representative, Taunggyi. September 2017.

2000s isolated Myanmar from western aid and investment, the rhetoric of market-led borderland development now being promoted by multilateral donors echoes much of the rationale that has underpinned Chinese and Myanmar government borderland development initiatives since the late 1980s.

Following a series of ceasefires agreed between the Myanmar government and the majority of armed groups in Shan State and Kachin State in the late 1980s and early 1990s, political and business elites increasingly re-imagined the country's conflict-affected borderlands with China and Thailand as offering new economic opportunities. Within Myanmar, the military government viewed the vast natural resources in these regions and the expansion of cross-border trade with China and Thailand as a means to revive the country's failing economy (Woods, 2011; Meehan 2011). Cross-border trade through government-controlled border gates was legalized in the late 1980s. In 1991 the Myanmar government passed the 'Wastelands Law', which deemed all land without legal titles – effectively including all land governed by customary tenure – to be 'wasteland' and provided the government with the legal right to allocate this land for large-scale private development. At the same time, China promoted greater economic integration with Southeast Asia as a way to stimulate economic growth in the country's interior landlocked provinces where levels of development lagged behind coastal China (Summers, 2013). Alongside logging and mining, the focus of these strategies in Myanmar was on 'opening up' the country's 'agricultural frontiers' and large amounts of land in Shan State and Kachin State were subsequently converted to rubber, maize and to a lesser extent sugarcane and fruit plantations (Woods, 2020; Woods, 2013; TNI, 2012; Kenney-Lazar, 2016). Following the government's gradual easing of restrictions on private enterprise through the 1990s, small-scale agricultural brokers also encouraged smallholders to embrace market opportunities by providing farmers with credit, agricultural inputs and connecting them to markets. A number of agribusinesses also launched smallholder cash-crop schemes as a way to integrate Myanmar's agricultural frontiers into their global supply chains without the risk of inciting legal and political challenges from large scale land concessions (Woods, 2020).

The continuities between pre- and post-2010 approaches to rural development in Myanmar's borderlands warn against some of hyperbolic language that has been used to describe the country's post-2010 'transition' from decades of isolation and stasis to sudden political and economic transformation (Rhoads and Wittekind, 2018). Instead, it emphasizes the need to understand how the rural economy in Shan State today – including the importance of illicit opium cultivation to the livelihoods of many of the region's rural poor – has been shaped by the legacies of previous efforts to 'develop' the country's borderlands and integrate them into global markets.

A cursory examination of the experiences of rural development across Shan State's drug-producing regions in the 1990s and 2000s reveals three important insights for current efforts to promote rural development and reduce levels of opium production. First, the development model promoted by the government and multilateral donors poses particular risks to upland farming populations in the country's borderlands. Throughout hill areas most land is governed by customary land tenure that is not recognised by the government, and large populations practice shifting cultivation for which individualized land titling is not possible. Shan State's proximity to China and Thailand, as well as its fertile soil and good climate (in comparison to the country's Dry Zone) has made land highly coveted. Shan State's long history of armed conflict also means that rural areas are highly militarised spaces in which private sector interests and military power have often conspired to fuel dispossession. Second, in such contexts, claims that market-led development strategies will simultaneously promote agribusiness and empower smallholders are deeply misleading. Pledges to promote 'pro-poor' and 'inclusive' market integration have proved impotent against the forces of unregulated frontier capitalism, as will be explored in the next section. Third, the claim that market-led agricultural development will reduce opium cultivation by addressing rural poverty and providing alternative livelihoods overlooks the fact that in parts of northern and southwestern Shan State opium cultivation increased through the late 1990s and 2000s. The final section of this paper explores these insights in further depth.

3. Opium as the alternative livelihood: Poverty and precarity in Shan State

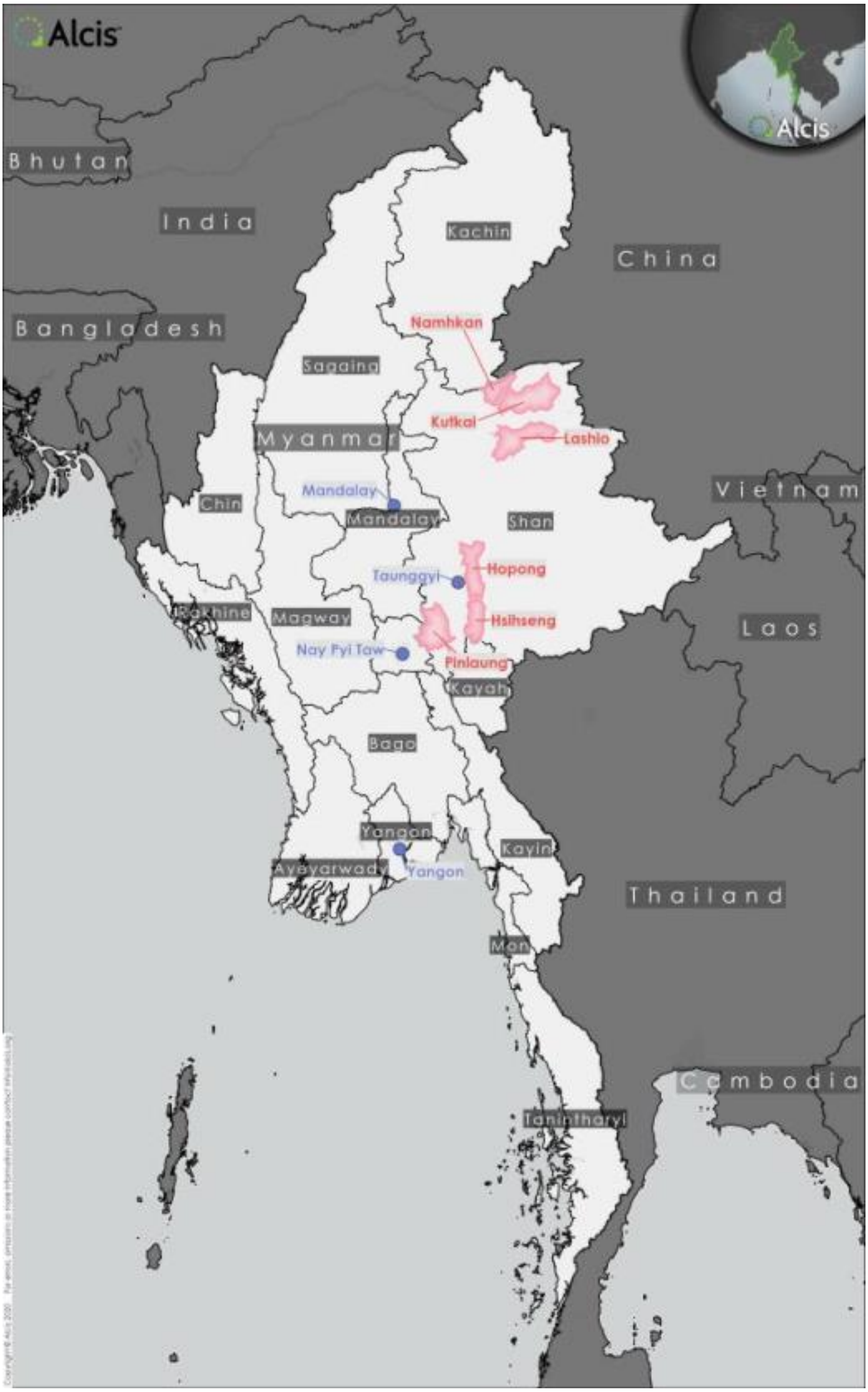
Patterns of opium cultivation in Shan State have shifted significantly since the late 1990s. Historically, the most densely cultivated areas of opium have been in eastern Shan State east of the Salween River. However, in the early 2000s opium cultivation across this region fell as a result of draconian opium bans implemented by a number of armed groups that had ceasefires with the government and controlled territory along the China border.[6] However, triumphant claims that the fall in Shan State opium production meant that an "important and painful chapter of world drug history is coming to an end" proved premature (UN, 2003). The belief that "the vicious linkage between opium and poverty is being broken" (ibid) in Shan State was soon belied by a sustained rise in opium cultivation between 2006 and 2014 (UNODC, 2014). Field studies conducted across Shan State during the 2011-2 growing season recorded opium cultivation in 49 out of 55 townships (SHAN, 2012, 6). Two areas in which illicit opium cultivation expanded most significantly – and which the remainder of this paper focuses on – were the hill ranges across Kutkai, Lashio and Namkham townships in northern Shan State and

[6] These bans were motivated by armed groups' efforts to strengthen Chinese support, improve their international image, and to have western sanctions removed, including their listing under the US Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act. These opium bans have largely held ever since, in part because these same armed groups secured new revenue streams by moving into the less conspicuous production of synthetic methamphetamines for which there was a growing market throughout Asia.

the hill ranges south of Taunggyi across Pinlaung, Hopong and Hsihseng townships in southwestern Shan State (see Figure 1). Both of these regions have a long history of small-scale opium cultivation. However, by the mid-2000s, the UNODC was reporting "large-scale" poppy cultivation at "commercial levels" across parts of all of these townships (UNODC, 2006; UNODC, 2007; UNODC, 2008; See also: PWO, 2006; PWO, 2010; PYO, 2017; Khun Moe Htun, 2018).

Figure 1: Shan State, Myanmar[7]

[7] This map has been produced by Alcis, a partner on the GCRF Drugs and (Dis)order project (see footnote 3).



Rising opium cultivation in these regions was particularly notable because there are territories where the reach of insurgent groups long blamed for masterminding the drug trade declined through the 1990s and 2000s, as the Myanmar Army, ceasefire groups and army-backed militias secured greater control over contested areas.. They are also areas in which rural lives and livelihoods experienced growing commercialization and agricultural production was increasingly integrated into regional commodity chains. Of course, the extent of market integration should not be overstated. Large parts of rural Shan State continue to experience physical isolation, bad roads and lack of market access, as well as ongoing armed conflict and limited provision of even basic services. This has been especially true for northern Shan State after the collapse of various ceasefires since 2010. However, development discourses that present opium cultivation as being driven solely by these forms of longstanding vulnerability ignore how opium cultivation has also become a response to 'new' forms of livelihood exposure and precarity experienced by households as a result of intensifying processes of market integration and agricultural modernization. The remainder of this paper focuses on two important dynamics that connect opium cultivation to processes of market integration and agricultural modernization across northern and southwestern Shan State. First, it explores why market integration has created particular risks for poorer smallholders. Second, it demonstrates the lack of viable "exit options" (World Bank, 2008) for those farmers who have struggled to compete amidst processes of agricultural commercialisation. In doing so, it reveals how opium cultivation has become their alternative livelihood.

Opium cultivation as a livelihood response to 'adverse incorporation' into markets

For many smallholders across northern and southwestern Shan State, processes of agrarian change since the 1990s have been highly disruptive and destabilising. New flows of capital and commodities have challenged pre-existing local economies upon which rural livelihoods were based. Most notably, economic liberalisation and the relaxation of restrictions on international trade resulted in significant market shifts for some of Shan State's most important upland cash crops. In southwestern Shan State one of the most significant impacts of the gradual trade liberalisation of the 1990s was the sustained decline in prices for *thanatphet* leaves, which are used to roll cheroots (Nyo Nyo Kyaing, 2003). Thanatphet trees, which grow well on steep hillsides, had long been an important cash crop for farmers who had maintained links with cheroot factories in central Myanmar even throughout the decades of armed conflict (Khun Moe Htun, 2018; Nang Kham Nyo Oo, 2011). However, the rapid growth of cheap imported cigarettes and tobacco saw prices for cheroots fall by more than half between the late 1980s and mid-1990s (Nyo Nyo Kaing, 2003, 29). Similarly, in the Palaung Hills of northern Shan State, economic liberalisation contributed to a steep decline in the local tea industry, which has been the region's main cash crop for generations. The expansion of cross-border trade inspired an influx of (legal and illegal) imports of cheap tea into Myanmar markets, especially in the early 2000s. Falling prices meant that in certain years tea farmers were unable to cover the costs of production and abandoned their plantations. This had a devastating long-term impact because, as one civil society organisation explained, "once farmers stop cultivating tea it can take a long time to recover the tea plants. They need to be tended constantly. If they are left to mature it can take five years for the same quality of leaves to come back. So even if prices go up again after one or two years it is too late for the farmers".[8] Falling farm-gate prices for tea were also a result of business alliances established between the Myanmar Army and Chinese investors that moved into the northern Shan tea industry in the 2000s. Through a combination of intimidation and control over local trade networks, these alliances of military and private sector power monopolised much of the tea market, effectively creating a monopsony that was able to set farm-gate tea prices throughout the region (Meehan, 2016; TWG, 2011).

Furthermore, poor smallholders have been least able to capitalise upon new opportunities offered by economic liberalisation. Indeed, although market integration had a negative impact

[8] Interview conducted in Lashio, June 2013.

on certain commodities such as tea and thanatphet, it has also facilitated the expansion of new cash crops, notably maize and rubber, and has created new markets for various fruits and vegetables. However, the distribution of risks and opportunities surrounding these market shifts is highly uneven and poor smallholders have faced far greater challenges compared to better-off households and agribusinesses. In part, this is a consequence of the risks that smallholders have faced from the Myanmar government's allocation of large-scale land concessions to private companies (TNI, 2012, 34-35). These deals have exploited the lack of legal protection for customary land tenure and reflect military-state elites' support for 'modern' agribusiness modes of production. However, more commonly the risks that smallholders experienced were a consequence of the debt and dispossession that accompanied their attempts to embrace modernity and pursue market opportunities (Woods, 2020). Commodity production has generally entailed higher upfront costs to pay for HYV seeds, pesticides and especially fertiliser. Although some brokers initially provided these inputs to farmers at subsidised rates, these subsidies were usually phased out after a few years. Other cash crops promoted in Shan State, notably rubber, have a long maturation period of five to seven years, creating long lag-time between investment and harvest that poorer households cannot afford. Integration into regional commodity chains also exposed farmers to price volatility. For examples prices in national and Thai markets – the main destination for onion, garlic and sugarcane cultivated in southwestern Shan State – are highly sensitive to shifting patterns of regional trade, especially from China, which produces 80% of the world's garlic and is the world's third largest producer of sugarcane. As one representative of the PNO ceasefire group reflected of southwestern Shan State, "traditionally the area was rich in many crops, especially garlic, tobacco and cheroot leaves. In the past, despite the country being closed, the domestic market was enough to ensure Pa-O farmers could still get a fair price for their crops. Today that is no longer possible."[9]

[9] Interview with PNO ceasefire group representative, Taunggyi. January 2013.

More intense agricultural practices also have significant economies of scale because yields are much higher where irrigation can ameliorate adverse rain patterns and where fertiliser is used to offset soil exhaustion. Agribusinesses and better-off smallholders have been able to capitalise on these economies of scale because they have been able to cultivate more land and invest more capital on inputs (Woods, 2015; Woods, 2020). Furthermore, they have been able to access formal credit (in the case of Chinese companies, this has partly been through the ORP) or have used their own capital to invest in production, thereby avoiding borrowing money through informal rural credit systems that incur heavy interest. Agribusinesses and better-off smallholders also have greater scope to manage the impact of price volatility, often by delaying sales until after harvest-time gluts or absorbing losses in bad years. In contrast, poorer smallholders have found themselves increasingly exposed. Smaller land-holdings and limited capital to invest in inputs deny smallholders economies of scale, resulting in more marginal gains. Most smallholders produce on credit, borrowing money at the start of the growing season, which they pay back after harvest. Moneylenders charge interest as high as 5-10% *per month*, and often require farmers to sell to them their entire harvest at prices fixed by the moneylender as part of the conditions set for the loan.[10] Furthermore, the fact that farmers need to generate cash quickly and limit the interest payments on loans means that they often rush to sell crops immediately when prices are typically lower.

Thus, the way that poorer smallholders have been incorporated into markets has increased their exposure to shocks such as bad weather, price volatility, or the sudden termination of input

[10] Focus Group discussion with farmers from Southwestern Shan State. 27 March 2013. Nyuang Shwe.

subsidies. This is captured clearly in the following testimony by an experienced Kachin agriculturalist working in Lashio:

> Many farmers started to grew corn although there have been many problems with this. Harvests fall after the first few years because the soil is exhausted. They need more and more fertilisers and that puts a strain on farmers…some farmers only grew corn. They even stopped growing rice so they became reliant on corn prices…The larger farms around Lashio can spend more on fertiliser and have better links with traders in the town so they are in a better position. But many small farmers are vulnerable. In recent years the price for corn has really fallen especially for those who used the seeds sold by Chinese companies."[11]

Despite promises that embracing the market would make them rich, the reality for many poorer farming households has been an increasing cycle of debt, distress sales of assets to service debts, and further impoverishment. This has been particularly pronounced amongst smallholders involved in tea cultivation and maize cultivation in northern Shan State where debt-induced dispossession has resulted in increasing landlessness. In some cases, solvent farmers have also chosen to sell their land, aware of the difficulties they face and attracted by lump-sum payments. As one local researcher explained, "many farmers have never seen that much money. They believe it will make them rich. But many spend it on bad things or soon discover that it doesn't last long without any proper livelihood. And then they wish they had not [sold their land]."[12] Furthermore, many of the coping mechanisms that households traditionally deployed to overcome sudden shortfalls in income have become increasingly

[11] Interview with Kachin agriculturalist, Lashio. December 2016.
[12] Interview with Palaung research organisation, Lashio. June 2013.

unviable. For example, extensive deforestation has limited households' ability to generate income from forest products, firewood, animal hides, and charcoal production.

It is against this backdrop of market-induced precarity that the shift to opium cultivation across upland areas of northern and southwestern Shan State since the late 1990s needs to be understood. In contrast to other cash crops, whose prices feel or were prone to significant volatility, farm-gate opium prices throughout the 1990s and 2000s remained stable and rose with inflation. Stable prices were underpinned by a combination of rising demand for heroin within China (Ko Lin Chin & Zhang, 2015; Shao-hua Liu, 2011; Zoccatelli, 2014) and the opium bans launched in northern Thailand since the 1970s, and across northern Laos and eastern Shan State in the early 2000s. These bans effectively gave farmers in Shan State a 'comparative advantage' in opium production that they did not have in other crops.

The intersection of politics and market forces is also important in explaining the spread of opium cultivation. Throughout much of Shan State, government authority is limited beyond the region's major towns (see Maran, this volume). Governing rural areas by proxy – through ceasefire groups and militias – became a preferred Myanmar Army strategy as it insulated army units from the rigours and risks of everyday governance (Buchanan, 2016; Meehan, 2015). The Myanmar army has allowed local militias to expand their role in the opium/heroin trade as a way to finance themselves. The Army has also used offers of informal protection, impunity and the opportunity to invest in legal businesses – as well as the underlying threat of prosecution should they step out of line – as a way to strengthen the loyalty of local militias. The prioritisation given to counter-insurgency over counter-narcotics thus enabled drug networks to quickly expand into areas of northern and southern Shan State.

Many distressed smallholders in northern and southwestern Shan State turned to opium cultivation, sometimes initially working as labourers on poppy farms in militia-controlled areas before then cultivating opium on their own land. Opium provided them with a number of distinct advantages. There are few input costs: seeds collected from one harvest can be used the following year and it is possible to obtain decent yields without extensive use of fertiliser (although yields are higher when fertiliser is used). Farmers can generate a significant income from only small plots of land. Most households grow opium on plot sizes of only 0.25-0.5 hectares. In interviews conducted with poppy farmers in southwestern Shan State in 2012 and 2013, this generated a yield of 3-6kg which farmers could sell for US$250-450/kg and which could easily be transported by motorbike. Generating the same income from fruit or vegetables requires harvests of many hundreds of kilograms and incurs significant transport costs. Small plot sizes also enable farmers to continue to practice shifting cultivation, which reduces reliance on fertiliser. Poppy grows well on steep land at elevations of more than 800m above sea level and has a short maturation period, producing a marketable harvest in 3-4 months. Risks of land dispossession are much lower in hill areas than in more easily accessible lowland areas. Other cash crops that could be cultivated in upland areas – such as tea, coffee, potatoes and fruit trees – all take years to mature and were thus unable to address farmers' urgent need for revenue. All of these factors meant that opium offered farmers a way to generate cash quickly on otherwise marginal and inaccessible land. As one farmer in Lashio commented, "the land used for poppy is low quality but the profits are higher."[13]

Furthermore, poppy is always cultivated alongside other subsistence food crops and thus supports a livelihood that has a stronger bulwark against food insecurity. This contrasts with maize production, where some farmers had tried mono-cropping as a way to generate greater

[13] Interview conducted with a local farmer in Lashio. June 2013.

revenue but at the cost of worsening food insecurity in years when prices fell. As one Kachin agriculturalist in Lashio explained, the farming year for many smallholders comprises "the food cycle and the poppy cycle".[14] Most food crops are harvested in the autumn (September/October) after which poppy is sown, which in turn is harvested in January-March, before the next cycle of food crops.

Opium cultivation as the 'exit strategy' from licit agriculture

A number of Myanmar government and donor policy documents acknowledge that strategies to modernize the country's agricultural sector will initiate a process of "de-agrarianization" in which a smaller proportion of the population will be needed in farming and more rural households will benefit from 'stepping out' of agriculture (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018; LIFT, 2019). "De-agrarianization" entails a shift away from peasant modes of livelihood in which non-agricultural activities become increasingly important to the occupations, incomes and social identity of rural dwellers (Bryceson 1996; Bryceson, 2019). It has been a central component in processes of agrarian change across many of Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbours over recent decades (Rigg & Nattapoolwat, 2001; Rigg, 2006). Deagrarianization generates new patterns of poverty and prosperity, and new forms of precarity and resilience (Pritchard et al. 2017; Rigg, 2006). The prospects of escaping the drudgery and hardship of small-scale agriculture has often been welcomed, especially by younger generations, and numerous studies have shown how income diversification and off-farm employment can generate more resilient livelihoods for certain households (Rigg, 2006). However, in many cases, these aspirations are frustrated, especially for the poorest who invariably exit agriculture on the least advantageous terms (Li, 2009; Li, 2010), and in contexts where off-farm work remains casualised and precarious and where social safety nets offer scant protection (Rigg et al., 2018). Indeed, in the hill regions of Shan State, the assumption that new

[14] Interview with Kachin agriculturalist, Lashio. June 2013.

opportunities in the non-farming sector will offer viable "exit' options" (World Bank, 2008) for those made surplus to agriculture is deeply problematic.

In Myanmar's agricultural frontiers, it is land rather than labour that has been highly coveted. Development strategies that favour agribusiness, and land laws that facilitate large-scale dispossession have generated profound risks to smallholders that have outpaced the generation of off-farm opportunities. It is highly questionable whether sufficient jobs will be created to absorb labour that is forced to "step out" of agriculture in Shan State, given the challenges of developing an industrial sector (at a local or national level) capable of competing with cheap Chinese goods, the dearth of local small and medium sized enterprises, the failure of country's education system to equip young people with skills to get good jobs, and in light of the fact that ongoing armed conflict will limit the growth of many sectors, for example tourism, in borderland areas. Agricultural transformation across Shan State thus reflects a wider phenomenon experienced across large parts of rural Asia in which land and resources are highly valued but local populations serve little purpose for the interests of capital, "so that dispossession is detached from any prospect of labour absorption" (Li, 2010).

The challenges facing upland rural populations in Shan State are compounded by the fact that racial discrimination against ethnic minorities has meant that companies operating in Shan State typically employ labourers from China or recruit Burmese migrant workers, rather than recruit locally for the limited jobs that are created. Thus marginality is not simply a function of physical isolation or lack of market integration. It is also a consequence of how borderland development is mapped onto longstanding racialized discourses in ways that exacerbate the 'adverse incorporation' into markets experienced by upland ethnic minorities.

Policy narratives also disregard the powerful attachments that people have to land and place. These narratives ignore how, as encapsulated by one farmer in southwestern Shan State, "land is so much more than simply an income. It provides meaning to our life" (see also: TNI, 2015). The trauma of losing land and the lack of viable alternative employment has been linked to depression, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, and has exposed individuals and families to desperate 'choices' in the fight to stave off destitution (Marks et al., 2015; Physicians for Human Rights, 2015). Indeed, the main 'exit option' that has been available to populations in Shan State – migration to Thailand and China – has led migrants to become a largely undocumented, unprotected and exploited underclass (Sai Latt, 2011). Young women have been particularly vulnerable as promises of well-paid jobs in the service sector have often been a mask for very low-paid domestic work or sex trafficking. In northern Shan State, families desperate to generate large cash-sums have sold daughters into marriages with men in China as part of a growing cross-border trade in young women driven partly by China's one-child policy induced demographic imbalance (John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health & Kachin Women's Association Thailand, 2018; PWO, 2011). Many of these risks are linked to longstanding vulnerabilities. For example, the legacies of armed conflict and drug addiction have meant that in many families women have become the main breadwinners, creating a context in which they feel compelled to take jobs in Thailand and China despite the risks (ibid). However, rising levels of debt and dispossession linked to processes of market-led development have created new forms of precarity that have further exacerbated these risks.

These stark realities are conspicuously absent from sanguine claims that structural economic transformation will provide the foundations for "broad-based and inclusive" rural development and poverty alleviation. In this context, it should hardly be surprising that many impoverished smallholders have seen “poppy as a gift from heaven”.[15] Opium cultivation embodies a form of resistance, a way of pushing back against the disruptive and dislocating forces of modernity. The resurgence of aggregate levels of opium cultivation recorded in UNODC figures between 2006 and 2016 was not only a story of marginalised rural communities left behind by development. It also revealed the dark side of many smallholders’ unhappy encounter with development. Opium became the ‘exit option’ from a licit agricultural sector in which the odds were stacked against them.

Opium cultivation: A Faustian Bargain?

Opium cultivation has offered an important lifeline for many impoverished households but it has also exposed them to new risks. Although there have been not been the large-scale fumigation campaigns witnessed in other drug-producing countries (notably Colombia, see Acero & Machuca, this volume), the Myanmar government, non-state armed groups, and anti-drug social movements do conduct periodic crop eradication campaigns (see Dan, Maran & Sadan, this volume). Operating in the illegal economy also increases farmers’ dependence upon rural brokers – who provide credit (often at very high interest rates), connect them to secretive opium buyers, and set opium prices. Farmers are also dependent on local authorities (often army-backed militias) that grant farmers the ‘right’ to grow opium – usually for a fee – and offer a modicum of protection from eradication. The decision to enter the illegal drug economy has thus increased households’ dependence upon systems of authority that are often exploitative, but against which they have little scope to challenge. In many ways, this typifies the Faustian bargain, described by Geoff Wood (2003, 455), which so often faces the poor: “risk management in the present involves loyalty to institutions and organizations that presently work and deliver livelihoods, whatever the longer term cost.” This Faustian bargain has

[15] Interview with member of the Myanmar Opium Farmers’ Forum, Taunggyi. September 2017.

worsened in recent years, most notably as a consequence of a growing trend amongst rural brokers to part-pay farmers in methamphetamine pills. As one local administrator in Hsihseng Township, southwestern Shan State, reflected, "This put the local farmers in a trap as it turned them into small-time drug dealers. If they are to survive and pay back their debts the farmers have to rush to sell those tablets. This way meth tablets have become widely available throughout the area."[16] Farmers have limited bargaining power to challenge opium buyers, and worsening levels of drug use – which is a cause of so much concern amongst communities across Shan State (Drugs and (Dis)order, 2020) – has thus become intertwined with the ways that farmers have tried to secure their livelihoods.

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between poverty, development and illicit drug cultivation than is evident in current policy debates. This has implications both for those engaging in rural development and drug issues in Myanmar, and for wider policy debates around how to integrate drugs and development. The rush to engage in Myanmar following the country's 2010 General Election out-paced the ability – or willingness – to fully understand the experiences of rural populations in Shan State over the previous two decades. Consequently, there has been a failure to appreciate the fact that the rural development toolkit now being rolled out in Myanmar is not so different from the approaches pursued by the Myanmar and Chinese governments through the 1990s and 2000s. The emphasis on economic liberalisation, market integration and foreign investment as the key drivers of rural development – coupled with the failure to acknowledge the inherent tensions that exist between agribusiness and smallholder production – effectively replicates many of the

[16] Interview conducted by members of the GCRF research team, Hsihseng Township. June 2019.

policies that rural populations have experienced, and struggled to grapple with, over the past two decades and which have played a significant role in driving opium production.

Many of the challenges facing poor rural households across Shan State are of course mapped onto, and exacerbated by, longstanding forms of vulnerability. However, worsening livelihood insecurity – and the decision to cultivate opium as a response – cannot simply be framed as the consequence of armed conflict and economic marginality in territories beyond the reach of the state and markets. Worsening levels of debt and dispossession, and the relentless struggle that many households now face to stave off food insecurity and destitution, are also rooted in new forms of precarity created by the adverse incorporation of the rural poor into markets and the ways in which market-led development is enacted upon inequitable rural power structures. The benefits of such development are distributed highly unevenly and are rooted in processes that have generated worsening precarity for many of the rural poor across Shan State.

This paper also provides a stark warning of the risks facing Shan State's most precarious rural populations if shifting market demand across Asia for synthetic drugs causes a permanent downward trend in opium prices.[17] Policymakers have welcomed the potential for shifting drug market dynamics to "create opportunities to entice farmers to switch crops" (UNODC, 2019, v). However, this ignores the fact that opium has become the alternative livelihood for those who already faced worsening precarity within the licit agricultural sector. Far from providing 'opportunities', falling prices represent the slashing of the key safety net that many farming households are reliant upon.

[17] The drop in opium prices due to competition from synthetic drugs is not unique to Myanmar but has also been reported in Mexico, where the rise of fentanyl use in the US has caused a steep decline in opium prices in Mexico in recent years (Le Cour Grandmaison et al. 2019).

In terms of wider policy debates, this paper argues that if current efforts to integrate drugs and development are to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of the rural poor in drug-producing regions, this agenda must avoid presenting a 'markets-plus' development model as a panacea for tackling rural poverty and drug cultivation. Instead, it must confront the chronic poverty and precarity that is embedded within development processes, and acknowledge that the decision by poor households to cultivate drugs is often a response to their unhappy encounters with development, rather than because of a lack of development.

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