



One Year Later

Bent Roads:

Exploring the Impact of Development Projects in Two Communities in Myanmar

Introduction

In July 2022, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the Karen Peace and Support Network (KPSN) undertook field research on the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of extraction and construction projects in Myanmar.

The research focused on two villages in Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District, which is situated in the Karen National Union-controlled area of Myanmar. This research aimed to understand the consequences of harmful projects disguised as ‘development’ initiatives, while shedding light on project-affected communities and their struggles to preserve their indigenous way of life.

The research team conducted individual interviews with 12 participants as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) with 138 participants, comprising farmers, fisherfolk, local villagers, local and district authority representatives, and those with firsthand experience of the historical floods of 1970, 1998, and 2018.

The research report—titled ‘Bent Roads: Exploring the Impact of Development Projects in Two Communities in Myanmar’—was published in December 2022. It provided recommendations for key stakeholders—including civil society organisations (CSOs), mining and construction companies, the Karen National Union (KNU), broader civil society and the United Nations—on ways to make development projects more community-led, ensuring that free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is embedded

into every stage of the project. It also recommended to halt destructive development projects that exploit a community’s natural resources.

Situation on the ground

Since the research, there have been many challenging developments within the research sites. The State Administration Council (SAC) started carrying out brutal attacks in Dooplaya district and within Win Yay township. This included air strikes, ground attacks, kidnapping, and other human rights violations. In addition to continuous shelling, in September 2022, a landmine planted by the SAC exploded, killing and injuring livestock in the area.¹

In January 2023, as a result of ongoing bombardments by warplanes and the use of artillery against villagers, more than 10,000 internally displaced people were forced to flee Dooplaya district because of the escalating conflict between the Revolutionary Joint Forces led by the local Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Military Council.² In February 2023, the SAC declared Martial Law, forbidding people from going out after 6 pm. Many of those who violated the order were arrested; while others disappeared, never to be seen again.³ In addition there were multiple reports of SAC using villagers as human shields, resulting in injuries and even death.⁴

As a result of this volatile situation, it became impossible to ask impacted communities—who were part of the original research project—to participate in a new survey. None of the community research facilitators were able to access the area. Unfortunately, no one has been able

1 <https://khr.org/2023/04/22-244347-d1/dooplaya-district-short-update-indiscriminate-shelling-and-landmine-explosion>

2 <https://karennews.org/2023/01/10000-more-idps-fled-the-on-going-war-in-dooplaya-district-the-knu-6th-brigade-zone-during-first-week-of-the-new-year/>

3 <https://khr.org/2023/06/23-8463-d1/dooplaya-district-short-update-villagers%E2%80%99-disappearances-and-imposition-martial>

4 <https://khr.org/2023/07/23-3-bp1/shadow-death-use-civilians-human-shields-state-administration-council-sac-southeast>



to directly communicate with the community due to a communications blackout/cut off with shut down of phone and internet services. The lack of access to information about the situation in Dooplaya—paired with the research team’s disconnection from the community—demonstrates the intersectionality of challenges experienced by the people of Myanmar who are facing destructive development projects against the backdrop of armed conflict and a brutal military dictatorship.

Since the publication of the report, the district level Karen Livestock and Fisheries Department acknowledged the water and fisheries resource issues in the area. The department has specified its intent to communicate with the communities impacted by the gravel extraction project in order to address watershed management along the Maw La stream. However, nothing has been done to mitigate the environmental impacts of the project.

Capacity building and advocacy initiatives

In April 2023, despite the ongoing conflict in the research site, the research team was able to complete a virtual training on indigenous and land rights for 35 youth participants.

Due to the escalating conflict and safety concerns, the team had limited access to the original research site. The research team then decided to work with the surrounding communities. In July 2023, the team conducted a community forum in the Doo Tha Htoo district, which was facing similar issues as the original research site. In the forum, 305 participants discussed the importance of tree plantation on the surrounding ecosystem. This was followed by a reforestation activity, where 10,100 trees were planted on 20 acres of protected land.

In addition, representatives from KPSN attended the United Nations Annual Business and Human Rights Forum in Geneva, Switzerland in November 2023, where they had the opportunity to meet with relevant UN Special Procedures and Mandate Holders as well as state representatives to discuss the ongoing situation in Myanmar and advocate for their fundamental rights and freedoms.

Conclusion

The fragile and ever-evolving situation in Myanmar has created a challenging environment for the research team. This has affected the team’s ability to carry out follow-up activities with the affected communities. Likewise, this has impacted the project’s continuity as a whole. As a result, the research team had to adapt other project activities that ensure the safety and security of everyone involved. Ultimately, the goal was to make sure that the community was not overburdened by additional responsibilities and expectations.

The inability to carry out sustained research, capacity strengthening, and advocacy activities in Myanmar alludes to a much larger issue of how the military is abusing its powers to violate human rights and erode civil society.

Against the backdrop of the attempted military coup, destructive mining and construction projects continue to be greenlit under the guise of ‘development’. Such projects have profound impacts on the rights of communities and indigenous people. Scrutiny over these projects, however, end up taking a back seat. Before coming up with ways to make development projects more human rights-centric, the military junta’s reign of violence and terror over Myanmar must first come to an end. Peace and democracy must be restored. Only then can a vibrant civil society thrive and hold the government and businesses accountable for their actions.