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**Research Report**

## Migration and security challenges in Yangon's informal settlements: The case of Hlaing Thayar township

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# MIGRATION AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN YANGON'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

The case of Hlaing Thayar township



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
Methodology and case study area	8
<b>Background: demography and the history of migration in Yangon</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>City government plans and approaches to migrants</b>	<b>17</b>
Multiple land regimes and informal settlements	19
Lack of urban plans for informal settlers	21
Hardliner approach to informal settlers and poor migrants	23
<b>Migrant challenges and perspectives</b>	<b>27</b>
Fear of evictions and constant mobility	30
Insecurity, criminalization and lack of protection	31
Mistrust and lack of social cohesion	35
<b>Migrant resilience and informal protection strategies</b>	<b>39</b>
Help and protection from religious organizations and leaders	41
Buying land and building roads in hope of recognition	43
Informal strategies of obtaining documents	44
Political parties help and capitalize on the migrants	45
Low self-organization and leadership	46
<b>Conclusion: wider security challenges and possible solutions</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>56</b>

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**INTRODUCTION**



Yangon is Myanmar's largest city and most vital business center.<sup>1</sup> It is the country's main hub for economic growth, trade and industry.<sup>2</sup> Since the end of military rule in 2012, the city has changed dramatically with new construction projects popping up everywhere and with large foreign investments. Geographically the city is expanding and its population is growing steadily. These developments are happening as the country is opening up politically and economically to the outside world. The city holds much potential for growth and development, but also faces major challenges, like massive traffic jams, insufficient electricity, poor drainage, inadequate housing for the many newcomers, and rising crime.

Yangon's population is now around six million, and with a 2.6% population growth rate, it is expected to double by 2040 (Thin Thin Khaing 2015: 3).<sup>3</sup> Migration from the rural areas accounts for 81 percent of the growth (Department of Population 2016: 142). Most of the migrants come from rural areas in search of jobs, due to rural poverty, natural disasters and the increasing number of landless farmers (Forbes 2016: 197). New businesses and industries are generating jobs, which in turn are encouraging more people to migrate to the city.

Yangon is a city of hope and expectations. Yet despite the generation of new jobs, many migrants are struggling to find formal jobs and tenure security. Property values have skyrocketed and the supply of affordable housing and space is inadequate to meet the new demands of internal migration (Forbes 2016: 198). The majority live under dire conditions as tenants in poor hostels, or as informal settlers and squatters on the fringes of the city where they have no legal access to services and documentation. According to city authorities, around 400,000 people are now squatters in Yangon (Myint 2017). They face a constant fear of eviction. This situation is creating new dynamics of insecurity and tension, especially on the fringes of the city.

The city and national governments have no coherent plan to address the situation. Instead, evictions and threats of evictions constitute the main political tool to deal with informal settlers. Despite the change to a democratically elected government in 2016, when Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) took power, little seems to have changed in the government's approach towards poor migrants and informal settlers. In June 2017 police drove out 4,000 squatters in one township and destroyed their houses to make way for new developments. A year earlier the NLD chief minister of Yangon declared that there would be no tolerance towards squatters.

In Myanmar, as opposed to a range of other countries where land informality is accepted (e.g. Egypt), informal settlements are considered illegitimate by the government (Forbes 2016: 209). There is a historically embedded tendency to view all informal dwellers as strangers rather than as legitimate residents of the city. This perception makes life more insecure for the poor newcomer migrants, who are simultaneously securitized and criminalized.<sup>4</sup> The city government perceives the informal settlers as a huge problem and they see the fringes of the city as zones that are threatening urban development and the security situation of the inner city.

This report focuses on the relationship between urbanization, migration and (in) security. It explores this relationship from two angles:

- how the city government authorities in Yangon, at different levels, perceive of and approach the situation of increased migration, especially regarding informal settlements; and
- what challenges the informal migrants are facing in the everyday and how they deal with their insecure situation, often in various informal ways.

The report argues that the lack of tenure security and constant threat of eviction are creating high levels of mobility and feelings of insecurity among informal settlers, which in turn are creating the grounds for crime, social disputes and lack of social cohesion. Mistrust between neighbors and criminalization by city authorities are inhibiting the development of viable forms of self-organization that otherwise could substitute for the lack of government services, protection and recognition. Simultaneously, the informal settlements are expanding through, and somewhat sustained by, a widespread informal economy and informal forms of governance by local "big people", including some government officials, who benefit from illegal land sales and informal fees for issuing documentation to the poor migrants. While there are no indications at the moment to suggest that the dire conditions facing the informal settlers will lead to any large-scale, open conflict or uprisings, there is a growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the current government, which could have future political implications.

The insights of this report are based on field research in Hlaing Thayar township during January–March 2017, as well as drawing on observations from earlier research.



## METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY AREA

Hlaing Thayar township lies in north Yangon, on the other side of the Hlaing River that divides the inner city from the rural areas of Yangon region. It was chosen for this research, because it a) is the fastest growing and most populated township in Yangon due to migration with an estimated population of 700,000,<sup>5</sup> b) has a very large informal settler population, and c) is commonly associated with high insecurity and crime when compared to other areas of Yangon. The township became an industrial zone in the late 1980s, and since 1993 has been established as a residential area as part of city expansion, mainly for housing squatters who were relocated from the inner city by the military government. Two exclusive gated communities also exist next to the Hlaing River, closest to the inner city. These communities border the slum and squatter areas, standing as visible markers of high wealth inequalities. Since 2012 especially, the township has become more densely populated and expanded considerably, mainly informally, into surrounding farmland areas, due to the high influx of poor rural migrants. Today newcomer migrants either live in the expanded informal settlements or mixed with people who are migrants from previous periods, including those who were relocated there by the government in the early 1990s. Many of the latter see themselves as natives of Hlaing Thayar, because they have lived there since the township was established. Some of these first comers have formal land tenure, household registers and access to services like electricity, but others have remained informal settlers for all the years they have lived in Hlaing Thayar.

Hlaing Thayar township is notorious for high levels of crime and insecurity, which is reflected in media reports, albeit the actual rate of crime is difficult to assess due to the lack of available official statistics. Many people from the inner city do not dare to travel to the outskirts of the township, let alone stay there at night, which reflects the bad reputation of Hlaing Thayar. Crime is commonly attributed, by outsiders and “natives,” to the high rate of squatters and informal settlements, caused predominantly by immigration. These different dynamics make the township highly relevant for a study of the relationship between urbanization, migration and security.

Due to the timeframe for field research, a limited number of three wards (out of twenty wards in Hlaing Thayar) were selected for interviews. These included wards 20, 11 and 12. The focus was on informal settlements within these wards, which were selected based on mappings obtained from international contacts and on knowledge from previous research conducted by the author and her Myanmar research partners.<sup>6</sup> There was a deliberate effort to choose different kinds of informal settlements and forms of residency, in order to capture the variety of migrant challenges and coping strategies. Thus, interviews were conducted with newcomer migrants and longer-term informal settlers living in hostels, including hostel owners, in rented houses, and in houses on land that had been informally purchased. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with migrants and informal settlers with a balanced representation of gender and age. To get the perceptions of local government and ward leaders, interviews were also conducted with three ward administrators, five household leaders, two ward police officers, two monks and one Christian pastor. Five interviews were, in addition, done with international experts working with urbanization and migration in Yangon and one interview was held with a high-ranking city government official. Thus, the report is based on a total of forty-six interviews.<sup>7</sup>

All interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide with selected themes and example questions, but the interviews took the form mainly of open-ended, extensive and long conversations of up to three hours, and with several repeat visits to a selected number of migrants so as to build trust and confidence. Thus, the data upon which this report is based is highly qualitative, and supported by some population statistics and secondary historical material. This also means that the report findings cannot be said to be representative of Yangon as a whole, or of informal settlements elsewhere in the city. The qualitative methodology and the selection of few wards, nonetheless means a deeper insight into the personal stories and coping practices of the migrants that were interviewed.





Background:  
**DEMOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORY  
OF MIGRATION IN YANGON**



Since 2012 Yangon's population has grown by a little over one million, from 4.9 million in 2012 to just over 6 million in 2017.<sup>8</sup> This growth is predominantly due to the influx of rural migrants. According to the 2014 census, 800,000 migrants arrived in Yangon between 2009 and 2014, and this number is growing every day.<sup>9</sup> While Yangon has historically been the most ethnically diverse place in Myanmar/Burma, notably including a large Indian and Chinese population in the downtown area, the majority of rural migrants today are from the Bamar majority. In Hlaing Thayar, ethnic Rakhine and ethnic Karen from Ayeyarwady Delta were also among the rural migrants.<sup>10</sup> A large number of these poor Bamar, Rakhine and Karen migrants are not able to find tenure security, and instead settle informally. Therefore, they become part of what the city and national governments define as squatters, which includes both newcomers and people who have been residents of Yangon for a long time.

According to UN-Habitat there were 380,000 squatters (in 423 locations) in Yangon in 2016, but the number is likely higher, as suggested in another study, which holds that in 2012 ten percent or a bit over 500,000 were squatters (Gomez-Ibanez et al. 2012: 9). Forbes (2016: 207) holds that up to three times this number live in some informal way with no tenure security. When comparing rural and urban areas, the lowest level of tenure security is found in urban areas (Department of Population 2016: 138). According to World Bank figures for 2010–2011 the poverty rate for Yangon is 34 percent, which is seemingly surprising given that the city is a commercial center, but the high rate is likely caused by the higher costs of urban living and the lack of available employment for the many incoming rural migrants (World Bank 2014: 23). In addition, poverty is unevenly distributed, as it is estimated that 60 percent of the people in the peri-urban areas, on the fringes of the city, live below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> Today most poor migrants and other informal settlers live on these fringes of the city, bordering farmland areas. This also includes those informal settlers that lived in the inner city in the past and who were forcefully removed by the government to places like Hlaing Thayar to make way for new developments, like hotels, and office and apartment buildings (Forbes 2016: 207).

The history of migration and urbanization in Yangon is one of forced government removal and city expansion, with the opening up of an increasing number of townships. The first major “squatter clearance” in the inner city took place in late 1950s to early 1960s. At that point the informal settlers had reached 300,000, due to an influx of migrants because of the political instability and conflict in the rural areas after Independence. People were moved to townships that at the time were on

the periphery of the city, but which today are part of the inner city. They were given land plots, but few adequate services. In the late 1980s the military government made another round of evictions of an estimated 450,000–500,000 people from the inner city to six new townships that the government established on the fringes of the city. Hlaing Thayar was one of them. This relocation seems to have been more politically motivated than the first one, as it came right after the 1988 political uprising and military crackdown on political dissent: many squatters lived around monasteries and other public sites that had been staging points for the protests. About a fifth of the relocated persons were given land plots, but some of these were also civil servants, not former squatters, who were being rewarded with land plots for their services (Forbes 2016: 211–213). The new land plots did not come with any basic infrastructure and services, like electricity, drainage and sanitation (interview, YCDC, 31.01.17), and many of them were in low-lying areas with high risks of flooding. People built their own houses and, over the years, the people who were relocated from the inner city got access to electricity and garbage collection, but access to water and sanitation is not well developed. According to interviews, the people who were relocated to Hlaing Thayar in the early 1990s perceive themselves to be natives of Hlaing Thayar today. Some have a degree of tenure security, but others are without formal land titles and thus remain informal settlers.

Hlaing Thayar has expanded rapidly since 2008 and especially after the political and economic opening in 2012, which increased immigration, especially of rural dwellers from the Ayeyarwady Delta. Most are economic and environmental migrants, fleeing from a combination of environmental disasters like Cyclone Nargis or soil erosion, and economic hardship brought about by stagnating rural wages, landlessness and seasonal unemployment.<sup>12</sup> The rapid migration has not been accompanied by availability of formal housing and formal allocation of land by the government. Rather it has resulted in informal expansion of the township into unoccupied lands on the fringes, to squatting on public lands as well as to the opening up of hostels by other residents on formal as well as informal land. These types of informal occupation have in turn given way to new cycles of government evictions inside the township. For instance, in January 2014, 4,000 huts built by squatters were demolished under orders from the regional government (Irrawaddy, 14.03.14 in Forbes 2016: 220). Our interviewees also spoke of smaller evictions by ward and township authorities, including 10–50 households at a time. These evictions are, however, futile because squatters re-erect their structures in other areas of the ward or township (see also Forbes 2016).



The cycles of squatting, evictions, and migration, sustain livelihood uncertainty and create high levels of mobility inside townships like Hlaing Thayar, which in turn is believed to breed crime and social problems, including mistrust and disputes between neighbors and within families. There are frequent incidents of domestic violence, neighbor quarrels and street fights, sometimes associated with alcohol abuse and drugs. While this study did not systematically research the causes of the high levels of crime and social tensions in Hlaing Thayar, there are clear indications that a combination of poverty, caused by unfulfilled expectations of getting stable jobs, with tenure insecurity and high levels of mobility are strong contributing factors. This situation is worsened by the lack of any coherent urban plan to address the migration challenges and by unclear landownership and management, which in addition reflect the negative attitude of city authorities towards the informal settlers and newcomers. The next section explores these issues, beginning with an overview of the official governance structures in Yangon.



**CITY GOVERNMENT PLANS AND APPROACHES TO MIGRANTS**





As in the rest of Myanmar, Yangon city is divided administratively into townships, of which there are 33, and within these townships there are numerous wards (totaling 630) (UNDP 2015: 11).<sup>13</sup> However, as opposed to the rural areas and smaller towns, it also has a municipal government, known as the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC). This committee has some characteristics of an urban local government, as it in 2013 included elected people's representatives.<sup>14</sup> The chair of YCDC is also the city's mayor (UNDP 2015: 1). Only Yangon, Naypyidaw (the capital city) and Mandalay, the second largest city in Myanmar, have such city committees (UNDP 2015: 8). The YCDC has a number of responsibilities, including urban planning (including zoning and construction permits), operation and maintenance of urban infrastructure (roads, bridges, drainage, markets, public housing); garbage and waste collection, water supply and sanitation; management of public spaces (including parks and street lighting), and; public health in relation to food. Responsibilities also include administration of public lands and the construction, repair and demolition of formal and informal settlements (Forbes 2016: 200; UNDP 2015).

The YCDC is technically independent of the government, and raises its own revenues through tax collection, fees, licenses and property development (Kraas et al. 2006; UN-Habitat 1991). However, in reality, the governance of Yangon city is characterized by three overlapping authorities, which are not always able to collaborate: the YCDC, the Regional Government, the Union Government and the General Administration Department (GAD). The YCDC area covers the whole city, but simultaneously falls within Yangon region, which also includes surrounding rural and farmland areas. These outer areas are not governed by the YCDC, but by the Yangon Regional Government and the GAD.<sup>15</sup> This means that when the city informally expands into farmland areas, it moves beyond the YCDC's territorial borders, and into the Yangon region government's jurisdiction.<sup>16</sup>

Within the city limits, the YCDC also has to share power and authority with the regional government, which has an elected body and a chief minister. The latter is appointed by and responds directly to the union government. In addition, the YCDC mayor is simultaneously the region minister of development affairs (dealing with municipal services), which falls under the Yangon region government and therefore the authority of the chief minister (UNDP 2015: 1). The YCDC also has to share power with the GAD inside the city. The GAD is the principle manager of the country's public administration and it is supposed to ensure peace and security. It falls under the military-run ministry of home affairs, and therefore also the union government. The GAD has administrative offices at district and township levels, are below these are elected ward administrators who have to respond to directives from the GAD

township offices. The ward administrators register residents and handle daily ward affairs. They resolve disputes and issue recommendation letters for residents to obtain jobs, access services and to enter public schools (Chit Saw & Arnold 2014: 2–3; UNDP 2015: 48). In rural areas, the GAD is also officially engaged in land management, and in practice, they also do so in the city, even though the YCDC principally has this mandate.

The YCDC has a separate office at township level, but has no representation inside the wards, which means that authority within the wards falls under the GAD. Within the GAD system there is a further layer of coordination known as the household heads or leader system, which includes ten "one hundred household leaders" who collect information for and respond to the directives of the ward administrators (Chit Saw & Arnold 2014: 2–3; Kyed et al. 2016).

According to a higher-ranking YCDC official, the YCDC has little de facto decision-making power today, and in reality, the mayor cannot take independent decisions, but follows the orders of the chief minister of the regional government. Labor divisions are unclear between the three tiers of government. At township level, the GAD is supposed to respond to the YCDC office, but the lines of command are unclear. In addition, there is no division at township levels between which of the departments respond to the union government and which ones respond to the regional governments. It seems more like a bundle of service departments, which are not integrated and coordinated (UNDP 2015: 60). Finally, the YCDC has no law enforcement role, so dealings with informal settlements depend on decisions of the regional government, and on the help of the police. The police fall under the ministry of home affairs (interview, YCDC, 31.01.17).<sup>17</sup>

The unclear layers of authority in Yangon city are evident in poor land management and in the lack of a coherent urban plan. The latter in particular is reinforcing a politically negative stance towards newcomer migrants and informal settlers.

## **MULTIPLE LAND REGIMES AND INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS**

Although the YCDC should now administer urban land, a lot of land has still not been transferred to the YCDC from the ministry of construction (MoC), which used to manage government land in the past (YCDC interview, 31.01.17). The MoC still has not handed over all the maps to the YCDC, likely because the MoC still wants to influence new construction projects and investments (interview, Boutry, 23.01.17).

Moreover, at ward level, land is de facto administered by the GAD. When there are issues with YCDC land then the YCDC has to collaborate with the GAD and for land relocations, it in turn depends on regional government permission.

Complications also arise when townships like Hlaing Thayar expand, informally, into farmland areas, which are outside the YCDC boundaries, and fall under the GAD. It is very difficult to change from farmland to residential land. You have to apply to the land record department under the ministry of agriculture, which also falls under the union government. The land management committee in the regional government must also agree. The YCDC can only make recommendations, but the regional government has the final say (YCDC interview, 31.01.17). In Hlaing Thayar, this lack of coherent land management is creating a rather chaotic situation where land is sold and leased in various informal and uncoordinated ways. The results are multiple land regimes and a shadow economy in which both public and private actors are participating. During the research several examples of this were found, both in the interior of Hlaing Thayar township and on the outskirts. Several powerful local actors were involved.

There were examples where previous farmland under the MoC was handed over to the YCDC and then YCDC staff sold it informally to businessmen and political party members at a low price. The latter then parceled out the land and sold it on to newcomer migrants, without any formal titling, just informal contracts or landslips. In another ward, land designated for a nursery school, which used to be farmland in the past before the YCDC took it over, was sold out to a plastic factory and to newcomer migrants by the original farmer, in collaboration with lower-ranking YCDC staff and political party members. The GAD at township level did not officially recognize this, but also did not take any action against it, leaving the new “owners” with no formal registration, although they had paid for the land plots. Consequently, the new occupants cannot get access to electricity and they face the risk of evictions. The same occurred in the neighboring ward where YCDC land designated for a playground and park area was never developed due to lack of funds. Squatting occurred frequently, and the YCDC destroyed several houses but gave up in the end. Finally, the original farmland owner sold out the land to four contractors, who divided the land into 56 plots and sold them illegally. The previous ward administrator supported this sale, informally. None of the new landowners have formal titles, only informal selling/buying contracts.

In yet another ward, there was a piece of undeveloped YCDC land, which the previous farmland owner tried to claim back. The farmer owned the land until the YCDC took it away from him in the 1990s. When he saw that the YCDC had left the land undeveloped he applied to the government at township level to get it back. Without waiting for official permission, the farmer began to grow paddy on the land. Shortly after that, he collaborated with an opposition political party to parcel out the land into 83 plots, which then were sold. Most of the plots now have new houses and hostels on them. The area has not been formally recognized, because selling off farmland as residential land requires special and complicated permissions.

There were also situations where the one hundred household leaders divided and sold off parcels of public land in smaller plots, which then post-facto were informally recognized by the ward administrator for a share of the sale. Finally, there was an enclosed, hidden away, informal settlement with 40 households, which was located behind the main ward office of the former ruling party. The party had given land to newcomer migrants to establish these households after the 2008 Cyclone Nargis.

These examples show how powerful local actors, including city government officials, are taking advantage of the unclear land management situation. However, at the same time, they are informally accommodating the high demand for housing by the newcomer migrants. This gives the migrants a place to stay, but leaves them in a precarious situation without official titling. This situation further reflects and is compounded by the controversies surrounding urban planning.

#### **LACK OF URBAN PLANS FOR INFORMAL SETTLERS**

There is no doubt that the population growth of Yangon is testing the coping capacity of the government to deal with service provision, infrastructure and housing. Albeit foreign investments are coming in, including a plethora of international agencies that want to influence urban planning, there is also a lack of public finances to cope with the challenges. Many interests and priorities are at stake, and in general, this has led to a lack of consideration for poor rural migrants and informal settlers in particular. Urban planning is also a politically controversial matter.

Urban planning is a continuous battlefield between the YCDC, the regional government and the union government. In 2012–13, the YCDC worked with the Japanese International Corporation Agency (JICA) on a Greater Yangon 2014 Master Plan,



which included city expansion in the form of seven new satellite towns to accommodate ten million people. It also had a strong focus on improving infra-structure, transportation and supply of water, drainage and electricity (Myanmar Times, 11.06.15; 17.12.15; YCDC/JICA 2013). Although parts of the plan began to be implemented under the previous government, like public transport and water supply, the plan was never fully approved by the regional government. Instead, in 2014, the chief minister of the regional government presented an alternative “New City Project”, involving city expansion into farmland areas. However, this plan was suspended by the regional parliament due to public outcry over lack of transparency in choosing a construction company.

When the new NLD government took power in 2016, it announced that it would not accept the two (disconnected) plans, but needed to review them and see revisions. JICA submitted a revised plan in January 2017 (Myanmar Times, 04.01.17). The regional government announced that it would collect inputs from this and other plans (from other international agencies – Korea, France, and the UK), before adopting a new single plan (Myanmar Times, 04.01.17). The new mayor criticized the JICA plan for underestimating migration influxes to the city (Myanmar Times, 18.01.17) and recognized the urgency of the new city project: “if there is no plan to expand the city’s residential and business areas in line with the population growth, there are going to be big problems” (Frontier, 07.11.16). As of February 2017, the regional government announced its plan to re-embark on the new city project in southwest Yangon, covering 30,000 acres of land, but controversies remain over contracting of companies and lack of public financing, as the project is likely to cost billions, which the government does not have. In addition, the YCDC is not part of executing this plan (Consult Myanmar, 21 February 2017).

Another controversial issue is that none of the plans addresses the question of informal settlements and slums. No doubt, this is because such settlements are politically difficult. Not only is there a lot of public resentment against squatters, many government officials believe that providing tenure and security to squatters will result in a massive new influx of migrants to the city, once word gets out that the city is accommodating them. This view seems to be shared by the new NLD government. Just after the NLD took power, the new chief minister of Yangon announced a squatter clearance plan, and most recently in June 2017, the police was ordered to clear a large informal settlement of 4,000 houses in northeast Yangon to make way for new high-rises (Coconuts Yangon, 12.06.2017). This reflects the meager consideration of urban poverty, and that evictions still seem to be the only available option in the toolbox, despite the democratic transition

(interview, UN-Habitat, 10.01.17). The regional government and the YCDC have proposed the building of affordable housing, but the lack of available public finance and private investors who would invest in affordable housing makes this proposal unrealistic for informal settlers and squatters, who will not be able to afford any new housing opportunities without available loans. There are no policies specifying compensation when people are evicted, let alone when they lack legal documentation for residency (Forbes 2016: 203–4). In fact, in some areas, the construction of new housing has already led to the demolition of informal settlements, which then leaves people to squat elsewhere (Forbes 2016: 206).

This situation reflects not only a lack of public finances, albeit important, but also the overwhelmingly negative views and lack of acknowledgement of the dire conditions facing informal settlers. Informal settlers have no legal rights. Instead, they are criminalized. This view is in turn, influenced by what seems to be a clear prioritization of profit-making projects that focus on high-end housing and business developments.<sup>18</sup>

#### **HARDLINER APPROACH TO INFORMAL SETTLERS AND POOR MIGRANTS**

Despite proposals to construct affordable housing, the core perception of the YCDC and the regional government is that informal settlers and squatters cannot be tolerated and that many among them are “gangsters” or “professional squatters” who make a business from renting and selling illegally occupied land. Thus, migrants and informal settlers are generally not framed as poor residents in need of assistance or as potentially positive assets for the economic growth of the city, i.e. as laborers and consumers.

In May 2016 when the new NLD chief minister announced the squatter clearance plan, he promised that punitive action would be taken against those illegally residing on public and privately owned land. Any future squatters would have no rights to benefit from relocation plans. Local authorities and police were ordered to make lists of the squatters in townships like Hlaing Thayar, and to arrest those who refused to be put on the lists. Based on these lists, the regional government would draw a distinction between the “legitimately landless” or those squatting in need of housing, who would be moved to tented camps outside the city limits and eventually given jobs, and the “professional squatters” or those squatting for commercial purposes (like renting out land to subtenants), who would be evicted for good. Part of the plan was to clear out criminal elements in townships like Hlaing Thayar. The

informal settlements are seen as havens for criminals and gangs, who make a business out of the incoming migrants, and the slums are presented as security threats. Ideas circulate of “professional squatters” bringing in truckloads of people from outside of Yangon to settle illegally on public lands. A 100-day crackdown on crime was launched at the same time, reinforcing police patrols in collaboration with local ward leaders (McPherson 2016). This hardline approach came as a surprise to international agencies, as they had expected that the newly elected democratic government would take a softer approach, rather than continue the strong-arm tactics of the military government.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually the chief minister’s eviction plan was never executed, because there was lack of financing and no viable plan for resettling the “legitimately landless.” Nonetheless, evictions are happening on the ground and when new construction projects are planned and implemented. In June 2017 the NLD government authorized a forced slum clearance in northeast Yangon’s Hlegu township to make way for new high-rises, hospitals, parks and a golf course, in an area with approximately 4,000 (mostly bamboo) houses.<sup>20</sup> The project is based on a profit-sharing contract between the ministry of construction (MoC) and a private company (Myint 2017). Between one and two hundred police officers coordinated with local authorities and hired over 1,000 civilian workers to destroy the houses and evict the occupants, using chainsaws, machetes, axes and crowbars. The eviction came with no alternative housing options in sight. In fact, a government official interviewed by the media said that the settlers would not get compensation because they had illegally squatted on government owned land. The city authorities accused the squatters of having deliberately settled to get compensation, because they knew of the coming construction project (Coconuts Yangon, 12.06.2017; Reuters 12.06.2017). An official from the MoC called them “landlord squatters”, a label used to describe local property owners who unlawfully purchase and live on or hire out government land to newcomers. This criminalization of informal settlers overlooks how some of the evictees have lived on the land for many years. The eviction led to protests by some informal settlers, which gave way to violent clashes, several police arrests and one injured police officer (Coconuts Yangon, 12.06.2017; Reuters 12.06.2017). One of the evicted persons, interviewed by the media, was a former resident of Hlaing Thayar, originally from Kayah state, who had bought the land a few months before the eviction from a local villager, because of insecurity and rising rental prices in Hlaing Thayar. She showed the media a document with the land price, which had been issued by an administrative official, so she believed it was legal (Myint 2017).

In Hlaing Thayar smaller evictions also occur frequently. Ward leaders said that, after the chief minister’s announcement in 2016, the YCDC and the GAD had ordered them to remove any new squatters and destroy their houses, even though formally the ward leaders do not have this authority. If the squatters do not comply, the ward leaders must go to township offices for help. This order reflects the deeply negative view of informal settlers also within the YCDC. Interviews with YCDC officials at central and township level revealed that they were frustrated with the regional government’s failure to implement the larger eviction and relocation plan. This frustration reflected a deep mistrust in and lack of sympathy for the squatters. There is a strong perception that if the government formalizes the informal settlements or allocates land to them, the informal settlers will simply sell the land and squat in other areas. The YCDC official at township level said: “we have a motto: if you see a tent, destroy the tent.” (Interview, 4 April 2017). When asked if the YCDC has a plan for the squatters, he said:

” No these people are actually not homeless. They are very greedy people, who want to get other people’s land for free, and then they build a house and try to get the land. These people are clever people. They never work hard and they are just waiting for opportunities. Some of them had their own land before [from previous relocations] but they sold it out. ”

(Interview, YCDC, 4 April 2017).

The township official further emphasized that most of the squatters are not poor newcomers, but people who have been in the “squatting business” for 25–30 years.

These negative images of squatters fail to acknowledge the poverty trap that most newcomers and informal settlers from previous forced relocations face in the everyday, which forces them to reside informally. According to this research’s study into the histories behind informal settlements, which is confirmed by Forbes (2016), those making a business out of informal settlements are not the poor migrants, but some local leaders and other powerful persons in the wards and at township level, including some YCDC officials and political parties. Simultaneously, these local “big people” (Lue Kyi), as people call them, are also those who are more sympathetic to the newcomers, and who allow them to reside and get by in the ward, despite the hardships. Next, the report explores the challenges faced by the migrants and informal settlers in the selected wards in Hlaing Thayar. It will also discuss in more depth how local “big people” can benefit from informal assistance to migrants.





## MIGRANT CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES



In Hlaing Thayar the number of people squatting on public lands is estimated by the YCDC at township level to be 20,000 or approximately 2.5 percent of the population, but this does not include those who are unregistered and informal settlers, for instance renting houses and rooms in hostels or occupying land re-sold by private actors. In addition, numbers are not updated regularly, and new migrants arrive daily. In ward 20, the ward administrator keeps informal counts of newcomers. He said that there are 30,000 unregistered residents and 70,000 registered persons in his ward, which gives a much higher percentage of informal settlers – i.e. around 30 percent – than the YCDC estimates. Not all of the informal settlers are newcomers who have arrived in Yangon within the past five years. Some are also from the relocations of the 1990s, who either never obtained tenure security or who ended up selling the land they were given by the government as a survival strategy, because of lost incomes or because the household got overcrowded as their sons and daughters grew older.

Access to available formal housing and land titling is desired by, but unreachable for, most newcomers because: real estate prices are rising, the land titling process is expensive and difficult, and because the government has failed to implement an affordable housing plan and make land available. Thus, the vast majority are forced to settle informally or rent rooms in one of the many hostels that have popped up in Hlaing Thayar, some of which are also inside informal settlements. The majority do not get access to formal factory jobs, because they lack the required skills and official documentation. This compels them to take low-paid, casual and informal jobs, with no stable incomes. Most of our interviewees were also caught in serious debt traps, because they have to take informal loans with high interest rates, to pay for rent and for daily survival (see also Save the Children 2016). Sometimes the interest rates are as high as 30 percent, and many times the borrowers have to take new loans from other people just to repay the interest.<sup>21</sup> Although there are loan sharks and professional brokers who lend out money, the majority of people interviewed borrow from other informal settlers in the nearby neighborhood or from family members. People also borrow money to pay hospital bills and to get official documents, i.e. when they want their children to be admitted to the (public) school or when they want to apply for a job. The inability to repay loans sometimes creates conflicts, including violent clashes, which sometimes mean that the borrowers move to other locations.

Newcomers tend to constantly move between different hostels, rental houses or settlements on different informal plots, and many therefore are not registered by the local authorities or are registered in one location, but live in another. Mobility is caused not only by evictions, but also by the inability of tenants to pay rent, due to unstable incomes and poverty, and because people move in hope of more secure housing. Mobility is strongly believed, by residents and local authorities alike, to breed crime, because it allows gangs and individual newcomers to roam freely and to easily escape prosecution. Mobility and rapid migration are also seen to breed social problems and tensions, including mistrust and lack of collaboration between residents.

Residing in informal settlements makes it even more difficult to get access to formal documents, like ID and household registration, which are required to obtain formal employment as well as micro-credit or government provided loans with lower interest rates. They must obtain documents through informal channels, which costs additional fees, because they have to bribe or pay “tea-money” to local officials, for which they often must borrow more money. This positions informal settlers in serious poverty traps. Newcomers tend to be worst off in this regard, as people who have resided in Hlaing Thayar for many years have better connections and/or can use household registers from previous places they have stayed in the township to obtain documentation.

The unregulated and unrecognized character of the settlements has given rise to different forms of informal governance. Local leaders and other powerful actors, including party politicians, older residents from the 1990s relocation, and religious organizations, assist the newcomer migrants and settlers in informal ways to get access to registration papers, and they engage in illegal land sales, rentals, money-lending and the sale of services (like water and electricity). While some local authorities informally cater for the informal settlers, including resolving their social disputes, many informal settlers are also left to their own devices. They are unrecognized by the local authorities, and this puts them in an even more precarious situation.

Interviewees among the informal settlers highlighted economic insecurity and daily survival, including lack of access to electricity, clean water and indebtedness, as the biggest challenges. With these challenges also came the fear of eviction, feelings of insecurity, lack of protection by local authorities and mistrust in neighbors. These topics are discussed next.



## FEAR OF EVICTIONS AND CONSTANT MOBILITY

” My problem is that I am anxious. If the [informal] landowner comes to evict us, where will we go? I don't know the place where I can go with my two children. ”

(Interview, 35-year-old woman in a small bamboo house, informal settlement, 8 February 2017).

The vast majority of the informal settlers interviewed feared eviction, because they are well aware that where they live is not legal. However, they feel they have no other option. Asked about the possibility for formal and “affordable” government housing, one female tenant in a hostel on informally settled land said: “the affordable housing flats are for the rich people to make a business. They buy them and sell for a higher price. So many people here wait to buy illegal farmland, and then they hope that one day it will be legal, because they know that it is not legal (interview, 7 March 2017). Getting tenure security is something the newcomer migrants see as out of their reach. They know that government land is not for sale and even if it was, they cannot afford it. So, the only option they have is to rent small rooms in a hostel or a house on informally settled land. They consider themselves lucky if they are able to afford to purchase land informally, i.e. from farmers or contractors who are illegally re-selling YCDC land, as described above. Even if they only get an informal contract, and have to risk eviction, this is the better option. Living in hostels is cheap but means small, crowded and dire conditions. Many hostel rooms most resemble small prison cells, divided from each other by no soundproof walls and tenants complain of lots of noise, quarrels, and disputes. Neighbors often complain about the hostels, and look down upon those who live there. People do not stay in one hostel for a long time, and tend to move in and out of hostels, either because of the lack of discipline or because they cannot pay their rent on time. Rental contracts are short-term, because of fear of evictions and of being unable to pay rent, due to unpredictable incomes.

Among our interviewees, the vast majority had stayed at many different places in Hlaing Thayar over the years (or months) they had been there. For instance, a 53-year-old man and his family had lived in Hlaing Thayar for 16 years. First, he rented land where he built a house. When he was evicted from this house, he rented houses in two other places, before he built another house on informal land where he again was evicted. When the research team met him, he was renting a house on illegally sold YCDC land, but he only took out three-month rental contracts, because he feared eviction. His story is not extraordinary. Mobility is high, and there was a widespread notion that this was part of everyday life. With nowhere to go to

complain, there was a general sense that if there was a problem with the house or hostel owners or the local authorities, people would simply move to another place. Mobility and the lack of tenure security also affect the security situation.

## INSECURITY, CRIMINALIZATION AND LACK OF PROTECTION

” People automatically look down on Hlaing Thayar. So, I never give my address to friends, because if I say I live in Hlaing Thayar, the look on people's faces changes. They think that all people living here are thieves and criminal people. So I just say to people that I live in Tha Mine. ”

(Interview, 25-year-old woman, March 2017).

People in Hlaing Thayar are well aware that the township is infamous for high crime levels, and that the newcomer migrants and informal settlers are blamed. The ward-level police confirmed this perception, stating that newcomers commit most crime, because they are affected by natural disasters back in their rural areas and because when they come to Hlaing Thayar they fail to get jobs. One officer said that he thinks people from Ayeyarwady region, who comprise the majority of the newcomers in Hlaing Thayar, commit more crime than others. He also believes that crowded and densely populated spaces breed criminal minds. This criminalization of the migrants was somewhat challenged by the ward leaders and the local religious leaders we spoke with (and not surprisingly by the newcomers themselves). They were rather of the perception that Hlaing Thayar had earned its bad reputation because criminals come to hide in the overcrowded and informal places, because here the authorities are unable to register and regulate residency and mobility. The environment breeds social problems and crimes; as one pastor who helps informal migrants with education said:

” The migrants are not criminals, but they settle in very poor places and in very crowded hostels so even if they do not want to be involved in the problems, the environment is created for being involved in problems. The migrants are not directly related to criminal issues but they are misled by the criminal people. Some criminal people come to their environment and they commit a crime and then they move to another place. This gives the migrants a bad reputation. ”

(Interview, February 2017).

The ward leaders complained that since the new NLD government, it has been more difficult to control the criminals, because there is no longer a requirement that the ward authorities register newcomers on a weekly basis.<sup>22</sup> Quarrels between neighbors and within families, related to alcohol, and disputes and fights related to moneylending cases are the most common, according to the ward leaders, but there is also a higher incidence in Hlaing Thayar of rape, murder, fights with knives and thefts than in other parts of Yangon, according to one ward police officer.

Simultaneously, the fact is that many migrants and informal settlers, especially single women and widows, themselves fear and are victims of crime. The women interviewed fear to walk outdoors at night, and they stay inside their houses or hostel rooms when they are not at work. This is further underscored by a sense that the informal settlers are unprotected and do not get help from ward authorities when they face crimes and are involved in disputes with neighbors, kin or landlords. While there is a general tendency for many crimes in Hlaing Thayar to remain unreported to the official system (police and courts), this tendency is higher among informal settlers and newcomer migrants than other groups. Simultaneously, informal settlers often do not dare to report crimes and disputes to the ward leaders, who otherwise tend to resolve many cases, informally, for the officially registered residents (Than Pale 2017; Kyed 2017). Women, especially, fear to report crimes because they feel unprotected and fear that the perpetrators will seek revenge (Than Pale 2017). One man, who owned a household plot on illegally sold YCDC land, said:

” We applied to be on the household list with the ward administrator, but he said to us: “even if there is a burglar or robber who comes to you it is not our concern. Your place is illegal.” In ward 11 [where he lived before] the ward administrator was good, and we want to sell here now and move back there. My niece went to the ward administrator to get a recommendation letter to get a job, but he refused. So, we asked the ward administrator how we should live and he said: “it is not our concern. Your kids can collect shit. If there is a robber we will not resolve it. ”

(Interview, January 2017).

The ward administrator in the ward where this man lives confirmed that he cannot give household registers to the informal settlers and he does not have the responsibility and permission to resolve their issues. However, when we spoke with the one hundred household leaders below him, who manage the neighborhood sections of the ward, one of them told us that he has informally taken responsibility for those informal settlers who are in his area and that he resolves disputes for them if they ask him to. This is not official at the ward administrative office, but he does it to try to keep the peace and stay on good terms with the informal settlers. Also, he and the other one hundred household leaders do not like to use the word “squatter”. Even though the township authorities have told them to register the migrants under this label, they find that it is a bad and discriminatory word and thus instead call them “migrants”. The attitudes of the ward leaders ranged from signs of sympathy towards informal migrants, often combined with a pragmatic approach to keeping peace in their areas, to ignoring their existence. Some one hundred household leaders told us that they do not allow migrants to squat, but they also do not evict them: “we just forget about them and sometimes close our eyes and ears, as long as they do not break any rules.” (Interview, group of one hundred household leaders at ward office, February 2017). In another ward, the ward administrator had established temporary household leaders for the informal settlements, to keep informal registers and to inform the ward office about issues and problems in the areas. Here the ward administrator also accepts to resolve disputes if the informal migrants ask him to and if they can show some form of ID or documents from a previous legal residency.

Irrespective of these practices, the informal settlers in general held the perception that they had no one hundred household leaders and that they were not welcome to bring disputes and crimes to the ward office. In one settlement the residents told us that a one hundred household leader comes, but only to raise donations for the monks, not to resolve their issues. When asked what they would do if they were robbed, the majority said “nothing” and that they had nowhere to report. However, when asked again, most believed that they could in principle call the police, but this was a feared and undesirable option, because they know they reside illegally. In general, they felt left to their own devices. An exception was the hostels, where internally, the hostel owners have drawn up their own internal rules and regulations of conduct, like prohibiting alcohol, quarrels and a 10pm curfew. Hostel owners resolve internal disputes such as domestic violence and tenant quarrels. They cannot, however, forward cases to the ward leaders, because the hostels are not legally registered, and therefore the hostel owners can get in trouble if they report to the ward office.



The police do not play a proactive role in the informal settlements, although the police say that they will receive complaints from anyone, irrespective of legal documentation/residency or not (interview, ward police, February 2017). Intriguingly, our interviews revealed that the 100-day crime crackdown program in Hlaing Thayar, which involved 24-hour patrols by police and groups of ward leaders, only targeted the formal settlements. Interviewees living in formal settlements, all said they frequently saw police patrols, but those living just one or two streets down in the informal settlement, said the patrols never reached their area. Some had the idea that the police were too afraid to enter the informal settlements, while others simply believed the police did not care. One one hundred household leader also said that he was too afraid to enter the squatter areas after 10pm, “because you never know who is a good and a bad person there.” (Interview, March 2017). This fear can be seen as a result of the ward leaders’ lack of overview and knowledge of the residents, due to the high levels of mobility.

For the informal migrants the lack of protection means that a core security strategy is to isolate oneself inside the house, and not mix or speak with others, unless necessary. One man, who rents a bamboo house in an informal farmland place, said:

” We take care of our own place and I tell my son to go and come on time so that he will not meet the criminals. We are also afraid of the fights and the quarrels, because if there is a case there is nowhere to go with the complaint. If we hear about a quarrel, we just close the door and our ears. ”

(Interview, February 2017).

Statements like this one reflect not only a fear of crime, but also mistrust in neighbors, fear of social disputes and lack of social cohesion in the informal settlements.

## MISTRUST AND LACK OF SOCIAL COHESION

” I carefully close my door at night, because it is difficult to guess how people are. If you think someone is honest, they might abuse you. So I hardly ever visit my neighbors. People are not good. If someone is in a good economic situation, people are jealous and if someone is in a bad economic situation, people insult them. Sometimes, when I wear gold, the neighbor tells me that “Aww...you can’t wear gold. You do not need to pay for your living.” The neighbors are not good and I don’t want to make close relations with them. Sometimes, they want to borrow money from me, but if I cannot do that, they become very angry. ”

(Interview, 25-year-old woman, March 2017).

There was a common perception in the informal settlements that were characterized by high population turnover, that the best way to live peacefully was to stick to oneself and not be inquisitive about neighbors, to not ask any questions and not ask for help. Residents feared getting into quarrels if they did not follow these modes of conduct. Sayings like “follow water, follow fish”<sup>23</sup> and “if someone wants to have water we have to give the cup” were used to describe how the informal settlers put their heads down, did not complain and did not get involved in neighborhood issues. There were hardly any examples of self-organization among residents, such as establishing their own informal leaders or social groups. In general, when there are funerals and religious ceremonies neighbors contribute donations and invite each other, also across ethnicities and places of origin, but otherwise they stick to themselves. The insecure environment, the lack of legal protection, and the high levels of mobility, which mean that neighbors seldom know each other well and that it is difficult to build trust, were used to explain this situation. Simultaneously, there were exceptions and variation from area to area.

Differences were observed between informal settlements where residents had bought illegal land, and where there was some stability in the duration of their residency, and areas where the majority rented on a temporary basis. In the former, there was more interaction between the neighbors. We also found that there was more trust among neighbors who come from the same rural area and ethnicity.

Interestingly, support networks were stronger among ethnic minorities like Rakhine and Karen, who are quite numerous in Hlaing Thayar, and tend to live together in smaller clusters, rather than among the majority Bamar. According to Boutry, this is the case across other areas of Yangon as well, where solidarity among ethnic and religious minorities is stronger, and cuts across economic class, which is not the case for the large Bamar group. When ethnic minority migrants come to Yangon they usually get various kinds of support, including housing, help to get ID and obtain jobs, from other members of their group or, if they are Christian, from the church organizations (interview, Boutry, 23.01.17). Since the vast majority of newcomers in Hlaing Thayar are Bamar, this could help explain why there is higher mistrust and lack of self-organization and mutual support, as opposed to other areas where different minorities settle (like the Karen in Insein township, where crime is also very low).<sup>24</sup>

No open ethnic or religiously based tensions were found in Hlaing Thayar, and Karen and Rakhine interviewees said that they did not feel discriminated because of their ethnicity.<sup>25</sup> An important exception was the few Muslim residents that were interviewed, who felt particularly isolated, discriminated against and afraid.<sup>26</sup> Very few of the Muslims residing in Hlaing Thayar are newcomers, as the newcomer Muslims rather tend to settle in townships, including in the downtown area, where there are large Muslim neighborhoods (interview, Boutry, 23.01.17). Those Muslims who live in Hlaing Thayar are spread out in smaller clusters or in single households, and came during the forced relocations in the early 1990s. The two families interviewed had formal tenure titles from this period. However, they still felt very insecure and tried just to keep their heads down so as not to draw any attention from neighbors. They felt that others looked down on them and saw them as poor. If they got into a dispute, say over fencing or a land plot, they would be afraid that the resolution would be biased towards the non-Muslims. Neighbors would greet them, but not interact with them. The children could not get ID, because of their religious identity, and thus it is impossible to obtain formal jobs. Hostel and houseowners would not rent to Muslims, the Muslim interviewees told us. Some Hindu interviewees also felt discriminated against, because they were mistaken for being Muslims due to their darker skin color. For about two years – no one could give us any exact information – the Muslims have been prohibited from praying in public at the mosques in Hlaing Thayar, which are de facto closed. Some believed that the closure of the mosques was based on a decision by the township administration, in order to prevent religious tensions.<sup>27</sup>

There was a general sense that the situation for Muslims was worsening in Hlaing Thayar. A plausible explanation is the surge in anti-Muslim sentiment and nationalist politics in Myanmar in general, spearheaded by radical monks (Schissler et al. 2017), and which is increasing due to the violent conflict and exodus of Muslims from Rakhine state in 2016 and 2017. Although violent clashes between Muslims and Buddhists have not occurred in Yangon, as in other areas of the country including the second largest city Mandalay, these incidents do influence perceptions and fears in places like Hlaing Thayar. In mid-2017 nationalist monks tried to unleash attacks on Muslims in a downtown township of Yangon where a large part of the population is Muslim. Fortunately this did not lead to outbreaks of communal violence, but it is heightening feelings of insecurity among Muslims (Htun 2017). In Hlaing Thayar, where there have been no open clashes, the anti-Muslim sentiment of the rest of the country nevertheless furthers an environment of mistrust, insecurity and lack of social cohesion, which also prevails among informal settlers more generally, but which tends to be worse among Muslims. It should be noted that this may be different in wards with a majority of Muslim residents, where forms of mutual protection and solidarity between Muslims may ease their situation. In the wards covered by this research, there were only a few, dispersed Muslim households.

Despite the many challenges that the migrants face, there are various, informal ways in which informal settlers and newcomers try to get by and survive, as addressed next.



**MIGRANT RESILIENCE AND INFORMAL PROTECTION STRATEGIES**





When the informal settlers were asked if they get any help from the government, some looked puzzled at the question, and others laughed, as if it was self-evident that they do not get anything. At the same time, no one pays fees or taxes to the government. They are not part of the YCDC garbage collection system, cannot get access to the electricity line, and there is no help for road construction and repairs, as in the formal settlements. Instead, most throw their garbage in the river or outside the house. Those who have some economic means get electricity from their own generators. Others buy electricity from other informal settlers who make part of their living from having a large generator with wires connected to surrounding households. As Forbes (2016: 233) notes, the informal settlements on the periphery are like a "city within the city" with their own informal economy. Much of the employment is generated by the informal settlement itself, not only in terms of electricity, but also water distributors, moneylenders, vending of small produce and informal real estate brokers and landlords. This also occurred on a micro scale. For instance, one woman who rented a bamboo house in an informal settlement made a living from having three newcomers rent a small spot inside her tiny house.

When newcomers try to get jobs and a place to stay they mainly rely on connections to relatives or fellow villagers, who already reside in Hlaing Thayar. Some hostel owners also said that they help newcomer tenants to get jobs, although only informal jobs, by spreading the word in their networks. This particularly applied to Karen and Rakhine ethnic minority hostel owners, who mainly rented out to people of their own ethnicity.

An exception to the lack of government services is access to public schools. The vast majority of the informal settlers do send their children to school. In order to do so they rely on different informal strategies to obtain some form of legal documentation. The same regards applications for jobs. Despite the fact that the informal dwellers are well aware that they cannot get formal access to public services because they reside on illegal land, there is nonetheless a small hope that one day the government may recognize their areas. This section explores the different ways that informal settlers try to protect themselves against eviction and obtain legal documents, and how other actors get involved to help them deal with everyday insecurity.

## HELP AND PROTECTION FROM RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND LEADERS

Apart from personal networks to relatives and fellow villagers, we found that religious organizations and leaders, Buddhist as well as Christian, provide both direct and indirect help to some, but not all of the informal settlers. There are important differences in how Christian and Buddhist religious actors provide assistance: the former provide material support, whereas the latter provide protection, not only spiritual but also against potential evictions.<sup>28</sup>

The Christian pastors and organizations provide assistance to obtain education, get jobs and, in fewer situations, monetary gifts to support survival and rent. One pastor got support from NGOs, the Baptist Church and the Karen diaspora to provide skills and English language training to improve job chances, and he helped migrants to get jobs in Korea and Malaysia by providing them with loans and skills training. With the remittances, the migrants who have gone aboard can support their families back in Hlaing Thayar. In one informal settlement we found a hostel owner, who had been able to buy the land and build the hostel with remittances from his brother who the church had helped to get a job in Korea.

Support from pastors mainly extends to Christian Karen, but one pastor also helped Bamar Buddhists. One Hindu family had converted to Christianity, as they received donations from a church which comes to Hlaing Thayar every year to help squatters. The Christian churches cannot, however, provide informal migrants with any legal protection, and it is even difficult to apply for a legal permit to establish a church in Hlaing Thayar, according to one pastor. This situation is very different for the Buddhist monasteries.

Because of Buddhist beliefs in merit, there was a widespread notion among even the poor migrants that it was shameful to receive food or other material support from the Buddhist monks. Instead, they regularly donated rice and money to the monks, who also make rounds in the informal settlements. Donations give merit, which Buddhists believe can improve present and future life conditions. In addition, monks, and especially the presence of a monastery in an informal settlement were believed to protect the area. A monastery gives an area some layer of recognition and reduces the fear of eviction. Building a monastery is a way of civilizing the territory, in a symbolic way. Settlers believed that government authorities would be

much more reluctant to evict residents if there was a monastery on the informal settlement. Some even hoped that maybe one day this could mean formal recognition. This is because government authorities in Myanmar have a lot of respect for the monks.

In one ward there were two new monasteries located right inside an informal settlement area. They were small, but it was clear that they were expanding with new cement buildings. This was in the undeveloped YCDC area that was sold by the original farmer, in collaboration with a political party, referred to earlier. A monk from Ayeyarwady region headed one of the monasteries. It was built with donations from the monk's followers in Ayeyarwady and from the farmer who had sold the land. First, the farmer had called the monk and established the monastery. Then they called the Ayeyarwady people to buy the land, the monk said, and added: "before we built this monastery people did not dare to build a house, but after we built it people also built their houses." (Interview 02.02.17). The monk claimed that the monastery land is now legally approved from the ward administration to the regional government level, even though it is on illegal land. This gives a sense of security to the informal landowners and tenants. For this reason, even one Christian Karen hostel owner in this informal settlement donated money to the monastery. One Buddhist land plot owner, who lives next to the monastery said:

” If there is a monastery, it gives a good guarantee for living land. People trust more to buy land in that area. If there is no monastery the people will think it is an illegal place and will not buy. It is also another reason that it is more peaceful here, because people cannot easily quarrel in front of the monastery. And we can easily donate. It means we are less afraid of eviction, because we are on religious land and we are like religiously registered. This has reduced our fear. ”

(Interview, 01.02.2017).

The monastery also provides food daily for the people over 80 years of age, and the monk has organized the construction of a cement road to improve conditions when the area floods in the monsoon season. He collects donations from the informal settlers, but during festivals he also gets donations from richer monasteries and followers.

The other monastery is run by Rakhine monks. The informal settlement has quite a number of Rakhine residents. Here also, the monastery was a way to safeguard the area, both to protect its investors and its residents. It was built with donations from the head monk's sister, a wealthy engineer, who also bought some of the land from the farmer (most likely to resell it, or to rent out houses to migrants). The monk said he chose this area to help the poorest. When newcomers come from Rakhine, the monastery provides them with shelter until they find a job (they can house 20–30 persons). The plan is now to build a computer and training center for the young people to prevent them from getting into criminal activities – an issue the monk sees as a major challenge in the area.

The monks from both monasteries defined themselves as defenders of the informal migrants, criticizing the government for not recognizing that they had bought the land and that they too are citizens. They do not see them as squatters. In other wards, monastic schools also provide alternative schooling for those poor migrants, including non-Buddhists, who cannot afford the expenses associated with public schools (like tuition, books and inscription).

#### **BUYING LAND AND BUILDING ROADS IN HOPE OF RECOGNITION**

The large-scale eviction that happened in northeast Yangon in June 2017 clearly testifies that it is risky for people to buy public land illegally, even if this involves a large number of people. Irrespectively, informal settlers in Hlaing Thayar still hoped that if they bought land in large groups they could one day get formal tenure. Informal landownership contracts, often with local leaders as witnesses, were seen to somewhat protect the owners from eviction, especially in areas where there were many informal land plots clustered together. Pooling together donations for laying gravel and cement roads was seen as another way to try to get recognition. This tends to be more difficult among newcomers, and people who rent houses or rooms in hostels, due to the high mobility of these groups, and to be, rather, an action taken by those who have been in Hlaing Thayar for several years and who have good support networks.

At least in some places these strategies of buying land and building roads have led to the residents being tacitly recognized or at least tolerated by the ward authorities, who do not try to remove them and who provide them with recommendation letters when required.



## INFORMAL STRATEGIES OF OBTAINING DOCUMENTS

There are many strategies and a widespread informal economy around obtaining legal documents to get jobs, attend schools and so forth. However, those with some financial means and connections do better than those who do not have these. Some borrow National Registration Cards (NRC – the main ID in Myanmar) from friends to get work at factories, or use the household certificates of family members or friends who live in formal places in Hlaing Thayar. The friend or family member takes the informal migrant to the ward administrator and tells him, something like: “this is my niece and she now stays with me.” So friends stand guarantee for the informal migrants. One interviewee got a recommendation letter for a job through his friend who is a ward administrator in another township. Some one hundred household leaders and brokers also get fees to help with documents, and some factory managers have lending businesses around providing work documents.

One family said that they kept their old NRC address in North Okkalar township because of fear of eviction in Hlaing Thayar. If that happens, they can always hope to go back to North Okkalar for documents. But their children do not have NRCs, and even if they could get them while living in the informal settlement, they could not afford it, because you have to pay many places. Their daughter has a formal job, but this is only because they had a good relationship with the ward administrator when they lived in another ward: he gave them the right documents, and wrote that the daughter is “still applying” for an NRC.

Hostel owners in informal settlements also help their tenants. Although they cannot get the tenants on any official list, they can negotiate with the ward administrator for a smaller fee to get recommendation letters, as long as the tenants have an NRC. One hostel said that when her tenants need recommendation letters, she takes them to the ward office, pays 1000 kyats (0.8 USD) and then she guarantees for them. In another hostel, where the tenants are Rakhine, the hostel owner’s sister, who is also Rakhine and who lives in a legal place, just opposite the hostel, helps the tenants. She puts the tenants on her guest list and then they can get recommendation letters. They pay 2,500 kyats per person to the sister for this service.

Although the ward leaders all denied taking any fees from informal settlers, they did openly say that they provided recommendation letters as long as they got some form of legal address. It is clear from this and from Forbes’ (2016) research that ward leaders are part of the informal economy around documentation, but at the

same time this means that they are also supporting the survival strategies of the informal migrants. This is nonetheless producing differentials between migrants who have more and those who have fewer financial means and connections.

## POLITICAL PARTIES HELP AND CAPITALIZE ON THE MIGRANTS

Much more research is needed on the role of political parties with regard to informal settlers and newcomers. This research only obtained very tentative information, for instance of cases where political parties had been involved in illegal land sales and in securing land for settlers against protection and informal rents. To what extent this is a strategy to obtain votes is not clear, as many informal settlers do not make it on to the electoral lists due to lack of official residency. We did not find examples where the current ruling party, NLD, was involved, although this party won the vast majority of votes in 2015 in Hlaing Thayar. As far as our insights go, the other parties engage with the informal migrants more to establish future powerbases than to immediately gain votes. Simultaneously, they get financial incomes from rental and informal land sales to migrants. For instance one smaller political party, connected to the previous military regime, has 20–30 offices in Hlaing Thayar alone. It operates as a kind of “shadow power” by engaging a high number of “spies” or informers on the ground. They not only resolve disputes among its members, but also settle crimes like theft, involving non-members.

Intriguingly, there were also two examples of informal settlers engaging with political parties to get protection. In both examples, this regarded members of a religious minority, who, as mentioned earlier feel more at risk of discrimination and have greater difficulties in obtaining legal documentation. For instance, one man of Indian descent (previously Hindu, but now Christian) is an informer of the above-mentioned political party, and he does this, he said, because having a good connection with local big people is important to protect his family and business: he has an informal garbage collection business. He uses his political party “spy” card as if it is an NRC card (which he does not have). In another example, a Hindu head of household told us that his business and residency is protected because he volunteers for a former ruling party at township level and this also means that he has a good relationship to the ward authorities.

## LOW SELF-ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

The survival and protection strategies of informal settlers do involve the activation of networks of kin, friends and neighbors, and sometimes ward leaders, brokers, religious leaders and political parties. However, in general, these strategies are individualized and do not take the form of any stable or enduring form of collective organization. Usually there is also some kind of financial income involved in helping others, whether through moneylending, selling of electricity or access to legal documentation. This informal economy also creates tensions and, sometimes, social disputes. During the research, very little evidence was found of self-organization and establishment of informal leadership and representation among informal settlers. There were two exceptions to this, and both were in informal settlements where people had informally bought land, and where there were monasteries, which gave a sense of some security and stability. In one area, the new landowners were in the process of forming a social group, which had also tried to collect donations to build cement roads, but they were struggling because those in the hostels could not pay.

In another area, there was a self-established “Elder,” a kind of neighborhood advisor. Neighbors come to him for advice and help, for example when someone needs to go to the hospital he helps to call a taxi. He had also taken the initiative of collecting signatures in order to apply for access to electricity (which however failed). He also resolves marriage and neighborhood disputes at his house. For instance, a neighbor beat his wife and tried to destroy the house. He is Buddhist and she is Muslim. The wife asked the Elder for help. He went to their house and the husband said it was not his business, but then the Elder tied the husband up and kept him at his house. Now the husband behaves a bit better. The neighbors chose this individual for the job, because he does not drink and is calm. It was not like a formal election, just an informal agreement. His wife said: “He did not take official responsibility, because we are landless people and we do not know when we need to move from here.” (Interview, January 2017). He only deals with issues in the informal settlement, because he is afraid that if he deals with outsider people, there might be a complaint to the ward leaders and then he would get into trouble.

Despite these examples, very few informal settlers establish social groups and forms of organized assistance. The broad lack of collective organization in most areas underscores a general atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty, and a sense that it is difficult to trust anyone. In the bigger picture it also means that the poor migrants do not constitute a strong political force or movement. Rather, if anything, it is the early settlers who now see themselves as natives, in particular those connected to the administration and political parties, who are benefitting in terms of small incomes and power, from the informal status and insecurities facing the migrants.





**CONCLUSION: WIDER SECURITY CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**



This report has provided insights into the challenges facing the many poor newcomer migrants, as well as other informal settlers, who contribute to the fast growing population and territorial expansion of Yangon city. The influx of rural migrants to Yangon is nothing new, but has increased since the political transition and the opening up of the economy in 2012. Although the economic growth of Yangon, supported by increased foreign investments, is creating hope of better lives among rural migrants, thereby acting as an important pull factor to the city, the migrants benefit minimally from these developments. They live a life of informality, with little or no access to formal jobs and stable incomes, public services, tenure security, and legal documentation. Many are trapped in debt cycles, and although they do get help from kin, fellow villagers, and sometimes from religious leaders and local big men, such networks of support are unstable and often fraught with mistrust, and constitute an informal economy that sometimes creates social disputes. This situation contributes to lack of social cohesion that, along with unstable incomes, and the high mobility of informal settlers and newcomer migrants, is perceived to create the grounds for crime in wards with large informal settlements such as Hlaing Thayar. At the heart of these challenges, is the fact that the different tiers of government are generally both unable and unwilling to recognize poor newcomer migrants, and other informal settlers, as legitimate and desirable residents of the city.

Instead of accommodating the newcomers, the city and regional governments of Yangon have, since 2012, continued the historical practices of the military government, namely to evict informal settlers. The government gives no social support to the newcomers and informal settlers. Instead, evictions are happening both on a larger and a smaller scale, and while the Regional Government in 2016 did make plans to find relocation places for the evictees this never materialized. Efforts to create affordable housing that poor migrants can actually afford have also been unsuccessful. Undoubtedly, lack of sufficient public finance and technical capacity to accommodate the many newcomers, amounting to no less than 800,000 immigrants between 2009 and 2014 alone, plays a significant role. However, the hardliner approach to informal settlers and poor urban migrants is also influenced by a historically negative view of these people as “strangers,” potential criminals and obstacles to urban development and stability. This perception is reinforced by a prioritization in urban planning of high-end housing construction and business developments, which is influenced by domestic as well as foreign investment interests.

What are the wider consequences of the Yangon authorities’ hardliner approach to newcomer migrants and informal settlers for the stability and security of Yangon? To address this question, it is necessary to look at both the immediate or shorter-term consequences and the potential longer-term effects.

One immediate consequence in townships like Hlaing Thayar, is that the hardliner approach is creating constant fear of eviction, high levels of mobility, and an informalization of livelihoods, which is in practice reinforcing the notion that informal settlements are crime zones. In this sense, rather than curbing crime and social disputes in Hlaing Thayar, the evictions and threats of eviction are contributing, albeit unintentionally, to rising crime and insecurity. This is only somewhat curbed by the informal practices of local big men, including ward and township level officials and police, who despite being told by higher levels of government to evict informal settlers, are accommodating the needs of informal settlers to some extent. Simultaneously, this gives way to an informal economy of support networks, which are unstable and not equally accessible for all informal settlers. Tensions and social disputes also arise from this informal economy, for instance around moneylending and illegal land sales.

Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that the hardliner approach by the city authorities towards the informal settlers will lead to open political unrest and uprisings, but rather it seems likely to produce increased insecurity, including criminality and eventually gang violence. However, evictions and the lack of recognition and viable alternatives for informal settlers and poor newcomer migrants could have longer-term political repercussions that could also create instability. The June 2017 evictions led to counterattacks on security forces and to a critique of the NLD government by those who were bulldozed and evicted. Among these people, there is a growing disillusionment with the new political leadership, who many hoped would improve their livelihood conditions. In the short-term the NLD will unlikely suffer consequences, because informal migrants cannot vote. However, if the current trend continues, evictions are likely to become more and more confrontational and violent. Those who can vote generally do not view informal settlers and newcomer migrants favorably, but these voters will take notice if evictions become increasingly frequent and violent. This could eventually lead to political pressure on the government to find more accommodating solutions. More problematically, the government’s criminalization of a very large and steadily growing population of informal and poor migrants, can also risk developing into



what Beall et al. (2013) define as “civic conflicts”, which are found in other urban settings of the world. Civic conflict is specifically urban, and involves more or less spontaneous and reactive violence that forms in response to feelings of powerlessness, socio-economic exclusion or spatial marginalization. It can take place among groups in society (gang warfare, ethnic or religious violence, crime), or between society and the state (riots, terrorism, state violence) or be a mixture of these. Systemic discrimination and neglect embedded in governance institutions is central to civic conflict. In Yangon there is no evidence yet of a development towards civic conflict, but some of the underlying conditions that create such conflict are present and evident in places like Hlaing Thayar where there is a growing number of informal settlements. The residents of these settlements do not tend to organise and there is no evidence of collective mobilisation. There is still much available room for improving their conditions, in order to avoid the negative spillover effects that can threaten the city’s current stability and, comparably, very low level of crime.

While this report is not intended to provide policy recommendations, it is worth highlighting a number of possible solutions to the current challenges of urbanization, migration and security in Yangon.

Overall, there is a need to change the dominant framing of newcomer migrants as a security threat and as a burden on urban development, which is now prevalent among Yangon authorities and other residents of the city. Reframing will also influence the actions taken towards this large group of people. Instead, migrants can be framed as assets in boosting urban economic growth, i.e. by viewing migrants as consumers, laborers, rent-payers, and innovators. As argued by Haysom (2013: 25), changing the negative attitude towards migrants requires a new narrative that does not frame migrants as burdens on public resources or as vulnerable victims, but that emphasizes the resilience that migrants often display and that highlights the contribution that migrants can make to urban societies. International organizations, like UN-Habitat and others working on migration and urbanization, can play an important role here in lobbying government departments to reframe their view of migrants. While this reframing is a critical task, it is also a very difficult, and politically sensitive one, that will likely meet opposition given the long history of hostility towards informal settlers in Yangon. In addition, there are strong investment interests at play in the urban landscape, and there is no immediate profit to be made from recognizing poor newcomer migrants, and the informal areas they settle in – areas which can be used for more profitable construction projects. Investing in affordable housing for migrants, for instance, can however be a favorable longer-term investment, but this remains tricky in Yangon at the moment.

It is clear from this research that there is a strong demand for tenure security among migrants, and that lack of such security is a root cause of many of the challenges that exist in places like Hlaing Thayar. Given the limited public finances available, and the current priorities of investors, it is unrealistic to rely on (or wait for) government-provided affordable or free housing. A more viable solution at present would be to provide informal settlers with land titles and access to low interest loans for building their own houses. Support to access to water, electricity and sanitation in these areas is also vital, and even though some informal settlers can currently afford these services, their lack of legal documentation, like land titles and household certifications, prevents them from getting access. These matters point towards the need to give legal status to informal settlers, for instance by formalizing existing informal settlements and engaging with slum upgrading projects. The current lack of access to loans with low interest rates is strongly influenced by informal settlers’ lack of legal documentation. Consequently they end up in serious debt traps, because they are forced to take informal loans at exorbitant interest rates. In the shorter term NGOs and micro credit schemes could have more lenient requirements in terms of documentation, as this would allow informal settlers to be included in such schemes. Assistance to get formal employment by newcomers and informal settlers is also extremely important, and again here the lack of accessible and affordable legal documents is key, along with the need for skills training.

It is vital that the Yangon city and regional governments support and pave the way for the abovementioned initiatives, which, as this report has argued, will require a reframing of how migrants and informal settlers are currently perceived. Besides pushing the government towards recognizing the positive potentials of migrant inflows, including the possible formalization of informal settlements, international aid agencies can also provide assistance in the fields of housing, infrastructure, labor and loans. In this area it is also important that organizations that work with migrant issues in Myanmar begin to focus on the challenges of urban migration, in addition to the important work that is being done with respect to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees in the conflict-affected border areas of the country.

## NOTES

- 1 Since before British colonial rule and until 2006, Yangon (previously Rangoon) was the capital city of Myanmar (previously Burma), but this changed when the military regime decided to establish Naypyidaw (approximately 400 kilometers north of Yangon) as a new capital. Some few ministries and all foreign embassies nonetheless remain in Yangon.
- 2 An estimated 20 percent of Myanmar's GDP is generated in Yangon region (UNDP 2015: 7).
- 3 Myanmar is still mainly rural, with 30 percent of the population living in urban areas (this is lower than other South East Asian countries, but close to Vietnam at 33 percent) (Department of Population 2016).
- 4 In this report 'newcomer' migrant approximately refers to people who have settled in Yangon within the past five years.
- 5 The other townships in Yangon vary in size between 25,000 and 350,000, which means that Hlaing Thayar is substantially more populous than other townships (UNDP 2015: 11).
- 6 This previous research was conducted during 2015 and 2016 in Hlaing Thayar as part of the EverJust (Everyday Justice and Security in the Myanmar Transition) project, which is a partnership between the Danish Institute for International Studies, Yangon University, Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF) and Aarhus University. It explores how people address disputes and crimes in the everyday, what institutions they go to and how different groups of people access or fail to access justice. Part of this research also covered informal settlers and newcomer migrants, and insights from this, as well as general knowledge obtained about Hlaing Thayar inform this report.
- 7 Two researchers from Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF), Lue Htar and Nang Sapphires Win, participated in data collection, and this report is deeply indebted to their assistance, including translation and discussion of research results.
- 8 <http://populationof2017.com/population-of-yangon-2017.html>. In 1983 the population of Yangon was approximately 2.5 million and in 1960 it was approximately 1.2 million. The entire Yangon region has an estimated population of 7.4 million (UNDP 2015: 7).
- 9 This figure covers those who moved to Yangon between 2009 and 2014 (Department of Population 2016). The figure is therefore likely higher at the time of writing (2017).
- 10 In Yangon as a whole, the Rakhine and Karen are the most populous of the recognized ethnic minorities who reside in Yangon (UNDP 2015: 14).
- 11 Personal communication from international consultant, January 2017.
- 12 In Hlaing Thayar we did not find any evidence of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled to Yangon due to the armed conflicts between the military and ethnic armed groups in the border areas of Myanmar. This is likely due to the fact that IDPs tend to remain within their ethnic states (or end up as refugees in neighboring countries like China and Thailand), as Yangon has historically been associated with the military government.
- 13 In Hlaing Thayar township there are 20 wards.
- 14 During late colonial rule and in the first years after Independence the municipal government of Yangon also had elected representatives, but this was terminated in the 1960s with the transition to military rule (on this history see UNDP 2015: 16–17).
- 15 Besides an executive branch, the regional government also has 92 elected members (the rest of the 123 members are military appointees). Elections were introduced in 2011 in accordance with the 2008 constitution (UNDP 2015: 24).
- 16 There are 45 townships in Yangon region, 33 of which fall under the jurisdiction of the YCDC (UNDP 2015: 1).
- 17 Historically the GAD, which together with the police falls under the ministry of home affairs, has been controlled by the military, and is still headed by a military-appointed minister. This is safeguarded by the 2008 Constitution, which also keeps the military with twenty-five percent of the places in parliament, meaning that the democratization process towards elected civilian government is partial. In addition, the ministry of home affairs is reputed to be among the most resistant to decentralization of governance and democratic change in Myanmar (Chit Saw & Arnold 2014).
- 18 According to personal communication with an international expert in Yangon, the different international agencies are also competing internally over the different urban plans, which favor their own countries' ongoing investment plans in Yangon.
- 19 This insight is based on personal communications with international experts working on urbanization in Yangon.
- 20 In 2015 under the previous chief minister, a smaller part of the same area was bulldozed and thousands of dwellers fled to the next village (Myint 2017).
- 21 This very high interest rate in the informal market stands in comparison to NGO micro-credit loans where the interest rate is down to 2.5 percent. However, obtaining such loans requires an ID and household registers, which most of the informal settlers do not have. In addition, NGOs are not present everywhere. Moneylending is illegal, unless the lender is registered, and if not the person can get a fine or three months imprisonment (Denney et al. 2016: 1–2).
- 22 This is the result of an amendment of the Ward and Village Tract Administration law of 2012, which previously required that even overnighting guests had to register with the ward office. It was removed by the NLD government in 2016, because it had previously been used to target political activists by the military government (Kyed et al. 2016). Police and the GAD have been against the amendment, claiming that it now prevents them from tracking down criminals in hiding.
- 23 This saying comes close to the English notion of 'going with the flow', but in Burmese it also denotes that by going with the flow you also do not stick your head out, contradict or interfere with the other people (personal communication with EMReF researcher).
- 24 The EverJust project also did fieldwork in Karen wards of Insein township, on the other side of the Hlaing River. Here there was much more social cohesion than in Hlaing Thayar.
- 25 We asked questions about discrimination, because in Myanmar on a nationwide scale, there is a long history of discrimination against minority groups as well as armed conflicts between government troops and armed groups defending the minorities in the border areas (Kyed & Gravers 2015).
- 26 It was very difficult for the research team to interview the Muslim households. The members of the Muslim households feared to speak openly and on a second visit to one household, the researchers were told by the household members that they were afraid to speak with the researchers, because the neighbors would suspect them of getting help from outside people and this could create tensions. They did not want to draw any attention.
- 27 Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview the township administrator to verify this information, but it was confirmed by several household leaders.
- 28 Given the very limited contact we had to Muslim interviewees due to the security situation and lack of access, we did not look into the help provided by Muslim organizations, although we did hear from one local elder that a Muslim household got help to win a court case from a Muslim organization.



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## **Photos**

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All photos are from the Yangon Region

Cover: Squatter houses in Hlaing Thayar

Page 4-5: Bamboo house constructed in an informal settlement where public land was sold illegally to migrants.

Page: 10-11 House in informal settlement in Hlaing Thayar

Page 16-17: YCDC land divided into plots and sold informally by the previous farmland owner in collaboration with a political party. Some plots now have houses and others are fenced in by the new (informal) owners.

Page 26-27: Rental houses in an informal settlement on illegally sold farmland. There is no garbage collection.

Page 38-39: The Elder and his wife who help the neighbors in the informal settlement to resolve disputes.

Page 48-49: Informal garbage collection.

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