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Documenting Myanmar's Social Transformation

Insights from Six Rounds of Research on Livelihoods and Social Change in Rural Communities

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Abstract

This paper presents the initial findings from six rounds of research conducted between 2012 and 2016 on livelihoods and social change in rural Myanmar, undertaken as part of the Qualitative Social and Economic Monitoring initiative. These data provide unique insights into the ways in which broad processes of democratization and globalization—put into effect following Myanmar's historic reforms beginning in 2011—are experienced at the village level. The analysis focuses on three key aspects of the "social contract": local governance mechanisms, shifting expectations of the state, and changes in the types of networks connecting villagers to regional and global markets. Remarkable social progress has been made in Myanmar since 2012, yet there are no grounds for complacency. Managing ongoing transformations in these three domains, in ways perceived to be locally legitimate and effective, will be crucial if the initial gains are to be consolidated and expanded.

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Documenting Myanmar's Social Transformation: Insights from Six Rounds of Research on Livelihoods and Social Change in Rural Communities

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1. Introduction

Since 2011, Myanmar has undergone significant reforms. A commonly accepted view is that the impetus behind these reforms, unlike many of the political shifts experienced elsewhere in the world in the 21st century, came not "from below," but from national elites, prompted in particular by military decisions to further open the country to the world and put it on a slow path to democracy (Pederson 2012). As a result, much of the academic and policy literature on Myanmar's transition focuses on national-level dynamics, seeking insights on what has changed, why, and how, and doing so by examining shifts among political elites, the business community, and the upper echelons of the *Tatmadaw* (see, for example, Pederson 2012, ICG 2012, Jones 2014). Yet although analyzing the motives and strategies of elites is vital for understanding the national impetus behind Myanmar's reforms, it leaves little space for assessing how the transition has played out among the broader populace, particularly in the rural villages where 70 percent of Myanmar's people live. It also overlooks how the prevailing social institutions at the local level have responded to the various forms and sources of contention (actual and/or potential) inherently accompanying such major change, and the associated implications for policy and practice in Myanmar. The nature and extent of the 'social contract' is being re-written in Myanmar – i.e., the terms on which citizens interact with one another, and the basis on which contending views of citizens' core rights and responsibilities are negotiated with and legitimately upheld by the state. Responding to these daunting challenges will require strategies informed by the best available evidence.

This paper seeks to contribute substantively to policy deliberations on Myanmar's social transformation by analyzing how governance reforms and changes in the life experiences of people in rural communities are altering the social contract at the village level. From these observations regarding the state-society relationship, we draw some preliminary conclusions regarding changes in social relations in Myanmar as the reform process evolves. We argue that three areas of change have affected how citizens in rural areas interact with the state: village governance, citizens' expectations of the state, and connectivity.

In this paper, we address each of these in turn. First, we examine how changes in village governance institutions and structures have reconfigured centers of power and influence at the local level. Next, we examine how an increase in service delivery and the rollout of national policy reforms have led to changes in what villagers expect of the state. Finally, we trace how villagers' networks beyond their immediate communities are expanding, allowing them to forge new and different connections with others within their townships, across Myanmar, and internationally. We argue that, at the village level, the transition thus far has been effective and (relatively) peaceful because it has provided space for the development of social accountability mechanisms of sufficient strength to manage what villagers expect of the state and how the state, in turn, responds.

Drawing these three interrelated areas together, we explore the implications for state-society relations at the village level in a context where, we argue, more coherent social accountability mechanisms and procedures are slowly being forged. As important and commendable as this

progress is, however, we note that at present this has not been a result of systematic policy planning to encourage bottom-up accountability, but rather because of a perceived greater space for engagement; heightened access to communications tools (i.e., mobile phones), which facilitate more active participation; and individual enterprise (i.e., the abilities of local administrators, staff and village elites). Integrating and institutionalizing emerging state-led policy mechanisms with local-level initiatives will be crucial to ensuring that initial achievements are consolidated and expanded, and that potential (or actual) tensions between them are coherently and amicably resolved.

Findings are grounded in four years of data from the Qualitative Social and Economic Monitoring (QSEM) research program, a large-scale longitudinal panel study on village life in Myanmar, which has tracked 54 villages across the country over six research rounds since 2012.[1] The study is based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions held with approximately 1,000 people in each round. Its scale, longevity, and scope make it a unique lens through which to understand how Myanmar's transition is playing out in everyday village life.[2]

The following sections explore these arguments in greater detail. Section 2 briefly reviews the existing literature on Myanmar's social transformation as it pertains to prevailing governance institutions, economic networks, and state-society relations. Section 3 explores how changes in the structure and functions of village governance institutions have led state-society relations to evolve. Section 4 examines changes in citizens' expectations of the state. Section 5 addresses the nature and extent of the steadily expanding economic and social networks of Myanmar's rural citizens. Section 6 considers the interplay between these three vectors of change. Section 7 concludes with preliminary implications for policy and practice, and identifies key areas in need of further examination.

2. Previous and Ongoing Research on Myanmar's Social Transformation

Any study seeking to examine Myanmar's ongoing transition to democracy needs to locate its findings in the scholarly research and policy analysis that has been undertaken since these momentous processes were put in motion in 2011. We thus begin with a brief review of the literature on Myanmar's governance institutions, economic networks, and citizens' expectations of the state.

The literature explicitly examining Myanmar's state-society relations at the village level is limited. Most studies undertaken during military rule focused on particular aspects of engagement with the state (e.g., Thawnghmung 2003) in a context where access to rural communities was limited. Starting from the 2008 Constitution, the Government of Myanmar has been implementing policies to decentralize what has historically been a heavily centralized structure (UNDP 2014). A growing body of research analyzes this decentralization process, including The Asia Foundation's policy research on state/region and township governance (Inada 2014, Nixon 2014) and UNDP's local governance mapping project (UNDP 2015). Most of this work focuses primarily on institutions at the township level and above. Research looking at institutions below the township level is more limited, and includes work by Susanne Kempel on village governance (Kempel 2012, 2014, 2016). The QSEM builds on this by examining how rural communities have engaged with these institutions as they have evolved, and by examining how the transition has affected village leadership and decision-making.[3]

The literature on connectivity is more limited. A number of reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) examine how migration is affecting rural communities (IOM 2013, IOM 2014), while the recent World Bank study 'A Country on the Move' (World Bank 2015) examines migration patterns in detail. There has been limited academic work to date on the expansion of ICT in Myanmar and its social effects, though a number of journalistic accounts provide some useful context (Mod 2016). We attempt to bring together several strands of applied research (including the effects of migration, improved physical infrastructure, and mobile technology) to show the effects of enhanced and deepened connectivity on community interactions with the state.

A number of studies have examined how communities in Myanmar view and rely on (or actively avoid) state institutions. These include Mike Griffiths' work on community resilience (Griffiths 2016), Gerard McCarthy's research with IGC on non-state social protection (McCarthy 2016), and Helene Kyed's ongoing study into everyday access to justice (Kyed, forthcoming). Similarly, previous Myanmar Update papers have also proven useful in elucidating how land (Wells 2014), access to rural credit (Turnell 2010), and other key issues are shaping state-society interactions. Much of this work demonstrates the enduring importance of non-state institutions even as formal government services have expanded in recent years. This paper builds on this work, giving particular attention to how this expansion of state-provided services is being received and perceived by people in rural communities, where historically the state has been regarded with deep suspicion or indifference.

Building on these foundations, we now consider how data from six rounds of QSEM research enable us to draw initial conclusions about the nature and extent of social change in rural Myanmar since 2012.

3. Village Governance

The role of village government institutions in Myanmar

Village governance institutions in Myanmar play two key functions: they maintain social order within and between villages, and act as interlocutors between community members and external actors. These core functions have changed little since Myanmar's reforms began (Kempel 2013). The QSEM research demonstrates, however, that *how* those functions are carried out and *what factors influence* village institutional actors, have changed significantly since 2012. For example, national reforms have led village tract administrators to grow in stature and influence at the expense of village administrators.[4] Although the current policy framework for local institutions has flaws, we argue that, overall, national reforms have led village institutions to be more responsive to people's needs.

Early stage research in 2012 found that in the vast majority of villages, villagers perceived village administrators to be the most important actor for managing village affairs, mediating disputes, and representing the village beyond its borders. Village administrators were elected in approximately a quarter of villages. In such villages, for example most QSEM villages in Chin State, villagers reported greater social trust compared to villages where village administrators

were selected by township authorities (often on the recommendation of village elders rather than by village consensus), or were long-term incumbents (QSEM 2012). The research also found a link between trust and collective action. Research across 2012 and 2013 also found that levels of trust between villagers and local leaders were higher in communities where villagers perceived themselves as more distant from the central government (QSEM June 2013), such as in parts of Shan State. In remote areas, the need of villagers need to act collectively to meet village needs helped to build social bonds (QSEM June 2013).

Other actors played important roles in distinct aspects of village life. Village elders, for example, either helped to legitimize village administrator decisions within the village or to balance power. Networks of village elders tended to function as closed groups: their members generally consulted privately, reaching agreements that were then announced publicly to the village. Religious leaders were influential in social and religious affairs and advised village administrators on specific issues. Women, poorer households, and other marginalized groups had limited opportunities to influence village meetings. Across the QSEM panel, no women were identified as holding local leadership positions (i.e., village tract administrator, village administrator or ten household head) in early rounds of research.[5] Despite this, the early research found few complaints about these developments: research participants perceived little divergence between their interests and those of village leaders (QSEM 2012).

A new law results in rapid and consequential changes

The *Ward and Village Tract Administration Law,* passed in 2012, fundamentally changed the village governance institutions that had evolved under military rule. These changes are laid out most clearly in Susanne Kempel and Aung Thun's memo (Kempel 2016), which emphasizes three areas. The first was the decision to empower communities to indirectly elect village tract administrators (VTA) via ten household heads and make the VTA an officially recognized part of the state at the village tract-level. VTAs had access to a clerk, were provided with a stipend[6] and were responsible for representing the village tract at the township level. The second was the formalization of the role of village elders to manage local elections. The last change is what was left out: village administrators were not included in the 2012 law (Kempel 2016). Some of the new law's effects on village institutions became rapidly visible following the first VTA elections in late 2012/early 2013; others took root more slowly.[7]

Following these changes, village tract administrators rapidly became the most important center of local power at the expense of village administrators. Research in 2013 in Ayeyarwady, for example, showed clear evidence of increased village tract authority as VTAs took over a range of administrative functions ranging from registering land to approving applications for the SIM card lottery. The process of approving land registrations was of particular importance, as it gave the VTA the right of approval over even the most influential villagers. Similarly, in Magway, VTAs changed committee memberships to better suit their vision and instituted reforms—some of which simply consolidated power into the VTA's hands. There were some regional variations, however. In remote areas of Rakhine, there was little immediate indication that the VTA was becoming more important relative to other institutions, whereas in Shan State, village tract dynamics varied significantly (QSEM, December 2013).

By 2014, power was more generally being consolidated in the position of the VTA at the expense of the village administrator. This consolidation was driven by government policy changes, improved government pay, and, as new external assistance (from both government and the donor community) began to arrive in more villages, greater responsibility. "I only want to be a village tract administrator. As village administrator, I wouldn't have the right to do village development. As all projects go through the village tract administrator, they steer the projects towards their own village" was how one village leader in Chin State explained the change in influence. Increasingly, though most villagers still identified a village leader as their first point of contact, they perceived that final decision-making power increasingly rested with the VTA (QSEM 2014).

However, the story of the VTA's role since 2013 is not purely one of ascendance. In the later stages of the research, VTAs began to report that the responsibilities of being a VTA outweighed the benefits. Although VTAs are the only elected officials within the tract, township, or district, their work remains subject to oversight by township officials of the General Administrative Department (GAD), so in practice their administrative authority is constrained. In more recent rounds of research, for example, some VTAs reported being told by township officials to relinquish their involvement in key committees that oversee the use of development resources and to focus instead on more minor administrative functions (QSEM, forthcoming). Opportunities for personal gain and local hegemony are no longer the clear benefits they once were, which makes the role less attractive.

Since the first VTA elections, village administrators reported having less authority to assist villagers, despite receiving a similar number of demands for assistance.[8] Removal of recognition of their role by government meant that they were constrained in how they could represent their communities, despite ongoing demand from villagers, leading to feelings of powerlessness. This sense of powerlessness, when combined with the contrasting situation of the VTA (with a stipend, specified government role, staff), is driving a reduced interest in the role of the village administrator (QSEM 2014). One village leader from Mandalay Region summarized their position as: "OK. The village tract administrator gets a salary. But why must I do my work? I do not get anything. I am no longer interested" (QSEM 2014).

As with all experiences of Myanmar's reform period, there are variations—especially between communities close to the political center and those on the periphery. In more central areas, namely across most of Ayeyarwady, Magway, and Mandalay regions, the *Ward and Village Tract Administration Law* appears to be leading (if inadvertently) towards abolition in practice of the village administrator position. Research in 2016 found that though villagers in these regions identified the village administrator as a community leader, for administrative matters they relied solely on the VTA. Villagers in these areas are also likely to have more regular interactions with government structures and understand that clerks and VTA at the tract level have greater authority to deal definitively with their issues. So, where access is less of an issue they tended to go directly to these positions, bypassing and further undermining the role of village leaders. In contrast, although remote villages in most states reported continued reliance on the village administrator position, it was becoming increasingly difficult for villagers to identify a leader willing to assume this role.

Local elections in 2013 and 2016: How village politics evolved

The first VTA elections were held in 2013. The QSEM research period that followed showed clearly that the new law had reshaped local competition for power. There was VTA turnover in 44r percent of villages visited, while interviews with VTAs and VTA candidates across the QSEM panel indicated that the new elections process had encouraged increased political competition. In fact, a handful of tract elections caused local social tension as new leaders and old sought to gain or retain political power. Respondents perceived the competition to be spurred in part by the potential for private gain (QSEM, December 2013).

This level of electoral competition was, however, temporary. The sixth round of QSEM research following local elections in late 2015/early 2016 found a decline in competition for VTA positions. Less interest among incumbents in extending their terms resulted in a high rate of turnover (there was 75 percent turnover across the QSEM panel compared to 44 percent in the 2013 election). Few reports of local campaigning emerged, and unlike in 2013, no villages reported social tension emerging from the election result.

A number of factors account for this reduction in interest. Others have identified limitations in the administration of the VTA election process as constraining interest in the role (Kyed, 2016). The QSEM research indicates that the lack of interest, instead, reflects broader substantive changes in the tasks associated with being a VTA. First, as has been discussed above, the actual authority enjoyed by VTAs has not lived up to early expectations, and the autonomy of VTAs remains constrained by administrative authority of townships officials. Second, recent reforms have reduced the scope for VTAs to engage in cottage (or localized) authoritarianism. The ability of VTAs to force contributions from villagers has been banned (in practice it remains, but in a greatly reduced fashion), limiting the potential for personal enrichment. While social pressure to contribute to public goods projects (frequently organized by the VTA and sometimes benefitting them directly) and to local religious institutions remains strong, VTAs reported that they were less able to 'make' villagers contribute as in previous years. New sources of development assistance have reduced the controlling role of the VTA or sidelined them to advisory roles. Finally, during the most recent election, villagers and VTAs alike expressed uncertainty about the validity of the election process, assuming that the NLD would at least call new elections, or possibly reform local governance via new legislation. As one respondent in Magway Region commented "Why hasn't the administrator transferred their tasks yet to someone from the newly elected party?" (QSEM, forthcoming).

All told, some movement toward accountability

The 2015 research round showed that local governance institutions were being pushed to be more responsive to their communities. VTAs across the panel reported that they had been told in regular township meetings to better manage interactions with villagers. In particular, they were informed that the collection of fees from villagers to cover operational costs was no longer allowed.[9] Numerous examples have also been documented of VTAs being scolded by township officials in response to complaints made by community members. This accountability no doubt reflects changes in top-down policy in line with the previous government's emphasis on people-centered development (Nixon 2014). The research, however, suggests that bottom-up

accountability has been as much, if not more, of a driving factor. Perceived changes in the overall environment, reflected in the likes of VTA elections, albeit indirect, and improved information sources documenting successful advocacy pursuits across the country have increased the downward accountability, resulting in an increasing willingness of villagers to lodge complaints (QSEM 2016).

Non-electoral accountability to communities has also evolved in recent years, with village authorities reporting since 2015 that villagers are vocal with their demands and more assertive in their dealings with village administrators and VTAs alike. One village administrator in Chin State captured the trend, claiming that "before, village leaders wielded power. Now the villagers wield power" (QSEM 2014). In addition, as villagers' connections beyond the village expand, they have shown an increased willingness to question the work of local officials. While this emerging trend was reported first in 2015, in the 2016 research period there were clear examples of villagers in Chin and Kachin States interacting directly with the township authorities. As ever, there was some divide between the center and periphery; roadblocks to the expansion of VTA authority, such as access challenges or villages circumventing the village tract, were more common in the more remote states than in the central regions (QSEM, forthcoming).

4. Expectations of the State

Another central issue has been changes in how people interact with the 'everyday state'[10]and perceive its role in their lives. The relationship has been shaped by an extended prior period of engagement in which the state was coercive but provided few services in return. The coercive aspects included government regulations determining how villagers used their land (Takashi 2008), the types of crops they could grow (Hudson-Rodd 2003) and curtailing local political activity or the voicing of grievances through restrictive laws on freedom of association and expression (Wells 2014). Villages, in return, received little from the state. Government expenditure on social sectors, for example, was one of the lowest in the world as a proportion of overall budget expenditure (UNDP 2014, World Bank 2015c). People in rural areas expected little from the government and sought to minimize their interactions with state actors, with villages becoming largely self-reliant (Tripartite Core Group 2008).

As part of the transition, policy at the national level emphasized the importance of producing results locally. The previous government's "people-centered development" approach aimed to deliver a "rapid improvement of public services and development with quick wins" (Anon 2014, Nixon 2014). In response, expenditure on health has tripled as a share of the budget, moving from 1.7 percent of the budget in 2009/10 to 6.4 percent in 2013/14, while education grew from 7.2 percent to 12.5 percent over the same period (World Bank 2015c). This increase in government expenditure has been reflected in the steady increase in government service provision in the QSEM villages. The rollout of these services, combined with the implementation locally of other national policy reforms – in particular reforms relating to land ownership, and strengthened information flows – are influencing community expectations of the role of government. In turn, these changing expectations are producing, over time, observable changes in how communities interact with government through greater upwards accountability.

Increases in government services delivered locally

QSEM research identified a three-fold increase in government-funded services in villages since 2011.[11] In the first three rounds of QSEM research, each village had, on average, slightly more than one type of government-funded service (such as a primary school). This grew over time. The QSEM research documented an increase in government assistance across the panel in particular between the third and fourth rounds of research, in late-2013 to mid-2014 when each village had on average over three types of service. Mirroring the views across many villages, one respondent from Shan State noted "the township administrator asked us to apply for funding. Our village tract received 5 million *kyat*. We never received anything before this" (QSEM 2014). The rate of increase has since steadied, with villages now receiving an average of close to four different types of services per village in the panel. The initial expansion was driven primarily by government funding for local infrastructure, including through a parliament constituency fund, education activities and access to credit.

The expansion in government services has been accompanied by changes in approaches to service delivery. At the outset, where government activities did make their way to the village level they were invariably centrally planned and provided limited scope for local communities to influence what types of services were delivered or how they were delivered. The vast majority of government services in early rounds centered on education or access to credit, invariably Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB) loans. MADB loans were uniform, with the only variation being different loan amounts for paddy growing areas and areas where other crops were grown. Education services were also uniform across areas, comprising mainly the provision of government teachers. Some villages also received basic school infrastructure projects, with villagers having limited ability to influence the type of support but invariably having to contribute additional financial or in-kind assistance. In one QSEM round, villages across several regions and states reported receiving funding for new school toilets (QSEM 2015).

Evidence from more recent rounds continues to highlight that villagers have limited voice in identifying what types of services they can receive. Research has yet to identify examples where villages undertake locally driven village-wide planning approaches to identify and articulate needs from the bottom up. The types of services delivered are invariably centrally designed and rolled out across the states and regions.

The government is, however, providing a greater degree of autonomy in how programs are implemented. Two examples show evidence of this from the most recent round of research. First, a government-funded electrification program observed in multiple villages in Kachin State and Mandalay Region enabled differing approaches to implementation dependent on the state or region. Village meetings were also held to discuss targeting in the village and household level contributions, although in most instances village leaders made the final decisions in consultation with the electricity service provider. Similarly, research has documented the expansion of the government's *Mya Sein Yaung* (or Evergreen Village Project). Starting in 2014, in the most recent round of research, it was present in almost 20 percent of villages. The project provides participating villages with 30 million *kyat* per village to be distributed to villagers as loans for livelihood activities. Although implemented through the Department of Rural Development,

villagers themselves determine criteria for accessing loans, the size of the loans and implementation procedures.

Both the examples above highlight that although centrally-planned, the adjustments that were made to some programs provided more space for local voices in decision-making around implementation. The examples reflect key aspects of much of the ongoing discussion on approaches to decentralization in Myanmar. Although national policy directives have urged greater emphasis on the role of sub-national levels of governance (UNDP 2014), approaches to achieving this have been top-down and ad hoc, with different departments emphasizing different aspects of perceived decentralization. The electrification program reflects a form of fiscal and administrative decentralization to the state/region level, whereas the Evergreen Village Project could be viewed more as administrative decentralization to below the township level. Both examples, however, are consistent with a somewhat minimalist 'deconcentration' definition of decentralization, with lower levels of government being provided with increased scope for decision-making within well-defined parameters (Schneider 2003).

Perceptions of implementation of national reform policies at the local level

In addition to expectations about increasing government services, local perceptions of the role of government are changing based on experience of how national reform policies have been implemented locally. As villagers have seen a number of policies rolled out locally, this has reinforced perceptions that the transition is not just a national phenomenon relevant to political elites, but is also playing out locally with direct impacts on the lives of villagers. The research has documented numerous examples of how this is playing out across rounds. Changes in the village administration policy framework resulting in more democratic elections of village tract administrators, as discussed in the previous section, is one example. We highlight two other prominent areas here.

The most tangible widespread evidence of the transition being felt locally arose from government policy to enable individual ownership of land.[12] Following the passage of the *Farmland Law* and the *Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Law* in 2012, research in 2013 identified strong awareness at the village level of the rollout of land registration and expectations from villagers that local officials would efficiently implement the new policies. In subsequent rounds, research indicated this had largely occurred, and by mid-2014, 80 percent of villages in the QSEM panel reported land registration as completed for all individually owned land in their village recognized under the Farmland Law.

In some areas, however, registration was problematic, and villagers have tested the responsiveness of government officials in attempting to overcome these issues. The most prevalent exception related to limitations in the regulatory framework restricting registration for land that was not individually owned, such as communal or shifting cultivation land, or was farmed by individuals but recorded in government records as vacant fallow land. Across a number of villages covered by the research, primarily in upland areas, communities have observed how others have sought to overcome this and begun to transfer communal land management to enable individual households to register land. In upland areas, the primary incentive for doing this was to reduce the risk of outside interests registering otherwise

unregistered land (QSEM, forthcoming).[13] In over a third of villages there were also reports of administrative barriers to registration at the time of registration. These included requests for informal payments to facilitate the process or inaccurate registration as officials drew on outdated land records. The research identified numerous instances where villagers, emboldened by their understanding of the new operating environment, pushed back against these administrative barriers. For example, a farmer in Shan State who was asked to pay 120,000 *kyat* to change the name on the land certificate from the previous owner's name only agreed to pay if the official issued a formal receipt from the department acknowledging that this was an official cost (QSEM 2016).

Villagers also identified perceived changes in the behavior of local officials in implementing their duties and linked these to the national reforms. Research in 2014 identified specific areas where officials were instructed to be more cautious in their engagement with communities. As discussed above, respondents across numerous villages claimed village tract administrators received instructions in their regular township meetings that the collection of fees from villagers to cover operational costs was no longer permitted now that the government was providing monthly allocations for administration of the village tracts. Similarly, in the same round of research, villagers in Rakhine State and Ayeyarwady Region claimed that fisheries officials were less likely to visit villages to collect licensing fees, as the officials had been instructed to avoid actions that could generate complaints (QSEM 2015).

5. Connectivity: From Local to Global

Since the reforms of 2012, QSEM has documented that the social and economic networks of people living in villages have expanded significantly. Telecommunications access has increased massively; migration networks have improved; road infrastructure has expanded; and access to markets has increased. Together, these have the potential to result in intense social transformation as identities, family structures, occupational stability, encounters with 'foreign' groups, prevailing rules, norms and procedures, social protection mechanisms, aspirations for the future, and access to more sophisticated financial instruments (potentially enabling greater opportunities for saving, lending and consumption-smoothing) are all significantly altered.

Whereas the research shows that villages have become much more connected to national and global networks following the transition, networks already existed before the reforms. Authors such as Wells (2014) and Paung Ku (2010) have documented the building of 'bottom-up' civil society networks that existed prior to the transition in parts of the country. Prior to 2012, these networks most commonly were mobilized as responses to specific issues such as the natural disasters of cyclones Nargis and Giri, and conflicts or concerns relating to the environment, natural resource projects or the like (Paung Ku 2010). Migration networks had also been established throughout the country. Although data on levels, types and destinations of migration have been lacking until recently, sufficient information exists to ascertain that migration was a common livelihood strategy across Myanmar, with significant variations in destination and levels dependent on states or regions (Turnell 2008, IOM 2014, World Bank 2015). Recent analysis suggests, for example, that approximately 5 percent of households in Ayeyarwady Region and slightly more in Magway Region had a family member migrating either domestically or abroad in 2010 (World Bank 2015).

One of the most noticeable changes in connectivity relates to the rollout of telecommunications networks across the country. The speed and scale of this rollout has been documented elsewhere (see Mod 2016). Government of Myanmar figures show that in 2009/10 only 4 percent of households owned mobile phones; by April 2014 this figure had risen to 33 percent of households and by April 2015, fully 55 percent of households owned mobile phones (Government of Myanmar 2015). With a government target of connecting 90 percent of the population by 2019, this number will only continue to rise (ADB 2016).

Expanded mobile coverage is also having a significant impact. During fieldwork conducted in mid-2013, villagers reported that "previously, there might not even be one land line in a village; one would have to go to a village tract village to find a phone. Now, however, with the cost of mobile phones decreasing, there might be up to ten phones in a village" (QSEM June 2013). The QSEM research has documented the almost immediate impact mobile phone connectivity has had for migration networks, allowing potential migrants to confirm opportunities beforehand, improving safety and enabling ongoing communication through the migration experience (World Bank 2015a). It was assumed that coverage would offer immediate potential for farmers and other livelihood groups through expanded market information. Farmers initially placed greater confidence in information gained through their traditional networks. But patterns of mobile use to inform market choices are emerging (QSEM, forthcoming). Although still nascent, these changes are likely to have important implications on social relations and engagement with the state over time. Others have argued that adoption is likely to be significantly influenced by types of livelihoods and reliance on networks within those livelihoods (Aricat and Ling 2015).

More immediately, there are at least two areas where improved mobile phone connectivity is already having a direct effect on engagement with the state and social relations. First, more recent rounds of research have highlighted how technology and, in particular, social media networks are starting to be used to strengthen or supplement existing communal mechanisms, in particular to respond to community-wide shocks. Field research conducted in July 2015 and early 2016 identified how community organizations were drawing on social media to assist efforts in response to floods and landslides which affected large parts of Myanmar following Cyclone Komen in mid-2015. Villages covered by the research and affected by flooding in Magway Region and Chin State highlighted how they were using social media, in particular Facebook, to source donations from networks in Yangon and overseas and keep relatives and friends up to date with recovery efforts. Once immediate needs had been met, in at least one village, the social media group started to support the work of village authorities to raise funds and advocate for a potential move of the village to a new location (World Bank 2015b).

Second, mobile networks have strengthened access to alternative information flows with particular significance in villages facing major external challenges. Wells (2014) explores the increasing role of mobile phone access in strengthening citizen voice in land disputes in Ayeyarwady Region. This work focuses on the importance of expanding mobile phone coverage to strengthen advocacy by linking village advocates to external networks of journalists, members of parliament and technical experts. Our research shows that, in addition, expanded connectivity has played a crucial role in providing villages with alternative sources of information. Villagers have drawn from improved connectivity to access information about local development issues

that previously was not readily available to them. Across a range of issues, this information has been used to mobilize communities to act. Examples have included village activists who have drawn on improved information networks to hold awareness raising meetings in their villages mobilizing around land confiscation issues close to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Rakhine State, or around land ownership in townships where land is controlled by Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises (MOGE) in Magway Region. In the same township in Magway Region, villagers received regular updates on advocacy efforts in a neighboring township hoping that resolution there would provide a pathway forward for resolution of their own issues. Similarly, in a number of villages, particularly in the uplands, villagers closely followed news through social media of land confiscation cases being resolved, which generated expectations that their own grievances could be acted on. At times, as is discussed in the following section, this access to information flows can further entrench differences in opinions among local groups and fuel contestation.

Improved connectivity through migration is also likely to have an influence on pre-existing social networks and power relations. The research has documented an almost doubling of migration rates across villages in each state or region between 2012 and 2015. At the higher end, average rates increased from estimated 10.2 percent of the population to 16 percent across villages in Mandalay Region. The lowest migration rates were in Shan State, with increases from 0.8 percent of the population to 2.6 percent.[14] Migration patterns varied: migrants from Chin and Rakhine favored international migration, while Ayeyarwady and Magway Regions saw increasing domestic migration to Yangon (QSEM 2016). More extensive research on domestic migration (World Bank 2015a) has yet to identify definitive implications on sending communities as a result of these increases in migration, at least in Ayeyarwady and Magway Regions. Our research suggests, however, that there is a significant likelihood that a combination of stronger social networks beyond the village generated through increased migration, combined with changes in socioeconomic wealth of households resulting from migration remittances and changes in demographics are likely, over time, to have an equally significant influence on local power dynamics and social relations.

A commonality across the cases explored above and throughout the research is that improved connectivity has implications for village governance and local power structures. The cases emphasize that improved connectivity can either strengthen the position of existing leaders or provide alternatives and, in the process, generate contestation. The work of the youth group in Chin State supported the village leadership while also providing an avenue for emerging leaders to play a role in village affairs. Similarly, the pursuit of claims for many of the land confiscation cases in the uplands has mobilized large parts of the village and improved information flows support the work of village leaders. Across several villages in Kachin State, however, this created friction with village tract administrators, who were perceived as being implicitly involved in the transfer of land. The strengthened activist networks in the examples from Magway Region or Rakhine State provided alternative options than those presented by traditional village leaders. To date, the competition generated from these alternative views has not generated social tension, but it does represent a change in village affairs. As one villager from Rakhine State noted after distributing information on the SEZ to villagers, “twelve months ago the village leader would never have let us hold meetings in this village. Now we can hold meetings, but he will attend and take notes of who came and what we discussed” (QSEM 2016).

6. Implications for State-Society and Social Relations

The preceding sections have examined key areas in which major social change has occurred for communities following the political transition at the national level in 2012. Our focus has been on the extent to which the transition is affecting social relations within and between communities, and between communities and the state. We have argued that the key vectors through which such change occurs is village governance, citizens' expectations of the state, and the nature and extent of connectivity. However, more importantly, it is how these three factors combine that is most significantly influencing social structures in rural Myanmar. In this section, we examine this interplay. One already apparent result of this has been observable shifts in social accountability mechanisms. Another outcome, less apparent but potentially more important, is that the increasing complexity of social relations at the local level will highlight local fault-lines that have previously been glossed over (or just non-salient politically until now).

Enhancing social accountability

A platform for community action is emerging whereas prior to the transition it was either off limits or restricted. This platform has emerged as a result of changing community expectations of the state and perceptions based on state action that increased voice is permissible, combined with networks that are providing communities with the tools and information to mobilize. If social accountability refers to the ways in which citizens (and civil society) participate directly or indirectly in holding government to account for their actions (Malena 2004), then we argue that the examples in this paper represent evidence of strengthening social accountability in rural Myanmar.

The most identifiable evidence of enhanced social accountability has arisen from mobilization around land confiscation cases. Approximately 20 percent of villages in the QSEM panel faced land confiscation issues, invariably involving large areas of land and multiple households. Most claims are longstanding.[15] The instances documented through the research show that communities take into consideration the prevailing political context in their actions (World Bank 2013). As political context has changed, even within the relatively short time frame covered by the research, so too have community demands.

Across the first three rounds of research in 2012 and 2013, although villages identified grievances in relation to confiscated land, the only active efforts to seek redress were in Rakhine State involving requests for monetary compensation from the pipeline construction and efforts to halt new attempts at confiscation. Since 2013, research has identified a significantly greater willingness to confront land cases. A military base transferred land back to villagers in a village in Shan State in 2014. A settlement had been reached to return land confiscated by military business interests in Kachin State and direct negotiations with business interests and government officials were ongoing involving land confiscation in Ayeyarwady, Magway and Rakhine.

This enhanced accountability has come about as a result of the convergence of the three drivers of village institutions, state expectations and connectivity. Advocacy efforts across all states and regions flowed from an awareness in villages that the national government had acknowledged

land confiscation was an issue and that pressure could be placed on local officials to pursue claims. Increased accountability of village leaders, including through the election process, was also a factor. Whereas in the past, village leaders had limited ability to mitigate confiscation efforts and, at times, facilitated confiscation, recent research has documented instances of upwards pressure on village leaders requiring them to liaise with township officials to seek resolution on behalf of villagers. As one newly elected leader in Rakhine noted, he realized that farmers want the question of compensation addressed and, since he owed his position to them, it was an opportunity to attempt to resolve the issue (QSEM 2014). Approaches to pursuing claims were also dependent on knowledge obtained from other cases. Improved information flows were crucial to this. Whereas in the past, limited communication channels meant that efforts could be blocked or delayed at any level, mobile networks now enable villagers to circumvent or identify alternative advocacy points if and where obstacles emerge.

Potential implications for social relations

Literature on village-level social relations in Myanmar is limited. As outlined in the introduction, much of the focus has been on power relationships at the national level. Where social relations have been examined, research has tended to emphasize the strong social bonds that exist within villages, as villages rely on communal action to address village needs (Tripartite Core Group 2008). The available literature implicitly assumes that local perspectives are shared by all and actions against the outside are based on local consensus. Studies focusing on bottom-up advocacy such as Wells (2014) and Paung Ku (2010) present a picture of unified community action in opposition to the state. The research presented in this paper, however, highlights that the reality is much more complex locally. Across each of the three drivers we have presented, the evidence shows that there are divergent views and, at times, contestation.

One of the villages covered by QSEM located in the oil extraction location of Magway Region provides an example of this contestation across the three drivers. The village falls within an area where Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises (MOGE) regulates land use and ownership. Village leaders, to date, have sought to avoid confrontation with MOGE over land ownership claims. Instead, they have prioritized lobbying for greater investment in services, such as school infrastructure. Not everyone in the village agrees. Up to early 2015, local activists with township civil society and the NLD political party links used their networks and information on land law to lobby for a more direct approach. Villagers, for example, uploaded photos to Facebook complaining about the quality of construction of the school building, resulting in the village tract administrator being scolded by township officials. In village tract elections in January 2016, the tract administrator decided not to run again, claiming that the effort involved was not worth it. Instead, his nephew ran and was successful. As in other QSEM villages, many in the village assume that the appointment of the new VTA would be temporary, depending the change of government.

The case shows a progressive transition of local authority from a village leader who derived authority under the previous government to interim arrangements as communities perceive local positions to transfer under the new government. Research found since 2015 an increasing state of flux in village governance institutions as authority was undermined and leaders and villagers perceived a transition would occur in line with the transition at the national level.

The case above also shows contestation in decision-making about how external assistance is used and how villages should engage with the government on important issues such as land. This, too, is not unique to this village. From an outsider's perspective, village advocacy efforts against external actors are often perceived as unifying with consensus among villagers on approaches to be taken. In pursuing grievances against external actors, villagers tended to put to one side the tensions that exist at the village level. However, contestation exists within villages, too. In a number of the land confiscation cases highlighted throughout the research, villagers perceived village tract administrators or village leaders to have played a role in facilitating transactions that resulted in confiscation. The research has documented similar local-level disputes that arise over the distribution of development resources either from donors and NGOs or the increasing government support.

Finally, the case above shows the increasing complexity introduced by improved communication networks as different parties can voice contending views and complain more prominently. The case highlights how strengthened information flows can be drawn on by different groups to further entrench opposing views and, on occasions, escalate disputes. Similar contests exist, for example, in villages around the Special Economic Zone in Rakhine State, where local activists with access to information from civil society networks at the township level often present rather differing views to those presented by village officials and obtained from government meetings.

We would argue that, overall, local contestation has yet to manifest itself. The transition process and the focus on the relationship of citizens and the state has meant that, for the interim, local tensions are being put to one side while parties focus on external grievances. However, given the prevalence of divergent views locally, once engagement with the state is normalized, these tensions have the potential to take more prominence. Going forward, forging strategies for anticipating and responding effectively (and equitably) to these tensions must be a priority issue.

7. Conclusions: Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

Myanmar's transition has been remarkable. A military government transferred power peacefully to a democratically elected one, Myanmar's relations with the international community have opened up, the economy has grown, and domestic and foreign investment has increased. The government is in the midst of complex peace negotiations with several ethnic armed organizations. To date, most analysis of this transition has centered on national-level dynamics.

This paper has explored the implications of the transition for social institutions at the local level. Wholesale social transformation is a perennial and vexing challenge for poor and rich countries alike. With 70 percent of Myanmar's population living in rural villages, understanding how the national reforms are being managed locally and how citizens are engaging in and shaping the reform process will be crucial. The paper has sought to provide a first step in this direction by drawing on a unique and extensive data set to analyze how governance reforms are changing the life experiences of people in rural communities and altering the social contract between citizens and the state.

To date, three changes have most influenced the relationship between the government and communities. First, national reforms in village governance have led the centers of power and influence at the local level to be re-aligned. Second, citizens' expectations of the role of government are changing. This is being driven by an increase in government service delivery, albeit from a low base, combined with changing perceptions of how government officials should act, which in turn is influenced by people's experiences of how transition is manifested in their communities. Third, people's networks beyond their villages have expanded, driven by improvements in telecommunications and local infrastructure and an increase in the movement of people.

These changes are re-shaping the social contract between citizens and the state, and have led social accountability mechanisms to strengthen. We argue that the strengthening of these mechanisms has been an unintended consequence of policy reforms across other platforms, such as telecommunications and nascent decentralization initiatives. Communities have both drawn from a perception that transition has led the government to respond better to community needs and, by acting on the perception, have re-enforced and further embedded that accountability. The focus on national transition and citizen engagement with the state has, to date, meant that local contests of authority have remained largely dormant and under-examined.

'Managing' this transition – or, more accurately, the many manifestations of these interacting transformations – requires placing a premium on the legitimacy of the change process, and the mechanisms by which the contests it inevitably generates are addressed. The research identifies a number of areas where policy can be strengthened to provide communities with an even greater role to play in Myanmar's transition. A clear, consistent policy on the role of village institutions is required. This includes providing villages with some autonomy in decision-making, defining the scope of authority of village tract administrators and putting in place mechanisms to encourage community participation and oversight. The broader decentralization agenda would also benefit from a more systematic framework rather than being dependent on ad hoc initiatives of different government departments. Finally, the research emphasizes the importance of the provision of timely and accurate information to communities to strengthen the positive role they can play in the transition.

It is also inevitable that there will be considerable variation in how well these transformations are resolved, some places will excel, others will muddle through, and still others will struggle greatly. Continuing to invest in grounded field research will be crucial to both documenting this variation and explaining it, as well as using the 'lessons' from this diversity, in real time, to enhance the likelihood that Myanmar's citizens and public officials can learn together how to shape their own democratic institutions.

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[1] QSEM is funded by the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust (LIFT) and implemented by a joint team from the World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research (EMR). The analytical framework for the research focuses on understanding rural livelihoods, shocks and coping strategies, village governance, social relations and external assistance.

[2] The original panel has consisted of nine villages each in three regions (Ayeyarwady, Magway and Mandalay) and three states (Chin, Rakhine and Shan). Villages were purposively selected to ensure representation across a number of variables. A seventh state (Kachin State) was added to the sample for the sixth round of research in early 2015.

[3] It should be noted that the QSEM research is conducted also exclusively at the village level. There are a small number of interviews in townships to cross-check information. While there is much discussion within government and by technical experts about the progress of political, financial and administrative decentralization this has not been an area that has attracted a significant degree of interest at the village level over the course of the research.

[4] Village tract administrators are official positions under the Ward and Village Tract Administration Law. The VTA represents all villages in a village tract and is important because the VTA acts as the main interlocutor between communities and the state. Prior to the Ward and Village Tract Administration Law, each village was also represented by a village administrator (VA, otherwise known as a one-hundred household head). Although this position has officially been abolished, most people in any given village are able to identify a village leader who, in practice, continues to perform this role.

[5] The most recent round of research saw a small but noticeable change in this trend, with nine women across two villages each in Mandalay and Magway and one village in Ayeyarwady being elected as ten household heads (QSEM, forthcoming).

[6] Asia Foundation research conducted in 2014 cited VTA's who reported receiving MMK 50,000 per month as support for office expenditure and a further MMK 70,000 as a personal stipend. There is limited wage data on rural Myanmar's civil servants, but in QSEM panel villages in 2016 teachers and rural health workers have been reported to earn between MMK 120,000 and MMK 180,000 per month.

[7] It should be noted that electoral accountability remains indirect, through 10 household leaders, who are selected via an informal election within each 10-household grouping.

[8] Although the role of village administrator was officially abolished after passage of the *Ward and Village Tract Administration Law*, in all villages in the research panel villagers were able to identify a village leader and there was consensus within that village as to who held that position.

[9] Restrictions on the ability of local officials to collect fees were imposed at the same time as the government increased stipends for VTAs and government officials and additional financing was accessible through an increase in development resources at the local level.

[10] The idea of the 'everyday state' – encounters with staff of government agencies that most citizens (especially those in rural areas) experience most frequently, such as teachers, health workers, police, agricultural extension officers, local officials – comes from Corbridge et al (2005).

[11] Government services are activities funded by the government that are delivered at the village level. Those identified through the research primarily cover village education and health services, local infrastructure and electrification programs and credit services. The research calculates the number of different types of services or programs funded by government in each village. The information is derived from interviews with villagers, including village leaders and updated through each round of research. Through the research approach it is not possible to track the level of funding across government services or per village as information about budgets is, more often than not, not available at the village level.

[12] In March 2012, the Government passed two new laws regulating land ownership. For the first time since military rule, the *Farmland Law* effectively formally acknowledges private interests in agricultural land. The law enables farmers to register land use certificates in their names and freely buy, sell and pawn land. The *Vacant, Fallow, Virgin Lands Management Law* regulates the use of vacant, fallow or virgin lands, including provisions for leasing such land and enabling farmers to apply to use otherwise unused land (QSEM 2013).

[13] It should be noted that in many areas of Myanmar, especially paddy producing areas, an additional driving incentive for registration was to facilitate access to loans and, in particular, Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB) loans.

[14] Across each round research teams asked village leaders in each village to estimate the proportion of the population currently migrating. These village averages were subsequently averaged across the villages in each state or region. The research emphasizes significant variations across villages.

[15] The claims cover all states and regions in the QSEM panel with the exception of Chin State and Mandalay Region. The land confiscation claims include claims against the military: a village in Shan State that has separate claims against three different military bases bordering the village; claims against business interests with ties to the military: as per several villages in Kachin State and a village in Rakhine State where wives of military officers attempt to seize five hundred acres of communal land; and claims relating to infrastructure investments: such as claims surrounding the gas pipeline in Rakhine State, a railroad built to support a steel factory and oil interests in Magway Region, as per the example above, and land confiscation by a company to build a road in Ayeyarwardy Region. Across a number of these cases, villagers perceive local officials including village administrators or tract administrators and township officials, particularly from the land records department, as playing a facilitating role in the land acquisition process.