

Delving into the relationship between land tenure and food security using the case of Ayeyarwaddy, Myanmar

Abstract

Many development partners and governments that promote land rights do so under the assumption that land rights increase households' ability to enjoy greater food security. Much of the economic literature popular among development partners suggests that land rights improve land tenure security through increasing the land holder's ability to make decisions to improve the productivity of their farms, increasing their ability to be food secure. While some studies have shown that differences in tenure security have positive impacts on some types of investment (e.g. soil conservation and adoption of stone terraces in Ethiopian studies), others have found no impact or have found that access to extension services, presence of irrigation and credit seem more important to increasing investment than land tenure. A recent systematic review by Lawry and colleagues (Lawry et al 2017) on the effects of land tenure interventions on agricultural productivity, income, investment and other relevant outcomes found mixed results. Some of the 20 quantitative studies reviewed suggest that land tenure is related to productivity and income gains from land tenure recognition in some regions. However, qualitative studies suggest otherwise (Lawry et al 2017).

Our study aims to contribute to increase the knowledge about the paths that link land allocation to food security using a mixed methods approach. In addition to this, our study highlights intra-household gender dynamics that may be related to linking land rights to food security. We utilize data collected using surveys applied to men and women, principal couples, of 712 households and data from participants in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted in the Ayeyarwaddy region in Myanmar. We focus on Myanmar to inform the work of development organizations and policy making to ensure that food security goals are being reached. There is a dearth of studies on this topic in Myanmar in a particular momentum where an important land reform is taking place.

Approximately 66 percent of the population in Myanmar lives in rural areas and depend on agricultural land as a primary means of livelihood. According to USAID reports, Burma is the poorest country in Southeast Asia (USAID, 2017.) In Ayeyarwaddy, as in other states and regions in Myanmar, landlessness and land alienation are serious issues affecting rural farming households (Scurrah et al., 2015.) Poverty, lack of food security, gender and ethnic inequality are long standing problems in Myanmar as well as institutional weaknesses in a context of complex governance environment. In addition to this, there is lack of infrastructure and basic service provision and underdeveloped land and financial markets (Landesa, 2018). Legislation and procedures to register and transfer land are complex and onerous for smallholders. This is related to the lack of systematic and computerized records in addition to the lack of clarity in the legal system. Sue Mark (2017) explains that the existence of multiple layers of revoked and active laws co-exist layered creating a major obstacle to the work of the land governance system. In a context such as the one in Myanmar where there are stark inequalities and access to power to solve conflicts, this weakness and confusion in the system of land administration plays in favor of the economic elites that grew stronger based on the benefits obtained during the previous regime that

ruled until 2010. The change of government created a system in which the military and the democratically elected NLD party share the control of ministries and power of the country.

Although in many parts of Myanmar's ethnic states, parallel government institutions still exist with large parts of the states being governed by armed groups (Scurrah et al., 2015), this is not the case in Ayeyarwaddy region which has a majority of Burmese population and is under the governance of the Ayeyarwaddy chief ministry. According to development organizations working in the region, the land reform has shown dynamism in Ayeyarwaddy. However, not much is known about its actual progress and the links between land tenure and food security where most of the population cultivates paddy and pulses combined with fishing or crabbing. Because of its location, Ayeyarwaddy is prone to experiencing climate related shocks which makes this place an interesting location to study food security. In our study we expect to see differences between landless and land holding households in terms of their strategies to achieving food security. However, we also expect to see different strategies among those that own less land and those who own larger farms. In this analysis, we will pay special attention to the roles that men and women, within households, play in the paths to food security. In this paper, we argue that the pathways from land rights to food security vary depending on households' land size and other contextual factors. Hence, we see the paths connecting land tenure and food security as much more complex than the linear explanation that considers that access to land gives owners an incentive to invest which ultimately leads to higher productivity and food security.

We believe the findings of our study can be helpful to inform government authorities of potential approaches to leverage the land reform towards increasing the food security for men and women in Myanmar. We think that our poster contributes to the theme of the conference because it utilizes an innovative approach to studying the link between land tenure and food security.