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**ENGAGING IN LAND RESEARCH IN
MYANMAR**
**A DECADE OF ACTION-ORIENTED RESEARCH
FOR GRET**

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Les Cahiers du Pôle Foncier

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List of acronyms

AAPP – Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)	MADM – Monitoring And Documentation Mechanism
ASDO – Ayeyarwaddy Social & Development Organization	MATA – Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability
CSO – Civil Society Organization	MoAI – Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation
CTS – Customary land Tenure Systems	MoALI – Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation
DALMS – Department of Administration of Land Measurement and Statistics	MOECAF – Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry
DoA – Department of Agriculture	MONREC – Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation
DoP – Department of Planning	MP – Member of Parliament
EAO – Ethnic Armed Group	MRLG – Mekong Region Land Governance Program
ECDF – Ethnic Community Development Forum	NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
EITI – Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative	NLD – National League for Democracy
FAB – Farmland Administration Body	NLUP – National Land Use Policy
FSWG – Food Security Working Group	NMSP – New Mon State Party
GAD – General Administration Department	PLIC – Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission
INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization	RoUM – Republic of the Union of Myanmar
KIO – Kachin Independence Organization	SLRD – Settlement and Land Records Department
KMSS – Karuna Mission Social Solidarity	SLORC – The State Law and Order Restoration Council
KNU – Karen National Union	SPDC – The State Peace and Development Council
LCG – Land Core Group	TNI – Transnational Institute
LIFT – Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund	USD – United States Dollar
LIOH – Land In Our Hands	VFV – Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land
LRC – Land Reinvestigation Committee	
LUASC – Land Use Allocation and Scrutiny Committee	
LUC – Land Use Certificate	

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Engaging in Land Research in Myanmar

A Decade of Action-Oriented Research for GRET

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the fabric of what started as a flexible research project on land tenure by a French INGO in Myanmar and ended up as a hybrid land research program. Written by three persons who played leading roles at different moments of the program between 2013 and 2021, it takes a reflexive look at approximately 10 years of work during the political ‘transition’ of the country. The aim is to describe and question the different postures we adopted throughout this work. We analyze the evolution of our posture by describing how we embodied various forms of expertise, sometimes cumulatively: first, through our entry into the land arena in Myanmar at a time of land reform, and the construction of a scientific expertise to legitimize our presence ; then by focusing on the way we came to embody an ‘engagement expertise’ through a gradual insertion on the issue of land (re)allocations while accompanying—from a safe distance—the implementation of a pilot land reallocation project implemented by the government; finally by a more direct involvement in political action through advocacy against the promulgation of an amendment to the law on vacant land. Theoretically, we question what engaging in land research entails in a post-authoritarian context, and expand the understanding of the word ‘engagement’ to highlight the work involved in researching land issues and fuel policy debates, namely the work of sustaining a balance between independence from state or societal factions and our involvement with stakeholders of the land arena, as well as distilling knowledge production amongst polarized problematizations of land issues.

GRET was present in Myanmar since 1995 and first operated in Rakhine and Chin States; that is shortly before the junta rebranded itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replacing the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) and opened on a period of partial liberalization of the economy (Fujita and Okamoto 2006) reflecting the broader liberalization trends occurring in mainland Southeast Asia. Since then, GRET mostly developed technical projects on irrigation, agroecology and microfinance. Its presence in Myanmar, its expertise on land in other contexts (cf. Lavigne Delville 2016) and the opening of the country at the turn of the 2010s made it possible to imagine a research project on land issues. Yet, there were at that time multiple and often contradictory framings of land issues, and understanding the position of the actors involved and the way we could conduct research were our first challenges.

Given the dictatorial nature of the regime prior to its political transition, there was a high level of uncertainty regarding how to engage with the state and/or for public action. At large, our work on the land issue was very much influenced by the configuration of power that resulted from decades of militarized governance. In Burma/Myanmar, at least since the early days of the British occupation, the militarized state has ruled over land and individuals through law, force and impunity (Callahan 2002; 2003). More recently, in the peripheral regions, the regime has dispossessed residents *en masse* through counterinsurgency (M. Smith 1991) and

by declaring large tracts of land as wastelands (Ferguson 2014; Woods 2011). In the Burmese heartland populated by the majority Bama ethnic group, dispossession has been piecemeal. Since the 1960s, and even more so in the 1990s and 2000s, thousands of peasants have had their land confiscated by various bodies linked to the military regime, ostensibly for 'development' projects such as the creation of state farms, the building of dams or for the establishment of battalions (San Thein et al. 2018; Mark 2023; Huard 2020; Huard and Mya Dar Li Thant forthcoming).

In 2011, Myanmar's military officers began to loosen the control they had held over the government for several decades. A new semi-elected legislature was introduced, and key reforms, such as ending censorship and easing restrictions on freedom of association and expression, signaled the emergence of a more open political environment. Leaders of the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, were released from detention, won parliamentary seats in 2012, and eventually entered government after the 2015 general election. Myanmar's political system appeared to be "moving from dictatorship to something else" (Cheesman 2019, 879).

The transition to a "disciplined democracy" was rooted in the trial-and-error strategy of the military (Huang 2020), which, having imposed a fraught and "tactical" (Callahan 2003, 209) version of a revolutionary and socialist state in the 1960s, tightened its grip on society by ensuring hierarchical, bureaucratized command through a one-party system under military control and by defeating the judiciary from within (Cheesman 2011). The regime continued to operate through British (criminal) law. New laws gave the state a socialist overlay and affected the peasantry through a variety of land laws and agricultural procurement policies (Boutry et al. 2017) until the regime collapsed under the weight of nationwide protests in 1988. Under the various manifestations of military rule from 1962 onwards, the competence and independence of the police, civil service and judiciary were severely curtailed, if not completely eradicated (Englehart 2005).

Although changes were underway around the turn of the 2010s, Myanmar had not fully entered a new era of democratic governance (Chachavalpongpun, Prasse-Freeman, and Strefford, 2020). New political structures were emerging, but many elements of the old regime remained firmly in place. The military appeared to retreat from direct civilian leadership, yet senior officers continued to occupy key positions, most notably in the Ministry of Home Affairs, which controls the police, general administration, and residential land management. Many officials from the former regime stayed in power, particularly within the police and judiciary, and these institutions were still heavily influenced by colonial legacies and long-standing military dominance. As Cheesman (2019, 879) points out, discussions about transitional justice for decades of arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings by state security forces, especially following urban uprisings and ongoing violence in border areas, remained largely absent.

In 2012, the quasi-civil government led by President Thein Sein (2011-2016) had already shown several signs of political changes in its relationships with the Myanmar civil society, including the suspension of the highly controversial China-backed Myitsone dam on September 30, 2011.¹ Reforms were initiated in a wide range of sectors, including on land. Freedom of press and of association was introduced, enabling the (re)emergence of a recognized civil society. Beyond giving a number of key insights on the ways in which the land issue was publicized through debates on land reform and on the configuration of the networks of actors involved in land policies (administration, politico-military elite, civil society, international aid and private

¹ One of the biggest hydropower projects in the region, planned to produce 6000 MW to supply 90% of its electricity to China, under pressure from large-scale protests and nationalist resentment (Jaquet 2018, 96).

companies), this paper aims at questioning the making of our expertise on land in an authoritarian and postwar context. This is a reflexive analysis led by three international researchers/experts. The retrospective examination of the collective experience of GRET's land team did not include data collected after 2021 with other Myanmar researchers or actors active during the same period. It looks at an experience from a temporal and physical distance as we all left Myanmar shortly before or after the 2021 military coup. Therefore, no data has been produced to respond to the problems we faced while writing this paper, hence a lack of details about what has been reappropriated or not from our work by other actors. Nonetheless, we think describing the various postures we embodied allows us to locate the dilemma of engaging research on land in a (post)authoritarian context.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first one presents the context of political change and the evolution of land policies since the colonial period, the milestones in the development of civil society, and problematizes the evolution of the different postures we have adopted. The following sections detail the making of these postures over the course of ten years, from the production of independent, academic-type expertise through which we acquired our legitimacy in the land arena (section 2), to a progressive engagement with the state and public action (section 3), and a more significant engagement with national land actors and advocacy (section 4). Although the description of these different postures follows roughly a chronological order, many of the processes and activities underlined in these sections overlapped over time.

I. Land, civil society and expertise in Myanmar

1. Trajectory of land policies

Myanmar's modern land governance takes an important part of its roots in systems introduced during the colonial era (1824–1948). To convert land into revenue sources, the British implemented various land tenure policies designed to stimulate rapid land development. Early British land laws, such as the 1839 Waste Land rules, were aimed at attracting capitalists to develop the land into large-scale plantations with guiding rules, when immigration and agricultural expansion through small holders was deemed too slow (Allaverdian 2025). This approach disregarded traditional uses of land, redefining 'waste' lands based on economic, rather than ecological or social, potential.

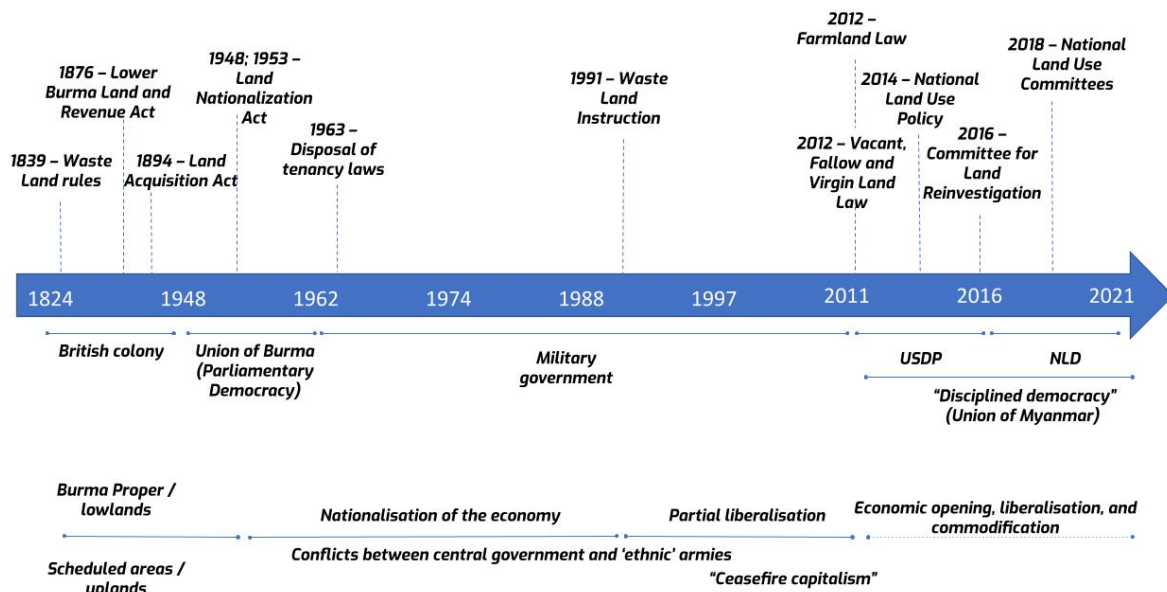


Figure 1. Trajectory of land policies

To manage land more systematically, the British enacted the 1876 Lower Burma Land and Revenue Act, introducing a system to assess individual holdings and enable effective taxation. The creation of the Settlement and Land Records Department (SLRD) in 1906 institutionalized this process, issuing receipts for cultivated land included in cadastral maps. The division of Burma into "Burma Proper," encompassing the more controlled lowlands of the country, and the "Frontier Areas" designating mountainous regions mostly inhabited by non-Burmese ethnic groups, further solidified colonial territorialization strategies (M. Smith 1991, 27). Through laws such as the 1894 Land Acquisition Act, the colonial state also established procedures for land acquisition, mandating compensation for land taken for "public purpose" projects, a principle that would resurface in post-2010 compensation claims for lands seized under the military regime.

In 1947, shortly before independence, a crucial meeting took place in Panglong (Shan State), gathering ethnic and bamar nationalist leaders to unite in a joint struggle for the independence of the Union of Burma. It resulted in the foundational Panglong agreement which states: "*full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle*" (Tinker, Griffin, and Ashton 1948). This would also shape conflictual center-periphery relationships for the decades to come, around territorial and self-determination claims by "ethnic minorities". Following independence in 1948, the government enacted the Land Nationalization Act (1948) followed by a more detailed Land Nationalization Act (1953), asserting ownership of agricultural land by the state, but with mixed success. Aimed at eradicating large-scale foreign land ownership, the Act left small-scale farmers' property rights uncertain, as private ownership was conditional on "productive" use as defined by the state (South and Katsabanis 2007). The act's full implementation was hindered by security challenges and insurgencies, leaving substantial rural areas beyond government reach (Brown 2013, 97).

Following Ne Win's 1962 military coup, the state's vision for land governance took a socialist turn. The new ideology, known as the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', aimed to end landlordism by designating all farmers as state tenants, subject to a fixed crop procurement quota. The 1963 Tenancy Act forbade farmers from selling, mortgaging, or renting land outside inheritance, targeting landlordism as an enemy of socialism. The government increasingly controlled agriculture by instructing farmers on crop types and schedules in "planned"

areas, while cooperatives distributed essential consumer goods locally (Brown 2013, 41; Huard 2024). This socialist structure also extended to trade, with laws such as the Enterprises Nationalization Law (1963) and the Socialist Economy Protection Law (1964) placing commerce under state control, largely impacting non-Burmese businesses and fueling black-market activities (Steinberg 2001; Myat Thein (U) 2012). Additionally, the Four Cuts Campaign, a military strategy aimed at isolating insurgent border areas by cutting off resources, signified a shift towards the territorial targeting of rebel-controlled zones, increasing the state's grip over "productive" lands (M. Smith 1991).

By the 1980s, economic failures had weakened the government's centralized hold, shifting policies to market liberalization. This transition included introducing 'high-yielding varieties' in 1975–85, followed by partial liberalization in 1987, forced cropping, and agribusiness experiments in the 1990s. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC/SPDC) took power in 1988–89 after wide-spread protests, blending command economy elements with limited market reforms. Although the state kept a tight control over land management, the liberalization of agricultural policies in the 1990s aligned to trends in other parts of the global south which started national-scale land titling programs – often funded by the World Bank. The Central Committee for the Management of Cultivable Land, Fallow Land, and Waste Land, established in 1991, provided a legal framework for allocating land to state and foreign joint enterprises, often at the expense of smallholder farmers (South and Katsabanis 2007; Ba Thun 2012), although many concessions were directly attributed by all-powerful Regional Military Commanders. Local authorities, frequently lacking agricultural expertise, retained substantial control over land designations, resembling colonial practices of reclassifying "waste" land based on economic motives. In an effort to expand the market economy to border regions, the military government initiated ceasefires with various Ethnic Armed Groups (EAOs), such as the Kachin Independence Army from the late 1980s onwards. These agreements allowed military enterprises, state agencies, and favored investors to enter border areas and acquire land and other natural resources (Talbot, Akimoto, and Cuskelly 2016). In Kachin, this period saw extensive, unregulated land confiscation—what (Woods 2011) refers to as "ceasefire capitalism." Lucrative deals often involved military conglomerates, government bodies, and preferred companies, frequently with foreign investors from countries that ignored Western sanctions (Scurrah, Woods, and Hirsch 2015). These deals, largely extractive, included oil and gas projects, hydropower dams, roads, infrastructure, and agribusiness ventures, often displacing communities and damaging local lands and livelihoods with little or no compensation. Conversely, in areas where rebels operated, the 1991 Wasteland instructions enabled the military to gain control over lands "occupied by people considered enemies of the state" (Ferguson 2014, 307). Meanwhile in the lowlands, corruption and rent-seeking practices were pervasive under the SLORC/SPDC, as documented by Thawnghmung (2004). Officials often diverted fertilizers and pesticides for sale, accepted bribes for program admission, seized land, and demanded payments during inspections. Although the centralized economic structure weakened in some regions, systems of forced procurement and export taxes persisted, maintaining structures of wealth extraction and widening the divide between the government and rural communities.

Direct military rule concluded on March 30, 2011, when the military transferred power to President Thein Sein. In light of this legacy of exploitation under SLORC/SPDC rule after 1988, reform-minded state actors initiated land tenure reforms in 2012. On March 30, 2012, the government introduced the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin (VFP) Lands Management Law (later amended in 2018) and the Farmland Law (amended in 2020). The latter Law opened up an opportunity for farmers to apply for a Land Use Certificate during the titling process

carried out by the State Land Record Department (SLRD).² However, unlike other Southeast Asian countries who undertook land titling in the 1990s, it was carried out very hastily in Myanmar, most probably in order to maintain a *statu quo* over past (and often contested) land transactions (Allaverdian, forthcoming). To some degree, it reintroduced the concept of private property³ as land-use rights could be legally sold, mortgaged, rented, pawned, and inherited (Boutry et al. 2017).

The Thein Sein government also set up a Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission (PLIC) in August 2012 to officially investigate cases of land confiscations that had occurred from 1988 to 2010. However, it had a strong bias to urban areas and urbanization projects (San Thein, Pyae Sone, and Diépart 2017) and many cases that involved large-scale ongoing projects or the military were excluded (Mark 2023, 51). Other progressive reforms involved the design of a National Land Use Policy (NLUP) started in 2012, which included public consultations in 2014-15 (see section 1.2). The NLUP, meant to provide an overarching land framework with the objective to harmonize the multiplicity land-related laws, was adopted in January 2016. Amongst other innovations in the land legal framework, it explicitly mentions “customary land use tenure systems [that] shall be recognized in the National Land Law” (RoUM 2016, art. 62). These additions reflect the dual reality of a lowland tenure system under central government control, and customary practices specific to mountainous areas, escaping control and taxation systems. However, the National Land Law never came into being and the government officials’ representation of most ethnic minorities’ land as undeveloped – hence classified as VFV land – persisted throughout the period of political opening and generated a whole lot of conflicts with activists (see section 4.3).

It should also be noted here that the use of the term “customary” (generally translated in Burmese as *dalei-hton-tan*) as loosely opposed to the national (legal) framework, is inevitably politicized in Myanmar⁴, where the government, like China, does not recognize any special rights to ethnic minorities as compared to the *Bamar* majority. Indeed, all ethnic groups (*taing-yin-tha*) are considered to “have lived together unitedly in the Union of Myanmar since time immemorial”⁵. Therefore, it hinders any discussions about the rights of Indigenous People developed in international forums such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (see also chapter 2.3). In this context, the debates and efforts to promote the recognition of customary land and rights in the NLUP established this category as a potentially significant legal tool for numerous CSOs and especially the political wings of EAOs to challenge the central state and assert their own forms of sovereignty. In these debates, there was however a tension about the objective of recognizing customary rights. Some actors pushed for rendering the question more technical through legal innovations or by importing models from neighboring countries⁶ while for others it was an opportunity to recognize customary territories⁷. Meanwhile, many organizations (such as MRLG⁸ or ECDF) worked for documenting the existence

² The name changed from SLRD to Department of Agricultural Land Management and Statistics (DALMS) in 2015 and again to Department of Land Records and Registration in March 2024.

³ Yet, the state remains the sole landowner, and this law adds another layer within a system of stacked laws (Mark 2016).

⁴ Even though it has adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

⁵ Statement by the Chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council on Myanmar’s Union Day on 12 February 1993, quoted in Erni (2008: 342).

⁶ See Ewers Anderson 2015.

⁷ “Protection and recognition of ethnic customary land management systems is an important component in achieving sustainable peace and must be enshrined in a future federal constitution and decentralized legal framework” (ECDF. 2016, 3).

⁸ See Land Core Group 2024 and Erni and Deligne 2022.

and transformation of customary tenure systems in various parts of the country to advocate for reinforcing land tenure security.

The NLD government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, took office in March 2016 with ambitious goals for agrarian reform, including modernizing farming, resolving land disputes fairly, securing land tenure, and ensuring transparency in land transactions. Building on the National Land Use Policy adopted by the previous government, one of its first priorities was land restitution through the Central Reinvestment Committee on Confiscated Farmlands and Other Lands. However, after a year, progress was hindered by issues such as lack of transparency, inconsistent procedures, limited resources, and inadequate farmer representation. In late 2016, the NLD also began reclaiming unused land from previous leases to concessionaires which totaled over 2 million hectares, with 75% classified as vacant, fallow, or virgin land (San Thein et al. 2018). Some of this land was redistributed, mainly in lowland regions, but many communities struggled to benefit due to issues with land quality, accessibility, and lack of financing (Mark 2023, 56).

Overall, Myanmar citizens' relationship to land and associated issues (tenure insecurity, harmful state policies, unrightful land acquisitions) have long concretized both the incompetence⁹ and the predatory nature¹⁰ of past military governments (1962-2011). Through the political transition, land therefore became a major arena for Myanmar civil society to express decades-old grievances to the government.

2. Land issues and civil society

Despite decades of authoritarian governance and repression, Myanmar was characterized by active social movements, taking much of their roots in the 1988 student-led uprisings and the 2007 Saffron revolution. This would comprise everyday forms of resistance (Malseed 2009) to movements such as the Ba Ka Tha (All Burma Federation of Student Union) that went underground after the 1988 crackdown (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju 2021) or the 88 generation student group formed in 2005 by students who were active in the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings and who would then play an important role in organizing protests in the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Many activists were imprisoned and only released gradually after 2011, contributing to a persistent polarization of civil society between those who had endured hardship and repression, those who had fled (often to Thailand), and those who had remained more cautious by remaining apolitical and taking refuge as INGO staff- or, in some cases, serving as civil servants, and who often faced suspicion from more politicized actors (Prasse-Freeman 2023).

The international presence and civic spaces in Myanmar changed after cyclone Nargis in 2008. In the wake of the disaster which killed around 140,000 people and affected over 2.4 million people, the government blocked international aid delivery for two weeks. This prompted the burgeoning of Burmese civil society groups (more or less structured) to provide immediate relief to survivors and which, for many, established themselves as local NGOs (Desaine 2011). Despite the junta's initial resistance, international NGOs in the country increased from 40 to 100 within a year while the volume of international assistance quadrupled (Carr 2018).

⁹ Such as unrealistic State rice procurement schemes particularly as a major source of indebtedness and land loss among small landholders (Boutry et al. 2017; Thawngmung 2004).

¹⁰ Particularly large-scale land concessions implemented through the 1991 Wasteland Instructions (San Thein, Pyae Sone, and Diepart 2017).

With the shift to a quasi-civilian government in 2011, important democratic measures were taken: the release of over 14,600 prisoners in May 2011 and 330 political prisoners in the year 2011 (AAPP 2014), the lift on media censorship, the amendment of the 2008 constitution to restore the legality of the National League for Democracy political party, the convening of a national parliament in Naypyidaw, a first of its kind since 1962 and the formation of a National Human Rights commission. Several ceasefire agreements were reached with ethnic armed organizations. Despite this, the military retained tight control, with the absence of oversight by the executive over the army, the control of key ministries (such as Home affairs), 25% of parliament seats reserved for military representatives, and the possibility to block any legislation and constitutional change. In all cases, the mutations placed Myanmar in a specific “*discursive context*” with “*real effects on the ground*” (Chachavalpongpun, Prasse-Freeman, and Strefford 2020, 5), in which notions such as democracy, freedom, justice and reconciliation came up in everyday speeches and media. One example of civil society influence came with the suspension of the mega Myitsone Dam project in 2011. This victory inspired further mobilization such as the Letpadaung copper mine protests. This China-backed project promoted by the military led to major land confiscations affecting smallholders. Marked by a violent crackdown on Buddhist monks, it became a symbol of civil society resistance to land grabs. Eventually, it became the first case where the military-owned UMEHL powerful conglomerate provided compensation to affected communities (Mark 2023).

In this political opening, land issues became increasingly central, as they were tied to wider debates about the peace process, federalism, constitutional reform, development and justice. They were shaped by ongoing political mutations, the ability of the newly elected parliament to exercise its power (Egreteau 2022) and longstanding grievances over military-era land confiscations and broader structural abuse.

Land thus became one domain of political debate, compromise and confrontation among many others in a civil society which grew louder and more visible after years of “confinement”¹¹ (Daré et al. 2024). The individuals and groups engaged with land in different ways, depending on their histories, connections and visions for the future. It is impossible to detail every aspect of what was the civil society in Myanmar at the turn of the 2010s – or even to define it¹². Yet, civil society organizations in Myanmar could often be characterized by their degree of engagement or opposition with the government. This antagonism between reformist approaches versus activist ones take root in Myanmar’s authoritarian past, ethnic armed conflict and repeated disappointments in deceptive democratic measures (such as the reestablishment of multi-party general elections in 2010 for which the National League for democracy was not allowed to participate). This divide crystallized into two loose groups: one that believed that the democratic opening was a chance to enact reform despite the military’s continued grip on state affairs, and the other that remained highly suspicious of the democratic transition and the State’s possible instrumentalization of civil society to legitimize its power.

Rather than a clear-cut divide, we understand civil society as a continuum, uncovering shifts in engagement strategies in public affairs. For example, some land activists, initially involved as individuals supporting farmers’

¹¹ Confinement refers to a situation when feelings of injustice find no space for expression beyond the local arena and cannot be translated into claims for justice. Companies take no responsibility for the harm they cause, administrative bodies are part of the exclusion process, and the judicial apparatus is seldom mobilized.

¹² Bernard Formoso proposes the following definition of civil society in Southeast Asia: “*an intermediary space of interaction between the domestic cell and the State, whose agents (individuals and groups recruiting on a voluntary basis or according to other modes of affiliation) implement modes of organization and action likely to integrate them transversally into the fields of politics, economics, the media and religion*” (Formoso 2016, 20. Our translation).

protests or negotiating short-term result-based informal arrangements (including bribery), moved towards more strategic approaches (or so they said), with structured and formal organizations engaged in policy influencing¹³. The opening period also coincided with an “NGOisation” of civil society, and organizational professionalization, under the influence of INGOs and donor requirements for compliance and formal registration (Masse forthcoming). These choices also divided civil society between those who sought to operate more organically as social movements, away from bureaucracy and donor agendas, and those moving towards NGOs oriented towards service-delivery and multi-stakeholder processes (MSP).

With the liberalization of land policies and the development of NGOs, the period also witnessed a shift that occurred a bit earlier over South East Asia from the mid 90s (Diepart *et al.* 2022, Mellac and Castellanet 2015) : whereas land interventions were once seen as the exclusive and politically sensitive domain the state, they were gradually reframed as technical issues with a strong focus on land registration. For example, an increasing number of NGOs, backed by donors, started to engage in their own databases and mapping of land and resource rights, under the guise of neutral development work. NGOs thus contributed to the depoliticization of land issues. A key example is the “One Map Myanmar” project, a multi-stakeholder platform with the government, designed to provide accurate and publicly available spatial data. In reality, even the seemingly less sensitive spatial information, such as roads or schools, could not be published, revealing the major political constraints persisting beneath the project’s technical framing.

The figure below represents the CSO landscape involved in the land scene according to their level of opposition vis-à-vis the state and organizational/institutional status. It does not represent all organizations, nor indirect linkages (e.g.: between some donors and EAOs for example) and dynamic processes.

¹³ Interviews in Mae Sot, May 2023, for ongoing PhD works (Allaverdian).

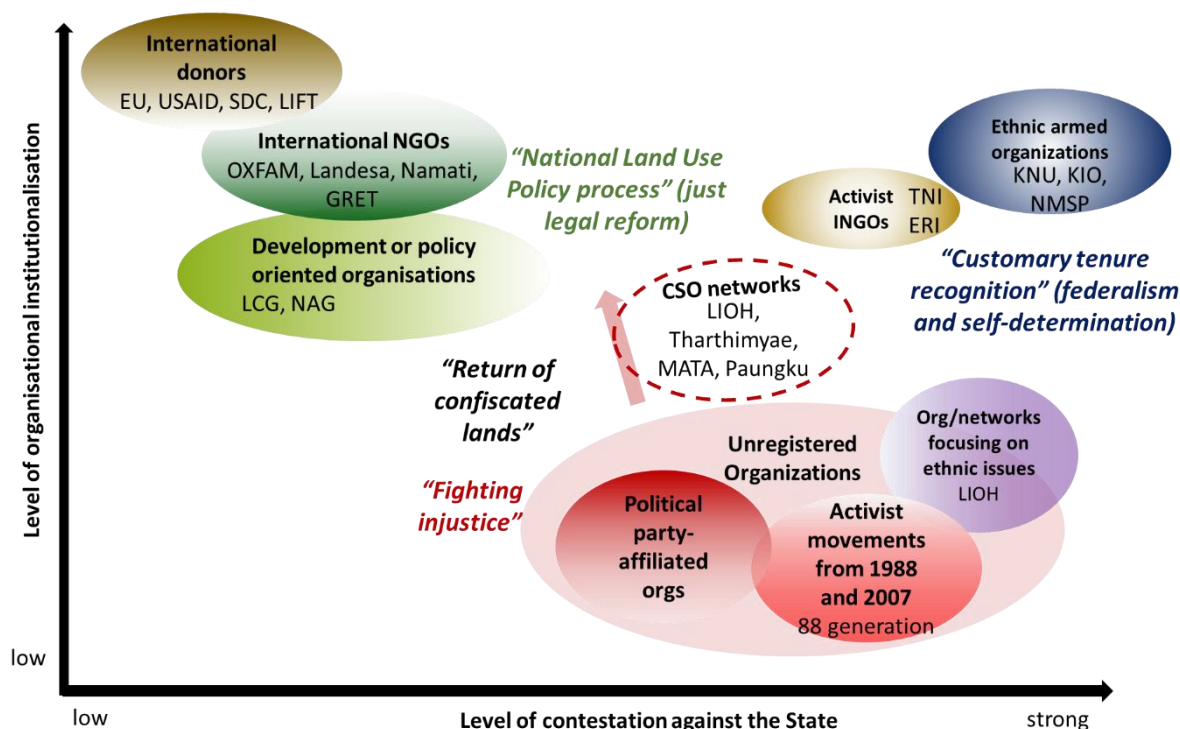


Figure 2. Civil society landscape concerning land issues in the 2012-2021 period

One such major MSP was the National Land Use Policy (NLUP), supported by the coordinated efforts of the European Union, USAID and SDC. In 2012, the government formed an inter-ministerial Land Use Allocation and Scrutiny Committee (LUASC) to lead the drafting process. It was chaired by the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry¹⁴ (MOECAF) viewed as a progressive ministry. Though most land management prerogatives were with the Ministry of Agriculture,¹⁵ it had the infamous reputation of conservative military culture and stood away from most reform processes involving civil society and international stakeholders¹⁶. The Land Core Group (LCG), a land advocacy network for Myanmar formed in 2010 under the umbrella of the Food Security Working Group (a network of development NGOs) played a key role in this process. From there, a Technical Advisory Group, essentially composed as "non-governmental technocrats" (Mark 2023, 57), including an American legal advisor and the chair of LCG, was formed to advise the LUASC in the development of the draft NLUP. LCG- initially a network- rapidly reformed its governance and positioned itself as an independent organization at the forefront of apolitical multi-stakeholders' land policy reform processes.

¹⁴ Formerly labeled as the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry (MOECAF), it was merged with the Ministry of Mines in 2016 (under NLD government) to become the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC).

¹⁵ Until 1996, it was named the Ministry of Agriculture. It was then renamed as the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MoAI) under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government following departmental consolidation. In 2016, President Htin Kyaw (NLD government) composed it with the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development as the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI).

¹⁶ For example, in 2017, the World Bank had surged into the Myanmar land scene with a land sector needs assessment with the hope of reaching a large bankable land administration program with the Myanmar government, but it led nowhere due to the blunt lack of interest from the Ministry of Agriculture.

The NLUP was eventually developed behind closed doors until the fourth draft came out in October 2014. For the first time in Myanmar history, a public consultation process was factored in the policy road map, under the pressure of international actors (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju 2021). However, its timing was extremely tight, since the government aimed for a final draft by the end of 2014. The initial debates on whether civil society should engage or not in the public consultations crystallized the activist/reformist antagonisms, as personally witnessed in a CSO workshop in Yangon in October 2014. A highly heated debate divided Burmese civil society organizations on whether a public consultation over the draft of the National Land Use policy would allow to exert influence and improve its contents or oppositely would be a cosmetic process to legitimize a top-down policy at the service of military elites' and international investors' interests. However, a number of activist organizations chose to engage in leading local consultations. Organizations such as Paung Ku, who had been involved in struggles for democracy and social justice, were boosted by the opening of civil society space. Addressing their own concerns about international INGOs and donor organizations "talking about and on behalf of the rural people" in public dialogues – though themselves supported by international institutes like TNI – they brought together their different networks and set up the first multiethnic land movement initiative Land In Our Hands (LIOH) in February 2014 (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju 2021, 5). It gathered individual land activists, local farmer organizations, and community-based organizations. Their core areas of work concerned land grabbing issues in ethnic states, land and resource federalism.

With ongoing negotiations under the Peace Process, EAOs such as the Karen National Union (KNU), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) were also discussing the development of their own land use policies with various degrees of advancement. The KNU published its own land use policy in December 2015, as a political statement to assert land management claims over the "Kawthoolei" territory, with a mix of indigenous claims to land and resource management and international principles such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries & Forests (VGGT). Ethnic-based civil society organizations would also actively advocate for a federal system and decentralization of land management prerogatives (still highly centralized at Union level as per the 2008 constitution), highlighting indigenous knowledge and ancestral customary rights and principles.

Meanwhile, political parties, farmer unions and various movements also mobilized around land issues. Engaging with land issues and the return of confiscated lands was a way for them to mobilize rural support and constituencies. From 2013 onward, many plow protests took place to claim back confiscated lands (Huard 2020; Prasse-Freeman 2023). The mediatization of those forms of mobilization, through their connections with networks of activists, of lawyers and journalists, also contributed in making the issue of land return a public affair (Huard and Mya Dar Li Thant forthcoming).

The result was a vibrant yet polarized civil society, composed on one side of formalized, donor-connected, capital urban-based NGOs which participated in state-led policy reform and, on the other side, more informal, critical, resistance-oriented groups who mobilized around land to articulate broader political claims such as sovereignty and self-determination. Their respective engagements reflected not only ideological divides but different histories, geographies and relationship to state and donor power.

3. Engaging in land research in a post-authoritarian context

Most literature on expertise focuses on projects and public actions developed in the Global North. Taking our theoretical cue on expertise from Lavigne Delville and Le Meur (2022), who attempted to confront this literature with forms of expertise developed for land projects in the Global South, we add another layer of complexity by asking: what does expertise involve in (post)authoritarian settings?

Lavigne Delville and Le Meur define the expertise of social sciences on land as an art of interfaces between knowledge, mediation and public action. For them, “the many land reform processes underway in developing countries, as well as the mobilization of civil society organizations against large-scale land acquisitions, for recognition of the land rights of rural populations or for the restitution of land to indigenous peoples, have given rise to numerous diagnoses, studies and assessments. Insofar as they mobilize knowledge in response to a commission, these can be broadly described as “expertise” (Lavigne Delville and Le Meur 2022, 941, our translation and emphasis). Following Lascoumes (2002) and Théry (2005), expertise is commonly defined as the production of specific knowledge for action. It is a particular diagnosis of knowledge in a problematic situation ‘within the framework of a mission integrated into a decision-making process of which the expert is not the master’ (Théry 2005, our translation). Isabelle Théry (2005, 315–20) distinguishes three types of expertise, which are not exclusive categories and that can help us question the kind of expertise the GRET team has developed on land in Myanmar:

- A service expertise, where the entity demanding expertise has his own skills but needs technical expertise in a field that he does not master. We are dealing here with the model of technical and legal expertise, where the expert is supposed to be neutral and mobilize contextualized knowledge to inform the decision.
- An engagement expertise, where ‘a specialist is commissioned to provide a scientific analysis, establish a diagnosis and make proposals for action (legal reforms, public policy reforms)’.
- A consensus expertise, which generally takes place within commissions, and whose role is to establish standards based on a debate between experts from different specialities.

Our position has evolved gradually, combining different forms of expertise. The specificity of our land tenure program stems from the fact that it began without being formally commissioned to produce a restricted output, enabling us to conduct independent academic research (2013–2017). However, we did have to make recommendations to ‘fuel the debate’ and ‘support advocacy recommendations on the country’s national land tenure and food security policies’, as set out in our project proposal. Building on the recognition given by most land stakeholders to the results of our research, we then negotiated with our main donor, the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund¹⁷ (LIFT, see Section 2), the exploration of more sensitive subjects. We had considerable freedom in conceptualising the scope of our studies and, in that sense, in applying academic knowledge to inform public action (Dumoulin, 2005, 304). This approach to research may not result in direct involvement in action, but it contributes to the debate on land tenure, raising awareness among other stakeholders of invisible (or perceived as too complex) dynamics.

A turning point for us was our involvement in land (re)allocation studies (2015–18), in partnership with other NGOs and CSOs (see section 3.1). This was in a context where the donor was recalibrating its engagement

¹⁷ A multi-donor fund set-up to centralize and coordinate aid delivered after the cyclone Nargis which hit the Ayeyarwady Delta in 2008.

with the state to address this issue, and where other actors, such as policymakers, were involved. However, we found their approaches problematic (see Section 3.2). Our work then resembled an expertise of service using a tried-and-tested methodology, without us having to make a precise diagnosis or establish a concerted approach to land reallocation with the government (beyond restitution at the regional level). Subsequently, we were invited to participate in a land reallocation project as experts, with the prospect of becoming an implementing partner under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture. However, we refused for various reasons, and this project was contested by many CSOs. After clarifications, we positioned the GRET team as the project's monitoring unit (2019–21), thus maintaining our political independence (Section 3.3). Meanwhile, we engaged in advocacy for the first time after reaching a breaking point when the NLD government issued the 2018 amendment to the VFV law, which put millions of farmers at risk of dispossession (Section 4).

What happens when we confront this trajectory with the definition of the “engagement expertise”? This is defined as a type of expertise “that clearly engages the expert in the political sphere, in a space that can be described as pre- or para-decisional. While drawing up recommendations is usually part of a consultant's job, for the researcher it is a specific position, where he ‘inevitably transgresses the limits of his own knowledge’ (Roqueplo 1997, 20) by transferring it into “a chain of decisions and actions, and more broadly into the political arena” (Lavigne Delville and Le Meur 2022, 949). This form of expertise pushes the researcher to the frontiers of his field of competence. It is characterized by a tension between applying specialized knowledge, value-neutral positions and political engagement. Experts can follow established directives or independently define problems, draw on personal experience or foster group reflection. This form of expertise unfolds in contexts where public policy debates include a large variety of participants and where knowledge is generated in increasingly diverse settings, often resulting in mixed forms that blend scientific and political narratives (Lavigne Delville and Le Meur 2016, 83).

To account for our trajectory, we needed to break down the “engagement expertise” by changing our understanding of the term “engagement”. Because land issues are fundamentally political problems, we use this term as a tool to grasp what dealing with the land arena means for a group of people working through an INGO in a post-authoritarian context. Broadly speaking, engagement refers to two questions: engaging with whom/what, and for whom/what? In the above definition of engagement expertise, everything hinges on localising the ‘pre- or para-decisional’ sphere and understanding how expertise can affect the official sphere through this channel. Firstly, this refers to the configuration of politics (Li, 2019), which we understand as the way power was organised in Myanmar before and during the transition period¹⁸. Secondly, it refers to how local and international actors attempted to engage in politics, which is understood as the way they challenged and contested the existing configuration of power. These two dynamics shaped the emergence of civil society and the polarisation of Burmese society after decades of military dictatorship. In this context, it is still possible to produce an engagement expertise without taking a public position (or being perceived to do so) by making recommendations that remain private for instance. Classically, it is the crossing of the normative boundary between research and public decision-making that constitutes engagement. But in the case of Myanmar, as in many other contexts, the definition of public is not self-evident, and engagement can have many meanings. Following on from the work of Thévenot (2006) and Huard (2024), we propose separating the concept of engagement from its usual connotations (humanitarian, military, political, etc.) and focusing instead on the evaluation process integral to the act of engaging (with or in something):

¹⁸ The problem of ‘the political’ in Myanmar is often debated in Burma/Myanmar studies (cf. Cheesman 2016; Taylor 2008).

“The interesting part of the word engagement is that it expresses [...] the act of evaluating something (a length, a weight, a stake) through a scale (to gauge) and acting upon that evaluation. It highlights a process through which someone gauges and can commit or defy. [...] Engagement refers to the act of binding, committing, contracting and taking responsibility by assessing the appropriate pledges and obligations” (Huard 2024, 20).

We thus use engagement as a tool capable of capturing how we navigated the different political spaces revolving around land issues. It allows us to question and analyse our own and others' actions, discourses and affiliations by focusing on the process of evaluation. In return, it enables us to understand why our experience never really fit the three categories highlighted above due to the very nature of Myanmar's transitioning context. Looking at our work in terms of engagement, with a plurality of actors and ideas in an emerging and consolidating land arena, is helpful to avoid reifying the postures of the expert and instead allows us to highlight the work revolving around embodying different postures.

The way politics worked was far from being democratic and ‘the state’ (Abrams 1988) was mostly a chain of patrons and a bureaucracy working for the military and the cronies. Land issues have historically been the prerogative of the executive branch until the Thein Sein government opened discussions with civil society, starting with a multi-stakeholder National Dialogue on Land Tenure and Land Use Rights in 2012, which paved the way for the consultative drafting of a land use policy. Still, the government at that time was run by former military officers turned civilians and, given the past six decades of direct military rule, did not have trust from the public. It is only with the accession of the NLD party to power in 2016 that the public could be represented by an elected government (although 25% of parliament seats as well as a key ministry remained in the hands of the military).

Therefore, when we started our first land project in 2013, even if there were opening spaces, the decision-making process was opaque and the way to influence policy was moving from decades of international and internal confrontation and mistrust into something else. Beyond making recommendations – which were unlikely to find their way to government officials –, engaging in the formulation and implementation of public policy on land raises at the very least the problem of being associated with the state and the risk of being excluded from the circles of many CSOs/INGOs. Another issue is the instrumentalization of scientific expertise, which can sometimes be used as a guarantee for development projects, a question that arose mainly after the NLD's accession to power – which opened space for introducing new theories of change in the land reform (see Section 3.2). At the other extreme, embodying expertise and being backed by a consortium of international donors can also be useful to gain access to resources, sources, places and contacts that would otherwise be inaccessible. Therefore, engaging in land research in Myanmar was about evaluating the relevance and possibilities of studies' topics, evaluating and dealing with the constraints inherent to the gradual politicization of Myanmar society, building a flexible project's team and calibrating our relations with land stakeholders (CSOs, INGOs, donors, and government institutions).

Finally, we must consider the composition of the project's team and the diversity of its individual profiles to better grasp the way we have engaged in the land arena. The trajectory of the program in relation to public mediation, from an academic research stance to increased engagement with the State and in the field of advocacy, cannot be separated from the modalities of the project's implementation. The first project (see Section 2) was designed in 2012-13 by C. Allaverdian, at that time a GRET agronomist newly arrived in Myanmar. Looking for a socio-anthropologist profile in order to lead the project, she contacted M. Boutry, a French anthropologist who had already spent five years in the country, alternating academic research and

consultancies with different international organizations and NGOs since the completion of his Ph.D in 2007. Drawing on his past experiences, he had already developed a highly critical view of humanitarian work and development (Boutry and Ferrari 2009), both in terms of the objectives of development projects and expertise. He began as a project manager under a consulting contract, then continued until the end of the land program as principal investigator for various projects, while C. Allaverdian became project manager. The implementation of the first project was also supported by M. Mellac, an experienced geographer who had herself conducted studies on land tenure in Southeast Asia (André-Lamat and Mellac 2012; Mellac 2011). Finally, S. Huard began as a master's student in the first project, then as an external consultant during the land assessment period (see section 3), while preparing his PhD in anthropology, and finally took on the role of project manager towards the end of the land program (section 4). There were our Burmese colleagues whose diversity of backgrounds complemented each other. For instance, having one senior agronomist trained in Yezin¹⁹, who could play up his influence with officials who graduated later from the same university, was crucial in gaining access to and navigating land-related government institutions. On the other hand, a core of emancipated Burmese young women – e.g. who enjoyed the normatively masculine practice of small talks over cigarettes and drinks (Prasse-Freeman 2023, 152) – were instrumental in establishing connections with civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists. This configuration largely explains the academic research identity that the GRET land program has acquired over the course of its development.

However, while the donor had requirements for delivering recommendations, in hindsight, the “translation” (Lavigne Delville 2016) of scientific findings into practical implications remained a weakness regularly underlined by the external evaluators of our projects. It took the completion of two projects and three years to address the “missing link” (Lavigne Delville 2016) needed to operate this translation, and therefore to solicit an external policy maker – who worked for the EU within the Myanmar Department of Planning – to help us formulate more practical recommendations. But this ‘reluctance’ to produce actionable findings also reflects the time we needed to understand the land arena and to calibrate our relationships with its different actors. This lack of translation – at least in the form of written productions – was partly compensated by our engagement with selected land actors through committees consulted for the steering of our first project (see section 2) and by systematically sharing our findings through workshops. These workshops were progressively tailored for different audiences: international actors, CSOs, government stakeholders and farmers. We also selectively engaged with individuals from CSOs enrolled in our studies.

To sum up, the evolution of our postures reflects how we navigated the constraints inherent to a fast transforming – hence uncertain – post-authoritarian context. We tried to maintain as much independence as possible when making recommendations, which derive less from the production of knowledge than from worldviews and values that were highly polarized during the political and economic transition. We tried to sustain this independence by calibrating our engagement with the land arena's stakeholders. This endeavour has limited our involvement in the para- or pre-decisional space of policy making – specific to “engagement expertise” – and the impact of knowledge production on policies and the political sphere remains hardly measurable.

¹⁹ Yezin Agricultural University is *the* higher academic institution administered by the Ministry of Agriculture. Most high level government officers in the agricultural sector come from this university.

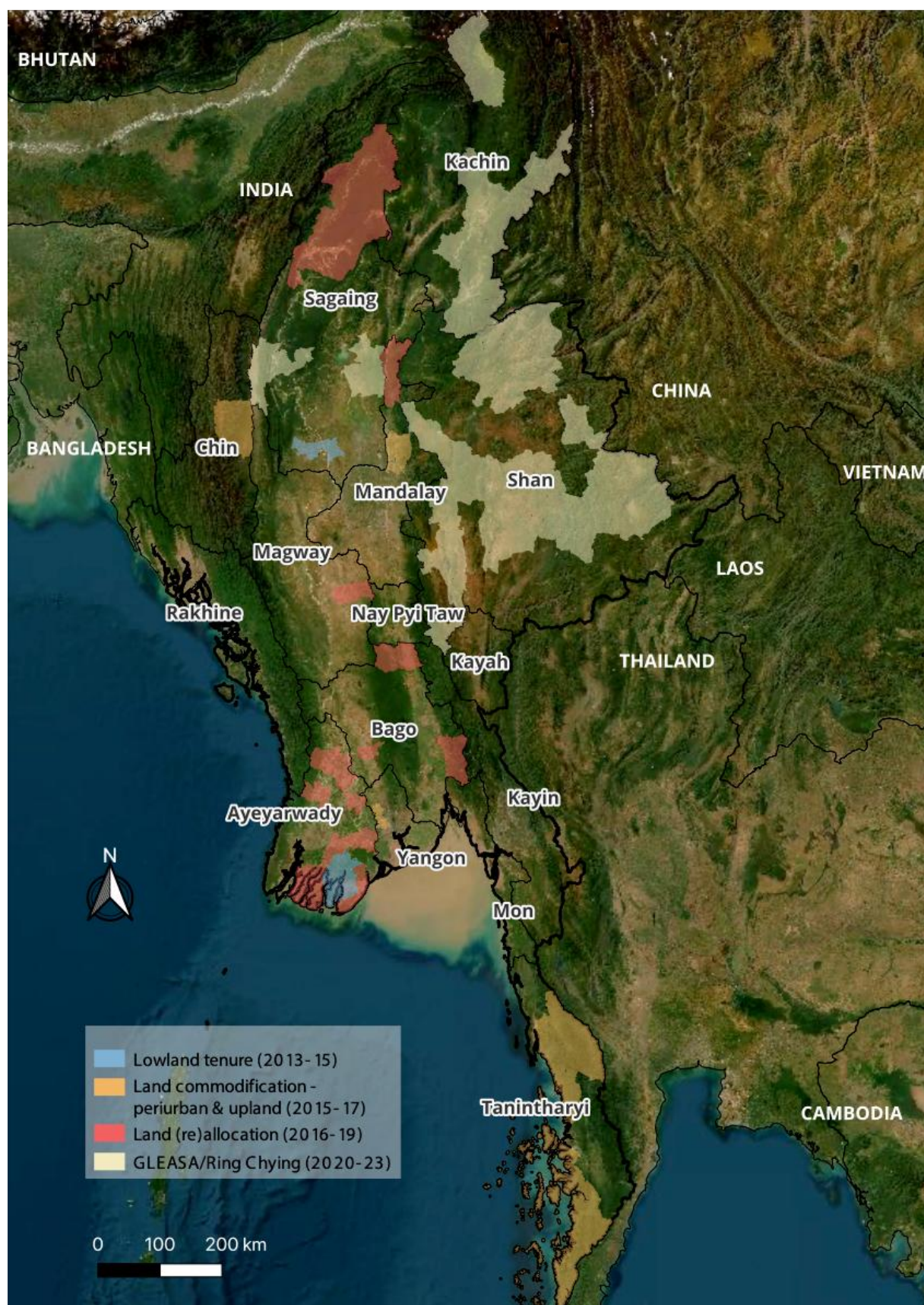


Figure 3. Map of GRET's land research program activities in Myanmar

II. Becoming (a legitimate) expert on land issues

1. Gaining a foothold in the land arena

Land governance has been one of the traditional areas of GRET's expertise around the world, built on the results of applied research and participating in reflections by internationally recognized academics.²⁰ However, in Myanmar, projects focusing on land tenure and governance could not be developed until the transition to a quasi-civil government because of their political sensitivity. GRET's activities in the country had until this period consisted mainly in agricultural development, microfinance, water and sanitation projects in different parts of the country (Ayeyarwady, and Sagaing Regions, Rakhine and Chin States, Mandalay city). This said, GRET project teams could witness – notably in Rakhine State – the strong wave of land confiscations as a result of the combination of military authoritarianism and liberalization that characterized the 1990s and 2000s (Deline 2009, 20–21). In Chin State, GRET would also look at land access dynamics in the development of paddy terraces which was then promoted by NGOs in the 2000s.

With the political transition, room was given to open new debates about land governance, thrust by the multiple reforms engaged by the partly elected Thein Sein government. As most of the organizations whose work had long dealt with food security issues in Myanmar, GRET was part of the Food Security Working Group (FSWG), an NGO platform and networking meant for coordination and joint learning in the “food security” sector. It gave birth to the Land Core Group (LCG) in 2010, early in the political and social reform process, as a network²¹ of civil society organizations, local and international NGOs who had an interest in influencing ongoing legal reform on land. It is through such connections that GRET contributed to the implementation of the first contemporary²² field-based documentation of upland customary tenure systems (CTS) of Chin and Shan States (Ewers Anderson 2015). The objectives were to develop evidence-based recommendations for the recognition of customary communal tenure and to define procedures for codifying this tenure system under statutory law. Indeed, the 2012 VFV Law merely reinstated provisions of the 1991 Wasteland Instructions, defaulting land without statutory protection to the VFV category, that is most of land cultivated under CTS. Protection of upland CTS and restorative justice for farmers whose land was unrightfully confiscated represented the two main sectors of activities. Mostly ethnic CSOs were active in the field of documenting and protecting customary land, while Bamar (i.e.. the Burmese majority population of the lowlands) CSOs mostly worked in supporting and defending claims of farmers seeking land returns and/or compensations – thus reflecting the historical divide between lowland Myanmar and upland areas inhabited by a variety of ethnic minorities and often contested by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). These CSOs generally operated with the financial support and technical guidance of international NGOs. Regarding the implementation of the farmland law 2012, which legalized land transfers and provisioned the distribution of new land use certificates (LUCs), also widely known as Form-7), existing studies focused mainly on the legal and institutional frameworks.

²⁰ See, among others, Chauveau and Jacob 2006; Lavigne Delville 1998; Le Meur 2002; Colin, Lavigne Delville, and Léonard 2022.

²¹ In 2015, the LCG was dissolved as a working group and set-up as an NGO of its own.

²² FSWG published in 2011 an overview of trends impacting upland tenure systems, mostly based on desk reviews and interviews with its members (FSWG 2011, 2). Older documentation about Myanmar upland tenure systems was written by colonial rulers, and few analyses were done by anthropologists after independence, such as Lehman (1963).

GRET projects in Myanmar thus followed the wider transformation of the development sector, from technical topics (agricultural extension, micro-credit, irrigation, food security) toward programs centered on more political issues such as land governance. However, some constraints remained, notably in the form of the MoU signed with the national government. For its operations, GRET had secured a MoU with the Ministry of Agriculture. Although being one of the main government stakeholders in the land reform, the Ministry of Agriculture was also among the most conservative. Comparatively, the Ministry in charge of forests, because it manages only land under forest status (that is 25% of national land),²³ had less stakes in land reforms than the Ministry of Agriculture and could adopt a more progressive view. Therefore, extending GRET's activities to land governance studies had to be introduced carefully to the Ministry of Agriculture, notably by rendering these "technical" (Li 2007). This also motivated the choice not to tackle the highly sensitive and publicized issue of land grabbing. This was especially true in the Dry Zone, where the Letpadaung copper mine was already a point of contention in 2012, between the government and farmers expropriated for the project.

Beyond issues of restorative justice for farmers whose land was confiscated and of protecting customary land tenure systems, there was a glaring lack of data regarding the impact of past policies on land dynamics at the village or household levels. Post-colonial academic publications about Myanmar agricultural sector up to 2010 were essentially macro-level political economy studies,²⁴ with the exception of a few anthropological works.²⁵ Between 2010 and 2013, that is in the wake of the so-called political "transition" (2012-2021), the Food Security Working Group and Land Core Group were responsible for a few publications focusing mostly on upland tenure security²⁶ and legal reviews following the enactment of new land laws in 2012.²⁷ Yet, these studies often remained macro-level analyses, and focused on interventions of agrobusinesses, large investors and government policies. Albeit their contribution to understanding the factors impacting farmers' livelihoods (land grabbing issues, agricultural policies, non-pro-poor investment policies, etc.), ethnographic descriptions of land tenure and land rights at the local level were lacking in the contemporary literature on land tenure in Myanmar.

Whilst donors were eager to support reform processes and land policy formulation, they were aware of these knowledge gaps. Some Western donors notably provided financial and technical support to the government bodies tasked with drafting the future National Land Use Policy (Mark 2023, 57–58). Although the explicit goals of the land reforms initiated by the government were "to provide land tenure security to farmers and to promote land-based investment" (Mark 2023, 3), on the ground these objectives were often contradictory as investments were led by domestic economic actors (amongst whom a majority with ties to the former military government) with little regards for the wellbeing of smallholder farmers. Some scholars even argue that international actors working in Myanmar endorsed a development agenda focused on efficiency and economic growth, which drove rural populations into unstable economic conditions in urban areas (Campbell 2022).

Thus, GRET could develop its first land studies in a landscape that was then relatively unexplored by researchers. The organization submitted its first land research proposal to the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT) under an "Innovation window" – that is, not a competitive call for proposal focused on

²³ Mark (2023, 58).

²⁴ See among others Adas (2011), Fujita and Okamoto (2006), Khin Maung Kyi (1975), Mya Than (2000), Myat Thein (1997), Saitō (1981).

²⁵ See Lehman (1963), Pfanner (1962), Thawngmung (2004).

²⁶ See for example FSWG (2010; 2011).

²⁷ Obendorf (2012).

specific approaches and/or actions imposed by the donor. GRET's opportunity to study land issues in Myanmar was assessed by in-country GRET staff already working in the agricultural development sector and who had developed good relationships with the European Union, at that time the main donor of the LIFT consortium. GRET's positioning on the LIFT's Innovation Window funding stemmed from the informal discussions that had taken place at the time about donors' interest in supporting land policy reforms and the production of knowledge about land issues in Myanmar.

Without wishing to delude oneself about the impossible neutrality (in relation to land policies or the expectations of the donor) of service expertise (Lavigne Delville and Le Meur 2022, 949), the design of the first GRET project was largely motivated by the idea that the knowledge required to formulate informed debates needed to be generated *independently* from the agendas of both the government and international donors. The main objectives of this project entitled "Understanding rural land issues to engage comprehensive policy dialogue in Myanmar" were to document the social processes leading to land insecurity and those leading to investment and sustainable use of land by rural populations. The study also aimed at tackling issues such as land markets and their impact on equity, the dynamics of landlessness or the interaction between state intervention and local authorities in current land tenure regulations. We decided to undertake this study in the two main rice-producing areas of the central Dry Zone and the Ayeyarwady delta, where GRET was already running agricultural development projects.

LIFT's openness and inclination toward a qualitative research program matched with its long-term (20 to 30 years) perspective of contributing to the country's development. Particularly, LIFT sought the keys to understanding needed to reform an administration characterized by a weak capacity to implement laws and a high degree of opacity in its operations²⁸. LIFT's positioning enabled us to come with a genuine research project initially planned for a 14-months period – which contrasts with the usual time constraints of expertise (Lavigne Delville and Le Meur 2022). The project, launched in May 2013 then benefited from a no-cost extension to cope with the initial difficulties to find local researchers and train them on land issues. By the end of this first research, the fact that LIFT accepted another proposal for, this time, a cost extension to the initial project, was a first step in endorsing our approach. The whole process was not exempt from some negotiations with the donor, notably around issues of coordination with other LIFT-funded partners working on land, dissemination of findings and capacity building of national land actors (local NGOs and CSOs), but was overall very flexible.

GRET's inclusion in the land arena was therefore built on a research project with the aim of producing knowledge that could fuel policy debates on land tenure in Myanmar. GRET history of studies on land governance in many countries surely contributed to the acceptance of the project by international donors sitting at the LIFT board. GRET HQ's operational backup and part-time oversight of the project by a GRET employee newly arrived in Myanmar embodied this heritage of land expertise. GRET had, however, a limited understanding of the fast-growing land arena and the power relationships at work between its different stakeholders in 2012-13. Conversely, most national organizations involved in the land sector had no or little knowledge of GRET, other than its rather "technical" work as an INGO on agricultural and rural development in Myanmar since 1995. Therefore, public legitimacy remained to be built with these actors.

²⁸ LIFT's former officer, personal communication.

2. Building a public legitimacy

Being an independent agency with its own “proven” expertise does not suffice to build public legitimacy, especially in newly democratized regimes. After all, Thein Sein's government (2011-2016) came to power through an election that most observers described as irregular, and the transition from a military dictatorship to a so-called “democratic” government (where 25% of MPs remained appointed by the military) was introduced by the military rulers themselves through the 2008 constitution (itself supposedly approved by a referendum held in the wake of Cyclone Nargis). In such a context, many national stakeholders, activist organizations in particular, viewed any form of collaboration with the government as suspicious. We were keen to distinguish ourselves from the broad category of ‘international organizations’, generally seen as reformists willing to support, rather than opposing, government policies, as opposed to national activist organizations (see section 3). It led to the idea of exploring how past and current land policies impacted smallholder-farmers through in-depth qualitative and quantitative studies whose outcomes could be debated in both reformist and activist circles.

The set-up of the research team also played a role in defining GRET's positionality and identity in the land arena. The research team was led by an international anthropologist, fluent in Burmese, although totally unfamiliar with land issues. He was seconded by a GRET employee acting as technical adviser who, although newly arrived in the country, had her own expertise of land and agricultural issues. Each of the two spatial components of the study (Central Dry Zone and Ayeyarwady Delta) were overseen by a Burmese national, one being an experienced agronomist, and the other an anthropologist. Surveyors were recruited locally so they already had a general knowledge of the region where they would work, although they were not necessarily familiar with land issues. Therefore, whence attending land forums, the fact that the team leader was fluent in Burmese on the one hand, and in a learning position toward land related issues on the other, helped gaining sympathy from national organizations. GRET's international expertise, represented by the team's technical adviser, helped to forge links with international expert organizations. Those links were further tightened through the set-up of an advisory committee in order to provide advice on the study's action plan, activities and orientations. This committee comprised members of international “expert” organizations (LIFT, UN-Habitat's LAMP Project) and representatives of the LCG network, all aiming to engage in land-related policy and law formulation. The project also involved the University of Dagon, from which two master students did their thesis within the project's framework, highlighting the team's interest in building an academic identity in the project.

This academic identity was also reflected in the design of the methodology, developed with the support of an experienced French geographer working on South East Asia and land issues. The study itself was conceived in three phases: a first exploratory one, to gain a general knowledge of villages' socioeconomic conditions, farming practices and trends regarding land access, accumulation, etc. ; after selecting villages to include some diversity of situations (such as the distance from town and administrative services, salinity in the delta, agrarian practices, landlessness rate), the second phase was dedicated to an in-depth socio-anthropological study; a quantitative survey including all the households of selected villages was implemented in the third phase. Altogether, this research project lasted two years, including consultation workshops with a variety of stakeholders at different stages. Right from the start, the project also sought legitimacy through consultation with other stakeholders interested in land issues, notably on the core research issues to look into.

The set-up, methodology and timeframe described above were crucial in defining GRET's land program as a research project, which design and outcomes were discussed at different workshops seeking inputs from a wide range of stakeholders including national organizations, international agencies, NGOs, and donors. Its

legitimacy, especially toward internationally trained Myanmar experts, was further enhanced through the quantitative phase of the study. Indeed, public perception of different sciences situate quantitative disciplines at the top and – qualitative – social sciences at the bottom (L. D. Smith et al. 2000). This perceived hardness impacts in turn on the public legitimacy granted to a project and/or organization (Fjørtoft and Michailidou 2021). GRET's legitimacy in the land arena was thus built on a mix of evidence-based arguments and accountability to other organizations consulted throughout the design, conduct and findings restitution steps of the study. The academic nature of the project was finally formalized with the production of a first peer-reviewed publication, laying the foundations for a dedicated GRET edition entitled *Of Lives and Land Myanmar* research series.²⁹ This peer-review process also established the program's legitimacy. GRET's land program therefore acquired a strong identity as a research program rooted in the realities of small farmers' practices.

The program's first outcomes made it possible to build bridges with both activist and reformist organizations. For instance, it enabled us to investigate the causes behind extremely high landlessness rates across Myanmar lowlands (59.5% in Delta, 41% in Dry Zone) – much higher than in any other Southeast Asian country.³⁰ Importantly, the study concluded that such rates were linked to past agrarian policies leading to indebtedness and village-based “intimate exclusion” (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011) – as the result of agrarian class formation, face-to-face relationships between villagers, and more largely the processes through which social intimates exclude each other from access to agricultural land – rather than large-scale land grabs and evictions (Boutry et al. 2017). This led us to suggest adopting an across-the-board land size ceiling to address and regulate land concentration, a recommendation shared by some activist networks such as LIOH (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju 2021, 503). Though such recommendations would put us at odds with some international experts of neoliberal thought – for whom such land ceiling was understood as a barrier for investment and economic development – reflections on improving the implementation of existing laws through reforming, for example, village-level Farmland Management Bodies in order to improve impartiality in land conflict resolution, also helped to keep up exchanges with reformist organizations.

3. Embracing methodological ambivalence

Unpacking existing concepts and categorizations such as “the landless” became a methodological trademark of GRET's land program (see also section 3). Beyond explaining high rates of landlessness, we showed that this category encompasses a high diversity of livelihoods, economic situations and agrarian trajectories. For instance, we showed that among the rural households having no access to farmland at a given time, less than half of them may be in need of, but excluded from, accessing land. The other landless households comprise young families who should later access farmland through inheritance and others relying on different livelihoods (mainly fishing in the Delta and weaving in Dry Zone). This study also concludes that providing land to landless households under current circumstances would entail a wider agrarian reform placing a ceiling on land holdings given the high rates of land concentration and the closure of the land front in lowland areas (Boutry et al. 2017). Indeed, it was already clear at that time that lands supposed to be vacant and classified as “Vacant, Fallow and Virgin” (VFV) on cadastral maps were either already cultivated on the ground or of very low agricultural interest (because of low fertility, remoteness, etc.). Finally, this study shows that in the Ayeyarwady

²⁹ This edition led to two publications only (cf. Boutry et al. 2017; 2018).

³⁰ For instance, in Cambodia, landless farmers make up 28% of the rural population (Phann et al. 2015) while in Vietnam, landlessness rates among rural households are estimated at 12% (Mellac and Castellonet 2015).

Delta families relying principally on agriculture cultivate a minimum of five to six acres of paddy land. These reflections on landlessness and land productivity would become part of GRET's expertise as acknowledged by other land stakeholders and later be mobilized in a more applied expertise (see section 3).

More broadly, we tried to cultivate a methodological ambivalence, that is not taking polarities for granted, as mere descriptions of the state of things (Kierans and Bell 2017). It is indeed the scientists' task to question and very often deconstruct established categorizations and, more importantly, to avoid polarities as they tend to impose a moral hierarchy of legitimate objects of research (Fassin 2012). For example, the opposition – often described in terms of 'oppression' – between the country's Bamar majority and its so-called 'ethnic' minorities; or the conception of the immutable, reasoned management of customary land systems in the face of the predations permitted by the government's legal framework. For instance, the decades of ethnic politics (M. Smith 1991) fostered by post-independence military governments have largely infused debates in the land arena. In particular, these debates were polarized around the opposition between the national land legal framework – ostensibly focused on lowland farming practices – and the customary land tenure systems governing the bulk of farming practices in mountainous areas. As a matter of fact, the national land legal framework was essentially developed to administer Burmese (here in the sense of the ethnic Burmese majority) lowlands, and particularly irrigated paddy land (Boutry et al. 2017; Boutry 2022). Under this framework, non-mapped areas were considered as “wastelands” under the 1991 Wastelands instructions (and later rebranded as VFV land through the 2012 land reform). From the British Empire seeking to territorialize land for revenue extraction to the post-independence central government seeking control of insurgent areas and the generation of new revenues through foreign investments (after 1990), the wasteland/VFV land laws were central in the political construction of Burma (Ferguson 2014). The country's political transformation of the 2010s made it possible for ethnic-based CSOs to document their customary land tenure systems and advocate for their recognition by the central government. If these attempts led to the recognition of a “customary land” category in the 2016 National Land Use Planning, the only actual translation into the legal apparatus was the exemption of “customarily owned land” from the VFV land category as per the 2018 amended VFV law. However, several studies showed that in practice, it is almost impossible to claim customarily owned land under the VFV law (Boutry and Mya Darli Thant 2022). In parallel with such discussions, and as mentioned earlier in section 1.2, Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Mon National Development Party started the formulation and even the implementation (for the KNU) of their own land laws and policies. These legal frameworks generally combine indigenous claims to land and resource management.

This historical and political context led to a strong polarization of debates where ethnic CSOs generally perceived the national land legal framework as against ethnic minorities' interests. Practice also showed that until the military coup of 2021, land institutions from the central government (and particularly the Ministry of Agriculture) had a very limited interest in formally recognizing customary land tenure systems as part of country-wide land governance. Such polarization of debates nonetheless tended to conceal ground realities of farmers who often have to navigate both the national framework and their own customary land systems. This is the case of Northern Chin smallholder farmers living in villages around Hakha town, who managed to integrate individual use rights on paddy terraces introduced through government-led projects to their own customary systems which privileges collective ownership of land (Boutry et al. 2018). This is also the case of Karen swidden cultivators in Tanintharyi region who would seek land titles from both the KNU and the national government authorities. But more importantly, such studies would expose the irrelevance of the opposition between the national land system and customary ones, for instance putting Karen smallholder farmers at odds

with the KNU institution supposed to represent their interests. This is the case for Karen households impoverished by decades of civil war, resorting on clearing and selling hill land to Burmese (*bamar*) farmers in order to generate incomes, whilst selling “Karen land” to non-Karen individuals is discouraged³¹ under the KNU’s land legal framework (Boutry *et al.* 2018).

The desire to emancipate ourselves from the mainstream topics of land programs (national land policy and law reform, documentation of customary land systems, land confiscations...) also fostered the design of projects aimed at filling knowledge gaps on overlooked issues. One of them was the development of a very dynamic land market concomitant to the enactment of the farmland law (2012) which allowed transfers (mortgage, sale, rent) after decades of tight control by the government. Prior to 2012, farmers could officially only transfer their land through inheritance, and most land transfers were informal. After 2012, land transactions were particularly numerous in peri-urban areas, in demand of new residential lands to accommodate a growing urban population, and land use conversion processes fueled further speculation. Such issues were covered by two studies dealing with peri-urban land issues in Yangon and Mandalay (the two biggest cities of the country). This research notably pointed out that the land market enabled farming households to sell high value-added peri-urban farmland in order to reinvest in land that may be further away, but is often also more productive – which is particularly the case of low lying peri-urban fields of Yangon. It also showed a great gap between planned urbanization – mostly benefiting elites at the expense of smallholder farmers – and local dynamics of “incremental urbanization” which take greater account of ground realities (such as the – lack of – access to irrigation, agricultural land productivity, cheap housing needs, etc.).

To conclude this first section, the gradual and incremental diversification of research topics was led by the desire to work on invisibilized topics and address the blind spots in the political debate on land issues. The seven in-depth studies of land tenure dynamics – in rural lowlands, peri-urban areas, Chin and Karen (Tanintharyi) uplands and in islands off the coast of Tanintharyi region – produced under the in-depth research component of the land program further cemented GRET’s reputation as a producer of high-quality research in all circles of stakeholders in the land tenure arena. This being said, not all circles accessed GRET’s research outputs through the same media. In-depth and therefore lengthy written outputs were mostly integrated into the work of other academics, though they also contributed to a better understanding of the Myanmar context by donors, INGOs, IOs and development agencies. Yangon Agricultural University and Mandalay University also expressed interest in developing land administration units or modules that could be included in their curricula. Shorter written outcomes (executive summaries, policy briefs) but especially findings’ restitution workshops were key ways of raising awareness among national CSOs of the issues highlighted in our research. Some of our findings on landlessness, notably, were presented at CSOs training held within the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) program, implemented by GRET.

On the other hand, the offbeat nature of the researched topics complexified the translation of findings into turn-key policy recommendations and bringing these subjects out beyond our own studies was not a straightforward process. Among other examples, a Myanmar National Housing Policy White Paper indicates

³¹ As per the KNU Land Policy, the transfer of land use rights are subject notably to the determination by the Karen Agricultural Department that “prior to the transfer of any use rights, the original user has in good faith attempted to contract with: first, [...] a relative from the same village who is qualified; second, [...] a non-relative in the village who is qualified; and third, [a] person [who], if qualified, [is] currently employed as a laborer on the farm” (KNU 2015).

that our studies on peri-urban informal land markets (Boutry et al. 2015; 2016) remained the only existing ones on this topic even several years after they were released (RoUM 2020).

Above all, the methodology we developed during these initial land studies became the hallmark of GRET's expertise, serving as a foundation for connecting our work with other forms of expertise, as explored in the following two sections.

III. Engaging with the state: the land reallocation issue

This section explores our shift from knowledge producers to commissioned experts assessing land tenure on sites identified by the state for potential reallocations. We eventually took on a monitoring role in a government-led land reallocation project. This transition marked our move toward something akin to an “expertise of engagement,” requiring constant negotiation of our position with officials, donors, NGOs and CSOs. With the NLD's rise to power in 2016, donors increasingly sought collaboration with government stakeholders. Around the same time, Landesa, a U.S.-based NGO newly operating in Myanmar, leveraged political ties to promote a “land to the landless” scheme with the NLD and Ayeyarwady's regional government. While LIFT considered supporting this, concerns about Landesa's inexperience in Myanmar and the risks of complexifying the existing land restitution agenda led to caution. Our established expertise in Ayeyarwady eventually enabled us to negotiate a new component to our LIFT-funded project: assessing land tenure on targeted reallocation sites.

The 2012 Farmland Law, which launched a nationwide land titling effort, added to a complex legal landscape and brought numerous land claims and long-standing conflicts to light (Mark 2016). This occurred amid Myanmar's political transition in the context of a largely agrarian economy where past authoritarian regimes had carried out widespread land confiscations. As public space began to open, various actors (farming unions, activists, CSOs, and new MPs) started demanding land restitution. Dispossession thus emerged as both a legacy and hallmark of the former regime. In 2012, the Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission (PLIC) was established³² to collect complaints, producing reports but lacking authority to resolve disputes. Responsibility for action rested with the Ministry of Home Affairs via the General Administration Department (GAD). Most confiscations dated back to before 2011, often involving opaque deals with the military, companies, cronies, and state departments. After taking office in 2016, the NLD pledged to return “illegally lost land”, dissolved the PLIC and formed the Central Reinvestigation Committee for Agricultural and Other Confiscated Land, vowing to resolve all cases within six months. Land Reinvestigation Committees (LRCs) were then established at every administrative level nationwide.

The issue of land reallocation conflated at least two problems: that of restituting confiscated and unused land to its “original owners” (*mula paing-shin*) and that of allocating land to “landless” (*leh-yar-meh*). Both were political promises and ways to frame the problem. The first problem started to be addressed by the Thein Sein administration, and the second one was added by the NLD government. Besides, they also became entangled with debates and controversies around the issue of VFV land: a category that allowed the state to ignore local usages and allocate land at will as per the ‘moment's interests’ (Allaverdian 2025; Ferguson 2014). None of these issues was actually resolved and we often faced a combination of them unraveling where we did

³² Union Parliament Decree No. 52/2012 in August 2012.

fieldwork: the land that could be found ‘vacant’ by state agencies, and thus that could be reallocated, were often part of the land previously confiscated (and unused) by the state.

The politicization of the problem of confiscated land was marked by the rise of peasant organizations and more or less structured social movements, a certain porosity between these movements and the newly elected regional parliamentarians, and the proliferation of plow protests, that is protests involving the plowing and occupation of fields as a means to assert original owners precedence (Allaverdian 2024; Huard 2020; Huard and Mya Darli Thant forthcoming).³³

Our work on land reallocation can be divided into three phases. The first phase involves exploratory surveys and informed assessments of local preselected land allocation sites in the Ayeyarwady region, in collaboration with Landesa. In the second phase, we surveyed sites pre-selected by the Ministry of Agriculture in three other regions (Magway, Sagaing, and Mandalay) for a potential land project funded by LIFT. The final phase involves independent monitoring of the implementation of a land reallocation project in the Magway region.

1. Exploring land reallocation sites

Our engagement in land restitution began in 2016, amid growing national and international interest in land reform. International NGOs like Landesa and Namati advocated for pro-poor land policies, including land distribution to landless families (Namati & Landesa 2015). While Namati focused on grassroots legal empowerment, Landesa, with roots in U.S. Cold War-era land programs in Vietnam, brought global experience in micro-plot distribution. Although it’s unclear how the NLD adopted the land-to-the-landless agenda, Landesa quickly became its key technical partner. This approach often clashed with the promise to return land to original owners. Landesa nonetheless built influence from the top through international exchanges, donor-funded projects, and policy support (including drafting land policy, training NLD leaders, and advising on responsible land investment).

Landesa’s recent arrival in Myanmar and its push to redistribute land to the landless, despite limited understanding of local land dynamics, raised concerns among donors like LIFT. In May 2016, at a Landesa-led meeting with the Ayeyarwady regional government, attended by GRET, LCG, and LIFT, officials confidently claimed to have identified large tracts of land for allocation³⁴ and requested LIFT’s support for agricultural development. A field visit to one of three proposed pilot sites in Maubin was followed by the sudden addition of a fourth site in Pyapon which was formerly a state-owned farm of 1,326 acres and the site of a plow protest in the past. This larger site soon became the centerpiece of Landesa’s land-to-the-landless initiative and its proof of concept for scaling the program.

At LIFT’s request, LCG, GRET, and Namati, supported by MRLG and ASDO, conducted an initial study in 2016 on two pilot sites: Maubin and Pyapon (Pierce & Huard 2016). GRET played a key role in developing the land assessment methodology, focusing on local land histories, conflicts, and stakeholder claims. In

³³ Several farmer organizations and activist networks such as the Myanmar Farmers Development Party (Taung Thu Lei Tha Mar Toe Tet Yay Party in Myanmar), the Farmer Network Association (Taung Thu Lei Tha Mar Kun Yet in Myanmar) as well as political parties (including the National League for Democracy NLD) were very active in promoting farmers’ rights and supporting farmers to organize plow protests to claim land rights in the Ayeyarwady Region (Prasse-Freeman 2023).

³⁴ The figure could not be recalled exactly, but it was a six-figure figure, which surprised most of the land experts in the room, given that the region was already densely populated and had very little vacant land.

Maubin, land redistribution to the 'landless' appeared unjust to many given strong claims by dispossessed original owners (Huard 2020). In Pyapon, the larger land area allowed for a mixed redistribution, including some plow protesters, original claimants, and landless families, though some original owners were excluded. Overall, the findings show the contested nature of land claims, the need to critically define the 'landless' category, and the importance of a clear mechanism for conflict resolution.³⁵

The confusion surrounding the political orientation of the land allocation (towards the original owners or towards the landless) and the numerous forms of tenancy and competing land claims highlighted in the surveys prompted LIFT (who was still exploring funding options for Landesa to support its scheme) and the networks of actors working on land to call for 'independent' assessments as a precautionary measure. This led to the scaling up of land assessments in 15 other Ayeyarwady sites identified by the regional government for land allocation. The study results were intended to be used by the Ayeyarwaddy regional government, Landesa, and LIFT to develop their respective project proposals and contributions to the initiative. Initially, the selection of the sites was opaque to us, and the complexity of the local situations varied depending on the levels of land pressure, the history of settlement, and the forms of dispossession and access that had developed since the 1960s.

Our investigation was divided into two phases. First, a pre-assessment by a team researcher evaluated the feasibility of land distribution to the landless, based on land characteristics and local socio-political dynamics. Sites with high conflict potential were excluded. Selected sites then underwent a more comprehensive assessment involving 5–7 researchers over several days. These assessments aimed to: 1) identify land claims and conflict risks by tracing land and settlement histories; 2) analyze resource use and its role in local livelihoods; 3) assess legal status and physical condition of the land; and 4) examine grassroots impacts of ongoing allocation processes. Findings were systematically shared with civil society, local authorities, and MPs at various administrative levels (see section 4.1).

On the ground, Landesa had minimal field presence and played no active advisory or technical role in local land allocation. In reality, land appropriation was already unfolding through specific frontier dynamics (Allaverdian 2023; 2024), independent of both the Regional Government and Landesa. As such, our advisory role lost relevance. However, GRET continued the assessments, recognizing the opportunity to deeply analyze land conflict dynamics tied to reallocation initiatives. The dual issue on returning confiscated land and redistributing it to the landless allowed us to describe local realities, actors, and tenure arrangements. This experience also enabled us to research issues of higher political intensity that would otherwise have attracted the suspicion of local authorities, opened the way to accusations of complicity (with farmers' unions) or even being labeled as belonging to the "activist" category. As an INGO with a commitment to academic independence, we navigated a fine line between engaged research, development work, and political autonomy—while managing to build direct relationships with regional and township authorities, including SLRD, MPs, and GAD.

In 2017, GRET's land team was still involved in conducting land assessments, further refining the methodology to ensure inclusion of all key stakeholders and thorough conflict risk analysis. With LIFT's backing, we secured field authorizations that allowed interviews with land administration officials, line departments, and state farm

³⁵ The aim was 1) to document the potential problems associated with land reallocation in terms of risks and strategies for managing the risks associated with agrarian reform; 2) to provide criteria for identifying target beneficiaries, including the different types of "landless"; and 3) to advise whether the pilot program should be undertaken in the proposed pilot sites.

managers. Our position remained one of cautious engagement: maintaining independence from government and offering an alternative vision of development to organizations like Landesa, whose goals we did not fully share. This stance was reflected in field interactions, survey coordination, and the recommendations we issued. These emphasized resolving existing conflicts before reallocating land, critically unpacking terms like ‘landless’, ‘public land’, and ‘vacant land’, clarifying redistribution objectives, and promoting transparent, inclusive consultations to reduce conflict and prevent collusion. They invited consideration of complex local realities that diverged significantly from the observations and analyses used to justify development actions. They also emphasized technical elements, such as promoting water management and improving access to credit for landless households in the Ayeyarwady delta.

2. Assessing the land situation on potential sites

The next phase involved a second round of land assessments on sites identified by the Ministry of Agriculture’s Department of Planning, following the methodology developed earlier. This occurred amid growing political divergence: while the Central Land Reinvestigation Committee was tasked with returning confiscated land, the NLD government advanced further its land-to-the-landless policy. As a result, the ‘landless’ category gained prominence in land reform. On the ground, however, reallocation efforts were deeply entangled with broader justice issues, including securing tenure after the 2012 titling program and addressing past land confiscations under military rule (Mark & Belton, 2020).

Like other donors at the time, LIFT sought closer engagement with the government, even appointing a Ministry of Agriculture representative to its fund board. A key entry point was the Department of Planning (DoP), which hosted an international advisor instrumental in drafting the 2016–17 Agricultural Development Strategy. This strategy led to a DoP-led VFV land reclamation project, later funded by LIFT. In support of this, LIFT asked GRET to expand its land assessment work to new sites, selected in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture. These sites, located in Magway, Mandalay, and Sagaing Regions, included reclaimed VFV concessions and potential “virgin” lands.

For this series of assessments, it was expected that field assessments would be carried out with closer collaboration with officials. As a result, for the first survey site in Magway, GRET conducted joint fieldwork with a Union-level officer who had previously worked in the Land Administration Department. But this experience turned out to be quite terrible. One of the authors vividly recalls the sheer terror in the eyes of the villagers when they heard about a « government official from Naypyidaw » and noticed his bulky, jewel-encrusted gold ring which was an obvious expression of power and wealth. In the 1990s and 2000s, such visits by Naypyidaw ‘bosses’ usually rhymed with subsequent land grabs. Fortunately, such ‘joint’ fieldwork was not prolonged in later assessments. Besides, such officials were not particularly interested in field activities, and even less so when they discovered how low the GRET daily allowances were!

The Department of Planning quickly chose the first site (in Magway) for its project after reviewing our field memo and findings in a heated meeting in Naypyidaw (see section 4.2). The vast site, spanning over 12,000 acres, was likely perceived as a “low hanging fruit” due to its relatively low conflict intensity compared to other potential sites. This apparent ease of implementation made it an attractive option for the DoP, who was keen to secure the necessary funding for his project. However, DoP disregarded our assessments of the other (much smaller) sites, losing interest in our findings. Our work once again lost its “operational substance”. Despite this setback, we found meaning and engagement in our research, particularly in understanding land allocation dynamics and highlighting critical points of attention for local stakeholders, MPs, and authorities.

The pre-selection of sites for the second wave of assessments had notable local impacts. News of a village or township's potential qualification spread through administrative (DoA, SLRD/DALMS) and parliamentary channels, creating local expectations. Village authorities and land-related committees (like FAB) often responded with strategic narratives highlighting some issues while obscuring others to influence our perception. In the absence of clear official guidelines on how reallocation projects would be formalized, longstanding opacity in land governance persisted. This uncertainty intensified the question of who would benefit, and whose names would appear on the land recipient lists.

Our fieldwork thus involved deploying the methodology based on our longer-term studies. This methodology was designed to document the processes of invisibilization of local arrangements, people, and conflicts. With the team having gained significant fieldwork experience through prolonged fieldwork periods in the past, interpersonal ties among members had become strong. We had even developed their own vernacular terms for methods. For instance, we invented the concept of “unfocus group discussion” which occurred when, despite a tentative focus on specific interlocutors, group discussions rapidly attracted people with diverse interests in the land allocation issue. Another internalized method was “*la-pyan-bi*” (meaning “we are back again”), which became the team's motto. This Burmese expression reflected our persistent yet necessary investigative approach to visit local authorities multiple times until they finally provided requested information or official documents they were withholding on land matters.

Our role as ‘informed evaluators’ backed by a donor consortium closely linked to key government branches granted us access to diverse political configurations, from village to central levels. This demanded the development of a politics of research (Fassin & Bensa 2008), shaped retrospectively through collective experience. Grounded in collaborative research (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1994)³⁶ between French and Burmese scholars, this approach evolved through fieldwork and partnerships with local actors like ASDO, while navigating the risk of becoming embedded in local networks. In this context, the project became a fluid assemblage of actors, institutions, and agendas centered on the emerging issue of ‘land reallocation’. Our legitimacy to be there in the field was secured through LIFT's agreements with the Department of Planning.

On site, our research politics involved managing expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and questions (Krause 2021). Our first challenge was to normalize our presence with local authorities by meeting them to explain our role in the project and the institutions involved. The goal was to show that we were part of a temporary chain of institutions, groups, and individuals in positions of authority that collectively legitimized our presence, our ability to move around, and our right to ask questions—essentially, granting us access to the villages for our research. Presenting field authorizations from regional (MoALI) or national (DoP) levels allowed us to speak both the administrative (having the proper documents) and political (having a guarantor) language of the authorities. This also helped shift some responsibility off local actors who had to follow orders but could later be blamed if problems arose and the blame couldn't be pushed back up the chain. Once inside the villages, we deliberately shed some of the formalities that had granted us access. We presented ourselves as independent researchers with no decision-making power, but with a specific agenda: to meet as many people as possible, to deploy our team widely, and to identify key actors, stories, and issues through cross-checking and triangulation within a limited timeframe.

³⁶ The main difference is that our short collective surveys were not intended to clear the way for a researcher to work on a long-term basis.

Being able to sleep in the villages was essential in that regard. Since guesthouses were rare, we usually arranged for accommodation on arrival—either through the village tract administrator, an influential villager, or a contact identified during pre-assessments or through our regional networks. Often, especially in the Delta, we stayed in homes of people actively involved in land conflicts—usually on the side demanding land access. In such polarized contexts, it was nearly impossible to avoid being perceived as aligned with one side (Huard 2020). In contrast, in less familiar areas like northern Sagaing, where we had limited research experience and fewer civil society contacts, we stayed in guesthouses. While this made evening debriefings easier, it reduced opportunities to build trust and increased the extractive feel of short-term research.

Our approach to short-term collective fieldwork in a (post)authoritarian context relied on an indexical epistemology (Ginzburg 1980), which helped us navigate and interpret the opaque, often clientelist power structures shaping local land relations. Investigating the feasibility of redistributing land to the landless inevitably drew us into zones of social tension tied to different forms of justice—procedural, recognition, and redistributive (Fraser 2005)—which were intensifying and becoming more visible amid the country’s political opening. In this kind of ‘minefield’ (Albera 2001), the sensitivity of the topic shaped the type of assemblage required to access the field. It also led to a form of fieldwork that at times resembled judicial or journalistic investigation: to understand a local land situation, we had to retrace complex networks of action and responsibility—often hidden, coercive, or shaped by patron-client dynamics—that governed resource access. In short, understanding who had access to what, why, and how meant engaging with local political configurations. These configurations were often left out of official memos and reports unless we aimed to explicitly highlight problematic forms of collusion that needed to be addressed to resolve disputes or prevent new conflicts during land reallocation.

The studies primarily focused on the history of the targeted land and other contested areas, examining forms of resource access and rights transfers to identify the main “forces of exclusion” (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). At the same time, we remained attentive to non-land dimensions of local life: social stratification, economic activity chains, dependency relations, and village histories. Our approach was based on interviews, aiming to meet key and hard-to-reach individuals, while multiplying perspectives to trace oppositions and their genealogies. We also collected available documents, enabling us to compare oral and written narratives and reconstruct ownership changes, administrative arrangements, and evolving access to the land.

As our understanding deepened, we repeatedly met with key informants to refine our analysis and embed facts within the local historical context. Access to government data, like cadastral maps, was often limited, and authorities were sometimes reluctant to share information. Where private companies were involved, gaining their perspectives proved equally difficult. Two-thirds of the sites we studied had histories of land confiscation, some as far back as the 1970s, but most during the 1990s and 2000s, involving state agencies, public farms, or private firms. In three Ayeyarwady cases, plough protests in 2012–2013 by original landowners demanding restitution helped prompt the inclusion of these sites in reallocation plans.

The fieldwork resulted in a series of unpublished memos and reports, tailored to meet the demand for expertise but also to reflect the complexity of local land tenure histories and actor dynamics. The more detailed reports³⁷

³⁷ Overall, the 28 land assessments that had been conducted varied greatly in scope, depth and detail of documentation. Nine had been documented as brief memos. Eleven were documented typically as simple three to four-page pre-assessment reports summarizing land tenure history, disputes and conflicting claims. These provided summary background information to be considered prior to future re-allocation programs. The remaining seven were more comprehensively

included land suitability assessments, analysis of beneficiary lists, and documentation of conflicting claims. While we produced technical, legal, political, and procedural recommendations, such as clarifying project objectives and reviewing beneficiary lists, we were often uneasy writing them, aware of the sensitivity of our findings.

A central challenge was defining how far we could go in mapping the geography of responsibilities. It was essential first to clarify the political objective of the intervention: was it about temporary redistribution of wealth to the poor, providing sustainable opportunities to the landless, or resolving existing land conflicts? We once again emphasized the need to define the 'landless' category more precisely and to base beneficiary selection on villagers' socio-economic trajectories rather than a simplistic landless/landowner divide. We also recommended creating representative and inclusive monitoring committees throughout the reallocation process, along with ad hoc negotiation mechanisms to address conflicts. Our memos aimed to show what a land reallocation project might change on the ground and what kinds of conflict it could trigger. They implicitly conveyed our judgment on the feasibility of each project and suggested improvements at different stages of implementation. However, we did not produce a synthesis evaluating all sites against uniform criteria. Instead, the memos highlighted key concerns, such as land legal status, overlapping claims, interest groups, and patronage dynamics shaping beneficiary lists. These memos had limited influence on site selection, but each full assessment was followed by debriefing sessions with authorities mainly at township and district levels, and occasionally at regional or national levels.

Although the main aim of the land assessments was to support land reallocation to the landless, it intersected with other pressing problems such as addressing past dispossessions, updating land classifications based on actual use (linked to titling), and the recognition of land use and ownership on areas the state classified as "free," particularly VFV lands. These three concerns reflected different but overlapping forms of justice and were strongly voiced by civil society (Human Rights Watch 2018; Mark & Belton 2020). While the first issue sometimes led to excluding sites where original owners had strong claims, the latter two, and particularly the search for so-called "free" land, became increasingly central to land redistribution projects. Since VFV lands were often the only available option, incorporating them into a 'Pilot Project' for reallocation reframed the terms of public intervention and donor support.

3. Monitoring a land reallocation project

This third phase reflects how we recalibrated our engagement in land research by being involved in an official reclamation and reallocation project. In late 2017, one of our survey sites in Magway was officially selected for a VFV land reclamation initiative. Following a formal request from MoALI for funding the project, LIFT used our land assessment to understand the local context and flag key risks. We had highlighted that much of the so-called "vacant" land was already occupied by smallholders and recommended that any land allocation plan include regularization of these informal occupants. LIFT developed a detailed proposal to support MoALI's pilot program: *Reclamation of Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands, Re-allocation and Development by the Rural Poor*.³⁸ This three-year, \$2.3 million program aimed to create a replicable model for reallocating underused concession

studied and documented into reports both in English and Myanmar languages. Around 10 cases were also documented with powerpoint presentations.

³⁸ Cf. [REAL DEV Program](#).

land to rural poor and landless households, using participatory, inclusive, and transparent processes intended to inform future national land redistribution policies.³⁹

As mentioned above, the Magway project site was chosen because it was relatively straightforward. Over 12,000 acres of “canceled” concessions were released from companies. Some previous company employees still occupied parts of the land, while most dispossessed people had managed to take over some plots under the supervision of the company’s previous local supervisor, who yet appeared to maintain some control over land access in the area. Only a few disputes remained between former tenants/employees and original owners. There was no political intensity, and cadastral maps couldn’t reveal corrupt practices. Additionally, the Magway site involved large areas, which meant a larger number of potential beneficiaries, particularly landless people, a larger budget for the government, and potential electoral benefits for the NLD.

Yet, the program emerged at a critical juncture. Firstly, it faced the challenge of respecting the comprehensive principles of the National Land Use Policy adopted by the President’s Office in January 2016, before the National League for Democracy took office. Secondly, it needed to acknowledge and address the diverse demands of local communities, despite the restrictive legal framework in place. Beyond the Magway case, the program also had to consider how to handle land reclamation in the face of unresolved land grabs perpetrated by the military. On October 30, 2018, LIFT issued a public call for project proposals for REAL DEV, just after a public announcement regarding VFV lands. This announcement gave unauthorized occupants six months to apply for land use permits, after which they would be considered squatters and liable to eviction, fines, and jail terms. Shortly after LIFT’s call, two prominent organizations, Land In Our Hands (LIOH) and Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA),⁴⁰ published an open letter, endorsed by 346 organizations,⁴¹ protesting the program. They argued that the program would promote the government’s recently amended Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Management Law (VFV Land Law), passed on September 11, 2018. In essence, the timing of LIFT’s call for proposals coincided with the 2018 amendment and subsequent announcement of the VFV Land Law. The program became entangled in a large-scale mobilization against the amended law. Critics argued that the law was seen as legalizing land confiscations and criminalizing farmers,⁴² prompting LIOH and MATA to question why a consortium of Western international donors was developing a project that would legitimize this law.

³⁹ It included the assessment of identified land concessions, the analysis of reclamation processes, the engagement and capacity building of stakeholders, a cadastral survey of land parcels and the issuing of land certificates to identified beneficiaries, followed by livelihood and agriculture productivity activities for farmers who were allocated land.

⁴⁰ These organizations presented themselves in the following way: “LIOH is a national land movement platform with more than 400 members & allies across the country. MATA is a civil society alliance with 418 members & allies that support civil society actors to collaboratively advocate for transparency and accountability in all sectors across Myanmar” (LIOH and MATA 2018).

⁴¹ https://lioh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Joint_statement_LIOH_MATAMM.pdf

⁴² Section 22(b) of the 2018 VFV law requires users to register the land in accordance with specifications within 6 months after the enactment of the law. According to section 27(a), anyone using the vacant, fallow & virgin land without permission of the Central Committee shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or with fine not exceeding Kyat five lakhs or with both, as they violate the section 22(b-iii). On 30 September 2018 the Vacant, Fallow & Virgin Land Management Central Committee issued a letter notifying the public that the persons and organizations currently using the vacant, fallow & virgin land without permission from the Central Committee must register the land.

https://lioh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LIOH_MATA_Statement_20181116.pdf

LIFT was required to clarify its engagement with the government in light of these critics. It met with key land organizations to hear their concerns, and with the Union Minister of MoALI to discuss both the program and proposed amendments to the VFV law. LIFT also convened a public meeting with civil society, NGOs, and UN agencies, which led to changing the program's title and to clarify its intent to avoid misunderstandings. The main outcome of these consultations was the recognition of the need for a strong risk management strategy to ensure the program aligned with its stated goals and protected the land tenure security of smallholders and rural communities, including ethnic minorities. A key recommendation was the involvement of an independent third party to monitor implementation and provide feedback. In response, LIFT established the Monitoring And Documentation Mechanism (MADM) to accompany and oversee the REAL DEV land tenure component.

When the REAL DEV program call for proposals was published, GRET was invited by donors and national organizations to consider becoming an implementing partner. The program, framed as a pilot to demonstrate land redistribution aligned with the NLUP, seemed like a natural fit for GRET. However, after internal discussion, we chose not to apply. Despite encouragement from GRET Headquarters, we declined for several reasons: (1) to avoid direct involvement in a politically sensitive and controversial project; (2) to steer clear of the risks tied to working under MoALI on land distribution (we were skeptical about any external actor's ability to influence MoALI's approach); and (3) to avoid accountability for activities outside our control. We were wary of being placed in an ambiguous intermediary position—caught between donor expectations, local demands, and government agendas—under a ministry historically disconnected from local realities and resistant to recognizing customary land rights and local forms of land use. We also anticipated difficult dilemmas: managing disputes, mediating stakeholder communication, addressing conflict over alleged bribery, and navigating tensions between villagers and officials.

GRET chose instead to apply for the third-party *Monitoring and Documentation Mechanism* (MADM) tender, as it aligned with our commitment to remain relatively independent and reflected our interest in observing land allocation processes. This role better suited our expertise built on our work of documenting land dynamics on potential redistribution sites. We organized the MADM project around quarterly site visits and interviews to assess how the REAL DEV program integrated its core principles, including its risk management strategy. We proposed a clear interpretation of how we would monitor compliance and assembled a team of experienced researchers familiar with GRET's work. MADM was designed to support the project and its stakeholders—not to control them. Our team brought grounded experience and an understanding of field realities to offer pragmatic feedback to implementers and government actors. We stressed that monitoring should not be about simplistic judgments or rating performance with checkboxes, but rather about meaningful, context-sensitive analyses and discussions.

This demand for expertise put us in a position of authority we were not accustomed to embody. Monitoring involved observing and tracking the progress of the land component of the REAL DEV program over time. It required a new form of transgression: using our academic knowledge as a body of experience in the service of a potentially contentious project. It was a new form of engagement, situated between surveillance and care, that required us to adjust our stance in different situations, from meetings with government officials and implementers to interactions with villagers. Our main resources were our methodology and research know-hows. We developed a strategy that partly recalibrated the kind of fieldwork we were used to doing in order to shed light on problems that might remain invisible. However, we were no longer outsiders trying to decipher the workings of local society. We had a new responsibility: to keep the right distance to allow the project to run, while being critical and giving constructive advice on how to redirect certain aspects, such as the inclusion of certain groups in newly created committees and improving dialogue between the implementing partners,

government officials, and villagers. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, we were only able to start the project and conduct one monitoring field visit. After the coup in 2021 and donors' decision to withdraw from all forms of government engagement, REAL DEV was closed down. GRET negotiated the transformation of the MADM project into a regular land monitoring system across six Regions/States of Myanmar, focusing on land and resource issues and post-coup trends until its end in 2023.

This section demonstrated how we calibrated our engagement with a diverse range of actors, gradually developing something akin to an 'engagement expertise'. It showed how we navigated how the land reallocation problem was framed, as various line ministries, parties, parliamentarians, farmer unions, NGOs, and CSOs attempted to shape the debates. We endeavored to maintain our independence, closely attuned to ground realities while collaborating with local and regional State agents to a certain extent. However, this posture was challenged when we tried to engage with more central levels of power.

IV. Engaging in advocacy

GRET's turn towards proactive advocacy on land issues did not occur within a planned and time-bounded strategy. The shift towards this position occurred rather abruptly in reaction to one key event: the 2018 amendment to the VFV law. Although this turn to advocacy was unexpected, it resulted from a long gestation process, taking roots in the previous works described above, and which ultimately enabled us to take a more proactive and explicit policy influencing position.

1. Sharing results and dealing with multiples audiences

Influencing policy has always been an integral part of the project rationale. From the beginning of the first phase of the project, the main justification for conducting research on land and the linkages between land and livelihood security was based on the positivist stance that it would serve as evidence and provide reliable data to 'fuel policy dialogue' with 'policy makers' and civil society in the reform processes of Myanmar's opening. The use of such all-encompassing portmanteau terms was a way for us to cope with the period's uncertainties and our own lack of in-depth understanding of power relations in policy making in such changing and complex settings.

In the initial phase of building our legitimacy in 2013-2014, our first and main audience was clearly the other NGOs and CSOs working in the land sector at the national level to influence policy. To this end, sharing workshops and presentations in national-level civil society network events (especially the regular meetings of the Land Core Group), were mainly held at the Yangon level, with a rather open and critical tone. These events did not include government actors. They were occasion for GRET to provide data and field evidence on key issues such as livelihood security and indebtedness, a better understanding of the diversity of the 'landless' population, the local impacts of the nationwide land certification process that was rolled out at full speed from late 2012 to 2014, or on the root causes of ongoing land conflicts. It was anticipated that our findings and recommendations could potentially be taken up by civil society stakeholders, such as the Land Core Group, which was heavily involved in the formulation process of the National Land Use Policy (NLUP) (see sections 1.1 and 1.2).

At the early stage of the democratic transition, the combination of the lack of studies on land and agrarian dynamics and the general enthusiasm for policy and legal reform resulted in a real appetite among civil society organizations to learn about and debate these issues in order to formulate their own policy positions and recommendations. In other words, the aim was not so much to incorporate very specific recommendations and principles into legislation, but rather to add a brick to the edifice of civil society opinions and positions on land and agrarian issues in this first vibrant period of democratic opening. We did not engage directly in 'policy dialogue' with government and parliamentary actors, but rather contributed to debates within civil society, the international donor community (which was also funding part of these policy formulation processes), academics who had strong connections with different civil society movements, and various international and national experts who had been appointed as advisors to participate in the formulation of policies (e.g. NLUP) and strategies (e.g. Myanmar Agricultural Development Strategy) in order to shape, forge and strengthen specific positions and evidence for policy reform. We also sought to use our understanding of agrarian dynamics to influence the way in which major development donors in Myanmar, such as LIFT, directed their assistance in the design of their land and agriculture-related programs.

The involvement of government stakeholders in our research sharing workshops came later, notably in those concerning peri-urban Yangon land issues, for which civil servants from the Yangon City Development Council were convened, both to listen our presentations and to participate as panelists in the debates on broader issues about the relevance of agricultural development in peri-urban areas or the problems created by urban land markets and ways to address those.

Our audience changed, both in terms of scale and nature, when the project evolved towards the series of land assessments on specific land reallocation sites in 2017 (see Section 3). First, it was increasingly local as we aimed to share the findings of specific village-tract level land allocation processes. It also became much more oriented towards local authorities and politicians (notably the parliamentarians of the given local constituencies who were often involved in the committees for the reinvestigation of confiscated land) and entangled with local politics. Given the interests at stake, we shared the findings of our assessments in workshops for which we quasi-exclusively convened local authorities, line department staff, and local members of parliament (MP). This aimed to create a 'safe space' of dialogue with government authorities where sensitive issues and criticisms could be exposed without them losing face. The GAD district officer's opening speech of the workshop in Maubin district – a notorious land conflict hotspot – held in September 2017 in the town of Maubin and gathering 47 persons, mainly civil servants from various departments and MPs, reflects this open state of mind, as well as the perception of GRET's role in providing ground data and evidence for their own work of conflict resolution:

"We want to know the truth openly about what GRET has found from the ground. In terms of democracy, we want all participants to participate in discussions to reach a solution." And later, following a first presentation of our finding on a specific conflict case: "We need healing about these land conflicts. How do we resolve it through a better solution? I want GRET to discuss freely and openly".

Such workshops also enabled to gather different perspectives from various line departments involved in land and agrarian matters on concrete matters. For example, in this local workshop, separate group discussions were organized and facilitated by GRET team members: one group with MPs, another with land administration (DALMS) staff, and one with the General Administration Department (GAD) staff. A fictional case study on a specific land allocation process was proposed. The participants were asked to discuss according to their own

experience and following the legal framework the step-by-step process to allocate land in good conditions. Such exercise enabled people to speak freely about more sensitive institutional issues and untold practices among their peers.

Our envisioned contribution to debates also changed in scale, going down from national level policy and law formulation and decision making, to more concrete and local recommendations at township, district and regional levels to a lesser extent. Such local workshops aimed at influencing government stakeholders in land-related interventions by promoting local mediation and conflict-resolution processes and improving criteria definition and beneficiary selection in specific land allocation operations for example. According to the final project evaluation, although government stakeholders did not necessarily read our detailed reports, many actively participated in our workshops and appreciated the quality and content of the presentations and the debates. The construction of GRET's relatively positive image was enhanced by other factors such as the proper consideration of Burmese cultural codes. The ability to engage quality debates with a diverse range of audiences was also due to a dedicated research pluridisciplinary team made of very different profiles and communication styles. For example, while the senior Burmese agronomist, former University teacher and renown consultant could interact effectively with MPs and many MoALI staff from local to Union level with a suitable mainstream language, "Ice", a Burmese critical thinker and talented speaker could reach out easily to youth, and national activist audiences. The French project manager with prior experience in European and French policy influencing platforms could engage in active networking with development donors, experts and NGOs, while the perfectly French Burmese-fluent and empathetic betel-chewing anthropologist could interact with his Burmese interlocutors to translate ideas effectively.

2. Building trust with various stakeholders of the land "scene"

The trust built with reformist stakeholders (such as LCG) involved in land policy formulation processes drew upon GRET's initial research, sharing events, research publications and a positivist stance for "evidence-based policy influencing". Despite some antagonisms between reformist and activist networks, we also built trust with more activist stakeholders such as staff and representatives from LIOH or Transnational Institute (TNI). The relations with them were more organic and informal, resulting from discreet and interpersonal interactions in which critique was made with a stronger political stance against the promotion of capitalist relations to land and agriculture. Some of the crucial interactions that contributed to strengthening the relationships with the activist stream of civil society started with their appreciation of some of the recommendations we had made in our events about the establishment of maximum land ceilings for land ownership, or again by inviting TNI to write an article for our newsletter in the early years of our program or in sharing similar positions in discussions in the regular "land coordination meetings" (often coordinated by the Swiss [Agency for Development and Cooperation](#)) with key donors and NGOs in the land sector. Later in 2018 and 2019, such interactions were reflected in email exchanges and interpersonal discussions in which we expressed the concerns of our team (shared with the other project teams of GRET Myanmar) about donors' shift from pro-poor development narratives to private sector-led ones. For example, LIFT had given substantial development aid grants to major groups to help them develop profitable services to client farmers: 18.7 million USD were invested into Yoma bank (the 4th largest national bank) to promote mechanization hire-purchase services and 6.7 million USD to Awba group (major national manufacturer and distributor of agricultural inputs) to develop pulse and oilseed hybrids (LIFT 2019). Under this drive, NGOs were also asked by LIFT's technical staff to promote big cooperatives and large farmers, to build integrated value chains, to establish contract farming arrangements

between farmers and companies, or to promote farmer extension services delivered by agribusiness companies and agricultural-input stores. Concerned by these trends, the GRET land project manager had reached out to TNI and LIOH for advice and ideas on how to stir up debates and to question donors about this public aid trend deemed problematic.

With government stakeholders who did not necessarily have the interest to engage with, nor the institutional understanding of civil society networks, GRET negotiated its independence and legitimacy by highlighting its long-term work in agricultural development and its technical expertise in the field of agriculture and land. We “rendered” GRET’s work “technical” (Li 2007) by putting agricultural technical matters at the forefront when introducing our research. This was instrumental in engaging with more sensitive land issues and local authorities during field research for example. However, this was not always enough.

One crucial experience influenced our decision to engage in an advocacy campaign in 2018 (see section 4.2) and not to engage as an implementing partner of the REAL DEV project with MoALI (see section 3.3). It was a difficult meeting in November 2017 with the ministry of agriculture in Naypyidaw, during which the team presented its findings for the feasibility of the land allocation project over 10,000 acres of canceled concession land to be funded by LIFT. The team was practically harassed by a senior official for telling the ‘inconvenient truth’ that the supposedly ‘vacant’ land on which the government planned to allocate ‘land to the landless’ was in fact already occupied by farmers. The atmosphere suddenly changed when we showed satellite imagery to the high officials in the room, exposing that the selected perimeter for the allocation of ‘vacant lands’ was cultivated and even populated by village settlements. The two top officials of the ministry in the room then used various tactics to interrupt the presentations in a rude and humiliating fashion. The meeting chair complained that he could not properly understand what one of the researchers – of Mon ethnicity – was saying as he was presenting with a Mon-accented Burmese. Later, when it was for a foreign researcher’s turn to talk, criticisms shifted about the fact we were “giving lessons” although we had made clear that our approach was to provide insights on the ground situation of the planned site, for their own informed decision making on the land allocation or proposed “land regularization” process. Paradoxically, a few minutes later, the chair interrupted the presentation again and complained that GRET was providing too much information and ordered us to say what needed to be done. The official nonetheless criticized GRET for not being able to provide a detailed list of all informal occupants, despite the fact we had only conducted a short assessment over a few days and that such identification task on 12,000 acres was clearly out of the scope of our terms of references. It had been a verbally and symbolically violent confrontation, from which the team came out discouraged and humiliated. Despite the team’s bitter sense of failure, one international observer from the donor side who was present congratulated the team on the following day: “you managed to make them understand that the lands were not vacant and to consider the informal occupants, so you did not fail”.⁴³

3. The momentum against the amendment on vacant lands

We have seen in Section 1.1 that the 2012 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VfV) land management law replaced the 1991 Waste Land Instructions (notoriously known for its use in legalized land grabs) without major changes. As before, the law allowed various entities (companies, public bodies etc.) to apply for VfV land concessions for various economic activities (agriculture, livestock farming, mining, etc.).

⁴³ Personnel communication.

In September 2018, an amendment to this law was enacted with some cosmetic changes to refer to landless and small farmers in the list of possible beneficiaries of land use permits. It also mentioned the exclusion of “customary lands” of ethnic groups from the VFV classification (article 30.b). This could have represented a substantial advancement in safeguarding land and natural resource rights in the ethnic peripheries. However, given the fact no legal definition existed to define customary lands, such exemption was no more than “legislative lip service” (Allaverdian 2025). More importantly, the amendment aimed at taking stock of current land occupation. Occupants without official land use permits were required to apply for one, or else face imprisonment or fines. This entailed a significant risk of eviction and criminalization for non-registered smallholder occupants. According to some land administration officials involved in the formulation of the amendment, it was not intended for the eviction of such informal occupants but rather to revoke permits over undeveloped concession lands which were still in the hands of non-compliant companies and to redistribute them.

A public announcement was made shortly after on October 30, 2018, giving unauthorized occupants six months to apply for land use permits. After this deadline, occupied land without a permit would then be considered vacant, and occupants-squatters liable to fines and jail terms. The announcement coincided in a moment when GRET had built up a ‘critical body’ of knowledge deriving from the work outlined in the previous sections. After 5 years of research and studies in various regions of the country on diverse topics related to land (rural, urban, peri-urban, ethnic and customary land, land distribution and restitution), we had reached a critical amount of knowledge both in terms of quantity and of diversity of perspectives.

Our initial research experience in the Irrawaddy Delta and Dry zone had given us in-depth insights on rural land dynamics on the ground, local practices in terms of land rights and uses, transactions, people’s property relations and arrangements with authorities. This team of researchers in socio-anthropology had captured countless examples of how people negotiated their survival around harsh agricultural policies (e.g. forced paddy quotas) and legal constraints (prohibition of land leases and sales) in the last decades and thus a sharp understanding of the significant gaps between law in theory and the actual practices on the ground. The peri-urban land studies in Mandalay and Yangon periphery provided us with precious insights about informality and speculation in land use conversion processes and urban growth. Our studies in Northern Chin State and Karen coastal and upland areas of Tanintharyi division widened our understanding of customary land systems and on how the excessive focus on inundated and irrigated paddy production in policies since decades had led to systematic lack of recognition of other types of land rights and uses. The field work in the peripheries had also enabled us to grasp people’s relation to the lands within their villages, and to observe how these were totally at odds with the legal notion of ‘vacant land’ or ‘state land’.

Through the intense series of assessments in over 20 land allocation project sites, we interacted regularly with authorities and the different institutions involved in land governance (the land administration department, the farmland management bodies, the land reinvestigation committees...). We became increasingly familiar with the procedures, categories and tools of the land administration department. With the land assessments conducted at township and village level, we could assess cadastral maps, gain legal, technical and practical insights on how the registration of land rights and deeds or the conversion of land use were supposed to happen in theory, and how they actually occurred in practice. We often confronted with the land department’s structural corruption and the systematic excuses to selectively block land regularization processes and the recognition of informal occupants. Law was used selectively to serve arbitrary powers (Cheesman 2009). We had also grasped the challenges in the actual processes of cancelling concessions, the heavy constraints upon updating the legal status of land use, and the differential access to land administration services and

favors according to social, economic and ethnic status. We witnessed frustrations and the constant “struggle against excuses” similar to what occurs in Cambodia (Schoenberger 2017). Engaging with the state on land allocation issues was a transformative process that led various team members to gradually forge and mature different advocate postures, reflecting the diversity of academic backgrounds, origins, communication and relational styles. The connection of senior Burmese staff and researchers with one senior official within the land administration department allowed GRET to access detailed and updated data about the country’s land stock and concessions. This was critical in realizing that “VFV” was far more than an anecdotal land category, since it represented over a third of the country’s area and 75% of lands in ethnic states.

With all these cards in hand to understand farmland and VFV land issues, the VFV law amendment gave us the impetus to move out of our comfort zone. Because we understood the scale of potential impacts and risks of the amendment, drawing on access to actual land statistics, understanding of law and institutions related to land, exposure to many concession sites and land conflicts, we bore the responsibility of playing a role in public debates, beyond the consensual workshops and debates we had usually organized. In other words, the body of knowledge we had in our hands on land issues, combined with our understanding of the land sector arena, our insertion into various relevant networks and our own lived humiliating experience of government’s resistance to recognizing informal land rights (e.g. the November 2017 high level meeting in Naypyidaw) gave us the lucidity to go beyond scientific neutrality (Berlan 2023). We felt responsible to engage in the advocacy field about this law of vacant lands. As such, this engagement in advocacy came in a bottom-up fashion based on ground-level concerns, rather than from international standards and principles.

This was a significant turn. Historically, GRET had never engaged in advocacy in Myanmar since it started to work in this country in 1995 under the SLORC military regime. As other NGOs, it quietly conducted its development projects in the fields of agriculture and microfinance without engaging in campaigns or policy influencing actions. Other organizations who had settled in the country much later during the opening period after 2011, notably those with legal expertise and rights-based approaches, had engaged swiftly with parliamentarians in attempts to influence law formulation, and were able to produce position papers rapidly in reaction to the momentum’s specific policy formulation processes.

One example of our non-involvement in direct advocacy to government stakeholders and legislative spaces was the public consultation over the draft National Land Use policy in 2014 and 2015 for which multiple statements and position papers were published by different national and international organizations, while we had not done so. Instead, we had published a special issue of our project newsletter on the NLUP, which provided critical insights on policy formulation processes supported by international experts and donors. We collaborated with Elliott Prasse-Freeman, a scholar who was back then doing a PhD in anthropology to publish an article in the special issue with his comparative analysis between the Burmese and English versions of the National Land Use policy (Prasse-Freeman 2015). It highlighted the conceptual differences between the Western and Burmese notion of “rights” as well the dissonances between the two versions on various points such as trespassing, upland cultivation, and gender. For example, while one section in the English version had multiple occurrences about women’s rights, the Burmese one made no mention of women at all. This was not a small detail since the two versions were used for the public consultation process. The Burmese version was the official one to be enacted while the English version was the one discussed by the international community (international donors, experts, NGOs). This collaboration on the analysis of the NLUP exemplifies our position as critical researchers that examined policy-making processes, rather than as legal advocates that would provide specific feedback on the wording of specific articles of legislative documents.

Under the land program initiated in Myanmar in 2013, the engagement of GRET in advocacy had been rather light until 2018, and this for various reasons. First, as already mentioned, while our work was grounded in field work at village level, our research findings had constantly revealed the huge gap between law and actual implementation in farmers' fields. Therefore, GRET had naturally some reservations about seeking policy changes purely through legislative processes and the "rule of law" credo. In addition, as an international NGO, it did not feel legitimate to be on the forefront of advocacy actions in national policy making and preferred leaving the floor to the national organizations. As an implementing partner of the Mekong Regional Land Governance project, GRET nevertheless set a foot in this sphere with its interactions with various organizations and CSOs to facilitate "learning and advocacy" alliances.

Coming back to the 2018 amendment of the VFV land management law, the subsequent announcement on the six-month deadline provoked strong reactions from numerous civil society organizations working on land in the country. Heated google group email discussions took place with all these actors, about the problematic law and GRET actively participated with supporting data emanating from its various research works in Myanmar. Many cautioned on the risks of land conflicts and dispossessions, given the asymmetries of power, information and access to land services, as well as the high risks of corruption. Some ethnic movements also feared a potential takeover of their territories, in line with the waves of concessions and confiscations in the 1990s, and 2000s (Woods 2011). Representatives of ethnic nationalities of Myanmar even called it "a declaration of war on us" (Transnational Institute 2018).

A small collective of foreign and Burmese persons (often one Burmese and one international person per organization) working in four international NGOs (GRET, Oxfam, Earth Rights International, Namati) and one national one (Land Core Group), emerged organically. The organizations, all heavily involved in the land sector in various ways, had different strengths and fields of expertise: Oxfam brought its competence in advocacy campaigns, GRET and Namati contributed with more grounded knowledge on VFV-related issues and field-level experiences, Earthrights conveyed its legal expertise while LCG supported with its networking activities and its understanding of Burmese communication protocols with officials. The collective decided to prepare a response against the government announcement of October 2018 as fast as possible. Due to its urgent dimension, this happened through daily calls and emails between a core group of 10 persons to fast-track the writing process, negotiate together and reach a common agreement on key messages and on the protocol to follow for the submission of our official letter and the process to rally more signatories. The collective letter expressed concerns about the excessively short six-months deadline given for individuals and communities to apply for permits by March 2019. It highlighted a number of issues and risks, notably that of many people being considered trespassers on their own land, and called on the government to halt the law's implementation, prevent imprisonment and eviction of innocent individuals, stop allocation of VFV lands to private entities, and engage with stakeholders to establish a fair land governance framework aligned with the National Land Use Policy. It was signed by 41 organizations, out of which 16 were international NGOs and the others from national CSOs and NGOS. Various actions were then also organized by this core collective including a joint press conference in Yangon and several advocacy visits in Naypyidaw also took place shortly after the submission of the letter to meet with parliamentarians. Based on previous research, GRET also published a more detailed policy brief which provided more in-depth insights and data about the risks and issues related to VFV (Allaverdian 2019) and shared its expertise on the question through LIFT and its donors to reach the international community.

Other civil society networks reacted with their own actions, most of which were aligned to similar requests, but they preferred to coordinate among national organizations, away from the potential influence of International

NGOs. This was a combined result of Burmese nationalism, lived negative experiences with international organizations perceived as too ‘bossy’ and procedural with administrative and financial requirements. Furthermore, INGOs were also perceived as being too ‘mainstream’ in reformist and development discourses, out of touch with local realities and lacking understanding of the longer-term political consequences of their development interventions. For example, in 2019, one local NGO in Kachin refused to partner with an international organization because the latter wanted to promote legal awareness and encourage people to apply for land titles, while the local NGO preferred to avoid this and limit the penetration of contested rural areas by the administration of the central government. However, this did not prevent some forms of collaboration between INGOs and local organizations. For example, some national organizations used the data produced and shared by GRET to support their own messages (Saw Alex Htoo and Scott 2019). It was also understood by a national civil society network that roles were shared, with INGOs responsible for raising support from the international community while national civil society organizations in charge of connecting with their local networks and grassroots groups (Zaw Htet Aung 2020). Beyond this, historical antagonisms between various national civil society organizations and conflicting personalities, and the confrontation between activist versus reformist approaches, prevented a general and broader coalition to take place.

Through its grounded research identity, GRET could navigate easily in the different antagonistic networks and interact with the government without the usual suspicions of complicity made upon other organizations. This capacity to navigate in various antagonistic groups was a combination of personal and organizational features of the team. This also occurred since the start of GRET’s land program, with a diverse team, that could oppose a Burmese senior land and agriculture expert that firmly believed in evidence-based policy influencing and progressive reform to a Burmese radical thinker that refused to vote in Myanmar elections, without a full revision of the constitution to first unlock the military’s grip over power.

Despite multiple efforts and repeated interactions with parliamentarians, advocates failed to bring about any major changes to the 2018 VFV law amendment. Lawmakers did not postpone the six-month deadline and made no further amendments. This outcome revealed Myanmar’s “semi-authoritarian” context and the shrinking space for civil society after the euphoric and blissful years from 2012 to 2016. However, the various networks that led multiple advocacy actions using different approaches likely raised decision makers’ awareness of the strong public interest in the issue and the scrutiny surrounding the potential consequences of the amendment.

GRET played a co-leading role in the VFV advocacy campaign, which proved crucial in shaping the trajectory of its land program. This campaign marked the emergence of GRET’s new “advocate” position, where it tightly integrated research with explicit advocacy actions. This pivotal moment coincided with the conclusion of GRET’s LIFT-funded project (2013 to 2019) and led GRET to design new projects (such as the Ring Chying and GLEASA projects) and build partnerships with international advocacy players and recognized national civil society organizations.

One of the new partnerships was built on the collaboration of the VFV campaign with Oxfam and Earthrights International. Despite a cordial yet uneasy relationship with Oxfam in the previous years, when GRET would sometimes view the famous INGO as “arrogant” (reversely GRET was probably perceived as staffed with poor “advocacy” people), the collaboration for the VFV campaign was a positive experience in addressing the missing link between research and advocacy. Shortly after, Oxfam invited GRET to join a project consortium on land and extractives (GLEASA) in which GRET was to play a specific role in providing its expertise on land and research and in supporting CSOs in conducting relevant case studies to support advocacy and influencing

actions from local to national level. Simultaneously, Metta, a renowned national NGO also proposed a partnership with GRET for a project targeting Kachin internally displaced people and host communities. GRET would also provide its expertise to investigate land issues related to displacement and support Metta and its local partners in its research outputs for advocacy, building on their own experience in community-based participatory action research (Ring Chying project). At the same time, GRET was hired to provide advisory services for the monitoring of the REAL DEV land allocation project (see Section 3.3) implemented by local NGOs in support of MoALI as well as for an upcoming irrigation rehabilitation project led by MoALI.

As such, while GRET's previous action on land (other than with MRLG) in Myanmar was very much focused on research and implemented solely by GRET from 2013 to 2018, the program expanded to include a wider range of roles, to support research and knowledge management with local civil society partners, engaging in advocacy and contributing operational expertise on land issues through service provision contracts within development projects funded by donors in link with the government.

GRET's engagement in advocacy around the VFV amendment was both a rupture and a continuity: a rupture in its historical positioning in Myanmar, but also the natural outcome of years of grounded research, careful relationship-building, and a growing sense of responsibility toward the communities and issues it had come to understand deeply. This moment not only redefined the organization's role in the land governance landscape but also laid the groundwork for more strategic, plural, and politically aware forms of engagement moving forward. Or so we hoped until February 2021...

Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolving posture of the GRET land program in Myanmar. Drawing on nearly a decade of work by a team of researchers in an emerging and consolidating land arena, the study has described what it means to engage research on land issues for an international INGO in a post-authoritarian landscape. The trajectory of GRET's land program first highlights how we became a legitimate actor in Myanmar's land arena. It reveals how credibility was gradually built through academic rigor, methodological innovation, and a progressive understanding of a polarized sociopolitical environment. Initially rooted in independent academic research, the program progressively assumed more engaged roles—first in documenting and interpreting land dynamics, then in contributing to policy dialogue, supporting advocacy, and finally monitoring a potentially contentious land reallocation project. Throughout the period, the team was in tension between independence and strategic alliances (especially with CSOs), and between knowledge production and policy action. GRET's methodological ambivalence—its commitment to questioning dominant narratives—has been both a strength and a challenge. It allowed the team to shed light on overlooked dynamics, such as the heterogeneity of landless populations or the layered interactions between customary and statutory tenure systems. Yet, this same commitment sometimes complicated the translation of findings into actionable recommendations, especially in donor-driven environments that favored simplified narratives often ignoring the structural and systemic nature of opacity in land management.

Overall, the paper highlights the constructed nature of expertise. It shows the conditions of producing and diffusing knowledge in a transitioning context and how expertise is continually negotiated. This is particularly true in a post-authoritarian setting like Myanmar, where civil society is fragmented, state institutions retain authoritarian features, and international western actors have little influence. Rethinking the notion of

engagement was thus central to our argument and we used it as a tool to capture how the team navigated the various political spaces surrounding land issues. By focusing on the process of evaluation, it enabled us to question and analyze our own and others' actions, discourses and affiliations. This allowed us to locate why our experiences never really fit the three categories of expertise (service, consensus, engagement). We thus argued for a broader conceptualization of engagement as a continual process of evaluation, ethical positioning, and methodological recalibration. Engaging in land research in Myanmar means being aware of the risks of co-optation, the fragility of trust, and the changing relational dynamics with actors across civil society, government, and international agencies and the deep political implications of land interventions.

Although we presented the evolution of our postures chronologically for clarity, this evolution was not linear, hence the utility of looking at it through the idea of engagement. One question remains: to what extent was the transformation of our posture a deliberate choice, a result of external enlistment or something we underwent passively? Unsurprisingly, it was a combination of these three dynamics. We gained independence and credibility by producing and disseminating research that we deemed to be of a high standard. We engaged more with officials in order to study land reallocation due to a scientific and political interest in analyzing and making visible such a process, as well as because we had the opportunity to do so with the LIFT. Once we had reached a critical mass of knowledge and experienced the brutality of top officials, we leaned towards advocacy. Yet, throughout that trajectory, our research methodology remained at the core of our identity and practice. We created it during our first long-term studies, adapted it for the land reallocation assessments and reframed it to devise a distinctive approach to monitoring. The consistency of the program, beyond its strategic orientations, also lies in the continuity of the team, despite its variety of backgrounds, which is rooted in a co-created approach to land issues with a shared sensibility toward socio-anthropology. This was made possible by a relatively flexible donor that provided space for GRET to explore sensitive topics.

Reflecting on our journey leads us to specify the constraints and expectations we faced and the choices we made. Below, we list a series of ideas or principles that we identified through this reflective work and which guided our actions to some extent. We present them as a set of wills:

- 1) Not to become publicly involved in the political arena as an actor with a legitimate institutional voice, because of its non-membership of the country, to avoid accusations of complicity. The public stance is one of informed support, rooted in scientific independence, the contours of which change according to the interlocutors encountered, the issues dealt with, and the arenas crossed.
- 2) Not to act as a guarantor/caution for a state project, not to act as a front for good practice, especially when working on land reallocations when several framings of what should be done were coexisting and conflicting (land return, land to the landless, allocating VFV land).
- 3) To be part of a government-implemented project in order to gain access to the field (strategic interest), to people (invisible) and to voices (inaudible) justified by a form of political and scientific engagement to counter invisibilizations and make subjects, people and problems visible and audible.
- 4) To take responsibility for providing high-quality studies and assessments to counterbalance other experts with access to policy makers while producing reports defending theories of change that we wanted to challenge by highlighting the complexity of local situations.
- 5) Not to take sides with one of the many polarities in Burmese society (Bamar vs. ethnic minorities, urban vs. rural, etc.) by basing our discourse as much as possible on detailed analyses of local contexts.

6) Not endanger the stability of GRET presence in Myanmar and thus avoid destabilizing what was achieved, even though GRET offered a space for doing academic research on sensitive issues such as land tenure, conflict and governance.

Ultimately, we hope that the experiences shared here can offer helpful insights for others navigating politically sensitive environments. This journey invites us to reflect on what it means to do research in transitional contexts: staying critically engaged, shedding light on overlooked realities, and continuously questioning our own roles, tools, and impact. The military coup in February 2021, and the harsh return to an authoritarian regime, cast a new light on the years that came before. What once felt like a hopeful move toward democracy now appears, in hindsight, as a fragile and temporary opening, a semi-authoritarian interlude. Through these shifting and often difficult political landscapes, our research work continued. We adapted as best we could to new limitations while staying committed to the local team and its unwaning interest in understanding past, present and future land and agrarian issues.

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Annexes

1. Productions developed under or in connection with the Myanmar GRET land program

Peer reviewed publications

Allaverdian C., *Farming systems in Myanmar: Methodological background and synthesis of field-based studies across five states and regions of Myanmar*, LIFT, 2019, 83 p.

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Allaverdian, C., Boutry, M., Mellac, M., Ravaux, C., Khin Pyae Sone, Tin Myo Win, & Sung Chin Par. (2018). *Land and Urbanization. Land Dynamics and Livelihoods in Peri-Urban Townships of Yangon and Mandalay*. Yangon: GRET. 122 p.

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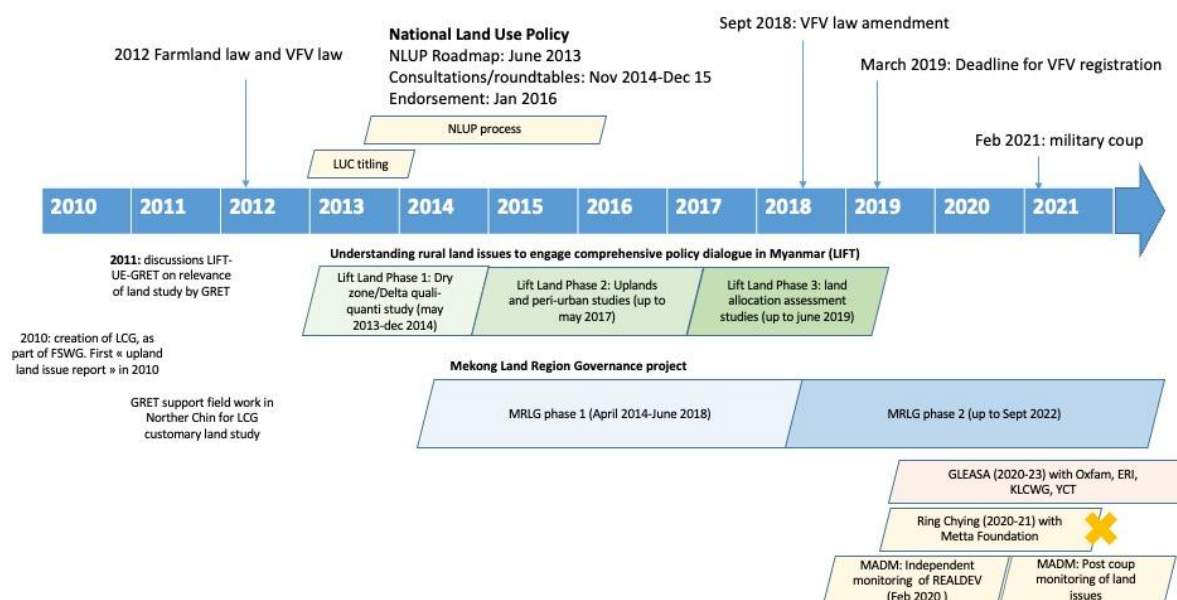
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2. Timeline of the program



Numéros parus

- N°29 *Les évolutions des communs des Aït Todght, au Maroc. Un processus d'appropriation privative ?* Amélie Smith, 2025.
- N°28 *Demandes de justice et traitement des injustices socio-spatiales et environnementales dans les pays du Sud. Note conceptuelle.* William's Daré, Stéphen Huard, Philippe Lavigne Delville, Eric Léonard, Tania Li, 2025.
- N°27 *Agriculture familiale et pression foncière dans les Hautes Terres de Madagascar. Une lecture géographique des dynamiques agricoles et des stratégies paysannes.* Quentin Grislain, 2024.
- N°26 *Sénégal : la Loi sur le domaine national, l'Etat et le marché. Contradictions structurelles et résilience d'une législation originale.* Philippe Lavigne Delville, 2024.
- N°25 *La gouvernance des arbres dans les parcs agroforestiers au Sahel. Cadre conceptuel et éclairages empiriques (Sénégal et Burkina Faso).* Philippe Lavigne Delville, 2023.
- N°24 *Accès à la terre et Accès à l'eau. Un cadre d'analyse pour étudier les agricultures irriguées des pays du Sud.* Jean-Philippe Colin et Olivier Petit, 2022.
- N°23 *Privatisation des droits de propriété et dissolution de l'organisation communautaire dans une zone d'agriculture commerciale au Mexique.* Mathilde Mitaut et Eric Léonard, 2022.
- N°22 *Le foncier rural en Algérie : de l'autogestion à la concession agricole (1962-2018).* Omar Bessaoud, 2021.
- N°21 *Histoire du peuplement, formalisation des droits fonciers coutumiers et inégalités spatiales (Département des collines, Bénin),* Philippe Lavigne Delville et Anne-Claire Moalic, 2020.
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- N°18 *Emergence et dynamique des marchés fonciers ruraux en Afrique sub-saharienne. Un état des lieux sélectif,* Jean-Philippe Colin, 2017.
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- N°16 *De la tenure héréditaire à la protection du fermier. Analyse historique comparée des régimes fonciers agricoles dans six pays européens,* Frédéric Courleux, Dimitri Liorit, 2016.
- N°15 *Jeu foncier, institutions d'accès à la ressource et usage de la ressource : une étude de cas dans le centre-ouest ivoirien,* Jean-Pierre Chauveau, 2016.
- N°14 *Politiques foncières et mobilisations sociales au Bénin. Des organisations de la société civile face au Code domanial et foncier,* Philippe Lavigne Delville et Camille Saiah, 2016.
- N°13 *Mise en valeur agricole et accès à la propriété foncière en steppe et au Sahara (Algérie),* Ali Daoudi, Jean-Philippe Colin, Alaeddine Derderi, Mohamed Lamine Ouendeno, 2015.
- N°12 *Smallholder Participation in Non-Traditional Export Crops. Insights from Pineapple Production in Côte d'Ivoire,* Jean-Philippe Colin, 2015.

- N°11 *La sécurisation des droits sur les terres : processus normatifs et pratiques sociales. La création de palmeraies par les élites nationales au Sud Cameroun*, Delphine Sevestre, Eric Léonard, Patrice Levang, 2015.
- N°10 *Formalisation légale des droits fonciers et pratiques de sécurisation des transactions dans les Hautes Terres malgaches*, Céline Boué et Jean-Philippe Colin, 2015.
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- N°4 *« Suis-je le gardien de mon frère ? » L'émergence de la relation sujet-objet dans la législation foncière burkinabè de 2009*, Jean-Pierre Jacob, 2013.
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- N°1 *L'émergence de la question foncière dans le nord du Cameroun (1950)*, Christian Seignobos, 2012

Résumé

Ce cahier propose un retour réflexif sur dix années de recherches sur le foncier menées par le GRET au Myanmar (2013-2021), au cours d'une période de transition politique d'un régime autoritaire à un gouvernement quasi-civil. L'étude, rédigée par des contributeurs clés du programme, explore la manière dont l'équipe a navigué à travers des terrains politiques complexes, entre la polarisation de la société civile et l'opacité de l'action étatique. Ancré dans la recherche universitaire, le travail de cette équipe du GRET a évolué à travers différentes formes d'engagement : construire sa légitimité en tant qu'expert indépendant, interagir de façon prudente avec les acteurs étatiques et enfin participer à des activités de plaidoyer. Dans l'ensemble, l'étude met en évidence les défis et les dilemmes éthiques liés au travail de recherche sur le foncier au sein d'une société civile fragmentée, divisée entre les tendances réformistes et activistes, et au maintien d'une éthique d'indépendance tout en engageant des activités de plaidoyer.

Mots-clés

Engagement, expertise, foncier, Birmanie/Myanmar, NGO

Abstract

This reflexive paper chronicles ten years of land-related research conducted by GRET in Myanmar (2013–2021), during a period of political transition from authoritarian rule to a quasi-civilian government. The study, authored by key contributors to the program, explores how the team navigated complex political terrains, civil society dynamics, and shifting state relations. Initially rooted in academic research, GRET's work evolved through different forms of engagement: building legitimacy as an independent expert, cautiously interacting with state actors, and ultimately participating in advocacy. The team developed a nuanced understanding of land issues shaped by Myanmar's colonial legacies, socialist land policies, dictatorship and post-2010 liberalization. Overall, the study highlights the challenges and ethical dilemmas of working within a fragmented civil society divided between reformist and activist tendencies and of maintaining political independence while still influencing policy.

Keywords

Engagement, expertise, land tenure, Burma/Myanmar, NGO

Le Pôle Foncier

Le *Pôle de recherche sur le foncier rural dans les pays du Sud* est un Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique (GIS) fondé par le Cirad, l'IAMM, l'IRD et SupAgro. Il est accueilli à la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme de Montpellier.

Le Pôle vise à structurer et dynamiser les collaborations entre les équipes des institutions d'Agropolis-Montpellier qui conduisent des recherches sur le foncier rural – agricole, pastoral ou forestier – étendu à ses relations avec le périurbain, les zones côtières et les activités extractives, dans les pays du Sud.

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