

Political Economy of Opium Reduction in Myanmar: Voices from the Grassroots

Mingalarbar! (Hello)

My name is Sai Lone, one of the Eastern Shan State opium farmer representatives to the Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum (MOFF). *[MOFF has been convening annual forum with the participation of opium farmer representatives from major opium growing regions in Myanmar - Shan, Kachin and Kayah – since 2013. MOFF is a platform for opium farmers to come together sharing our experiences, discussing our problems and making our voice heard.]*

In Eastern Shan, opium farming has become the main livelihood for farmers living in remote high mountain area since many generations. Income derived from opium farming is used to pay for costs of food, daily commodities, religious donation, social activities, health care and education for kids. There are very few crops that can survive the extreme weather and thin soil fertility of high elevation. In addition, poor road access and distance from market (trading center) make many cash crops not profitable enough to feed their families.

Significance of opium poppy as cash crop are: short term – can harvest within 100 days, easy to grow, easy to get credit, resistance to extreme weather of high elevation, least depletion of soil nutrients, easy to store and transport, high value and ready market.

Furthermore, indigenous people use opium to cure many common diseases in highland regions, such as diarrhea, dysentery, asthma, chronic cough, rheumatic pain and hypertension, etc. They also use opium in social ceremonies – house warming, wedding, funeral and other cultural rituals. Therefore, highland people often refer opium as the “gift from heaven”.

To address opium production problem, Myanmar government adopts suppressive law enforcement: criminalize farmers and eradicate opium fields without any livelihood supports. Forced eradication makes us lose all our investment and labor, and the income that expected to get us throughout the whole year. It pushed us into vicious debt cycle, as most of us had borrowed money to invest in our opium field. Some farmers migrated and worked in Thailand in order to repay their debt, and some even had to sell out their land. One opium farmer in southern Shan suicided last 2 years ago when his opium field was eradicated, it is really a sad news.

Myanmar government has been eradicating our opium fields since I was a kid, but there are still opium fields nowadays and even increased. I think government should review and change their ways of doing thing. Eradication doesn't reduce the opium cultivation. It only destroys the livelihood of poor farmers.

Government should not punish us by eradicate our opium fields, it only make our lives from bad to worse. Instead, they should work with us by providing supports that are effective and efficient for us to change our livelihoods without rely on income derived from opium farming.

Thank you very much for your attention!