

Environmental stakes in Myanmar

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The economy in Myanmar remains strongly agricultural: 41% of the GDP while only the industry corresponds to only 20% and the tertiary sector to only 39%. The country is full of important assets: raw materials are abundant (283 billions of m³ of natural gas, 50 millions barrels of petrol, plenty of minerals and precious wood), the internal market evaluated at more than 50 millions consumers and strong regional links (ASEAN, China, India...). With the economic opening that followed U Thein Sein presidency, Myanmar is one of the most coveted countries in the Asia. Even though it can be an asset for the future of the country, there are already evidences that some threat are endangering a full, equal and sustainable development for the country: disappearance of natural wealth, rural development and soils degradation, urban development or climate change.

1. Natural resources disappearances

Myanmar is rich in natural resources, but its diversity as well as sustainability are threaten by an unreasoned economic exploitation.

Myanmar has a rich variety of landscape and climate, making the country one of the richest biodiversity centres in the world. With coastal regions, mountains, tropical and dry zones, the fauna and flora host numerous and diverse species. “Les Amis de la Terre”, a French NGO, estimates that the country is a home for more than 7000 vegetal species, 1000 birds, 400 different reptiles and amphibians and more than 300 mammals species.

However, air and water pollution but also the major disfigurement of the environment caused by the heavy infrastructure of industrial exploitation (mining, hydroelectric dams, deep-water ports, coal power plants) or the development of extensive agriculture deteriorate the balance of ecosystems as well as the plant, animal and human populations that depend on them.

Thus deforestation is an endemic issue in Myanmar. According to FAO, the rate of deforestation stands at 1.4% per year, one of the highest rates in Southeast Asia. At such a rapid and continuous pace, it is expected that all mangroves disappear in fifty years. When it is known that mangroves are at the heart of a natural system for regulating the environment and climate, their next loss is really worrying. Indeed, the function of mangroves is key to nature and to society: sources of nutrients for fish, mangrove forests are the source of a natural food chain with obvious socio-economic benefits for fishermen. Furthermore, mangroves also serve as protection against tsunamis and provide as all forests in general climate regulation by retaining moisture. The decrease in return therefore generates increased drought and irrigation more and

more complex to implement, with important socio-economic costs for farmers.

In general, farming is highly threatened by deforestation in the country, which leads to erosion and landslides, with a reduction of the surface and productivity of arable land. Finally, the decrease in the absorption capacity of moisture by vegetation causes the appearance of stagnant pools of water, which generate the proliferation of mosquito vectors of infectious diseases, including malaria.

Furthermore, the illegal trafficking of animals fed with a very demanding Chinese market, and the destruction of their natural habitat greatly threaten the survival of rare species such as the red panda, clouded leopard or the Irrawaddy dolphin.

Letpadaung Mine Project

In Sagaing region, the Letpadaung Mine is a project leading to massive land grabbing, dramatic environmental destruction that created anger within the population as well as strikes and arrests from the police forces. Recently, the death of a woman protesting against the project resulted in a stronger mobilisation from a population denouncing all the human rights abuses created by the project.

2. Rural Development and Soil degradation

Current government priorities do not allow a sustainable rural development generator of wealth and synonymous of food security and employment opportunities for the local communities.

The practice of intensive agriculture export-oriented, with the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on large-scale farms, greatly degrades the diversity and soil fertility. The priorities given by the government, making the country the first exporter of rice in Asia, yield farmland to companies in order to produce palm oil (as in Tanintharyi) or developing industrial projects can not lead to sustainable rural development generator of wealth, food security and employment for local people.

Myanmar is primarily an agricultural country, the sector involving more than 70% of the population. Low productivity, coupled with the fact that farmers often do not have legal title contribute to the precariousness of a very large segment of the population. Nearly 26% of farmers live below the poverty line, and for the vast majority the food purchases account for three quarters of their budget. It is these farmers who suffer, in addition, from land

grabbing in favour of national or international companies that have the blessing of the regime or benefiting from corrupted agent of this unscrupulous State.

The use of pesticides is widespread even if farmers are not trained for their use. The health risks of these workers are real and often underestimated.

Consumers are also uninformed and toxic foods are sold in markets without any control. Ultimately, it is also the land lose in quality, which are degraded and are no longer able to provide sufficient returns, contributing to the search for more fertile land, ie deforestation.

In this context, the objective is to promote organic farming methods that maintains and uses traditional seeds to ensure the sustainability of the soil but also to ensure health standards on food production. Technological innovation in irrigation techniques, solar energy, financial services such as

micro-finance and micro-insurance, can be put in the service of promoting responsible agriculture that provides opportunities, productivity and investment for an organic small-scale farming.

Such agriculture is particularly desirable for Myanmar as many local actors have already mobilized in his favour. In fact, private institutions such as Myanmar Organic Agriculture Group (MOAG) offer the farmers wishing to certify their products "organic". Multi-Agri Development Association (MADA), linked to the Chamber of Commerce of Myanmar, organizes and promotes farmers farming without chemicals. Initiatives from local producers are becoming more numerous and are only waiting for strengthening the national label to export their production. The general population is looking for healthy food and products, although an important advocacy work remains to be done.

3. Urban Development

Urban development, the increasing population in both Yangon and Mandalay and the increased standard of living of urban population generate growth dynamics disconnected from a sustainable city planning.

The problems, which appear in Yangon as particularly striking, are found in all urban centres. For Green Lotus, the conditions are met for making the rural exodus a disaster for the people, the country, and the environment.

Waste management, normally supported by the cities, are not being taken onto consideration by the local policies, and often

find themselves supported by the informal private sector. Wastewater treatment infrastructure and sanitation of drinking water are in short supply and suffer from lack of investment in infrastructure during the past decades.

The public transport system consists of a dilapidated bus fleet, owned by private companies defining their journeys according to their interest. Thus, the historical centre of Yangon, Kyauktada Township, is constantly congested since all bus lines reach there. In general, the lack of planning and unification of the transit system is responsible of not only an increase in air pollution, but also of the congestion that saturates the transportation routes. It should be noted that the consequences of this saturation cities are not only

environmental but also economic and social.

Yangon population is expected to reach 8 millions by 2020. By then, there is still time to put in place a proactive policy of sustainable development.

It is obvious that political will is emerging. Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) has called on the expertise of Japanese cooperation to make a Masterplan and cooperated with Green Lotus for the organization of a participatory Conference "Let's draft a green Yangon" while Mandalay City Development Committee (MCDC) dream of a "Green Mandalay City" with the support of key players such as Safege (French company).

However, lack of resources, skills and the still limited interest of the general public on these critical issues constitute limits to which the Myanmar's green movement must respond.

Dawei's Special Economic Zone

Dawei's Special Economic Zone is one of the largest industrial project in South-East Asia.

This strategic project resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of villagers, the loss of their livelihoods, the massive destruction of fisheries, cultures, forests, rivers and huge environmental damage (pollution, use of arsenic, etc.) .

Since 2012, the discontent of the population has led the government to abandon the 4,000-megawatt coal plant project but the evictions of entire villages continue without the public being consulted or indemnified for damages.

4. Climate Change

Yangon is the second largest city most threaten by sea level rises after Dacca in Bangladesh.

Climate change is already affecting Myanmar a lot as Hadley Centre and climatologist expert U Tun Lwin highlighted it. Since 1978, monsoon season have been reduced by 40 days and natural catastrophe (cyclone, earthquake...) have increased. According to Hadley Centre previsions, temperature in Myanmar will increase by 5°C within 50 years, with Yangon as the second cities in the world to disappear because of sea level rise after Dacca in Bangladesh.

Far from the short-term priorities of the economic agenda, the consequences of climate change are more

and more decisive and dangerous, and needs for serious policies that take onto consideration climate change mitigation and resilience.

Myanmar's population knows already very well the dramatic consequence of climate change. Nargis was the most violent cyclone ever seen in the country. It is also the cyclone with the lowest trajectory in the Indian ocean, going straight to the most populated area of Myanmar: Yangon and the Irrawaddy delta. In few hours, more than 120 000 peoples lost their lives and there is still today a lot of families that still cannot

find the body of a member disappeared.

As an irony that only history is able to provide, Nargis is also the starting point amongst civil society in Myanmar. Plenty of CSOs and NGOs have been created in the aftermath of the cyclone in order to provide the population with humanitarian assistance and help. Nowadays, most of these NGOs constitute what seem to be a "green movement" in Myanmar, defending the local population and the environment against big industrial projects that endanger plenty of ecosystems.

Myitsone Dam : an important victory for Myanmar's Green Movement.

Developed following a 2005 agreement between the China Power Investment Corporation and the Ministry of Energy of Myanmar, the dam threatened resulted in "the disappearance of a unique biodiversity, forced population movements, flooding rare natural and cultural sites».

The mobilization of green associations, but also armed groups in Kachin State (which detonated several bombs in 2010 at the dam site), put an end to this project. U Thein Sein finally decided to abandon the project despite the discontent of the Chinese government.

The Myitsone dam therefore created a precedent and helped to cement the "green movement" in Myanmar. There still should be noted that environmental considerations of the government have not been the only one decisive. Indeed, political strategy issues and the positioning of Myanmar in the "conflict" India-China seemed to have ultimately pushed the government to suspend the Myitsone dam.



Green Lotus NGO

Green Lotus is a French Think and Do Tank dedicated to promoting sustainable development in Asia. Since 2003, Green Lotus is working to convince government officials, businesses and Civil Society Organisations that a green economy can bring prosperity for all instead of exclusive growth. After more than 10 years of networking and lobbying with Asian Civil Society Organizations, Green Lotus opened its office in Yangon in July 2013. Two years later and several field-testing, Green Lotus strongly believe that there is a place to experiment in Myanmar a green development path that avoid the mistakes of many other countries. In the context of Myanmar, where environmental issues are and will be many more in the future, Green Lotus is convinced that law and investments can be oriented towards sustainable growth.

Its vision

Asian countries, in all their diversity, now form a living heart of the planet. They may tomorrow be a spearhead of an ecological conquest for all mankind. Green Lotus intends to specifically implement the necessary actions to enable all actors of public life in Myanmar to choose Ecology and to implement real solutions for sustainable development.

The Myanmar Platform for Dialogue on Green Growth

The "Myanmar Platform for Dialogue on Green Growth" (MPDGG) is a project initiated by Green Lotus in June 2014 with the support of the British Embassy, the Regional Council of Ile-de-France and the French Parliament. The objective of the MPDGG is to develop an inclusive group of influential person convinced of the importance of green growth for Myanmar. Through three committees meeting monthly, the platform members intend to propose recommendations to policy makers and influence decision making in favour of a green economy.