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# Informal Settlements in Myanmar : current dynamics and new strategies

**A policy brief by Green Lotus (NGO).**



Think & Do Tank  
for A Sustainable  
Development  
in Asia

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in Asia

**“GREEN LOTUS” is a French/Burmese INGO created in 2003 and operating in Myanmar since 2012.**

“Green Lotus” mission is to raise awareness around climate change impact in Myanmar, and to promote green solutions for a sustainable development.

We work with the Union government, regional and state governments, local civil society organizations and communities.

Supported by public funds from France and United Kingdom, and endorsed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC) of Republic of the Union of Myanmar, “Green Lotus” developed and led the “Myanmar Dialogue Platform for Green Growth” between 2014 and 2017, gathering all actors of the civil society, business community, administration officials and elected representatives, to produce recommendations that supported the redaction of Myanmar legal framework on Climate Change policies.

Green Lotus is also active to support all community-led projects that aim at sustainable development. We promote and implement green solutions, such as organic farming, renewable energies, sustainable urban-planning, green tourism.

Green Lotus is bound by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Environmental Conservation Department (ECD/MONREC), and registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA).

Pyay Road 603D, Kamayut Township, Yangon

[www.green-lotus.org](http://www.green-lotus.org) || [contact@greenlotus.com](mailto:contact@greenlotus.com)

### The “Bawa Pann Daing” Project

“Community resilience and empowerment of a precarious settlement of Yangon,  
through participatory process and economic innovation”

Since 2017, Green Lotus has been working in Yangon to build resilience and empower a community of 20 000 people in an informal settlement inside the Ward 67, Dagon Seikkan Township, in partnership with Action Aid Myanmar (NGO), and with the support of the French Development Agency (AFD).

The pillars of the project are:

- Allowing self-empowerment and a common project for the community
- Working on an informal and sustainable rehabilitation of the settlement
- Building resilience to future challenges including climate change
- Increasing livelihood and autonomy thanks to social business activities

We also aim to experiment an empowerment model for the people of precarious districts in other parts of Yangon and other Myanmar cities. This project, and its innovative character, offer a strong opportunity for those communities to attest their central contribution to the life of the city.



**act:onaid**



# Executive Summary

While Myanmar stays one of the least urbanized countries in South-East Asia with only 30% of its population living in cities, internal migrations are driving urban growth. Yangon urban population should double to reach 10 million by 2040<sup>1</sup>. Country-wide, the National Housing Policy White Paper (2018) estimates a total housing shortfall of 1.08 million units. The Yangon authorities recognize the need to house 5.2 million people in the next 20 years, or 50,000 houses annually<sup>2</sup>, but it still requires to strengthen their capacity to develop truly affordable housing, current limitations contributing to a forecast of informal settlements growth in the near future.

60% of the people residing in the peri-urban areas, on the fringes of the city, live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> Vulnerable populations especially women and youth are among the most likely to feel the burden of urban poverty. 53 % of all internal migrants are women, and over 70 % of internal migrants are below the age of 35<sup>4</sup>.

The informal settlement population in Yangon is estimated to represent 7% to 15% of the Yangon population, and it is a growing phenomenon. According to UN-Habitat<sup>5</sup>, current informal settlements population in Yangon could be estimated at 450,000 people.

1 World Bank. 2019. Myanmar's Urbanization: Creating Opportunities for All - Executive Summary (English). Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group.

2 SABRIÉ, Marion, 2019, "Yangon 'Emerging Metropolis': Challenges for the Authorities and Resilience of the Yangonites", *Moussons*, 33: 33-64.

3 Helene Maria Kyed. "Informal Settlements and Migrant Challenges in Yangon". *Moussons* 33, 2019: 65-94.

4 Ibid Helene Maria Kyed. "Informal Settlements and Migrant Challenges in Yangon". *Moussons* 33, 2019: 65-94.

5 "Mapping of Yangon: the untapped communities, a preliminary study of informal settlements" elaborated by UN-Habitat reported 364,315 people living in informal settlements in 2016.

The development of informal settlements is both the product of push and pull factors. Pull factors are easily recognized in the lack of affordable housing in Myanmar and limited urban governance and urban planning. Push factors explaining migrations include rural poverty, agriculture transformation, climate change, call for “modernity”, and small job opportunities.

Key problems in informal settlements are fear of eviction, lack of official identification documentation, lack of employment opportunities, access to clean water, access to education and health, social stigmatization, precarious housing and sanitation, and loosening of family networks among others.

New strategies to deal with migrations and informal settlements need to be adopted. On-site rehabilitation and upgrading are found to be more efficient and cost-effective than resettlement plans. Promoting in situ rehabilitation wherever possible should be prioritized. Regarding all the different strategies, the consultation and participation of local concerned communities are critical and should be ensured from the inception until the conclusion of any policy. Recognizing lost identification documents, changing media focus from insecurity to social diversity and infrastructure development are levers of change that could considerably alleviate the burden of informal settlers. Supporting socio-economic development and job creation will address key issues and facilitate engagement with external stakeholders. Among rising inequalities, the social diversity of the city should be recognized. Within Myanmar’s democratic transition replacing eviction by cooperation would be a major achievement for the country’s future.

# 1. Introduction

*“Every citizen shall have the right to settle and reside in any place within the Republic of the Union of Myanmar according to the law”*

Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Chapter VIII, Article 355

In this early 21st century, Myanmar’s economy is growing, and its cities as well. While Myanmar stays as one of the least urbanized countries in South-East Asia with only 30% of its population living in cities, internal migrations are driving urban growth. Yangon urban population should double to reach 10 million by 2040 (World Bank, 2019). Country-wide, the National Housing Policy White Paper (2018) estimates a total housing shortfall of 1.08 million units. The Yangon authorities recognize the need to house 5.2 million people in the next 20 years, or 50,000 houses annually<sup>6</sup>, but it lacks the capacity to develop truly affordable housing, resulting in a forecast of informal settlements growth in the near future. The real estate market in Yangon has seen in recent years an oversupply of high-end luxury condominiums<sup>7</sup> several of them staying empty<sup>8</sup> while urban poor are left with no other options to join precarious settlements. Rural exodus and downtown gentrification following the economic liberalization since 2011 are both factors driving the population growth of Yangon. Unfortunately, the lack of proper city-planning<sup>9</sup> and affordable housing construction often drives the journey of new migrants toward informal settlements.

The informal settlement population in Yangon is estimated to represent 7% to 15% of the Yangon population, and it’s a growing phenomenon. According to UN-Habitat, current informal settlements population in Yangon could cover 450,000 people<sup>10</sup> in 423 locations<sup>11</sup>. As rural-urban migration and climate change-induced migrations keep on sustaining urban growth, while the pace of new truly affordable housing construction is low, new settlers are expected to join informal settlements. According to World Bank figures for 2010–2011, “*the poverty rate for Yangon is 34%, which is seemingly surprising given that the city is a commercial center, but the high rate is likely caused by the higher costs of urban living and the lack of available employment for the many incoming rural migrants*”<sup>12</sup>. In addition, poverty is unevenly distributed, as it is estimated that 60% of the people in the peri-urban areas, on the fringes of the city, live below the poverty line.”<sup>13</sup> New migrants are let to face new forms of poverty while moving to the city. And vulnerable populations, especially

6 M. Sabrié 2019

7 See Myanmar Times which advertises most of them.

8 See Times City or the Central for obvious example.

9 Maria Kyed 2019. It’s also worth notice that the YCDC planning department was only created in 2016.

10 Data from UN Habitat and YCDC quoted in Dr. Mu Mu Than\*, Khin MarYee\*\*, Kyi Lint\*\*, May Myat Thu\*\*, Marlar Han\*\*, “The Emergence and Growth of Slums: The Case Study of East Yangon District, Myanmar” International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, Volume 9, Issue 8, August 2019

11 “Estimates of the numbers of informal settlement residents in Yangon range from 270,000 (JICA and YCDC 2013), 365,000 (UN Habitat 2016), 400,000 (Myint 2017) up to 1 million (Dobermann 2016), and 1.8 million (Ye Mon 2016). Part of the reason that there is such a wide range of estimates may be lack of agreement on what constitutes an “informal settlement””. (E. Forbes; 2019)

12 World Bank 2019

13 Helene Maria Kyed. “Informal Settlements and Migrant Challenges in Yangon”. Moussons 33, 2019: 65-94.

women and youth, are among the most likely to feel the burden of urban poverty. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census reports that 53% of all internal migrants are women and over 70% of all internal migrants are below the age of 35. Urban poor unable to afford formal housing found themselves turning toward informal settlements. Huts in informal settlements are made of recycled construction material, corrugated iron, plastic tarpaulin and bamboo. According to Eben Forbes, “Most squatters live in substandard housing with more than 5 family members to a single room, compared to the Yangon average of 4.4 members to a household. A squatter family’s hut typically measures 15 feet by 20 feet (about 5.4 meters by 7.2m) and conditions in the settlements may be visibly squalid with open garbage dumps and inadequate latrines resulting in foul odors”<sup>14</sup>. Other issues derived from informality are limited – and often of poor quality - water access, poor sanitation facilities, limited access to health and education, along with social discrimination.

This study and its recommendations aim at increasing awareness around informal settlements in Myanmar, describing urban poverty, and suggests policy measures to address described issues.

Despite the lack of statistics, there are many more informal settlements in Myanmar located in regional and state capitals, urging to undertake further research to understand the magnitude as well as their living conditions and challenges. The conclusion of this paper might apply to other settlements in Myanmar but are mostly based on evidence from studies of the Yangon’s context.

## 2. Definition of informal settlement

Informal settlements acknowledge different definitions, critical standards to those definitions are the insecurity of tenure and fear of eviction. As land management and land status are still difficult to clarify in Myanmar<sup>15</sup>, many properties tenure is indeed legally contested and therefore could be named “informal”, however, some communities are more threatened than others. “Informal settlements” in this paper reflect the hundreds of thousands in Yangon that are living under the fear of displacement with lack of access to basic communal services such as water, sanitation, solid waste management, roads and electricity. According to Eben Forbes, “slum” refers to an informal settlement area where residents not only lack legal claim to their land or housing and lack basic urban services but also live in precarious conditions and are at risk of eviction”<sup>16</sup>. UN Habitat defines a slum household as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:

<sup>14</sup> E. Forbes, 2014, On the Frontier of Urbanization: Informal Settlements in Yangon, Journal of Burmese Scholarship. <https://journalof-burmesescholarship.org/issues/v1n1/9b-Forbes-en-ill-r2saveas.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Maria Kyed 2019 see also SiuSue Mark (2016)

<sup>16</sup> Eben Forbes 2019

1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions.
2. Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room.
3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price.
4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people.
5. Security of tenure that prevents forced eviction.

Informal settlements in Myanmar are called “*kyukyaw*” and suffer from negative perceptions associated with high criminality rates and insalubrity. “*kyukyaw*” in its layman Burmese usage refers to “invaders”, during the British colonization period, British were referred as “*kyukyaw*”. “Informal settlements” beyond a legal status, define indeed a collective emotion: the fear of eviction.

Despite most of the definitions being negative, informal settlements could also be defined as a product of Myanmar’s thriving development. Informal settlements are housing parts of the industrial workforce driving the country’s current economic growth.

## 3. Informal Settlements growth in Myanmar

In 2014 according to the Myanmar Population and Housing Census, there were already 9 million internal migrants in Myanmar coming mostly from the Dry Zone and Ayeyarwady region. Destinations of those continuous growing migrations are currently big cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. Estimated 800,000 migrants arrived in Yangon between 2009 and 2014, most of them settling in peripheral townships such as, Hlaing Thar Yar, Dagon Seikkan and Mingalar Don industrial zones. Migrants’ access to work is facilitated by the industrial economic growth but land price and legal-tenure issues limit access to housing, leading to the development of “informal settlement” in Yangon and Mandalay. In 2016, UN Habitat estimated the informal settlement’s population in Yangon around 350,000 people, and this population is constantly growing. More than half of informal settlements were built after 2008 following climate change-related Cyclone Nargis. Wherein 40% of those informal settlements are located in Hlaing Tharyar township, already housing a population of 700,000 (equivalent to the total population of Chin State plus Kayah State), with newcomers every day. The correlation with the 2008 Nargis Cyclone highlights linkages between natural disasters and climate change impact, and internal migrations.

All around the world, economic development is followed by migrations. In countries with low urban governance

capacity, lack of affordable housing and urban planning, this growth translates itself into the development of informal settlements. According to the World Bank “*Myanmar remains a predominantly rural country, with 15 million of the country’s 51.5 million people living in urban areas. However, this figure is expected to change -- projections indicate that an additional 7.1 million of its current rural population will move to cities by 2050. The increase in urban population has begun to put a severe strain on cities, particularly Yangon, and the needs for affordable housing, infrastructure and services.*”<sup>17</sup>.

In Myanmar “Migrations patterns are found to be both rural-urban and urban-urban with native inhabitants of peripheral townships losing their land with the rapid expansion of Yangon periphery.”<sup>18</sup> A sharp increase in informal settlement growth has been registered since 2008 following Nargis Cyclone and economic liberalization since 2011. According to UN-Habitat 2016’s study, 60% of the settlements in Yangon were formed between January 2010 and July 2016, highlighting economic transformation and climate change as the main drives of change.

The development of informal settlements is both the product of push and pull factors. Pull factors are easily recognized in the lack of affordable housing in Myanmar and limited urban governance and urban planning. Push factors are those explaining urban growth through migrations. Migrations patterns to informal settlements are found to be both rural-urban and urban-urban.

The transformation of agricultural systems toward more mechanization and export-oriented crop cultivation challenges rural social structure. “Most of the migrants come from rural areas in search of jobs, due to rural poverty, natural disasters and the increasing number of landless farmers.”<sup>19</sup> Climate change impact in Myanmar is also responsible for the disruption of agricultural patterns and loss of income forcing families to move. Natural disasters events such as the 2008 Nargis Cyclone or 2015 Sagaing landslides are also climate-change-induced events forcing large-scale migrations. Economic liberalization in Myanmar since 2010 also led to the creation of industrial zones in the periphery of Yangon, job opportunity is found to be one of the main explanations of migrations. Some social and cultural factors can also be considered, such as the call for modernity through the spread of smartphones and social networks attracting youth to urban centers, young women also migrate to escape pressure around marriage. Eben Forbes assesses push factors as more prevalent than pull factors, confirming that migrations are rather endured than planned. “Migration was somewhat more frequently the result of events that occurred in the place of origin (government relocation/slum clearance, poor conditions or natural disaster in the rural area, etc.) rather than by factors that would normally attract or “pull” rural dwellers into the city: employment prospects, better access to services, and so forth.”<sup>20</sup> As such 2008 Nargis Cyclone fostered large-scale and long-term migrations, which were endured rather than planned.

Urban-urban migrations define native inhabitants of peripheral townships losing their land due to the rapid expansion of Yangon periphery or rising rent. In Yangon, gentrification and metropolization are two dynamics supporting those urban-urban migrations, lower-middle-class being evicted out of the city-center by newly formed middle-class and international investments<sup>21</sup>. A critical push factor for residents in Yangon has been the use of displacement toward political ends, for example massive population displacement occurred in the aftermath of the 1988 revolution<sup>22</sup>. Some

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17 World Bank. 2019

18 Dr. Mu Mu Than\*, Khin Mar Yee\*\*, Kyi Lint\*\*, May Myat Thu\*\*, Marlar Han\*\*, “The Emergence and Growth of Slums: The Case Study of East Yangon District, Myanmar” International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, Volume 9, Issue 8, August 2019

19 Eben Forbes Op. cit. in Maria Kyed 2019

20 Eben Forbes « Migration, Informal Settlement, and Government Response: The Cases of Four Townships in Yangon, Myanmar », *Moussons*, 33 | 2019, 95-117.

21 M. Sabrié 2019 “Yangon ‘Emerging Metropolis’: Challenges for the Authorities and Resilience of the Yangonites”, *Moussons*, 33: 33-64.

22 Elizabeth Rhoads. (2018). Forced Evictions as Urban Planning? Traces of Colonial Land Control Practices in Yangon, Myanmar. *State Crime Journal*, 7(2), 278-305.

of those factors can be tackled, pull factors especially could be limited. However, this study leads to the conclusion that informal settlements in Yangon are the result of a complex dynamic that needs a long-term strategic policy to be addressed. Meanwhile, mitigation and improvement of living conditions in informal settlements can be developed to reduce negative output for slum dwellers and the city as an all.

## 4. Main issues in informal settlements

### 4.1 Fear of eviction

As aforementioned, definitions of informal settlements are broad and diverse. Housing can be declared illegal when the legal ownership of a building is contested, unregistered or unknown, in this regard it is estimated that most of the housing in Yangon could fall under this definition. However, though several buildings in downtown Yangon have unclear ownership their residents are protected from the fear of eviction. Fear of eviction by municipal authorities to make way to real estate projects is a shared concern by all residents of informal settlements. According to UN-Habitat 2020 rapid assessment of COVID-19's impact, 53% of households interviewed in informal settlements said that they feared being evicted, in Hlaing Thar Yar, 77% of respondents said they feared evictions. This fear and the lack of trust that follows create tensions and is a constant threat over the life of all concerned populations.

### 4.2 Lack of identification documentation

According to Myanmar 2014 national census, it is estimated that a third of the population lack official document proving identity such as the National Registration Card (NRC) or the Household Registration.<sup>23</sup> Migrants are especially concerned by this issue as official documents are often lost as a result of natural disasters or on the journey. Following Nargis Cyclone in 2008, approximately 800,000 houses were either destroyed or damaged, migrants from the Ayeyarwady region often testify losing their official documents during the disaster. Without NRC, individuals struggle to access formal jobs and are left to work only as day-to-day workers or through oral agreement endangering the respect of their rights. Though the informality of employment is a nation-wide problem (83% of the Myanmar workforce is believed to be working in the informal sector<sup>24</sup>), the absence of legal recognition from either employment or residence threatens particularly informal settlers. According to the World Bank “*Only 20% internal migrants*

<sup>23</sup> Myo Min (2020) The Socio Economic Struggles of Cyclone Nargis's Migrant in Yangon, Tea Circle Oxford. Available online.

<sup>24</sup> Data from the 2017 Labour Force Survey by the Department of Labour.

have permanent wage jobs. The majority do not have regular wages or benefits. Nearly 80% of the workers in urban areas work in microenterprises.” As H. Maria Kyed underscored it “The majority do not get access to formal factory jobs, because they lack the required skills and official documentation. This compels them to take low-paid, casual and informal jobs, with no stable incomes.” Without NRC or Household registration, children face discrimination at school and sometimes are barred from attending it. Some General Administration Department (GAD) officers can grant recommendations to help individuals without NRC accessing jobs, however, this procedure is often arbitrary. Discriminatory and arbitrary procedures for official document’s recovery tend to be part of a vicious circle transforming natural disaster’s victims into informal settlers.

## 4.3 Lack of infrastructure

As per the World Bank has stated “In Yangon, only 33 percent of the city’s population has access to piped water, traffic congestion is on the rise, as is solid waste, flooding and pollution. There is also a rise in the number of informal settlements as new residents cannot afford the existing supply of housing. If left unaddressed, these infrastructure needs will lead to further congestion, slums, pollution, and put a drag on opportunities for growth.”<sup>25</sup>.

According to UN-Habitat 2016 survey “virtually no informal settlements in Yangon has access to basic municipal services including piped water, sanitation facilities connected to a septic tank, municipal drainage and treatment networks, and solid waste management services.”<sup>26</sup> Informal settlements, especially those located at the periphery of the city (e.g. Hlaing Tharyar and Dagon Seikkan Townships.) lack the basic provision of public infrastructure and services such as roads, sewage, water, electricity, as well as access to health services. The absence of any water drainage leads to regular flooding during the rainy season. Most of the toilets available in slums are simply pit latrines that will be washed out by floods during the rainy season contaminating water sources and spreading feces all around the settlement. The impact on health of these poor sanitation facilities and costly access to water leads to increased prevalence of diseases such as diarrhea, dysentery, malaria and tuberculosis. Informal settlements because of their high density, have difficult access to health services, lack of sanitation is also at higher risk of contamination during a pandemic.

## 4.4 Precarious housing and sanitation

Informal settlements are often recognized through visions of shabby materials put together to form small and fragile housing. Yangon settlements are located around industrial zones and main roads, settlers use construction workshop materials, and industry’s leftover or they recycle by themselves wood, plastic and metal to build their hut. Yangon is at high-risk of flooding, according to UN Habitat “34% of informal residents are under severe risk of flooding and water logging, on a near daily basis”<sup>27</sup>. Climate change and resulting sea-level-rising will increase the frequency of such events especially affecting the urban poor. According to Eben Forbes “due to their crowded conditions, use of highly flammable building materials (e.g. thatched roofs) and use of wood for cooking fuel, [informal settlements] are also prone to fire in the dry season.”

Along with poor quality structure and poor resistance to natural elements informal settlers also face health risks due to lack of sanitation. Floods and stagnating water mixed with used toilets water altogether carry important sanitation

25 World Bank. 2019. Myanmar’s Urbanization: Creating Opportunities for All - Executive Summary (English). Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group.

26 “Mapping of Yangon: the untapped communities, a preliminary study of informal settlements” elaborated by UN-Habitat, 2016.

27 UN-Habitat 2020 COVID 19: Discussion paper on policy options for Myanmar.

and hygiene hazards. As Eben Forbes underscored, “conditions may be visibly squalid with open garbage dumps and inadequate latrines resulting in foul odors. Pit latrines are generally used but rarely maintained. Most residents let them fill up until the rainy season when floodwaters clear out the latrines’ pits or holding tanks, resulting in very unsanitary conditions”.<sup>28</sup>

Supporting the creation of community drainage, providing vocational training to local carpenters could help to mitigate those risks and reduce local vulnerability at a low-cost.

## 4.4 Limited access to water

Informal settlements in Yangon are mostly situated nearby natural disasters prone areas. Climate change is forecasted to result in sea-level rise many settlements are already suffering from it in Yangon. Besides the future flooding of settlements, there are already massive sea-water infiltration levels in Yangon. As informal settlements are not provided with piped-water or municipal connection to the water-grid system, dwellers often depend on local groundwater or pond which too often is at risk of contamination by pollution or infiltrated by sea-water. Usually settlers purchase 20 bottled drinking water at the price of MMK 500 which is similar to formal settlements, but water for washing and cooking (domestic use) comes either at an expensive price or a dangerous risk for health. Groundwater from local pumps or surface water from nearby ponds is often too salty because of sea-water infiltration. Those waters are also at high-risk to be contaminated by industrial rejections in Hlaing Thar Yar or Dagon Seikkan considering natural and industrial hazards delinquency<sup>29</sup>. Settlers are thus left to purchase a barrel of usage water at the rate of MMK 1000 per day. According to another study by UN- Habitat “water for drinking and bathing for a day can cost up to MMK 500 for a 20L can”. Water is indeed more expensive for informal settlers than formal ones, increasing the vulnerability of the urban poor. According to Eben Forbes, research by UN-Habitat<sup>30</sup> found that “*Hlaing Thayar has the highest occurrences in Yangon of disease related to poor environmental conditions and lack of water and sanitation facilities (diarrhea, dysentery, malaria and tuberculosis). Hlaing Thayar has the highest occurrences of diarrhea among all Yangon townships. It also ranks 2nd for malaria and 3rd for dysentery.*”<sup>31</sup> Lack of proper urban management, not only impacts urban poor but also affects the entire city. As the COVID-19 pandemic reminds all, cities are communities in terms of sanitation and health, discrimination will threaten all.

28 Eben Forbes, « Migration, Informal Settlement, and Government Response: The Cases of Four Townships in Yangon, Myanmar », Mousons, 33 | 2019, 95-117.

29 Su-Ann Oh, 2019

30 UN Habitat 2020 “Discussion paper on policy options for Myanmar”.

31 E. Forbes 2019

# 5. Recommendations

## 5.1 Historical background

*“There is a history of government-orchestrated forced resettlement in Myanmar and in Yangon in particular, to make way for urban development. Development – induced forced displacement and resettlement (DFDR) is increasing – uprooting and impoverishing people and undermining basic human rights.” UN-Habitat 2018<sup>32</sup>*

In Myanmar, illegal housing following massive migrations is not a new phenomenon. Starting in the 50s until today there have been several waves of migrations from rural areas to cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. In 1958 there were an estimated 300,000 informal settlers in Yangon<sup>33</sup>. First of all, this figure reminds that migrations have always brought new settlers to Yangon, but also that the size of the current total informal settlements’ population is not unprecedented. Under the military rule, the answer to the following creation of informal settlements has usually been displacement and resettlements in newly formed peripheral townships. *“In the late 1980s, the military government made another round of evictions of an estimated 450,000-500,000 people from the inner city to six new townships that the government established on the fringes of the city. Hlaing Thayar was one of them.”* (Maria Kyed 2019). Those policies have had different degrees of success, some of them offered affordable housing to newly displaced persons, while some were just violent forced expulsions. In 2015 the National League for Democracy (NLD) promised to *“establish, as quickly as possible, a program for the housing of homeless migrants who have moved to the cities as a result of natural disasters, economic opportunities and land confiscation”*<sup>34</sup>. However, the elected Yangon Regional Government has carried evictions since 2016. *“Instead of accommodating the newcomers, the city and regional governments of Yangon have, since 2012, continued the historical practices of the military government, namely, to evict informal settlers.”* (Maria Kyed 2017). As consequences of those evictions, the democratic transition and respect of basic human rights could be hampered.

**Therefore, for above presented in this study, recommendations would be as follow:**

## 5.2 Stop eviction

*“The YCDC official at township level said: “we have a motto: if you see a tent, destroy the tent.”* (Interview, 4 April 2017).”  
Maria Kyed; 2019

Since the NLD accession to power in 2016, the Yangon Regional Government has taken a hard stance against informal settlements, destroying impoverished people’s houses. As reported by M. Kyed, in June 2017 *“the NLD government*

<sup>32</sup> UN Habitat 2018 Introduction of the YISRP Yangon Informal Settlements Resettlement Program

<sup>33</sup> Than Than Nwe, “Yangon: The Emergence of a New Spatial Order in Myanmar’s Capital City,” *Sojourn: The Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 13, no. 1 (1998): 95-96. Op. Cit in Eben Forbes 2016.

<sup>34</sup> HEIN KO SOE, 2016 April “The lost dream of affordable housing” *Frontier Myanmar*

authorized a forced slum clearance in northeast Yangon's Hlegu township to make way for new high-rises, hospitals, parks and a golf course, in an area with approximately 4,000 (mostly bamboo) houses.”. The police drove out squatters destroying their houses to make way for real estate projects disconnected from local needs<sup>35</sup>. In 2018, the Yangon Regional Government proceeded to three demolitions of informal settlements in Hlaing Tharyar forcing people further away from the city and job opportunities. But it has had little effect to stop new migrations and new informal settlements establishment.

## 5.3 Upgrading vs Relocation (when it is possible)

“UN-Habitat’s mapping project confirmed that approximately 130 of the existing settlements are potentially suitable for in-situ incremental upgrading, while the remaining are located in hazardous areas that are potentially unsuitable for the development of human settlements.” (UN-Habitat 2018).

According to UN-Habitat and the International Growth Center (IGC) relocation projects always bear a very high-cost, higher than upgrading or legalization of informal settlements. There have been some recent projects in Myanmar of new affordable housing construction leading to future relocation of slum dwellers into formal housing. In 2014, the Department of Human Settlement and Housing Department (DHSHD) announced a US\$ 97 million plan to build low-cost housing, including 10000 units in Dagon Seikkan. However, as Forbes has reported in 2016, “even the lowest cost “affordable” units have been sold for about US\$ 20,000 a sum few working-class families can afford without an installment plan and/or low-interest loan.”<sup>36</sup>. The National Housing Policy White Paper (2018) estimates that only 14% of households in Yangon can afford to own dwelling units provided by formal housing delivery schemes.

According to UN-Habitat, 90% of informal settlements population do not want to leave their housing site but rather plan or hope for upgrading. Clearance costs 10 times more than upgrading. Upgrading on the other way, could lead the way to new private investment. UN-Habitat estimates that the regularization of land tenure results in significant private investment in these communities – on average, US\$7 private investment for \$1 of public funds. **Upgrading has the potential to unlock and mobilize extensive investments in housing.** Supporting social and economic diversity in the city will help businesses to hire diversified profile as they require, it will also ease traffic jams resulting from long commuting hours of the working class between downtown and the periphery. **Working with communities rather than expelling them outside of the city is not only cheaper but more efficient for everyone.** By doing so authorities could help to integrate the cities’ low-income workforce into the urban fabric. UN-Habitat already highlighted in Myanmar the potential for upgrading of 130 existing settlements. In specific circumstances, evictions might be deemed necessary, notably when precarious settlements are located into high-risk zones (natural or man-made) prone to flooding, impacted by industrial hazard and pollution, unsuitable land for construction or very steep slopes and when the lives of residents are at risk.

Regarding all the different strategies, the consultation and participation of local concerned communities are critical and should be ensured from the inception until the conclusion of any policy and throughout implementation

<sup>35</sup>Maria Kyed 2019

<sup>36</sup>Eben Forbes 2016

## 5.4 Encouraging infrastructure development

Developing infrastructure in informal settlements, and providing basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, sewage system and waste collection system would be cheaper to do than waiting for eviction and then new construction. Providing those services would improve the general health and sanitation of the city as an all and not only benefit settlers but other residents. For instance, the city of New York implemented such as strategy building and designing infrastructure ahead of migrations in the XIXth century. According to the International Growth Center<sup>37</sup> such a policy is cheaper than any resettlement plan. Planning infrastructure building ahead of migrations and in-situ improvement or upgrading are all affordable and sustainable policy compared with resettlement.

## 5.5 Recognition of lost document and improve access to new identity documents

GAD officers should grant recommendations to help individuals without NRC to access jobs, however this procedure is often arbitrary. NRC and Household Registration recovery should be facilitated. A standard procedure should be published for GAD officers to grant recommendations. The digitalization of current paper procedures and documents could help assess this national issue. The “smart card initiative” launched by Yangon Regional Government provided 60% of slum dwellers with an identification document in 2017<sup>38</sup>. However, this program was stopped as it was found to lack funding and efficiency and suffered criticism. The concept underlying this policy -to distinguish “honest city dwellers” and “opportunist”- was found to lack consistency. This program however could nurture future initiatives in order to offer some formal recognition and registration form to informal settlers. Providing official documents would help slum dwellers to participate in the industrial workforce. Access to formal employment would also allow the benefit of social security.

## 5.6 Support Small and Medium Enterprises and local social business creation

Green Lotus (NGO) has experimented with new practices to support and empower informal settlement communities through a focus on job creation and social business development. This strategy is answering the key issue as introduced by local communities. Employment and livelihood are always the first or second answer when considering both hope and challenges in informal settlements.

E. Forbes in 2016 described informal settlements economy as a “city within the city”, highlighting resilience strategies and informal economy opportunities. A walk through the streets of informal settlements in Yangon uncovers dozens of small shops from grocery to fishery. Along main-roads tire and small car repair shops take care of trucks going in and out of Yangon city. Since most of workers lacking NRC or household registration are prevented from

37 Collier, P., Glaeser, E., Venables, A., Blake, M., and Manwaring, P. (2019) “Policy options for informal settlements” Version 1. IGC Cities that Work Policy Framing Paper

38 Dr. Mu Mu Than\*, Khin Mar Yee\*\*, Kyi Lint\*\*, May Myat Thu\*\*, Marlar Han\*\*, “The Emergence and Growth of Slums: The Case Study of East Yangon District, Myanmar” International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, Volume 9, Issue 8, August 2019

joining the formal industry, some entrepreneurs set up small curry-shop and sell snacks to workers during their break. Many settlers are involved in the circular economy, selecting and recycling waste from the city giving them a new life and creating value. Those activities should be better studied and taken into account when evaluating informal settlements output to the rest of the city.

However, without any support or recognition from the government, no taxes can be levied on this. Informal business in informal settlements such as scavengers or recycling activities could be better supported and protected if workers had official document allowing them to register companies and pay tax further. **This would clearly demonstrate how informal settlements are indeed benefiting the city as well as extending the State's capacity in terms of tax collection.** Improving living conditions for residents is essential to increase local incomes and must be included as an objective to enable residents to deal with the new charges associated with interventions such as infrastructure development.

## 5.7 Considering land legalization

The International Growth Center among others has supported land legalization in informal settlements. However, Green Lotus (NGO) **does not recommend it as a priority measure.** This mainly follows historical examples from the regularization of land rights in India during the XXth century. Land rights regularization often fails to solve the root causes of informal settlements creation which includes the failure of the housing market to accommodate urban poor. Land rights regularization and provision of land titles to slum dwellers integrate them into the city housing market letting them with little protection from gentrification. Middle-classes are expected to push land prices up and ultimately force slum dwellers to sell. Such a policy would only give more legitimacy to resettlements but fail to address the root cause of informal settlements creation. Other initiatives could be considered such as collective land tenure schemes, although it is critical to ensure the market mechanism does not lead to gentrification and collective tenure to respect individual rights. This situation calls for innovation around the emergence and recognition of other tenure systems. As demonstrated by a recent academic workshop on collective land tenure hosted at Yangon Technological University<sup>39</sup>, collaboration with Myanmar universities and researchers to further elaborate solutions are possible and would benefit all.

## 5.8 Recognize the importance of social diversity within the city

Taking into account the presence of informal settlements when considering the location of new development projects. If the project is still developed, engage with communities to mitigate and compensate evicted/relocated population even if they lack proper documentation.

Regarding the creation of affordable housing, develop studies to assess the opportunity for the current informal settlements population to afford new housings. International donors and agencies such as JICA or Korean Bank have approached the Yangon Regional Government authorities to build affordable housing, however they target households earning between MMK 300,000 to MMK 1,000,000 a month, out of reach from the vast majority of informal settlers. In 2011, Department of Urban Housing and Development (DUHD) launched a program to build around 16,000

<sup>39</sup> International Seminar hosted at YTU in November 2019 organized by Ms Valerie Clerc from the Development Research Institute (IRD).

low-cost housing in Dagon Seikkan (while the rest of the 75,000 houses project would be built and managed by private companies targeting high-end customers). The cost of construction for those is around MMK 8 to 10 million targeting households with monthly incomes between MMK 100,000 to 300,000, however the limited and expensive access to credit still bars most of slum dwellers to access those “affordable housing”<sup>40</sup>. In Dagon Seikkan, a 2014 study revealed that while DUHD was issuing eviction notes for the construction of “affordable” housing, “unfortunately, none of the households interviewed would be able to afford a unit of this ‘affordable housing’”<sup>41</sup>.

Upgrading informal settlements might offer other opportunities at a lower cost. According to UN-Habitat “political commitment not economic feasibility is the challenge” when considering informal settlements upgrading.

## 5.9 For Media: changing the focus on insecurity

*“Informal settlers have no legal rights. Instead, they are criminalized.” M. Kyed 2017*

Informal settlements are too often depicted or perceived as areas of insecurity, criminality and sometimes even accused of slowing down the economic growth of the city as they opposed multi-million dollars real estate projects.

*“Despite proposals to construct affordable housing, the core perception of the YCDC and the regional government is that informal settlers and squatters cannot be tolerated and that many among them are “gangsters” or “professional squatters” who make a business from renting and selling illegally occupied land. Thus, migrants and informal settlers are generally not framed as poor residents in need of assistance or as potentially positive assets for the economic growth of the city, i.e. as laborers and consumers.” M. Kyed 2017.*

However, the reality is that informal settlements are most densely populated areas. Hlaing Thar Yar, the single township thought to house 40% of informal settlements in Yangon, is concentrating a population of 700, 000 thousand more than Chin State and Kayah State population united. Informal settlements hold about 7% of Yangon population on only 1.2% of its land<sup>42</sup>. In this regard, informal settlements are extremely efficient solutions in terms of land/population ratio. (the current COVID-19 pandemic context also highlights the resulting vulnerability of high-density population). Poverty, overcrowding and the absence of public lighting or even police patrols are factors naturally threatening the security of those communities. Informal settlements are not more dangerous than other places, but they are less protected and abandoned by the State.

Over a one-year period, internal migrants remitted on average of US\$ 165 per year person.<sup>43</sup> This highlights their contribution to income redistribution from urban to rural area, alleviating rural poverty and disruption of the agricultural sector by natural disasters and climate change. Urban migrants, and among them slum dwellers are indeed key resources to ensure social justice over the country.

40 HEIN KO SOE, 2017 September “For Yangon’s squatters, a better lie still out of reach”. Frontier Myanmar.

41 Eben FORBES 2014, On the Frontier of Urbanization: Informal Settlements in Yangon, Journal of Burmese Scholarship

42 UN Habitat 2019 “A comprehensive mapping exercise conducted by the UN-Habitat in 2016 identified a total of 423 informal settlements in Yangon, [...]. The settlements are spread over more than 1,800 acres, or approximately 1.23 per cent of Yangon’s total land area, and house an estimated 365,000 people, or between 6-8 per cent of the city’s total population.” UN Habitat 2019

43 Su-Ann Oh; 2019.

# Conclusion

Migrants leaving their villages because of natural disasters, agriculture loss, climate change effects or poverty are not culprits, they are forced to do so. They are seeking a better life in the city. Informal settlements arise as a solution for poor migrants when cities are not able to welcome them with affordable legal housing. Migrant workers are themselves both the product and a solution to Myanmar's development, supplying cities with an extended workforce, new skills and future market potential. Therefore, providing basic services and infrastructure to informal settlements is the recognition of the urban poor as citizens, it is a democratic action.

Informal settlements existence is not something authorities should be ashamed of, every major city, in the North or in the South, rich or poor is facing this reality. Informal settlements are a solution to rapid urbanization and migrations that always accompanies economic development. Myanmar as a young democracy has a great opportunity to lead global efforts toward migrations and informal settlements. Myanmar has already guaranteed the right to vote for informal settlements communities. In the 2020 general elections, MP candidates could be interested to reflect on those issues to build an urban future together.

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