# *Land Rush Working Paper & Notes*

**Issue No. 3, September 2022**

## Land, Labour, Social reproduction and the global land rush: Insights from Myanmar (Burma)

**Doi Ra**

The Land Rush Working Paper & Notes is a series of exploratory papers from the research project, RRUSHES-5. For more information, please see the project website. https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/commodity-land-rushes-and-regimes.

RRUSHES-5 -- Commodity & land rushes and regimes: Reshaping five spheres of global social life (food, climate change, labour, citizenship, and geopolitics) is a research project at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands, in collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI), that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834006).

**Abstract**

Contemporary land rush began from around 2008, due to crises in food price, fuel, energy, finance, and climate. Even before the global land rush unfolded, neoliberalism has pushed millions of people to the 'economic informality', appropriately termed as 'working people' by Shivji or 'classes of labour' by Bernstein. This research project will study less about *whether*, but more on *how*, the land rush has reshaped labour regime, and whether and how changes in labour dynamics in turn impacted upon land rush. Furthermore, a more relevant view on the relationship between land and labour is proposed by using a unitary lens on economic production and social reproduction. By constructing datasets around the framing of land/labour and economic production/social reproduction nexus, my intention is to ultimately understand the implications of the land rush in terms of structural, institutional, and political transformations in society. The case of Myanmar will be my study site.

## Introduction

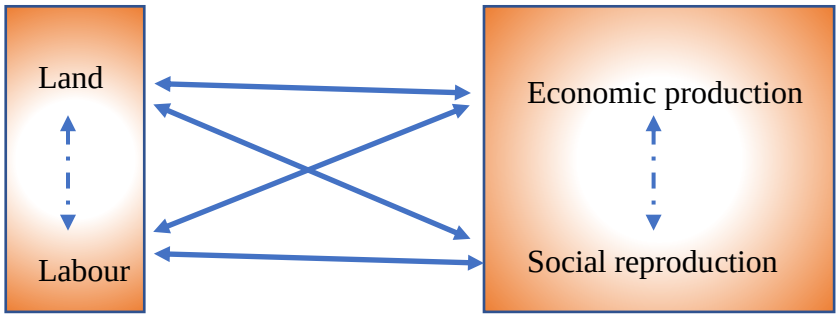
From around 2007-2008, with a sudden food price spike converging with crises in fuel, energy, finance, and climate unleashed an unprecedented level of race after land across the world (Zoomers, 2010). Subsequently, the following contemporary land rush received frenzied global attention. Contrary to what many has initially assumed, land grabbing and land grabbers cut across the global south-north divide, or poorer countries/BRICS divide, reminding us once more to focus on the political economy logic (or more specifically, the logic of capital), rather than on nationalities and national borders, that facilitates the land rush. But a little over a decade after the initial explosive report in 2008 on land grabs (GRAIN, 2008), many of the high-profile land deals were not pursued, or were scaled down, if not withdrawn altogether. How then do we make sense of what happened during the peak of the global land rush, and what does it imply on broader social life?

There are two dimensions of the land rush that are least studied in the context of the land rush literature, namely, labour, and social reproduction. The dominant literature on land deals have leaned heavily towards understanding land property relations in the context of economic production. Labour and social reproduction are equally important elements in the land rush. The question of labour has been flagged by important thinkers earlier, including Tania Li (2011) and Carlos Oya (Oya, 2013b) who reminded us how and why the issue of labour and exploitation should be at the core of the global land grab debate. Labour cannot be separated from land: the politics of land (who gets which land, how, how much, for how long and for what purposes?) shape labour regimes, and in turn, the changing labour regimes shape the patterns in land access (Borras, Franco, Ra et al., 2021). What impact does land deals have on labour not only among those directly implicated in particular corporate land deals, but including those only indirectly affected, or meaning, impact on labour regime? It is also important to look into labour not only in the context of labour who are directly linked to a specific corporate land deal, but rather, labour's impact on a specific landscape more generally.

'Is land everything to the 'poor''? was one of a series of questions asked to weigh different land deals against the return to labour in order to understand impact of land grab (Oya, 2013b, p. 516). Within the scope of this research project, the question is with reference to a scenario that combines both land and labour, not only in the sphere of economic production but also social reproduction. Social reproduction is 'an indispensable background condition for the possibility for economic production in a capitalist society' (Fraser, 2016, p. 4). Capitalism has intentionally split them apart to enable appropriation and exploitation for surplus value in both spheres (Fraser, 2016; Shah & Lerche, 2020). A more relevant view on the relationship between land and labour is one that uses a unitary lens on economic production and social reproduction. The complex interrelationship between land and labour as well as economic production and social reproduction is demonstrated in a schema (see diagram, 1). The tendency in many literatures in agrarian studies is to emphasize

either land or labour, and as a result, they tend to miss overall picture of social landscape and broader patterns of social change with regards to social structure, institutions, and political agency.

Diagram 1: Land and labour, economic production, and social reproduction




From the land multiple 'use values' and 'exchange values' can be realized (in Marx's term: 'use values' derive from physical properties of a thing, while 'exchange values' derive from commodification of things through objectified use of labour power and creation of social utility (Marx, 1976) to sustain lives, livelihoods, and social bonds. Following the discussion above, research questions will be framed around 'bundle of access' (Ribot & Peluso, 2003) following flows of relationships demonstrated in the diagram. Perspective from bundle of access is required because over-simplified categorization of land type and land use (for example - one person/one stand-alone fixed plot of farmland) by the modern land governance system conceal a web of relationships between the rural communities and the surrounding landscape (Franco & Borras, 2021, p. 19). Land access in terms of a range of institutional mechanisms for private and individual entities on one end, and for community-based and socialized arrangement on the other, will be explored in order to make visible the actual web of relationships on the ground and re-establishing these possibilities for a socially just future (Borras et al., 2021, p. 22).

Global explosion of the land rush is assumed to have subsided after a decade from 2008. Does this mean land transaction, land accumulation and land grabs have ceased to exist? Using Myanmar as the country case study, I will explain that this is not the case. My hunch is that the land rush globally, and more specifically in Myanmar, might have produced and continue to produce impacts that are far bigger in scope, intensity and scale than previously believed. It may have generated significant shifts in social structures, institutions, and political agency, thereby affecting broader social change. Whether indeed this is so is an empirical question that requires careful investigation, and thus, this ongoing research project. In the following sections, I will also present a series of discussions leading to the argument for the relevance and essentiality of the land/labour and production/social reproduction relationship. Ultimately, the research attempts to add a deeper discussion on the impacts of land rush.

## Theoretical framework

### *Global land rush*

The contemporary global land rush is a result of the 'current neoliberal, globalized, multipolar world' (Kaag & Zoomers, 2014, pp. 6–7). It is underpinned by the four defining features of capitalism, namely, private property, free labour market, expanded capital accumulation, and the role of market to allocate factors of production and society's surplus (Fraser, 2014). From the perspective of neoclassical economics, the goal is to pursue economic efficiency (with its three component pillars of technical efficiency, allocative efficiency, and distributive efficiency).

Different studies focus on specific parts of the land rush such as the size of land, with the biggest attention on the size of land (labeled as 'the fetishization of the hectare' by Edelman (2013, p. 488)). Many have focused on the characteristics of land grabbers (as in 'follow the money' approach), or the locations of land grab to study impact on the affected populations. Others emphasize the need to embed the study of the land rush in a historical framework because 'the spaces in which land grabbing occurs have almost always been created and shaped by earlier processes of political contention, longstanding patterns of land tenure and use, and pre-existing social formations' (Edelman et al., 2013a, p. 1521). And others called for studying the recent land rush in a broader context by tracing their structural and institutional origins (Wily, 2012; Zoomers, 2010). The global land grab initially created a 'hype' with its associated 'buzzwords and concepts that become very popular in the development circles' but still need to address critical discussion gaps around the issue (Kaag & Zoomers, 2014, p. 6; Oya, 2013b). Proposals 'to consider new questions and new ways of formulating questions' (Edelman et al., 2013a) and 'to reflect, challenge and reframe, nuancing and sometimes confronting existing narratives' have been put forward (Scoones et al., 2013).

### *Land and labour*

Edelman et al. (2013b, p. 1522) followed Li's argument for 'centering labour in the land grab debate' into two scenarios with regards to the global land debate: 1) when the land is needed but the labour is not, 2) when capital needs both land and labour. Both scenarios can be linked to increased poverty and dispossession of peasants and small-holder farmers in the countryside (Li, 2011), thus contributing to a growing relative surplus population. For Oya (2013b), we have learnt enough about different layers of exploitation under capitalism in agriculture, and so selectively acknowledging some only is not effective.

In order to engage with the challenging but urgent agrarian question of labour especially in the context of global south, an empirically-based class analysis to understand the differentiated impact would be crucial as Borras and Franco (2012, p. 516) proposed. Today's 'classes of labour' by Bernstein (2006) or 'working people' by Shivji (2017) has been transformed significantly to the

point that it is no longer academically or politically practical to put them into distinct and neat class categories. There is no longer a pure iconic form of 'full-time peasant[1]' or 'a full-time proletariat'. The contemporary army of labourers 'make live' (Li, 2010) along the continuum of urban-rural, agriculture-non-agriculture, formal-informal, long-term-season, and so on. The terms of insertion into the continuum and the implications are further differentiated along the line of gender, generation, ethnicity, and nation in the case of migrant workers. Current neoliberal capitalist system has increasingly intensified the process of 'fragmentation of classes of labour' where working people can no longer receive a generalized living wage to afford basic reproduction costs (Bernstein, 2006, p. 455). It has diverged significantly from Marx's (1976, p. 274) proposition of the value of labour-power which 'is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner' (i.e., the worker). It has also produced and accelerated the number of migrant workers – both internal and transborder working under conditions of 'hyper-precarity' and 'super-exploited' (Ferguson & McNally, 2015; Habibi & Juliawan, 2018). Working people are now comprised of 'the growing numbers … who now depend – directly and indirectly – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (Panitch et al., 2001, p. ix). In this research, location of land as 'the definitive political question and terrain of struggle of a (globalized) semi-proletariat' (Bernstein, 2006, p. 456) will be explored by investigating through the unitary lens of economic production and social reproduction.

*Economic production and social reproduction*

Fraser (2014) situated expropriation from the sphere of social reproduction as even more concealed than exploitation of labour power and framed it as part of the 'backstory' ran by ongoing mechanisms of dispossession and expropriation, and with distinctive ontologies of social practice and normative deals. In particular, 'wage labour could not exist in the absence of housework, child-raising, schooling, affective care and a host of other activities which help to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings' (Fraser, 2014, p. 7). It concerns with production, sustaining, and exploitation of a fluidly differentiated labour force, as well as that of nature (Katz, 2001). More comprehensively, social reproduction refers to:

> "… the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis and intergenerationally…. (it includes) how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and the elderly, and the social organization of sexuality" (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, pp. 382–383).

[1] The word 'peasant' may carry different meanings for different people. In this research, 'peasant' refers to those who are subsistence-oriented, produce cash crops mainly for survival and for maintaining social status (Edelman, 2013a).

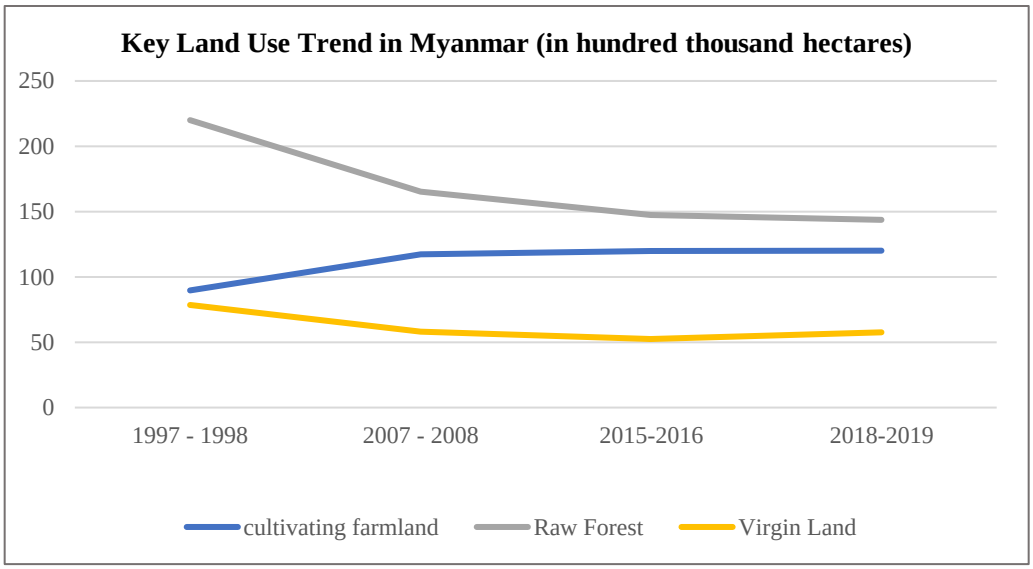
The separation of 'economic production' from 'social reproduction' is the nature of capitalism itself when in fact the two spheres are naturally co-constitutive (Fraser, 2014).

Other discussions on transcending the production-reproduction divide came from Marxists and Marxist-Feminists by underlining those reproductive activities usually associated with women's 'homemaking' role are indeed part of the productive labour which creates value by enabling daily regeneration of labour power and reproducing the next generation of workers (Costa & James, 1975; Federici, 1975; Fortunati, 1996; Mies, 1982, 1999). For capital, how the struggle for reproduction of labour power could affect economic production has always been a concern and consistently try to control the process (Mitchell, 1996, p. 191). This point has been reflected by the argument made by Ben that although social reproduction shapes social change, it is the relentless workings of caplitalism that ultimately drives the ongoing social transformation (Cousins, Forthcoming). And it would be crucial to understand the relationship between social reproduction and capitalism, particularly the unfolding contradictions and the tensions to improve our understanding on land politics (ibid). Current literature from both Marxist or feminist traditions has been limited to either only one of the spheres in relations to land and labour. In order to overcome this gap, we build on Bhattacharya and Vogel's (2017, p. 75) proposal to view 'spaces for production of value … and spaces for reproduction of labour power' as an integrated space in the theoretical and practical senses.

### *The 'localized' global land and commodity rushes*

Global land rush found fertile ground inside Myanmar as early as the 1990s when the military regime started to adopt an open-door policy towards international trade, private enterprises, foreign investment, and export-oriented industrialization. The land rush interacted with past and ongoing processes of land grabbing, deep-rooted ethnic grievances, social inequality, and militarization of various forms, scale, and intensity. Overall, it helped consolidate prior land grabs in Myanmar while facilitating their further expansion. Expulsion of peasants accelerated after the junta revived the adoption of Wastelands Instructions in 1991, a legacy of the British colonialism from 1863 in order to legalize land enclosures. Thirty-one percent of the country's land area has been classified as 'vacant, fallow, and virgin lands (VFV land)', out of which 70 percent of these lands are situated in the ethnic territories. Based on data available from the government and other sources, by the end of 2014, nearly 5 million hectares of VFV land concessions have been given to agribusinesses and growers in the form of VFV land grants (Government of the Republic of Myanmar, MOALI, 2016). Correspondingly, figure 1 below shows the general trend of land use change within the country, from which there has been sharp decline in the areas of rural forested lands and 'virgin land' could be observed. The country's total forest coverage dropped from 57 percent in 1962 to only 24 percent in 2008 (Buchanan et al., 2013).

**Figure 1. Land Use Trend in Myanmar**




Source: (Department of Agriculture Land Management and Statistics, n.d.)

**Table 1. Samples of agribusiness land deals from Land Matrix database**

| Deal size (ha) | Top parent companies | Origin country | Intention of investment | Other details |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 100,000 | Yunnan Hongyu Group Co., Ltd. | China | Food and Non-food agricultural commodities | Rubber and lemon |
| 200,000 | Wuhan Kaidi\| Myanmar Industrial Crops Development Enterprise | China, Myanmar | Food crops, Agriculture unspecified | Corn (Maize), Jatropha, Sugar Cane |
| 200,000 | State Development and Investment Corporation\| Great Wall Company | China, Myanmar | Biofuels | Sugarcane, cassava, and maize for biofuel production |
| 54,000 | Auto Industrial Company Ltd.\| Resources & Resources Ltd. | Singapore, Korea | Agriculture unspecified, Forest logging / management | Oil palm, Forest logging / management |

Source: https://landmatrix.org/list/deals (downloaded on 10 September 2021)

In addition, table 1 shows examples of agribusiness land deals from Land Matrix database (landmatrix.org) with corresponding land size, companies involved and their origin countries, and the intention of investment. The Land Matrix database is the largest database on land grabbing

internationally. There has been a debate about its method and usefulness (see, Anseeuw et al., 2013; Edelman, 2013; Oya, 2013b; Scoones et al., 2013). These sets of data produced a lot of attention given to the role of foreign governments and foreign companies in land grabbing, but the role of the central state remains key. State's structure, institutions, and interests are aligned with oligarchic capitalist interest for which it creates justifications for public legitimation of these land concessions (Levien, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013).

From 2011 (and notably, even more importantly from 2016), when National League for Democracy (NLD) government led by international icon Aung San Suu Kyi came into power, the new quasi-civilian (or quasi-military)[2] government implemented economic reforms with full support from international institutions such as the World Bank, International Financial Corporation, Asian Development Bank, and Japan International Corporation Agencies. Economic model of the country was priming to be transformed into a neoliberal capitalist economy through liberalizing market and investment regulations, privatising public sectors, and reducing state's role to becoming a subjective facilitator. World Bank's assessment recently provided a rosy picture of the country's economy as followed:

> 'Myanmar's economy grew at the extraordinary rate of 7 percent annually between 2011 and 2017—among the five fastest-growing countries in the world, and second only to China in the region in terms of historical growth acceleration. Capital accumulation, supported by foreign direct investment and, to a lesser extent, productivity improvement, contributed to this development.' (World Bank, 2019, p. 7).

Political reforms turned Myanmar attractive to the international investors, and they often refer to it as 'the final frontier of South East Asia', 'Asia's missing link' or 'huge greenfield opportunity' with rich untapped natural resources and nearly 60 million consumer market. For these investors, Myanmar is high risk but potentially very lucrative if the right regulatory system for the investors is fully in place (Grayson, 2012). The sentiment of capital community reflects that of the state by reading from Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at the Asean Business and Investment Summit as followed: *"... [Myanmar is] the last frontier of South-east Asia ... We have land, we have good young working population, we have many unexplored resources ... Exploration is exciting, exploration is lucrative, and exploration will help us to develop our country quickly ..."* (Arshad, 2018). In 2016, Japan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) helped develop the country's industrial policy which included key proposals such as economic growth through economic agglomeration, the establishment of domestic corridors connecting to Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) corridors, and the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) (Kudo & Kumagai, 2019). Similar plans but more comprehensive in terms of geographic coverage, sectors, and

[2] The term is used to describe structure of Myanmar state with control by the military in significant positions in the parliament, and government ministries.

potential impact were later echoed by China-Myanmar Economic corridor (CMEC) which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative pushed by China on a global scale.

**Map 1. Major showing mega investment projects in ethnic regions**


Source: (Buchanan et al., 2013, p. 31)

## Labour

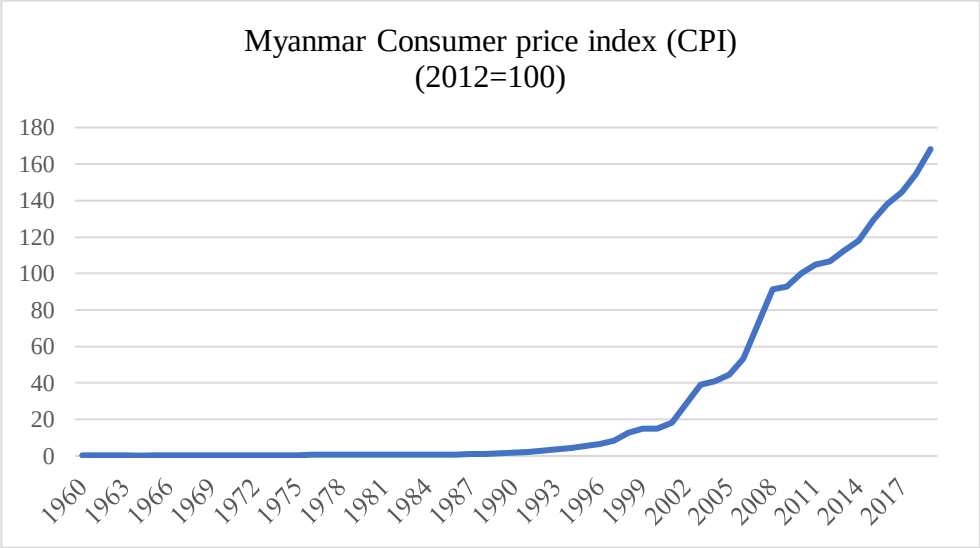
As these processes unfolded, the rural landscape (Mitchell, 1996) has been already dynamically transformed by working people due to long-standing processes of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession. It is estimated that from the early 1990s, nearly 5 million people have been forcibly displaced from their social environments and the same number of people have lost their lands due to deforestation or land concession (Government of the Republic of Myanmar, MOALI, 2016). At the same time, working people also exist as marginal and small land holders of inadequate size and quality, or whose access to land is under constant threat (Borras et al., 2021). Looking at the current situation in Myanmar, the people from the rural areas made up an overwhelming majority (87%) of the nation's poor (Central Statistical Organization, World Bank, and UNDP, 2019). Among them, 45.8% works in agriculture with no land; 33.4% in agriculture and non-agriculture with no land; 30.2% in agriculture with access to some land; and 22.6% in in agriculture and non-agriculture with land (ibid). While national statistics separately presents

working population as 70.9 percent of working age population in rural areas while 29.1 percent are in urban (Department of Labour, 2017), in reality, a continuum of landscape connecting spaces of rural to urban, and farm to factories has been built by a growing number of working people surviving under the 'economic informality' (Davis, 2006; Prasse-Freeman, 2021). A much clear manifestation is the rising number of slums or informal settlements in the peri-urban areas. From 2010 to 2016, number of slums in Yangon (former capital city) increased from 153 to 423 (ADB, 2019) hosting an estimated 10-15 percent of the country's population (Dobermann, 2016). They were deprived of decent housing and other public services leading to health and other risks (YCDC & Save the Children, 2016).

The ILO annual labour survey from 2007 mentioned 63 percent of the rural working age in Myanmar are employed (Department of Labour, 2017). Here, ILO defines anyone as employed when they have worked for one hour within the last seven days in return for a kind of remuneration. Such definition of employment masked the extent of real under- and unemployment among the rural population. Only 2% of the entire workforce of Myanmar is currently estimated to be employed in the formal sector which include factories, offices, and other work places where workers can register to be eligible for social security schemes (Griffiths & Oo, 2014). Even in the extractive sector generating biggest capital accumulation while occupying massive hectares of land, available data from companies and SOEs show direct employment of about 35,603 individuals representing only 0.2% of total Country's labor force (2015-2016) (MEITI, 2018). Compelled into overwhelmingly fluid forms of livelihoods and labour dynamics, the working people of Myanmar exhibit what Holmes termed as 'phantomness' (as cited in Levien et al., 2018, p. 861) – not fitting into any clear-cut categories such as a full-time peasant or a proletariat.

With realization of 'jobless growth' economy (Rodrik, 2016), the agrarian question of labour has developed into its own distinction and urgency to deepen understanding on the struggles for social reproduction (Bernstein, 2006; Chhachhi, 2014; Oya, 2013a). As in the graph below shows of the Myanmar consumer price index (CPI) which has risen sharply over the years from around 2000, it conveys the hardship working people face in order to procure food, non-food items and basic services such as health and education. The daily minimum wage equivalent of 3500 kyats (around US$ 2.3) was approved in 2015 and revised as 4800 kyats (around US$ 3) in 2018, while international poverty line is set as US$ 1.9 per day (Overeem & Theuws, 2018). In addition to being the lowest wage rate in the south-east Asia, it does not even apply consistently to the informal sector where most of the workers are concentrated.

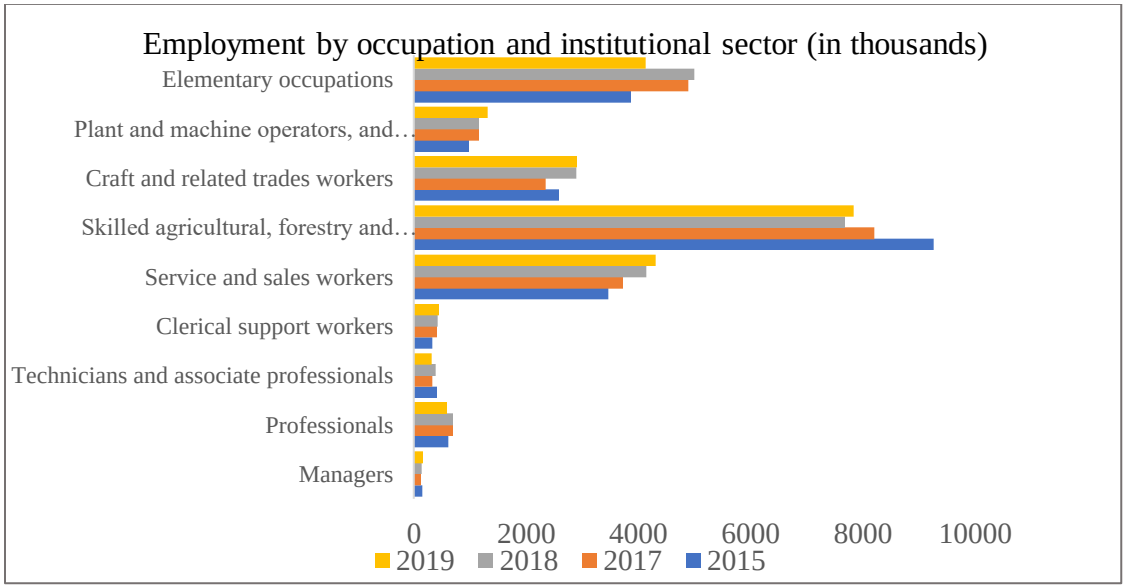
**Figure 2. Myanmar consumer price index (CPI)**




Source: www.data.worldbank.org (downloaded on 29 September 2021)

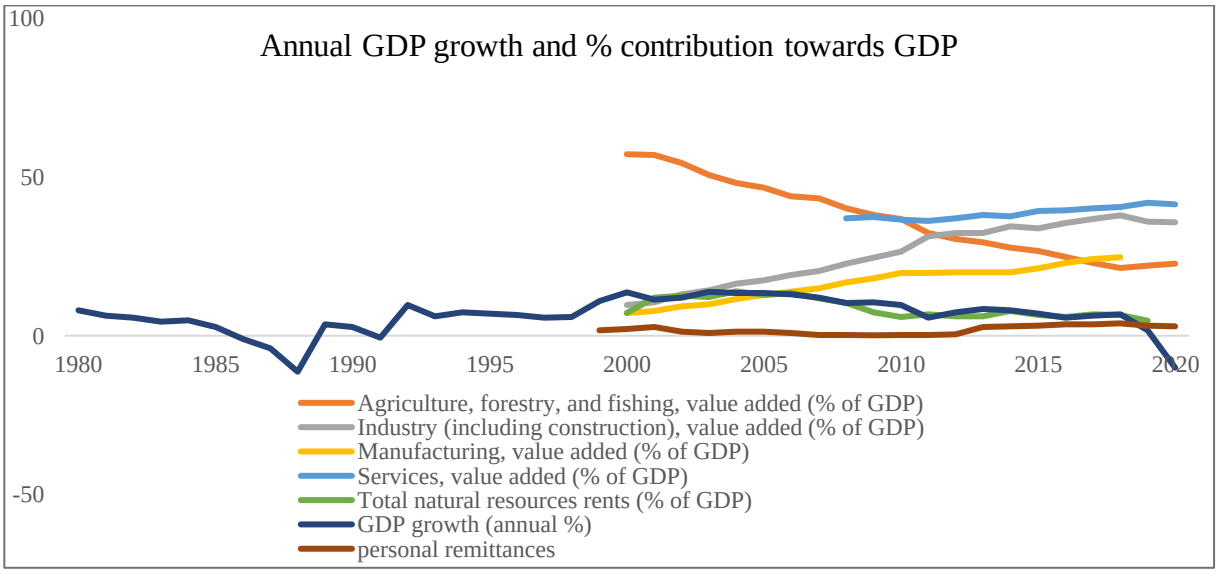
As shown in the figure below, majority of the working population are currently employed as agricultural, forestry and fishery workers, followed by elementary occupations, and jobs in service and sale, and trade sectors (ILO, n.d.). These 'clean' categories by ILO again mask grave realities of the working people such as the 'phantomness', the precarity and the fragmentation aspects. The first step to revealing such nature could be through the approach taken by Habibi and Juliawan (2018) by re-categorizing them into different types of relative surplus population (RSP) as developed by Marx (1976). Using the lens of RSP, we can see that the rural population forms a stagnant population of the active labour army by offering cheap labour to the emerging top sectors such as the service and manufacturing sectors, and by exporting labour to other countries (Borras et al., 2021). Annual GDP growth, except falling sharply due to the COVID-19 pandemic and even more so due to 2021 February military coup, has been contributed by key sectors with varying trends based on figure 4. While agriculture sector contribution fell over the year (57% in 2000 to 23% in 2020), it has been compensated significantly by the rise of manufacturing (37% in 2008 to 41% in 2020) and service sectors (7% in 2000 to 25% in 2018) based on World Bank database (www.data.worldbank.org).

**Figure 3. Employment by occupation and institution sector (in thousands)**



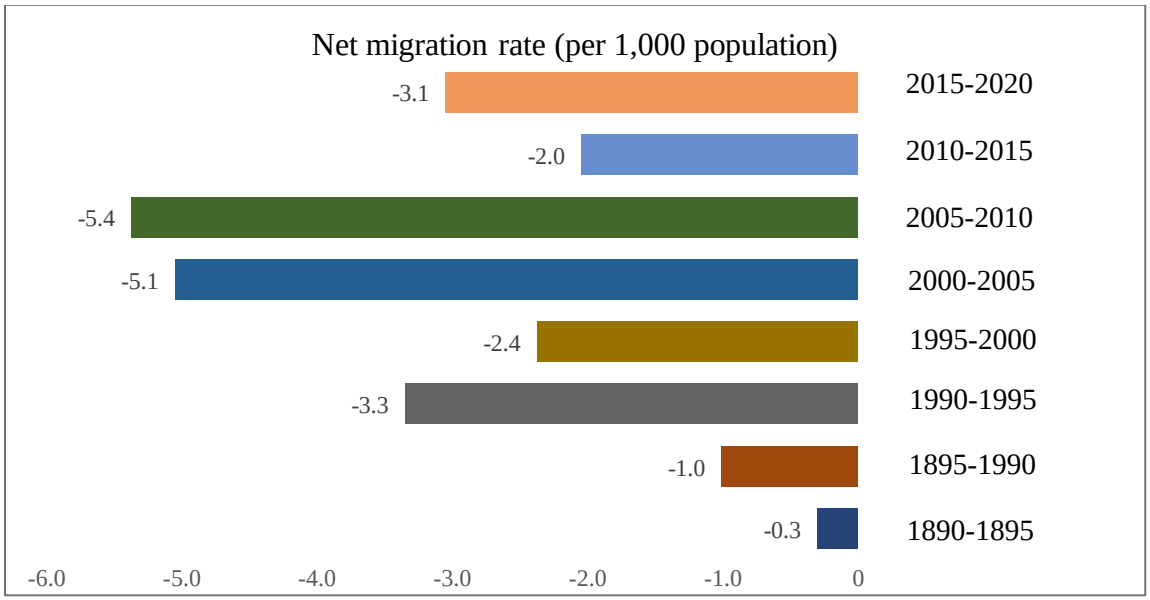

Source: https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/country-profiles/ (downloaded on 29 September 2021)

**Figure 4. Annual GDP growth and contribution towards GDP by key sectors**




Source: www.data.worldbank.org (downloaded on 29 September 2021)

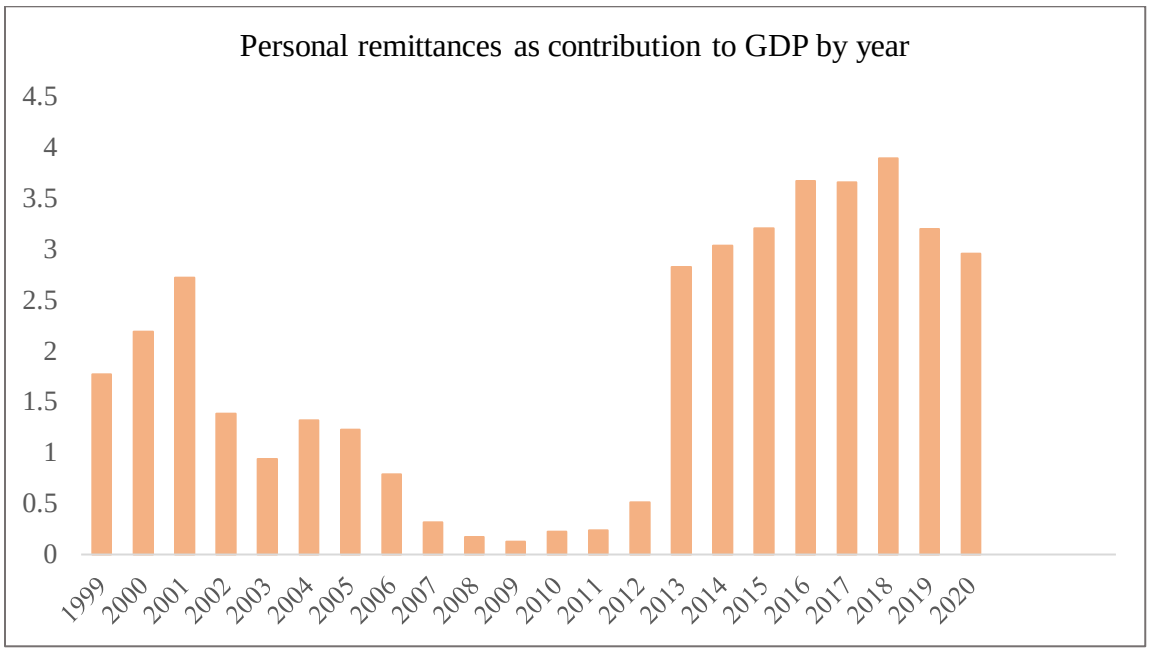
**Figure 5. Net migration rate of Myanmar**




Source: https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Interpolated/ (downloaded on 1 October 2021)

Faced with extremely precarious and cheap labour prospects in the country, migrant work has become a preferred livelihood for many people, with or without land, as one of the few coping mechanisms left for the people from the rural areas (Ra & Ju, 2021). Shown in the figure 5 above on trend of net migration rate in Myanmar, out-migration is clearly taking place much more than the in-migration (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019). The 2014 country population census showed that between 2009 and 2014, almost 3.6 million people or 7 percent of the population migrated internally (Department of Population, 2015). It is estimated that five million people from Myanmar to be working as migrant labour in other countries, including three million in Thailand alone (Parmar et al., 2019). Estimates of annual remittances from the transborder migrant workers alone ranged between 2.8 billion to 8 billion based on the estimates from World Bank and IOM (Borras et al., 2021). Their contribution to GDP peaked to as high as 4 percent as shown in the figure 6 below. Similar to the migrant workers from Vietnam working in Laos (Baird et al., 2019), remittances of Myanmar migrant workers went into maintaining farm production and buying livestock as well as for reproduction of households and communities including expenses incurred for child care, health care, education, and local festivals (Borras et al., 2021).

**Figure 6. Personal remittances as contribution to GDP by year**




Source: www.data.worldbank.org (downloaded on 1 October 2021)

## Land, labour and economic production

In fact, changing labour dynamics significantly affect how land is situated within the agrarian societies or how the landscape is transformed. Yet land is narrowly defined for economic production in terms of the viability of commercial farming or the 'yield gap' linked to productivity (World Bank Group, 2016). The World Bank's assessment identified that Myanmar suffered from both land and labour under-productivity compared to other Asian countries. And the solutions prescribed are to increase the supply of agricultural public goods, and improve efficiency and profitability of production (World Bank Group, 2016). Linking the point made by World Bank to the wider landscape perspective (Mitchell, 1996), let us take a look at the Myanmar agricultural sector in terms of its morphology and representation which are linked to labour. It is composed of predominantly smallholding plots of less than 10 acres (an estimated 90 percent) (MOALI, 2018), increasingly squeezed in by middle and large-scale agricultural plantations, factories, urban expansion and infrastructure such as irrigation dams and highways. In a way, we can say that Myanmar agriculture sector has been survived by the work of smallholders and landless labourers through different forms of 'self-exploitation' (Chayanov, 1986) as 'working people' (Shivji, 2017) or 'classes of labour' (Bernstein, 2006) discussed above. A trend termed as 'stepping in' has driven agriculture commercialization through investments such as retirement funds, remittances, or employment in other sectors or in most cases, just 'hanging in' by barely surviving through poorly paid wage labour combining with small-scale agriculture (Hall et al., 2017). At a glance,

impoverishment of the smallholder and marginal farmers and the rural wage labourers look natural. But when viewed closely, nothing about it is natural (TNI et al., 2021).

Linking back to Li's (2014) point on the making of land for productive use requires regimes of exclusion to determine who can access what resource for how long and for what purpose. The landscape becomes demarcated with inscription devices 'such as fences, title deeds, laws, zones, regulations, landmarks and story-lines' (Li, 2014, p. 589). A landscape approach by Mitchell (1996) in the context of Myanmar provides us an analytic lens to discern a landscape shaping and being shaped by 'stacked' claims (Hunsberger et al., 2017, p. 314). As discussed above, strong currents driving land grabs came from various overlapping sectors such as agribusiness, mining, real estate, military expansion, big conservation and so on, which can be termed as 'convergence of multiple commodity rushes.' In addition, I argue that Myanmar as a fertile ground for the global land rush is due in part to the availability of an expanding army of (completely and partially) dispossessed rural working people. But not only. It is made possible through the exploitation of social reproduction sphere.

## Land, labour, economic production and social reproduction

And taking the point from Fraser (2016, p. 4), 'non-waged social-reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism as such. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility for economic production in a capitalist society'. The two spheres are co-constitutive and are both subjected to appropriation for surplus value by the capitalists (Shah & Lerche, 2020). Even though rural agrarian societies may have come to depend less on land as the main livelihood strategy as in commercial farming, land still remains central for their survival for other social purposes (Borras et al., 2021). Cousins et al. (2018) showed land encompassing a range of 'distributive relations' which allocates resources to families, kinship, and communities based on socially legitimate claims. In practical terms, it provides means of subsistence, acts as shock absorber of external risks, provides access to other natural resources such as water and forests, stores biodiversity and ecological services, and for many social groups, it carries cultural and religious meanings including for its natural aesthetic beauty (Borras & Franco, 2013). Recent study with transborder Myanmar migrant workers revealed that 'land back home is key to keeping their rootedness to their community, now and in the future, where social care can be coordinated and carried out: childcare, schooling of children, care for elderly household members, and indeed as the locus for their own healthcare and retirement' (Borras et al., 2021, pp. 9–10). In times of emergencies like the current COVID-19 pandemic, land provides for the working people with a safe space to return to and from where future plans can be made (ibid).

As such, the need emerges to develop further the importance of land as space for social reproduction, with meanings and purposes beyond the concept of economic production which is

often the case, at least in critical agrarian studies. It cannot be just reduced to the purposes for agricultural production or income generation (Zhan & Scully, 2018).

## Concluding Discussion

In this initial working paper, I have attempted to explain that even though the global land rush peaking around 2008 appeared to have plateaued in the following decade, the implications have not been fully captured in the mainstream literature. The social impact needs to be considered even though land deals have not been pursued, scaled down or have been withdrawn altogether. This I mean particularly in terms of looking through the framing of land/labour and economic production/social reproduction nexus. At present, land property relations have been studied intensively in the context of economic production. However, land politics affect labour regime which depend on the sphere of social reproduction, not only to reproduce people as workers but also as human beings in different social contexts. I have demonstrated briefly how the global land rush has unfolded inside Myanmar through multiple processes, different characters and actors. While consolidating and enabling past and future land grabs, land rush under the neoliberal capitalist system has increasingly intensified the process of 'fragmentation of classes of labour' where working people can no longer receive a generalized living wage to afford basic reproduction costs (Bernstein, 2006, p. 455). Adding to the social reproduction crisis faced by the working people is the over-emphasis on land for economic production promoted by insitutions such as the World Bank. Using findings from research on Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers, I have highlighted that land is crucial for social reproduction, in Marx's words, for a range of 'use values' (Marx, 1976). Having produced profound implications across the world, the global land rush has also provided us the opportunity to re-frame our perspective towards the interconnection between land/labour and production/social reproduction. It is politically urgent and crucial for the current agrarian struggles of different forms and the future of working people who are now the majority of the world's population.

## References


ADB. (2019). *Financing affordable housing in Yangon*. Asia Development Bank. www.adb.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublication%2F504671%2Ffinancing-affordable-housing-yangon.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1qbIlkIb1zVRzt7GlbW28u

Anseeuw, W., Lay, J., Messerli, P., Giger, M., & Taylor, M. (2013). Creating a public tool to assess and promote transparency in global land deals: The experience of the Land Matrix. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *40*(3), 521–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.803071

Arshad, A. (2018, November 12). Myanmar Leader Aung San Suu Kyi Calls for More Foreign Investment. *The Straits Time*. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/myanmar-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi-calls-for-more-foreign-investment

Baird, I. G., Noseworthy, W., Tuyen, N. P., Ha, L. T., & Fox, J. (2019). Land grabs and labour: Vietnamese workers on rubber plantations in southern Laos. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *40*(1), 50–70. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12261

Bernstein, H. (2006). Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century? *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement*, *27*(4), 449–460. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2006.9669166

Bhattacharya, T., & Vogel, L. (2017). How Not to Skip Class: In T. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory* (pp. 68–93). Pluto Press; JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j.8

Borras, S. M., & Franco, J. C. (2012). Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *12*(1), 34–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2011.00339.x

Borras, S. M., & Franco, J. C. (2013). Global Land Grabbing and Political Reactions 'From Below'. *Third World Quarterly*, *34*(9), 1723–1747. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.843845

Borras, S. M., Franco, J. C., Ra, D., Kramer, T., Kamoon, M., Phyu, P., Ju, K. K., Vervest, P., Oo, M., Shell, K. Y., Soe, T. M., Dau, Z., Phyu, M., Poine, M. S., Jumper, M. P., Mon, N. S., Oo, K., Thu, K., Khine, N. K., … Ye, J. (2021). Rurally rooted cross-border migrant workers from Myanmar, Covid-19, and agrarian movements. *Agriculture and Human Values*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-021-10262-6

Buchanan, J., Kramer, T., & Woods, K. (2013). *Developing Disparity-Regional Investment in Burma's Borderlands* (p. 53). TNI.

Chayanov, A. V. (1986). *A.V. Chayanov on the theory of peasant economy*. Madison, Wis. : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999578353902121

Chhachhi, A. (2014). Introduction: The 'Labour Question' in Contemporary Capitalism. *Development and Change*, *45*(5), 895–919. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12125

Costa, M. D., & James, S. (1975). *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Falling Wall Press Limited.

Cousins, B. (Forthcoming). Land, social reproduction and agrarian change. In S. M. Borras Jr. & J. C. Franco (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Land Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Cousins, B., Dubb, A., Hornby, D., & Mtero, F. (2018). Social reproduction of 'classes of labour' in the rural areas of South Africa: Contradictions and contestations. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *45*(5–6), 1060–1085. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1482876

Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. Verso.

Department of Agriculture Land Management and Statistics. (n.d.). *Land use statistics according to land categories*. Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation.

Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019* [Online Edition. Rev. 1]. United Nations. https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Migration/

Department of Labour. (2017). *Annual Labour Force Survey—2017 (Quarterly Report)* (p. 9). Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population. https://www.mol.gov.mm/en/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2017/11/2017-ALFS-Q1-Reporten.pdf

Department of Population. (2015). *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*. Ministry of Immigration and Population.

Dobermann, T. (2016). *Urban Myanmar* [Policy note]. International Growth Center. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjhhqD646jyAhUKeisKHeKMAewQFnoECAMQAQ&urlwww.theigc.org%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2017%2F01%2FIGC-Urban-Myanmar.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1lBxOerRoW13zlHV6ewYmD

Edelman, M. (2013a). *What is a peasant? What are peasantries? A briefing paper on issues of definition*. https://www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/wgpleasants/edelman.pdf

Edelman, M. (2013b). Messy hectares: Questions about the epistemology of land grabbing data. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *40*(3), 485–501. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.801340

Edelman, M., Oya, C., & Borras, S. M. (2013a). Global Land Grabs: Historical processes, theoretical and methodological implications and current trajectories. *Third World Quarterly*, *34*(9), 1517–1531. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.850190

Edelman, M., Oya, C., & Borras, S. M. (2013b). Global Land Grabs: Historical processes, theoretical and methodological implications and current trajectories. *Third World Quarterly*, *34*(9), 1517–1531. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.850190

Federici, S. (1975). *Wages Against Housework*. Power of Women Collective & The Falling Wall Press.

Ferguson, S., & McNally, D. (2015). Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class. *Socialist Register*, *51*.

Fortunati, L. (1996). *Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (0 edition). Autonomedia.

Franco, J. C., & Borras, S. M. (2021). *The 5Rs in Myanmar: Five principles for a future federal democratic system where rural working people can flourish* (p. 48). TNI. https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-5rs-in-myanmar

Fraser, N. (2014). Behind Marx's Hidden Abode. *New Left Review*, *86*, 55–72.

Fraser, N. (2016). Contradictions of Capital and Care. *New Left Review*, *100*, 99–117.

Government of the Republic of Myanmar, MOALI. (2016). *Working Paper 10: Land Tenure and Administration: Formulation and Operationalization of National Action Plan for Poverty Alleviation and Rural Development through Agriculture (NAPA)*. FAO. http://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/b156a6a1-9007-4630-9f2a-1e7db36d2040

Grayson, D. (2012, March 22). *Myanmar Ripe for Private Equity* [News Channel]. https://www.cnbc.com/video/2012/03/22/myanmar-ripe-for-private-equity.html

Griffiths, M. P., & Oo, K. Z. (2014). *Formal sector internal migration in Myanmar, Results from 2013-2014 Formal Sector Survey* (pp. 1–12). LIFT, SPPRG, SSB, Ministry of Labour, Employment & Social Security, Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, ActionAid Myanmar. https://www.lift-fund.org/en/formal-sector-internal-migration-myanmar

Habibi, M., & Juliawan, B. H. (2018). Creating Surplus Labour: Neo-Liberal Transformations and the Development of Relative Surplus Population in Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *48*(4), 649–670. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1429007

Hall, R., Scoones, I., & Tsikata, D. (2017). Plantations, outgrowers and commercial farming in Africa: Agricultural commercialisation and implications for agrarian change. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *44*(3), 515–537. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1263187

Hunsberger, C., Corbera, E., Borras, S. M., Franco, J. C., Woods, K., Work, C., de la Rosa, R., Eang, V., Herre, R., Kham, S. S., Park, C., Sokheng, S., Spoor, M., Thein, S., Aung, K. T., Thuon, R., & Vaddhanaphuti, C. (2017). Climate change mitigation, land grabbing and conflict: Towards a landscape-based and collaborative action research agenda. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement*, *38*(3), 305–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2016.1250617

ILO. (n.d.). *Country Profile: The Latest Decent Work Statistics by country*. ILOSTAT. Retrieved 30 September 2021, from https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/country-profiles/

Kaag, M., & Zoomers, A. (Eds.). (2014). *The global land grab: Beyond the hype* (1st ed.). Fernwood Publishing; Bloomsbury Collections. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350223172

Katz, C. (2001). Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction. *Antipode*, *33*(4), 709–728. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00207

Kudo, T., & Kumagai, S. (2019). Growth Policy and Regional Balance: Developmental State-Building in Myanmar. In Y. Takagi, V. Kanchoochat, & T. Sonobe (Eds.), *Developmental State Building: The Politics of Emerging Economies* (pp. 135–156). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2904-3_7

Laslett, B., & Brenner, J. (1989). Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *15*, 381–404. JSTOR.

Levien, M. (2013). Regimes of Dispossession: From Steel Towns to Special Economic Zones. *Development and Change*, *44*(2), 381–407. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12012

Levien, M., Watts, M., & Yan, H. (2018). Agrarian Marxism. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *45*(5–6), 853–883. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1534101

Li, T. M. (2010). To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations. *Antipode*, *41*(s1), 66–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00717.x

Li, T. M. (2011). Centering labor in the land grab debate. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *38*(2), 281–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.559009

Li, T. M. (2014). What is land? Assembling a resource for global investment. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *39*(4), 589–602. WorldCat.org. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12065

Marx, K. (1976). *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy.* (Vol. 1). Penguin Books in association with New Left Review.

MEITI. (2018). *EITI Report for the period: April 2015—March 2016* (pp. 1–284). MEITI, Moore Stephens.

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwic6pW3-JbxAhXafH0KHQf5C3wQFjAAegQIBBAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Feiti.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocuments%2Fmeiti_report_2015-2016_final.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1xmcGCq0TIBxT0Hwz2wqXG

Mies, M. (1982). *Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (0 edition). Zed Press.

Mies, M. (1999). *Patriarchy and Accumulation On A World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (2nd edition). Zed Books.

Mitchell, D. (1996). *Lie Of The Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. University of Minnesota Press. http://muse.jhu.edu/book/31982

MOALI. (2018). *Annual Statistics Report (2017-2018)* (p. 345). Government of the Union of Burma.

Overeem, P., & Theuws, M. (2018, November 12). *Higher minimum wage in Myanmar: Bad news for workers?* SOMO. https://www.somo.nl/higher-minimum-wage-in-myanmar-bad-news-for-workers/

Oya, C. (2013a). The Land Rush and Classic Agrarian Questions of Capital and Labour: A systematic scoping review of the socioeconomic impact of land grabs in Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, *34*(9), 1532–1557. WorldCat.org.

Oya, C. (2013b). Methodological reflections on 'land grab' databases and the 'land grab' literature 'rush'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *40*(3), 503–520. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.799465

Panitch, L., Leys, C., Albo, G., & Coates, D. (2001). Socialist Register 2001 Preface. *Socialist Register*, *37*. https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5752

Parmar, P. K., Barina, C., Low, S., Tun, K. T., Otterness, C., Mhote, P. P., Htoo, S. N., Kyaw, S. W., Lwin, N. A., Maung, C., Moo, N. M., Oo, Eh. K. S., Reh, D., Mon, N. C., Zhou, X., & Richards, A. K. (2019). Migration patterns & their associations with health and human rights in eastern Myanmar after political transition: Results of a population-based survey using multistaged household cluster sampling. *Conflict and Health*, *13*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0193-1

Prasse-Freeman, E. (2021). Necroeconomics: Dispossession, extraction, and indispensable/expendable laborers in contemporary Myanmar. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1943366

Ra, D., & Ju, K. K. (2021). 'Nothing about us, without us': Reflections on the challenges of building Land in Our Hands, a national land network in Myanmar/Burma. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1867847

Ribot, J. C., & Peluso, N. L. (2003). A Theory of Access. *Rural Sociology*, *68*(2), 153–181. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2003.tb00133.x

Rodrik, D. (2016). Premature deindustrialization. *Journal of Economic Growth*, *21*(1), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10887-015-9122-3

Scoones, I., Hall, R., Borras, S. M., White, B., & Wolford, W. (2013). The politics of evidence: Methodologies for understanding the global land rush. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *40*(3), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.801341

Shah, A., & Lerche, J. (2020). Migration and the invisible economies of care: Production, social reproduction and seasonal migrant labour in India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *45*(4).

Shivji, I. G. (2017). The Concept of 'Working People'. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, *6*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2277976017721318

TNI, Justice Society, Lahu Development Network, Metta Development Foundation, Mon Area Community Development Organization, Mon Region Land Policy Affair Committee, Mon Women Organization, Mon Youth Progressive Organization, Pa-O Youth Organization, Paung Ku, Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization, Tai Youth Network, & RRUSHES-5 Research Project. (2021). *Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic: Their life stories and the social structures shaping them*. Transnational Institute.

Wily, L. A. (2012). Looking back to see forward: The legal niceties of land theft in land rushes. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *39*(3–4), 751–775. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.674033

Wolford, W., Borras, S. M., Hall, R. (Professor), Scoones, I., & White, B. (2013). *Governing global land deals: The role of the state in the rush for land* (Vol. 1–1 online resource). Wiley; WorldCat.org. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10768981

World Bank. (2019). *Myanmar—Economic Transition amid Conflict (English)* (Systematic Country Diagnostic No. 143563). World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/507421574785059413/Myanmar-Economic-Transition-amid-Conflict

World Bank Group. (2016). *Myanmar—Analysis of farm production economics (English)* (No. 100066). World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/509581468181132091/Myanmar-Analysis-of-farm-production-economics

YCDC & Save the Children. (2016). *Lives on Loan: Extreme poverty in Yangon*. Save the Children International. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16577/pdf/Lives%20on%20loan.pdf

Zhan, S., & Scully, B. (2018). From South Africa to China: Land, migrant labor and the semi-proletarian thesis revisited. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *45*(5–6), 1018–1038. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474458

Zoomers, A. (2010). Globalisation and the foreignisation of space: Seven processes driving the current global land grab. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *37*(2), 429–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066151003595325

**Doi Ra** is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands. https://www.iss.nl/en/people/doi-ra. She is part of the ERC-funded RRUSHES-5 research project. https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/commodity-land-rushes-and-regimes. She also works at the Transnational Institute (TNI) Myanmar in Focus Program.