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Food Security Policy Project Research Highlights
Myanmar

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AGRICULTURAL LAND IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE

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Introduction

This research highlight presents an overview of agricultural land ownership, distribution, use, and tenure for rural households in Southern Shan State, and how this has changed compared to the previous generation. All findings are from the Shan Agriculture and Rural Economy Survey (SHARES) which was conducted during June-July 2018 with 1562 rural households in nine townships of Southern Shan State: Taunggyi, Hopong, Lawksawk, Pindaya, Mongnai, Langkho, Hsihseng, Pinlaung and Pekon.

In this highlight, we use the term 'farm households' for households who are cultivating crops, whether or not they own land. We refer to households who do not grow crops as 'non-farm households'. 'Landed households' refers to households who own agricultural land, and 'landless households' to households who do not own agricultural land.

Furthermore, we also classify households by landholding terciles. Terciles are obtained by ranking all landed households in ascending order of landholding size and dividing into three groups with an equal number of households in each group. Tercile 1 consists of the third of households with the smallest farms, while tercile 3 consists of the third of households with the largest farms.

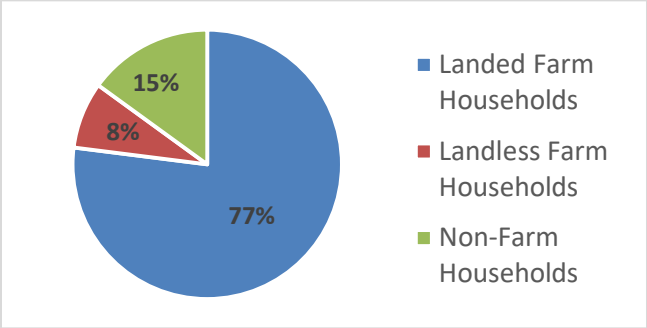
Results

Landholding characteristics

Rates of landlessness in southern Shan are lower than in other parts of Myanmar. Nearly one in four households (23%) are landless, but one third of these (8% of all households) cultivate land that they do not own. Thus, 85% of households have access to agricultural land and only 15% do not cultivate any land at all (Figure 1).

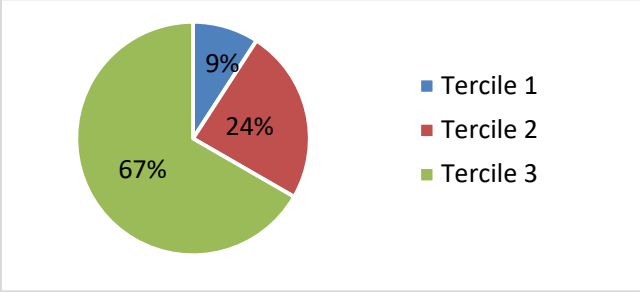
The average size of land owned by landed households is 5.7 acres (median 4 acres). This is somewhat smaller than average landholdings in the Delta and Dry Zone. The average area of land cultivated is 5.2 acres (median 3.5). The difference in average size of land owned and land cultivated results from households borrowing-, renting- and sharecropping-out land to landless households.

Figure 1: Proportions of landed farm, landless farm and non-farm households



Tercile 1 households own an average of 1.5 acres (maximum 2.5 acres). Tercile 2 households own 2.5-6 acres, (mean 4.3 acres). Tercile 3 households own more than 6 acres (mean 10 acres). Farmland is unevenly distributed, but to a lesser degree than in either the Delta or Dry Zone. Households in tercile 1 own 9% of all agricultural land, while those in tercile 2 own one quarter (24%), and those in tercile 3 own two-thirds (67%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Shares of total acreage of agricultural land owned by land tercile



Tenure status

Most cultivated agricultural parcels (82%) are owned and self-operated (88% among landed farm households). Ten percent of all parcels are accessed by borrowing. Similar to other areas of the country, the agricultural land rental market is only sparsely developed. Parcels leased in account for only 5% of the total.

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Most of the land that is borrowed or rented is utilized by landless farm households. Borrowed parcels account for more than half (53%) of the farmland used by landless farm households. In most cases, land is borrowed from parents, in advance of inheritance. Landless farm households that access land in this way can therefore be considered as 'transitory landless'. One-quarter of the parcels (26%) accessed by landless farm households are leased-in, while 6% of parcels used by these households are obtained by mortgaging-in and sharecropping, respectively (Table 1).

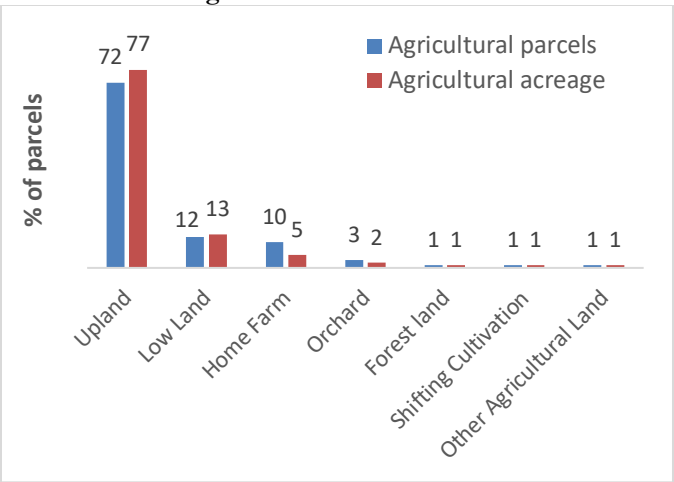
Table 1: Tenure status of operated agricultural parcels, by household type (% of parcels)

Tenure status	All farm HH	Landed farm HH	Landless farm HH
Owned & operated	82	88	0
Borrowed in	10	7	53
Leased in	5	3	26
Sharecropped in	1	1	6
Shifting Cultivation	0.8	1	3
Mortgaged in	0.5	0.1	6
Settled illegally	0.2	0.1	2
Owned by community	0.2	0	3

Farmland categories

Upland (*ya*) is the main type of agricultural land in our survey area, accounting for three-quarters (77%) of all farmland. Irrigated lowland (*le*) accounts for 13%. Most households (83%) have a small garden, (i.e. cultivate crops in their home compound). Crops grown in home gardens may contribute substantially to both household food consumption and income. We consider any home compound greater than 0.5 acres on which crops are grown to be agricultural land, and refer to these parcels as 'home farms'. 'Home farms' represent 10% of all agricultural parcels and 5% of the total acreage of agricultural land (Figure 3).

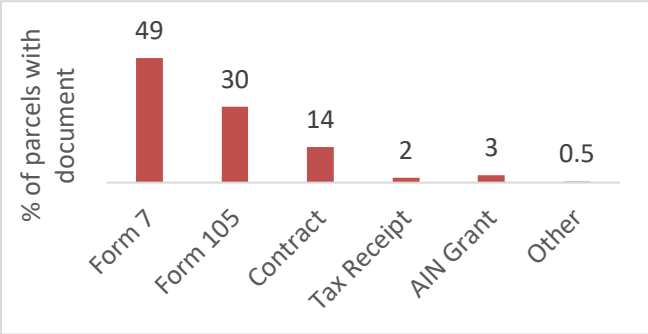
Figure 3: Share of agricultural parcels and acreage under different land categories



Land documentation

Formal land titling is less common in southern Shan than in lowland areas of Myanmar such as the Dry Zone. Only 25% of all agricultural parcels have any documentation related to land ownership or tenure. Among these, less than half (49%) have Form 7 (the most secure form of land title, introduced in 2012).

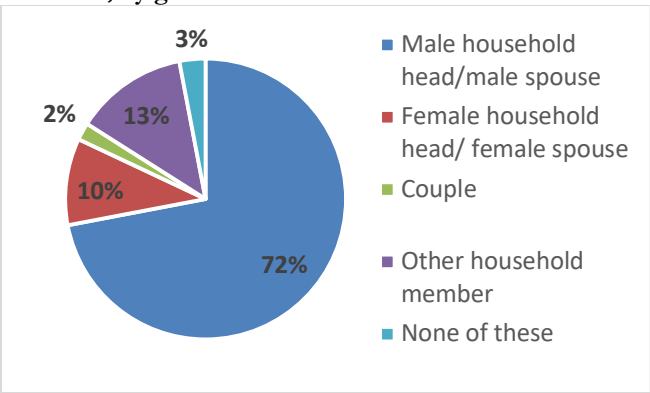
Figure 4: Type of document held as share of all parcels with any documentation



Thirty percent of parcels still have Form 105 (the title document that pre-dates Form 7), suggesting land records have been updated slowly in Southern Shan compared to other areas of the country. Fourteen percent of parcels with documents have a sales or rental contract (Figure 4).

There is a high degree of gender disparity in formal land titling. Land title and tenure documents are mainly in the name of a male household member, usually the household head (72%). Only 10% of agricultural parcels with documentation are held by women (usually the female household head or spouse of male household head) and 2% are in the name of both head and spouse. Thirteen percent are in the name of another household member. Three percent are in the name of former owners, indicating that documents were not updated after land transferring ownership (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Distribution of land titles among household members, by gender



Generational changes in landownership

Table 2 compares the landowning status of the current the household head and spouse with that of their parents. Most couples remain in the same landowning category as their parents - either landed (63%) or landless (9%). There is a surprisingly high degree of mobility between landowning groups across generations. More than a quarter of households changed group, and the share of landed households increased by 2% overall compared to the previous generation. This small increase is somewhat surprising, but may reflect a changing conceptualization of land as property, as compared to the previous generation.

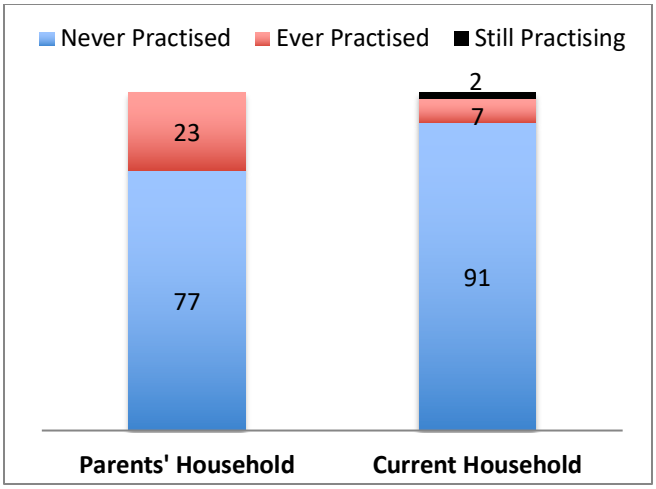
The average area of land owned by households in the previous generation was 30% larger than that owned by households of the current generation (7.4 acres versus 5.7 acres). Half of all household heads and spouses reported having inherited agricultural land from their parents, among which 60% were male and 40% are female.

Table 2: Landowning status of current household head and spouse and their parents

Parents owned agricultural land (%)	Household currently owns agricultural land (%)		
	No	Yes	Total
No	9	15	24
Yes	13	63	76
Total	22	78	100

Shifting cultivation was once widely practiced in Shan State, but the practice has disappeared almost entirely in the surveyed area (Figure 6). One-quarter (23%) of the parents of current household heads and spouses reported having practiced shifting cultivation during their lifetime. This share has declined sharply in the current generation. Only 9% of current households report having ever practiced shifting cultivation, and just 2% report still doing so at the time of the survey.

Figure 6: Changes over generations in practicing of Shifting Cultivation



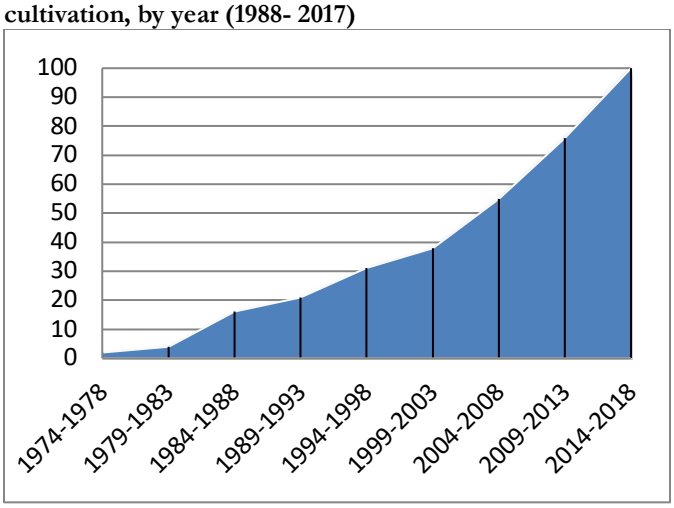
The main reason behind this decline is a closing of the land frontier, with the most accessible forestlands nearby the villages having been cleared. It is likely that many of these lands have since been brought under permanent cultivation. Respondents mentioned that it was no longer possible to access more forestland (41%) and that it is not easy to reach the plots for shifting cultivation (21%). Others mentioned that sedentary cultivation is more profitable (13%) or that they had insufficient labor for shifting cultivation (12%). Only 4% of households reported that they gave up shifting cultivation because authorities prevented them from doing so (Table 3).

Table 3: Reasons for stopping shifting cultivation

Reason	% of HH
Not possible to access more forest land	41
Hard to reach	21
Sedentary cultivation easier/profitable	13
Insufficient labor	12
Unable to control weeds	6
Prevented from doing by authorities	4
Insufficient rainfall to grow crops	3

The number of households giving up shifting cultivation increased steadily before 2003, and at a more rapid pace after that (Figure 7).

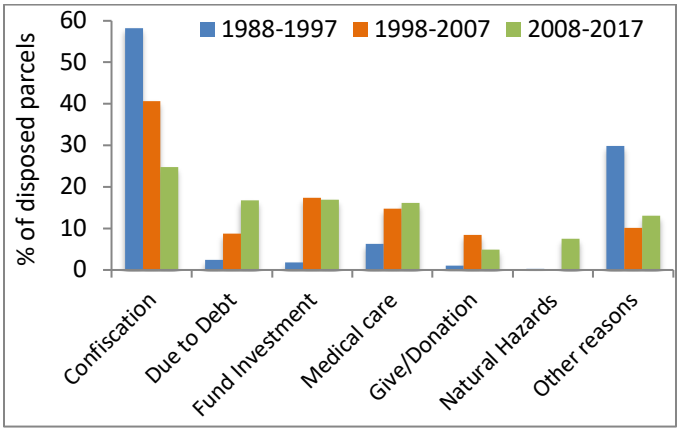
Figure 7: Cumulative frequency of cessation of shifting cultivation, by year (1988- 2017)



Disposed Parcels

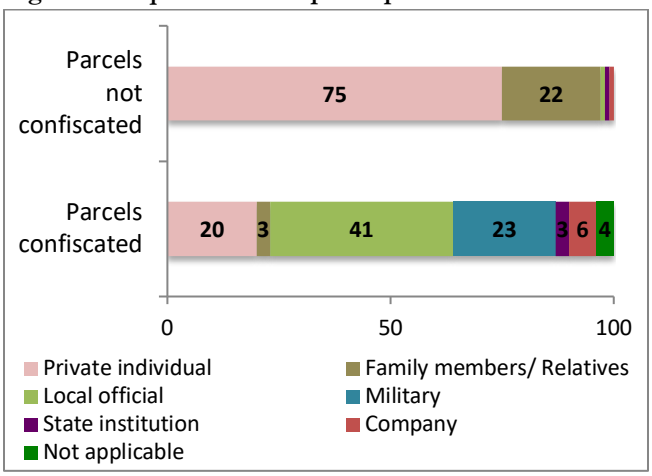
We refer to 'disposed parcels' as the agricultural parcels which the household lost or transferred to another person or entity for any reason during the past thirty years. One-quarter (24%) of all households (20% currently landed + 4% currently landless) had disposed of at least one parcel.

Figure 8: Reasons for parcel disposal, by time



Land confiscation was the single largest cause for disposal, accounting for 30% of disposed parcels (Figure 8). Confiscation was the most common reason for disposal during the period 1988 to 2007, but has become less prevalent during the past decade relative to other reasons. Only 17% of households from whom parcels were confiscated received compensation. Other reasons for parcel disposal include debt (15%), sale to fund investment (15%), sale to pay for medical care (15%), and religious donations (6%).

Figure 9: Acquisition of disposed parcels



Most confiscated parcels were acquired by local individuals or the military rather than being used for public infrastructure or private agricultural concessions. Confiscated parcels were most commonly acquired by local officials (41%), the military (23%) or private individuals (20%). Only 6% were acquired by private companies (Figure 9).

Three-quarters of non-confiscated disposed parcels were acquired by private individuals, suggesting an active market for land sales. Most other non-confiscated parcels (22%) were acquired by family members or relatives, presumably through inheritance.

Loss of land due to confiscation resulted in a higher frequency of negative impacts on households compared to other reasons. Nearly half of all households (48%) who lost a parcel due to confiscation gave up agriculture, and another 25% experienced decreased agricultural income (Table 4).

Table 4: Outcomes of parcel disposal by reason (% of responses)

	Reason for disposal		
Effect of disposal	Debt	To fund investment	Confiscation
No negative effect	60	78	10
HH gave up farming	16	9	48
Reduction in farm income	19	9	25
Other effects	5	4	17

Conclusions

The following points stand out from our analysis:

1) Rates of landlessness in southern Shan are lower than in other parts of Myanmar, at 23%. One-third of landless households access land for crop cultivation, mainly by borrowing from parents or relatives. As a result, 85% of households engage in farming.
2) Average operated landholdings in Southern Shan are smaller than in the Delta or Dry Zone at 5.2 acres (median 3.5 acres). One-third of farm households own less than 2.5 acres of agricultural land.
3) The rental market for agricultural land is not well developed. Only 5% of parcels are leased-in.
4) There is a high degree of tenure insecurity. Only one in four agricultural parcels have land ownership documentation. Among these, only half have the most secure form of land title, Form 7. Conversion of Form 105 to Form 7 has been slower than elsewhere in the country.
5) More than three-quarters of land registration documents are in the name of the male household head, despite 40% of agricultural parcels being inherited by women. This has potentially inequitable effects.
6) Rates of landlessness have not increased in comparison to those among the previous generation of landowners, but the average area of land owned has shrunk from 5.5 acres to 3.5 acres.
7) The land frontier has closed within the past two generations, causing shifting cultivation to almost disappear. About one quarter of households in previous generation ever practiced shifting cultivation, falling to 7% in the current generation and just 2% of households at the present time.
8) One third of the parcels of land disposed of by households within the past 30 years were confiscated. Nearly half of households that lost land due to confiscation were forced to stop farming entirely, while one-quarter experienced a substantial reduction in agricultural income.

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