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Land to the Tillers of Myanmar

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These are optimistic days, full of promise for Myanmar's rebirth. Diplomats, investors, donors and aid workers disembark en masse in Yangon International Airport while Daw Aung Sung Suu Kyi makes her first diplomatic tour of Europe.

It is a good time to pause and consider what is required to ensure that the present flurry of trade and development projects takes hold and sparks broad and sustainable growth, especially in rural Myanmar where most of the country's population — and a great majority of the poor — live.

In the last few weeks alone, road, bridge, electricity and rail projects have been unveiled by companies from India to China, Thailand to the United States. These will certainly help rebuild the country's woefully inadequate infrastructure and help jump-start broader development.

But the country's invisible infrastructure of laws and policies is also in need of urgent attention. The release of hundreds of political prisoners and the historic moves toward democracy notwithstanding, Myanmar's laws, institutions and regulations have kept the country's farmers, who till some of the most fertile earth in Asia, remain among the poorest people on the continent. Among the most needed legal and institutional reforms is providing Myanmar's farmers with secure rights to the land they till.

Nearly 70 percent of Myanmar's 47 million people live in rural areas. About one-third of these are landless agricultural laborers. Most of the others, fortunate enough to have some rights to the patch of ground they farm, control their fields only tenuously.

There are two main reasons for this. First, with increasing frequency, land is taken from farmers, often with little or no compensation. Large swathes of farmland have already been made available to foreign-based companies in a process that appears to be accelerating. Government data show that the amount of land transferred to private companies increased by as much as 900 percent from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s and now totals roughly 5 percent of Myanmar's agricultural land.

Second, Myanmar law requires farmers to grow what the government or the local military commander wants them to grow, and subjects farmers to production quotas. Policies like

these also displace farmers and lead to food insecurity, as farm productivity suffers. This can push farmers into debt by forcing them to take out loans from money lenders or sell their land in an effort to meet an unrealistic planting directive.

And now two new land laws — the Farmland Bill and the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Management Bill, recently passed by the legislature and awaiting action by President Thein Sein — are poised to give the government even more power to seize land without consultation or compensation.

Policies like these will have a direct bearing on the success of the investment and development projects now underway. If farmers don't have land tenure security or the right to choose what they plant, they won't invest in their land to improve their harvests. If harvests don't improve, food insecurity will endure, fueling the destabilizing cycle of poverty: hungry children work the fields alongside their parents to supplement family income.

NGOs entering Myanmar to address poverty all need to be mindful of the role of land rights. If they lack expertise in this area, they should explore collaborations with the variety of experienced local or international organizations that do and encourage government partners to lay the foundation of future growth by providing farmers with a powerful tool they can use to climb out of poverty. Integrating the critical role of secure land rights into poverty alleviation strategies can help achieve systemic change.

Investors should consider the land tenure impact of ventures, particularly because many of these infrastructure projects require removing farmers from their land, a destabilizing force during this sensitive transition.

The 50 countries in which we have done fieldwork on rural development clearly show the huge advantages of providing small farmers with strong, secure land rights.

In South Vietnam, where we began our work more than 40 years ago by partnering on reforms which provided one million tenant farmers with land rights, rice production increased by 30 percent — in the middle of the Vietnam War. Given its rich agricultural potential, there is no reason rural Myanmar, over the next decade or two, should not join the likes of Taiwan or South Korea.

Having embarked on a promising new path, Myanmar's government should work to ensure that the country's invisible infrastructure provides a solid foundation for economic development that is as visible as it is sustainable.

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