



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

MYANMAR

low as rice production is less profitable than other crops and exposing them to price volatility and market risks.

Since 2016, Myanmar is making efforts to diversify its agricultural sector to promote healthier diets, especially through the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI). The country is shifting from rice monocropping to more nutrition-sensitive, diversified and integrated systems in support of a more accessible nutritious food basket. Nutrition and Land policy specialists from the Food and nutrition security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) Programme have been accompanying multi-sectoral initiatives for nutrition and incorporating the nutrition perspective in different agricultural and policy processes – including decentralization.

Laws that envision rice-centric land titling and cumbersome land use conversions from rice to other uses did not enable producers to fully engage in this diversification policy and limited their access to affordable seasonal credit. To spark immediate changes, FIRST supported the Government in implementing a National Land Use Policy that applies free crop choice and gives farmers the flexibility to convert and unconditionally title their lands for different uses, such as

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agroforestry, rice-fish systems and aquaculture, integrated and rotating systems including shifting cultivation. FIRST will continue to



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Myanmar's culture, economics and agriculture cannot be explained without rice.

Myanmar sows the seeds for more diverse diets

The country's agricultural sector has become a champion for nutrition through inclusive policy dialogue for diversifying agriculture.

Rice has long dominated the political, social, and economic fabric of Myanmar. It is the essential base for daily meals and over one third of the country's cultivated land is dedicated to rice production. In the 1930s, the country was the world's leading rice exporter. Building that reputation as "the rice bowl of Asia", agricultural policies have been encouraging farmers to grow it and people to consume it, picking up particular momentum in the 1960s.

As happened in neighbouring countries, such as Cambodia, the focus on rice led to an increase in rice field production, even though

productivity in terms of land, labour and yield remain relatively lower in Myanmar. Increases in yields and broad economic growth contributed in part to an extraordinary reduction in the prevalence of hunger: from 48.3 percent in 2000 to 10.6 percent in 2017.

While this is a relative success, diets remain unbalanced and dominated by rice, lacking fruits, vegetables, animal-sourced and other nutritious foods. Over half of the population cannot afford a balanced food basket (IFPRI, 2019) and this is leading to poor dietary diversity and overall malnutrition. Although stunting figures have fallen, this progress has not been observed everywhere. Rice-centrism has limited investments in other promising and diverse value chains, keeping smallholders' incomes

support these policies (including the adoption of an inclusive perspective).

Meanwhile, FIRST is also taking part in shaping the longer term vision through the implementation of the MoALI's 5-year Agricultural Development Strategy, that now includes a comprehensive set of land reform initiatives that address the major land-related food security and nutrition challenges, enabling investments in diversified and integrated primary production systems.

The MoALI has also become a champion in the national nutrition agenda, which has been traditionally assigned to the health sector. FIRST supported efforts to improve coordination, strengthen capacities and establish an operational network of focal points at Union level and supported subnational planning. The MoALI is quickly becoming a more coherent public institution, and arguably one of the most active partners of the 5-year

The policy process is now more inclusive and decentralized

multisectoral nutrition plan (MS-NPAN) to improve consumption habits to ensure greater dietary diversity.

This multisectoral initiative is a landmark in a country with a strong legacy of centralized planning and decision-making based on national production targets – mainly of rice.

Since the very beginning, the work of FIRST in Myanmar aimed at establishing an enabling environment for inter-sector collaboration, broad partnership engagement and multistakeholder policy facilitation



Through agricultural diversification and nutrition-sensitive interventions, and the enabling land reform, the agricultural sector in Myanmar is now set to promote better nutrition.

within the Government, the civil society, private actors and financing partners. The Government of Myanmar now acknowledges the importance of this collaboration and has enabled a wide consultation process on the Agricultural Development Strategy and its investment plan. With the support of FIRST, consultations were conducted in all 15 States and Regions, involving staff from MoALI and civil society representatives. Furthermore, the MoALI, together with three other Ministries, has engaged in an extensive subnational planning exercise for the MS-NPAN. This represents a shift from a centralized top-down process towards a more participatory approach.

FIRST will continue to support these initiatives, for example, with the development of a series of tools for bottom-up planning that would help the move towards plan-based budgeting. Although there

is still some lingering resistance to devolving power to the subnational level and to participation of non-State actors, ethnic groups and conflict-affected areas, the policy process in Myanmar is increasingly inclusive.

Although rice continues to be a key element of Myanmar's identity, the ground has been prepared for pulses, fruits and vegetables, fish and meat to enrich people's diets and provide farmers with higher and more secure incomes. Through land reform, agricultural diversification and nutrition-sensitive interventions adapted to every local context and the needs of the most vulnerable, the agricultural sector is set to promote better nutrition. It is also ready to do so in close collaboration with other sectors, while establishing a more inclusive way of doing things along the Irrawaddy river, which crosses the country from North to South, leaving no one aside – nor behind. •

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