

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FAO Myanmar Newsletter

Safeguarding Food Security and Nutrition during COVID-19 and Beyond

HIGHLIGHTS

- Improving farming productivity in Rakhine State
- Addressing food and nutrition security in COVID-19 times and beyond
- COVID-19 impacts on agriculture, aquaculture, and fishing communities in selected regions and states in Myanmar
- Towards innovative conflict-sensitive and human rightsbased approaches to forest monitoring
- FAO contributes to national forestry capacity building through development of a Diploma level course on ecosystem-based sustainable forest management
- FAO Myanmar organized virtual trainings adapting to new telecommuting work environment

Dear Readers,

Since late March 2020, when Myanmar registered its first COVID-19 case, FAO Myanmar is actively working with the government, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation, to mitigate risks for agriculture and foods systems. In support of the government for the implementation of the COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP), FAO Myanmar has undertaken COVID 19 related assessments/surveys through independent work by the country teams and joint collaboration with the World Food Programme. These include: (i) COVID-19 Policy Options Bulletin for the Agriculture Sector by EU/FIRST team (ii) COVID-19 impact assessment survey results by GEF/SLM project; (iii) COVID-19 impact assessment survey results by GEF/FishAdapt project; and iv) the ongoing FAO/WFP rapid assessment of the COVID 19 impact on agriculture and food security.

Furthermore, measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 necessitate the realignment of our activities in Rakhine State. Since early June, with the support of the European Union, support targeting 6,000 families are ongoing in Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung townships, Rakhine State. Farmers receive rice seeds, tools, and other agricultural inputs, which means that they can continue to generate income and produce food for their families and communities. This is progress for us as it presents an opportunity to address the underlying causes of the conflict, boost sustainable development, and prevent aid dependency. In addition, we are also reaching farmers and communities through projects supporting the cash activities, eco-stoves, vegetable seeds, gardening programme and training programmes for upscaling livelihoods of the local stakeholders.

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The summary of the above actions demonstrates our commitment to strengthen coordination and collaboration efforts across all humanitarian and development actors to respond to changes in the operating environment. These concerted efforts of all stakeholders will support the government's recovery efforts outlined in the CERP, thus contributing to leading to a more equal, inclusive, and sustainable economy and society that is stronger and more resilient.

At last, I am pleased to share a good news on resource mobilization. A significant milestone was the signing of the five-year project designed to support the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation for monitoring of forests in a manner that is sensitive to local conflicts and protects human rights. With thanks to a EUR 8 million endowment from the Government of Finland, a consistent partner in the promotion of environmental sustainability.

Enjoy reading our Newsletter! Stay Safe, Stay Healthy!

Xiaojie Fan FAO Representative in Myanmar

Improving farming productivity in Rakhine State

Rakhine State, along the western coast of Myanmar, is home to approximately 3.3 million people, many of whom depend on agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture to make a living. However, since 2012, repeated outbreaks of armed conflicts and intercommunal violence, mostly in the central areas of Rakhine State, have led to civilian displacement.

As of 8 June, approximately 70 000 newly internally displaced persons (IDPs) are being hosted in camps or camp-like settings across 165 sites in Rakhine State (Source: Rakhine State Government). Worsening the situation is the region's vulnerability to floods, cyclones and earthquakes.

This combination of factors is undermining food security and threatening the agricultural productivity of hundreds of thousands of people in Rakhine State. Insecurity has led to lower production on farms. Movement restrictions due to the conflict and more recently COVID-19 government restrictions are limiting people's ability to work or to engage in production activities to earn a living. These factors combined translate into low productivity, which means that people have less access to sufficient, diversified and nutritious foods, as well as less income and reduced access to food.

Other challenges that farmers face include inferior farming methods and practices, lack of labor, poor access to agricultural inputs, limited access to water during the dry season, and water scarcity due to lack of infrastructure.

By the end of 2018, with support from the European Union, FAO began to implement the Improving Food and Nutrition Security project in the northern parts of Rakhine State – supporting communities in the Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung townships to rebuild and protect agricultural livelihoods.

Training and equipping farmers

Under this project, on 5-6 June 2020, FAO, together with the Agriculture Mechanization Department and Phyu Sin Saydanar Action Group, conducted training for over 30 farmers on basic skills related to managing, maintaining and repairing mechanized power tillers. The training was provided to equip farmers with the skills needed for operating, maintaining and repairing the mechanized tools in use in the villages. A total of 15 machines were provided for use in 12 villages to help farmers prepare their land for the monsoon planting season.

In Maungdaw, on 7-8 June 2020, FAO, together with the Agriculture Mechanization Department and Action for

Green Earth, conducted training for over 30 farmers on basic skills related to managing, maintaining, and repairing mechanized power tillers. A total of 19 machines were provided for use in 15 villages to help farmers prepare their land for the monsoon-planting season.



Mechanizing training in Buthidaung Township, Rakhine state

Village mechanization committees

Village mechanization committees, another component of this project, aim to strengthen community assets. These committees were set up to manage the farmers' use of the power tillers. Its members, village residents, oversee the use and renting of the equipment in their respective villages. The committees are responsible for repairing and maintaining the equipment. They are also responsible for helping farmers to make use of the power tillers to increase their individual farming production and income-generation capacity.

Amid COVID-19, providing rice seed in Rakhine State

Targeting 6 000 families, FAO started the provision of rice seed in Inn Gyin Myaing and Tha Yet Kin Ma Nu Villages in Buthidaung township.

To meet new requirements emerging from the effects of COVID-19, FAO has reorganized its programming under to ensure continued delivery of assistance where there are already high levels of need.

With support from the European Union, FAO has integrated and completed a number of awareness-raising activities dedicated to COVID-19. FAO and its partners have provided face masks, soap, or alcohol-based sanitizers to farmers at the beginning of all field activities. Handwashing demonstrations have been conducted to help people understand the benefits of handwashing through practical exercises.

All project activities integrate critical public health information about the importance of physical distancing

and individual actions to protect oneself and others from getting sick.



Hygiene sensitization in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State

The project Improving Food and Nutrition Security is aimed at restoring and protecting the agricultural livelihoods of vulnerable communities in Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung Townships in Rakhine State. The project is one of 10 pro-resilience projects in countries with food-crisis contexts being implemented within the broader framework of the partnership programme supporting the Global Network against Food Crises.

The partnership programme's goal is to enhance the resilience of populations in food-crisis contexts by strengthening the quality and frequency of food security and resilience analysis; building a body of evidence on effective options and interventions to enhance livelihoods and resilience at the country level; and bolstering stronger alliances at all levels to collectively address food crises through sustainable solutions along the humanitarian–development peace nexus.

Addressing food and nutrition security in COVID-19 times and beyond

Since March 2020, when Myanmar confirmed its first COVID-19 case, the number of cases has increased steadily. As in most countries worldwide, measures to contain the spread of the virus in Myanmar have disrupted livelihoods resulting in social and economic challenges. Health systems are rising to the challenge, while people are experiencing high levels of stress due to restricted mobility and the fear of outbreaks, and economies and food systems are under increasing pressure.

As the virus spreads and the government executes response measures to control the pandemic, the agriculture and food systems will be strained in countless ways. The likely impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Myanmar's food and nutrition security are multifaceted and wide-ranging because the processes that govern food production and food supply chains comprise a complex web of interactions involving farmers, agricultural inputs, processing plants, shipping services, traders and retailers, all of which are under duress. Additionally, auxiliary agricultural services such as storage, transportation and logistics, finance, marketing, research, and extension services have been affected by the lockdown measures.

For instance, in the crop production sector, the likely disruption of input supplies for the planting season may lead to seasonal and long-term food shortages and income losses, compromising purchasing power and access to a healthy diet. Wage decreases and livelihood loss could deepen poverty, push households to resort to negative coping strategies, and compromise their resilience to any further shocks such as floods that is likely in some parts of the country given the upcoming monsoon season.

According to the Myanmar Livestock Federation's recent survey, the livestock sector is hard-hit by the crisis and many businesses face financial difficulties. The fishing sector is also affected.

The direct impacts may be worsened for households with direct incidences of COVID-19 through lost labor opportunities and income, incurred expenses, and decreased agricultural production. Those households that are already economically disadvantaged; suffering from food insecurity and malnutrition; or vulnerable to socioeconomic shocks, natural hazards, and conflict are more likely to suffer severely from COVID-19, both physically and socioeconomically, deepening their shortand long-term vulnerability. Vulnerable households may cope by selling their livestock assets.

The recently launched government's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) outlines support for farmers and agricultural businesses through proposed actions that let development partners and other actors know that the government recognizes the importance of food and nutrition security, as well as increased production in the agriculture, fishery, and livestock sectors.



Agriculture mechanization, Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, and the scale of the extent of the impact remains uncertain. Therefore, the concept of forging strong partnerships cannot be overemphasized. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations encourages policymakers to consider social protection programs to meet the immediate food needs of vulnerable populations, keep international food trade going, keep the local supply chain gears moving, and support farmers' ability to maintain and increase food production. Moreover, market information on prices, production, consumption, and stocks must remain up to date. Disruptions to food supply chains by poorly coordinated policies risk locking in – or even worsening existing inequalities.

Myanmar will recover and we must start now to plan for a better recovery. We will maintain our support to the government in the development of coherent and evidencebased policies and programs to mitigate the risks of the pandemic in terms of food security and nutrition to enhance the country's resilience to future shocks and stresses.

COVID-19 impacts on agriculture, aquaculture, and fishing communities in selected regions and states in Myanmar

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations(FAO) assessments of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the agriculture, aquaculture, and fishing sectors show that measures to control the spread of COVID-19 have affected people's way of life in Mandalay, Ayeyarwady, the Yangon Regions, and Chin and Rakhine States.

The assessments conducted in April and May 2020 are intended for use by the government, as well as other stakeholders. Furthermore, the assessments are intended to assist in the identification of the community's needs and facilitate coordinated decision-making by the government and align FAO's assistance with the formulation of response actions to support affected communities.

Overall, the findings of the surveys by the FishAdapt and SLM projects show that COVID-19 related restrictions have significant adverse effects on every aspect of food production, market access, produce prices, the quality and price of agricultural inputs, food availability, employment, and income generation in all communities where the research was undertaken.

Jose Parajua, Chief Technical Advisor of the FishAdapt project, said, "We have shifted our focus to addressing immediate challenges with special emphasis on improving the livelihood opportunities in the 120 communities where we operate. From July 2020, we expect to begin providing fish seeds for freshwater fish farming, training for aquaculture workers, and community sensitization in response to the findings of the assessment."

In commenting on the SLM's response efforts, Senior Technical Advisor Xavier Bouan stated that the SLM project has expanded its school garden program. In addition, the operationalization of the home gardening programs in five project townships to ensure nutrition, food security, and livelihoods has commenced.

The SLM project will also provide nutrient-rich seed packages and key nutritional messages to improve home gardens, ensure future food availability, provide quick cash for work activities related the establishment of nurseries connect to afforestation in the Delta, integrate key nutrition and WASH messages in communications campaigns, and continue existing SLM project training.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that, as the evidence suggests, is already affecting Myanmar's food and agriculture sector. Prompt measures to ensure that domestic and international food supply chains remain viable are necessary to mitigate the risk of large shocks that would have a considerable impact on everybody, especially the poor and the most vulnerable.

As part of its COVID-19 response, the FAO's priorities are to provide timely information to support the government in anticipating and mitigating the pandemic's impacts on civilians' food security and livelihoods. Therefore, the FAO undertook these surveys to acquire a snapshot of the effects of the rapid changes caused by COVID-19 and provide recommendations for the government and the FAO to support farmers and address the challenges facing the agriculture and food sectors.

In its report, the FAO has identified priorities with policy recommendations as well for the government's consideration when formulating their responsive plan in relation to food and nutrition effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These include targeted COVID-19 communication campaigns in rural areas, cash for work activities through the manufacture and rehabilitation of village infrastructure, establishment of digital communication systems for animal health and production, funding support for livestock inputs and market connectivity, livestock production related educational activities for employment opportunities, fish seeds, and training for aquaculture workers.

In the future, the FAO will continue to collect, monitor and analyze information with their pros and cons to support the government to mitigate COVID-19 risks for agricultural and food systems.

FAO and MoALI conclude meeting to strengthen coordination, collaboration and responses to COVID-19 impacts on food and agriculture

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations concluded consultations with Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI) on 17 June 2020 to strengthen collaboration and responses to COVID-19 impacts on food and agriculture in Myanmar.



Participants of the FAO and MoALI meeting

The aim was to present the FAO's response and to deliberate on the impacts of COVID-19 on food security and agriculture in Myanmar. In responding to the Myanmar COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) launched on 27 April 2020, the primary goal was to provide timely, responsive, and continuous support to the government in developing coherent and evidence-based policies by sharing institutional knowledge to support recovery plans for the agriculture and food sector.

Participants discussed the findings and implications of assessments and surveys undertaken by the FAO to assess COVID-19's impacts on food and agriculture in Myanmar. These documents included the FAO's policy briefs; research surveys conducted by the project to strengthen the adaptive capacity and resilience of fisheries and aquaculture-dependent livelihoods (FishAdapt); and surveys from a project on sustainable cropland and forest management in priority agro-ecosystems of Myanmar (SLM), which were used to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on fishing, aquaculture, agriculture, and forestry production in five states and regions within Myanmar.

The participants also deliberated on findings of the FAO/WFP joint rapid assessment of agriculture and food security, with a focus on agriculture input traders for traders in the Yangon Region and the Chin, Kayin, Mon, Shan, Kachin and Rakhine States. The associates also considered policy proposals for agriculture and food systems in Myanmar.

During the formal meeting, FAO Representative Xiaojie Fan presented highlights of the FAO's re-orientation of its ongoing projects in response to the government's needs and emerging priorities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also expounded upon the FAO's vision to address immediate short- and long-term responses to address COVID-19's impacts on agriculture within the context of the government's CERF plan to mitigate the economic impacts of COVID-19.

"We are faced with a global health crisis that is affecting the food and agriculture sector," noted the FAO representative. "It is important for us to address emerging challenges and also not lose sight of the need for us to invest in the future by addressing underlying shortcomings that have been magnified by the pandemic," she added.

U Kyaw Swe Lin, Director General of the Department of Planning of the MoALI, commended the FAO's efforts to provide evidence-based analyses that have formed the basis upon which technical experts can make informed decisions to respond to challenges brought on by the pandemic. "Partnerships and alliances with the private sector and development are crucial for us to develop and deliver a comprehensive, holistic response to manage the current situation," he stressed.

AnnaLisa Noack, Food Security and Nutrition Policy Expert for the EU/FAO FIRST Programme in Myanmar, led the discussion on policy responses to address COVID-19's impacts on agriculture and food systems in Myanmar. The MoALI officials noted that COVID-19's shocks to agriculture and food systems have varied, highlighting the importance of complementary measures to address underlying vulnerabilities while addressing immediate challenges faced by communities.

Reda Lebtahi, FAO Emergency Coordinator, noted opportunities for strengthened cooperation in providing support for vulnerable communities affected by conflict and humanitarian crises.

The FAO representative assured the government of the FAO's full technical support. Taking advantage of it being a co-facilitator of the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector Coordination Group (ARDSCG), the FAO will support the MoALI in facilitating coordination and collaboration among the relevant ministries and partners and on using the ARDSCG as a platform for discussion on related issues as well as resource mobilization from donors.

The attendees included representatives of the Department of Planning, the Department of Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department (LBVD), the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Rural Department at MoALI, as well as the FAO country team.

Towards innovative conflict-sensitive and human rights-based approaches to forest monitoring

The Governments of Myanmar and Finland on 16 June 2020 launched a trailblazing project designed to allow for monitoring of forests in a manner that is sensitive to local conflicts and protects human rights.

The five-year project will be implemented by FAO Myanmar in collaboration with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, thanks to a EUR 8 million endowment from the Government of Finland, a consistent partner in the promotion of environmental sustainability.



Launching of National Forest Inventory Project in Myanmar

The project is innovative in taking a conflict sensitive and human rights-based approach to forest monitoring. This has global relevance as it will provide insights into how to bolster sustainable forests in other fragile countries affected by conflicts that are frequently exacerbated by disputes over tenure and access to natural resources.

"Actions to monitor and measure Myanmar's forests have great potential to deliver benefits for multiple purposes. In Myanmar there are many conflicts or mixed governance land areas, which pose particular challenges in working and engaging ethnic peoples and stakeholders in the measurement of forests. While performing the technical tasks of forest inventories, this new project will ensure that the socio-political and cultural context is explicitly addressed through appropriate conflict sensitive and Rights based approaches" said Xiaojie Fan, FAO Representative to Myanmar.

The virtual signing ceremony for the project was held in Myanmar's capital Nya Pyi Taw on 16 June and attended by the Director General of Myanmar's Forestry Department, Finland's Ambassador to Myanmar, and the FAO Representative to Myanmar. "The project is innovative in developing an approach to National Forest Inventory (NFI) in areas with security and conflict issues; a much needed approach with global application. NFI involves the physical measurement of the trees and forest on the ground, which is essential for accurate information on forests, and the corner stone of National Forest Monitoring Systems", said Julian Fox, FAO's Team Leader of national forest monitoring. "Accurate forest monitoring is the foundation of natural resource management decision making as well as contributing to global efforts to preserve biodiversity and fight against climate change", he added.

National Forest Monitoring Systems are also essential for evaluating and validating a country's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, an essential step toward enabling a country to obtain result-based payments from REDD+. "In the Government and especially in the Forest Department we are very pleased with the support we are receiving through Finland and FAO for developing a truly national scale forest inventory, something which never has existed in the country before. We are in urgent need of better and updated data about the state of all the forests in Myanmar. These data will help to better plan and evaluate sustainable forest use and conservation in our country together with all stakeholders, public and private and also in the land areas of our ethnic brothers and sisters", said Dr. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Director General, Forest Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation.

The human rights-based approach of the project is anticipated to actively contribute to alleviating conflicts and offer a platform for improving the livelihoods of the country where 70 percent of the population who live in Myanmar's rural areas and rely on the country's estimated 29 million hectares of forests for basic needs and service. It also has a special focus on engaging the more than 100 different ethnic groups, each with its own history, culture and language or dialect, who live in the country.

As some of Myanmar's regions are affected by internal conflicts, the project is designed to be participatory and inclusive, with extensive stakeholder consultations, communications and a grievance procedure that will include minority groups as well as global and national organizations with expertise in human rights and conflict. This will contribute to a do-no-harm approach in development projects related to the country's natural resources.

"Forest monitoring is part of Finland's support for Myanmar to mitigate and adapt to climate change. It is important that conflict sensitivity and human rights remain in the core of the forest monitoring work in order to ensure that it benefits all people, including ethnic minorities," Finland's Ambassador Riikka Laatu said. "Building a conflict sensitive and a human rights based methodology to forest monitoring is a key target during the first phase of the program. This includes answering questions on openness of data and building trust between the villagers and forest authorities on the use of data."

FAO is pledging to use the human rights-based approach to forest monitoring developed under this project to craft global guidelines for conflict sensitivity and human rightsbased approaches in ecosystem monitoring more broadly around the world.

FAO contributes to national forestry capacity building through development of a Diploma level course on ecosystembased sustainable forest management

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) SLM-GEF project is providing support to the Forest Department (FD) to revise and upgrade the 2-year certificate program curriculum offered at the Myanmar Forest School (MFS). The MFS recognizes the need for an environmental management approach (ecosystem-based). Therefore, a new curriculum that considers the full array of interactions within an ecosystem, including humans, is under development rather than considering single issues, species, or ecosystem services in isolation.

Upgrading courses at the forestry training institutions and opening them to the private sector is a high priority for the Training and Research Development Division (TRDD) of the FD. It pursues the ecosystem-based transformation that will profoundly influence the future sustainability of forestry practices in Myanmar. The overarching goal of this collaboration is to build a foundation for the National Ecosystem-based Sustainable Forest Management Capacity Building Program.

Experts from the University of Forestry and Environmental Science (UFES-Yezin) and FD on 11 June 2020 held fruitful discussions on the formation of an editorial board to review and provide technical oversight of the content of the upgraded curriculum upon 100% completion and the planning and delivery of the pilot ecosystem-curriculum for implementation at the MFS.

In the first quarter of 2019, the Training Needs Assessment consultants completed a review of the existing curriculum to identify upgrades and revisions required for incorporation in alignment with international best practices on sustainable forest management.

The Experts approved the composition of an editorial board made of five members who will provide technical oversight and editing of the curriculum. In addition, subject heads responsible for revisions submitted the 100% completed and upgraded curriculum to the project management team at UFES. Moreover, the Experts identified the six subjects, the respective subject leads, and members to lead the planning and delivery of the initial pilot phase of the curriculum at MFS later this year.

The capacity building programme includes a provision of forestry equipment, teaching aids and computer hardware. On 30 June, FAO Representative Xiaojie Fan handed over these equipment officially to the Director General of the Forest Department in Nay Pyi Taw.



Handover of teaching aids to Myanmar Forest School

FAO Myanmar organized virtual trainings adapting to new telecommuting work environment

A series of training sessions on gender, project cycle management, human resources, the procurement of goods and OPIM introduction were convened for staff on 21 May until 3 June, 2020. The training sessions were designed to develop staff knowledge about organizational policies and procedures related to project operations and formulation. This was intended to strengthen day-to-day work efficiency in the current tele-work environment and the future as well.

A total of 53 participants attended the virtual, interactive sessions, which provided an opportunity for staff to share their own experiences and get clarification through question and answer sections.

Muhammad Munir Khan, Senior Agronomist of the Global Agriculture Food Security Project, said that the training sessions offered him a unique opportunity to learn about important concepts in project/program operations, administrative policies, implementation and evaluation, which contributed to strengthening staff capacities.

He added, "Such like trainings should be arranged in the future, as well. The training sessions provided an opportunity for knowledge sharing and mutual learning between all project staff."



Participants attended the virtual trainings

Thiha, Sustainable Forest Management Specialist, said, "I personally found the training very helpful for my work. Thank you to the organizers and resource persons for creating an exciting, interactive learning environment during this difficult time of the health crisis."

Jose Parajua, Chief Technical Adviser and Team Leader of the FishAdapt Project, commented, "Thank you very much for organizing and coordinating these series of trainings on behalf the Country Office. Also special thanks to presenter and the other colleagues that have presented the different sections. It has been a very useful opportunity. Appreciated."

Xavier Bouan, Senior Technical Adviser of the Sustainable Land Management Project, said, "In spite of difficulties to present sometimes complex topics in such a short time, the training achieved its main objective and organizers did a great job. The level of attendance was more than adequate and contributed to fruitful exchanges among staff."

San San Myint, National Technical Coordinator, stressed the importance of additional training for staff when she said, "Continuous learning gives the skills we need to implement our projects."

The organizing team welcomed the overall support of all team leaders and the participation of all project teams in the ongoing efforts to strengthen the capacity of staff. From the feedback, it is evident that we need to continue with our support to strengthen staff capacity. Country Office remains committed to supporting staff as we explore innovative ways to ensure that staff are able to continue to deliver on our mandate.

Reflection from FAO Myanmar Team



"We work at the office for project monitoring and formulation during COVID-19 pandemic period" Thiri, Programme Officer and Thandar, Programme Assistant

"Being a critical staff, I volunteer to attend office 3 times a week as it is important to ensure that FAO colleagues are receiving the salary on time and payment are being process on time." Myat New, Finance Officer while going to the bank





Contact information:

FAO Representation in Myanmar United Nations Building, No. 20-25 Kyine Tone Street Zawana Theidi Quarter, Oattara Thiri Township Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar FAO-MM@fao.org http://www.fao.org/myanmar/en



