

Development Ground Zero: Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar

Council for People's Development and Governance

In the aftermath of World War II, foreign aid was used for the reconstruction of states allied with the US and to establish US neocolonial influence over many countries in the “third world”. Determined to maintain political control, donors led by the US used foreign loans, technical assistance and grants to help douse anti-colonial and national independence struggles taking place in the 1940s in the region, including in the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Given such historical background of using aid to advance donors' economic, political and military agenda, development cooperation reforms must be persistently espoused to ensure that the potential of aid to foster development is truly maximized.

Major bilateral development agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as multilateral institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, have designed and implemented aid strategies that merely promote the interests of donors. For example, the US frames its development assistance as an opportunity to “support America's national interests” through “collaboration with aspiring partners that are aligned with US interests and development investments where [it] can have the most impact”. A similar position is expressed by the UK when describing its work and development investment portfolio in its former colony Myanmar: “DFID's programme is part of a wider UK strategy for Burma to become a stable, prosperous, democratic, and like-minded ally that champions human rights, plays a positive role in the world, and that supports UK interests and bilateral trade.”¹

Development aid has been an effective tool to assure donors of markets that will absorb their surplus goods and capital. They have accomplished this through using aid as leverage on recipient governments to implement free trade, labor flexibilization, public-private partnership (PPP), and promotion of foreign investments, among others, as supposed drivers of progress and prosperity as well as of stability and peace. Recipient governments are often more than willing to oblige by these policy conditionalities not just because of the ‘development’ that aid supposedly brings but also because aid helps prop up their own political power. Unfortunately, many projects funded by aid are rarely aligned with and determined by the sovereign people's demand for genuine development. As such, violence against local communities, including through militarization, often accompany the implementation of these projects.

Over the past decades, official development assistance (ODA) has faced several challenges. Apart from the continuing struggle over donor countries' 0.7% ODA/GNI (gross national income) commitments, effective development advocates have also been vigilantly monitoring the increasing use of development aid to legitimize counter-terrorist and other security-related initiatives in recipient countries. Dwindling development aid spending vis-à-vis increased trend of military spending observed in the Asia Pacific is also becoming a cause for alarm. In 2016, the top five bilateral DAC ODA donors—US, Germany, UK, Japan, and France—disbursed a total of US\$72 billion in bilateral ODA while spending US\$802 billion for military, with the US military spending amounting to more than 21 times of its bilateral ODA disbursement.²

¹ 2017, UK Department for International Development

² 2018, The Reality of Aid, “Rising Militarism: Implications for Development Aid and Cooperation in Asia Pacific,” Manila: CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness.

This worsening condition is observed in developing Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Myanmar and Cambodia where military force is being used to forcibly convert vast tracts of land for aid-funded 'development' projects in communities where protracted disputes over land, food security, human rights and justice have long been taking place.

Development aid for donors' military/security agenda

Intense militarism and wars of aggression in recipient countries have created serious implications on the global aid regime and overall campaign for sustainable development. Especially since the US-led global war on terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, aid has been increasingly utilized as an instrument to protect donors' national security and promote their foreign policy such as the US's recent preoccupation of containing competitors like China.³ This use of what some refer to as 'smart power'⁴ is not limited to traditional world powers. China, for instance, played the most important role in boosting Myanmar's post-1988 economy through foreign investment that utilized Myanmar as source for its "much-needed natural resources and a market for Chinese manufactured goods, including weapons."⁵

The increasing tendency of prioritizing conflict, peace and stability as preconditions for development is realized not just in the individual donor development strategies being implemented in countries like the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar but also in the very efforts of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to "modernize" ODA that allow for military and police-related spending in relation to maintaining peace and security and prevention of violent extremism in recipient countries.

This increasing trend is observed in the development rhetoric perpetuated for instance by USAID in the Philippines when it proposes in its current development strategy how instability "brought about by poverty, marginalization and conflict has impeded development in many areas throughout the region"⁶ without taking into consideration what conditions have created conflict in the first place. The similar narrow focus of development is also noticeable DFID's work in Myanmar that is oriented towards "help[ing] Burma continue on a path to being a better governed, fairer and more peaceful society, through working with the government towards increased wealth and better public services shared by all of its people."

Continuing underdevelopment amid repression

Increasing ODA disbursements have been noted in the Philippines and Myanmar (with Cambodia experiencing a decline even as absolute figures show it still corners a substantial amount of aid) over the period of 2010 – 2015. (Table 1) A significant portion of people in these countries live below the national poverty line (Figure 1) amidst increasing reports of human rights violations committed among marginal and vulnerable communities.

In Myanmar, for example, the persecution and displacement of the Rohingyas through state-supported military violence have resulted in the forced evacuation of more than 650,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh on top of an estimated 120,000 internally displaced people in the central Rakhine

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 'Smart power' refers to the combination of soft and hard power currently emerging as buzzword in foreign policy; soft power often refers to development aid and hard power to military influence or force.

⁵ Seekins, Donald, 2015. "Japan's Development Ambitions for Myanmar: The Problem of "Economics before Politics", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 2/2015: 113-138.

⁶ "Advancing peace and stability in Mindanao", <https://www.usaid.gov/philippines/fact-sheets/advancing-peace-and-stability-mindanao>

State.⁷ Meanwhile in the Philippines, an average of 1 farmer is killed every five days since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in 2016.⁸ These killings exclude the estimated 5,000 drug-related killings under the Duterte administration reported by media outlets and human rights organization.⁹ In Cambodia, while international development agencies have lauded the creation of jobs facilitated by development projects and foreign investments—bringing its unemployment rate to 0.2 per cent (ILO 2018)—51 percent of jobs in Cambodia are actually considered as “vulnerable” jobs or jobs where people work but do not receive a salary.¹⁰

Table 1. Registered ODA Commitments for Philippines, Myanmar and Cambodia for period of 2010 -2015		
	2010	2015
Philippines	USD 14 billion	USD 32 billion
Cambodia	USD 72 billion	USD 67 billion
Myanmar	USD 7 billion	USD 63 billion
Source: OECD Creditor Reporting System Aid Activity Database		

⁷ Human Rights Watch World Report 2018: Myanmar, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/burma>

⁸ Peasant Movement of the Philippines, June 2018.

⁹ Int'l, local professors validate 5,000 deaths in PH due to war on drugs, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1003944/intl-local-professors-verify-5000-deaths-in-ph-due-to-drug-war#ixzz5KILJBctF>

¹⁰ <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodias-low-rate-unemployment-doesnt-tell-whole-story-report-finds>

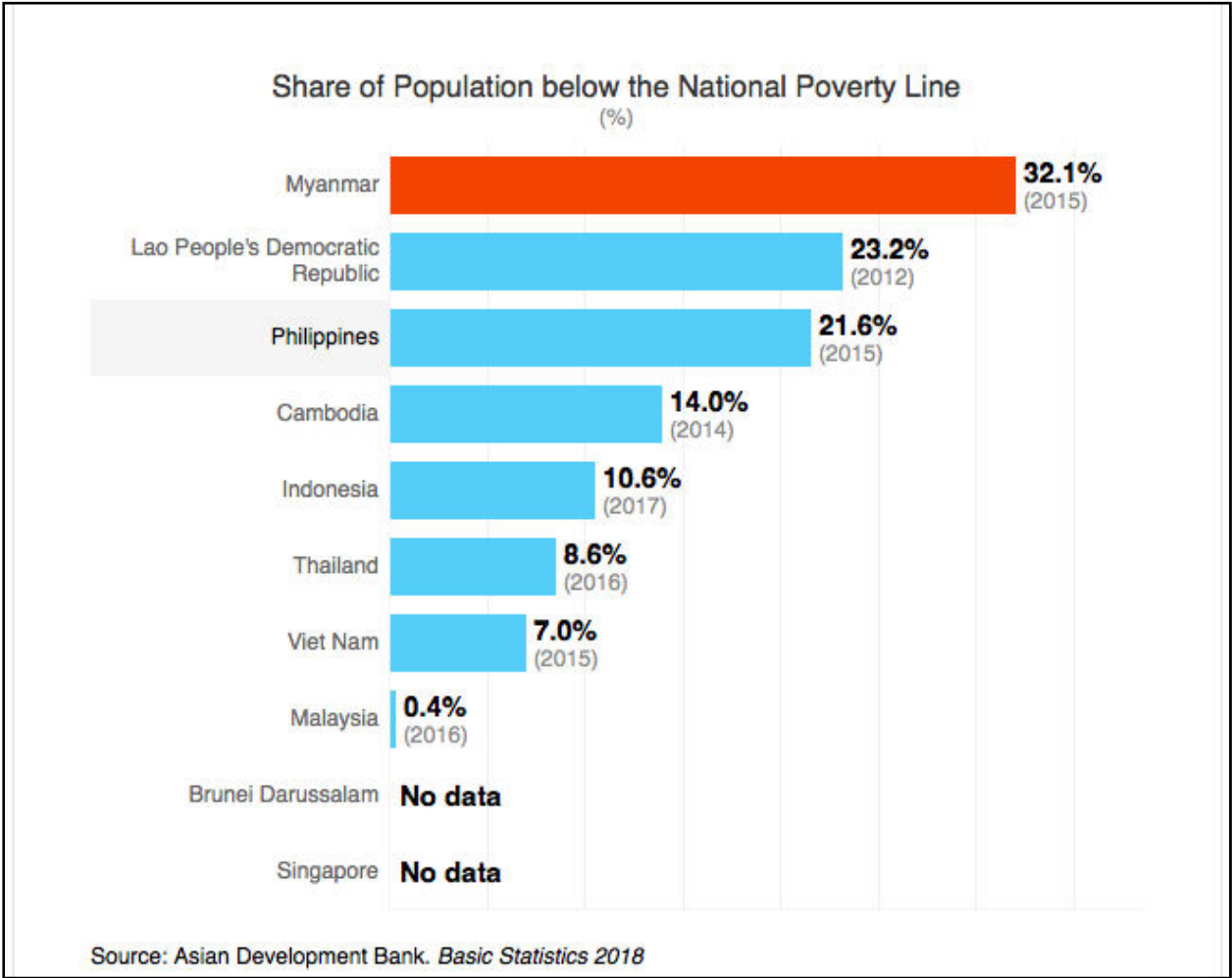


Figure 1 Population living below poverty line in South East Asia

Militarization, land grabs and aid

There is an increasing trend in the region of corporate land grabs enforced through state security forces often in collusion with big foreign corporations and supported by foreign aid.

A growing number of military encampments have been reported and observed by peasant communities and indigenous populations in the rural areas of the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar where decades of conflict and dispute over control of rich natural resources have been taking place.

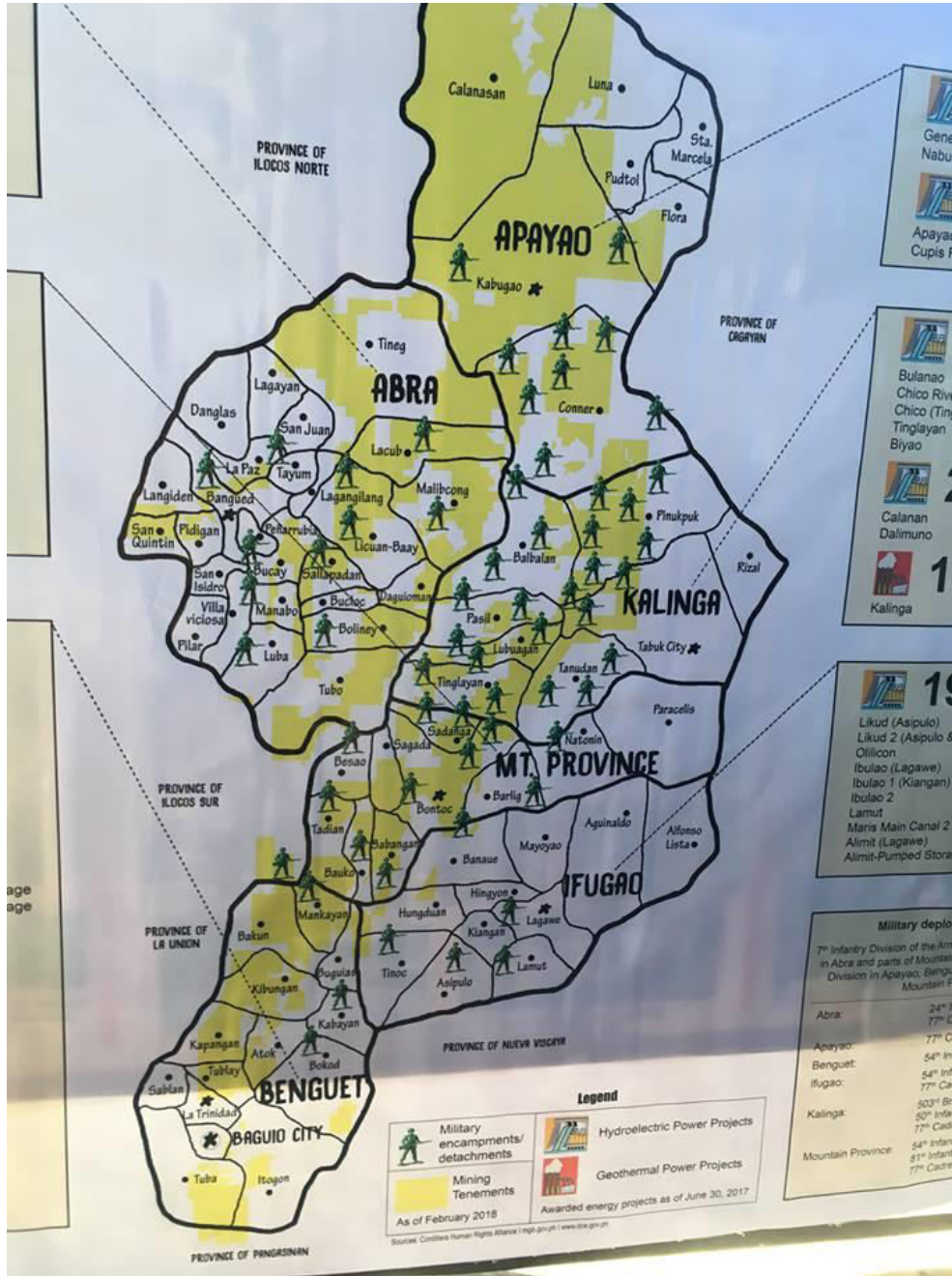


Figure 2 Military encampments and development projects in Cordillera Region of the Philippines

In the Philippines, for instance, human rights violations, including violations against indigenous people's rights to ancestral domains are rampant in regions such as in Cordillera where government promotes large-scale foreign-funded mining projects, hydropower and geothermal plants, irrigation dams, and cash-crop plantations (Figure 2). In Mindanao, an April 2018 international fact finding and solidarity mission led by the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (Peasant Movement of the Philippines or KMP), Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Right and other groups recorded around 2,945 human rights violations in land-contested areas in the said region. Note that Mindanao has been put under Martial Law by Pres. Duterte since May 2017 while big-ticket infrastructure projects are planned for implementation there as part of the administration's flagship program, 'Build, Build, Build' financed mainly through ODA. It is said that about 70% of the country's military and security forces are currently deployed in Mindanao.

In Cambodia, rampant land grabs and violation of human rights among indigenous and peasant communities have been prevalent in areas under the government's Economic Land Concession (ELC) program. ELC is a long-term lease arrangement allowing a concessionaire to clear land to develop industrial-scale agriculture. As of 2017, about one-fourth of the country's agricultural and forest lands are already under the control of Chinese companies of which almost a million hectares have been acquired through ELCs.¹¹ It's no coincidence that emerging power China is not only Cambodia's top foreign investor but also its top contributor of aid, accounting for more than 70% of the aid they receive.¹²

The intensifying repression of rights related to these investments is being experienced, for instance, by the Kuy people in the province of Preah Vihear where tens of thousands of indigenous people suffer from displacement, destruction of the livelihood, dispossession and harassment. The Cambodian government granted 42,000 hectares of land in Preah Vihear to Chinese company Hengfu Group Sugar Industry Co., Ltd in 2016.¹³

Meanwhile, donors such as Japan and the UK continue to provide loans, grants, and technical assistance to Myanmar amid the ongoing reported genocide of almost 800,000 Muslim Rohingyas. For instance, while the UK's DFID seems to be careful in distancing itself with the central government by channeling its aid through multilateral institutions as well as local and international NGOs, it still does not hesitate to express the "UK Government's enduring support for Aung San Suu Kyi [and] provid[ing] good foundations to influence and help her government to succeed."¹⁴

Emerging discourse among development and peasant scholars have begun to re-examine the religious/ethnic persecution of the Rohingyas as mere smokescreen to whitewash the state-supported corporate land grabs taking place in resource and mineral rich regions of Myanmar. In his research, Sakia Sassen notes the massive land grabs of vast stretches of land from smallholders enforced by state military forces since 1990s; enforced without compensation and threats against fighting back. "This land grabbing has continued across the decades but has expanded enormously in the last few years. At the time of the 2012 attacks, the land allocated to large projects had increased by 170% between 2010 and 2013. By 2012 the **law governing land** was changed to favour

¹¹ Dela Cruz, Deewa, 2018. "South-South Land Grabs: A desk study on Chinese land concession projects as economic investment cooperation with Laos and Cambodia," *Policy Research on Operationalizing People-Oriented South-South Cooperation*, CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness and Reality of Aid.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "APC condemns Heng Fu's land grabbing in Cambodia, expresses firm support to indigenous Kuy people's struggle for land," <https://asianpeasant.org/apc-condemns-heng-fus-land-grabbing-in-cambodia/>

¹⁴ 2017, UK Department for International Development (insert url here)

large corporate acquisitions.”¹⁵

Sassen adds that aggressive persecution of the Rohingya and other minority groups is possibly motivated by less by religious/ethnic issues more than military-economic interests given how expelling Rohingya from their land is “good for future business.” This coincides with the government’s allocation of 1.3 million hectares of the Rohingya’s area for corporate rural development, a sharp increase from the previous allocation of just 7,000 hectares in 2012.

Making aid work for development

Structural adjustments and other conditionalities that come with loans, technical cooperation and grants aggravate the conflict and social unrest in already conflict-riddled areas. Organized resistance against destructive ‘development’ projects pushed by governments and funded by foreign aid are suppressed, often by military force.

As donors and governments promote the view that “peaceful and inclusive societies” are precondition to development, they also dismiss legitimate people-led struggles for land, food, justice, and self-determination as violent extremism. Such rhetoric as perpetuated by the US and other top bilateral donors not only undermines the people’s struggle for real democracy but also delegitimizes the very root causes of their struggles—unequal distribution of wealth, landlessness and state-sponsored land grabs, rural underdevelopment, lack of access to basic social services, etc. Instead of helping address these underlying issues, aid initiatives for conflict, peace and security programs focus more on civic engagement, technical skills training, economic participation and restoring law and order as solutions to prevent radicalization and spread of extremist ideology in conflict areas.

The current practice of ODA delivery, use of aid, and influence over *what constitutes development* outlined in this essay illustrate how the use of state-sponsored military and security influence to oversee the implementation of development goes far and beyond diverting critical financial resources to military expenditure of top foreign powers. What with the increasing land grabs and forced conversion of lands in rural areas of the Philippines, Myanmar and Cambodia is ensured through state supported deployment of security and military in these areas. When peace-keeping and stability are framed as main drivers of development, protracted wars and emergency are becoming less an exception but rather a norm of development. And where the norm for addressing poverty and premise for development is economic growth that involves bending towards neoliberal orientation the use of state-supported militarized force to guarantee ‘development,’ how can aid function into anything but aggression? How can aid be transformed to serve the people’s need and champion the people’s guaranteed rights?

In the last 20 years, civil society organizations have used their combined position to engage high-level political space and unique knowledge and grasp of grassroots realities faced by marginalized communities around the world to counter the prevailing development rhetoric, challenge the practice and conduct of development aid, and advocate for overall development reform. Civil society and people’s organizations, as representatives of the people, are uniquely placed to hold donor countries to their historical obligations to assist poor countries recover from the aftermath of colonial aggression. CSOs and people’s organizations must continuously push for key reforms that will realize the transformative potential of development aid in helping change the lives of the people.

¹⁵“Is Rohingya persecution caused by business interest rather than religion,” The Guardian, 4 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jan/04/is-rohingya-persecution-caused-by-business-interests-rather-than-religion>

The potential of ODA as an essential and relevant resource for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) cannot be overlooked. When utilized according to the principles of democratic country ownership, inclusive development partnership, and transparency and accountability, aid has immense potential to steer economic and political policies that are truly beneficial to the people. Development effectiveness advocates maintain that it “could play a key role in realizing the SDGs because of its unique characteristics as dedicated resources for development shaped by public policy choices.”¹⁶ Most importantly, the participation of the people through organized political actions, people’s organizations and civil society is critical in ensuring that aid is driven by the demands, needs and aspirations of the people who stand to benefit from it.

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¹⁶ibid.

