

# Geographies of labor on Myanmar's marine resource frontier

Ben Belton, Michigan State  
Melissa Marschke, University of Ottawa  
Peter Vandergeest, York University

Agrifood XXIV Conference  
Bandung, Indonesia  
December 5, 2017



# Introduction

- Introduction: Fisheries, rurality, labor
- Rural Mon State
- The driftnet fishery
- The bagnet fishery
- The expanding resource frontier
- Labor implications
- Conclusion

# Intro: Fisheries, rurality, labor

- Fisheries an important feature of coastal and inland rural places worldwide, but often overlooked
- Myanmar: fish = 50% of animal protein; 1.4 million fishers; exports worth \$538 million), but very few studies
- General fisheries literature focuses mainly in issues of stock management, governance, livelihoods
- Labour conditions emerging as major issue following Thai slavery scandals
- Little attention to labour in small-scale fisheries
- Are similar labor dynamics present in Myanmar, and how they differ across fisheries at different scales?

# Rural Mon State

- Economy:
  - Agriculture (lowland paddy; upland rubber)
  - Remittances (Thailand)
  - Non-farm
  - Fisheries
- Small-scale fisheries: 11% income; 10% employment (1/3 in coastal zone)





# DRIFT NET FISHERY





The image shows four fish laid out on a blue and green surface. At the top left is a large, silver fish with a yellow patch on its side and reddish fins. Below it are two smaller, similar-looking fish. On the right side, a large, dark fish is laid out vertically, with white plastic ties around its head. A pink plastic basket is visible in the upper right corner. The background shows a blue container and a person's legs in blue pants.

**LARGE, HIGH VALUE SPECIES  
EXPORTED FRESH**









**LOW VALUE FISH & SHRIMP**



# DRIED, SOLD ON DOMESTIC MARKET



# The Expanding Resource Frontier (1)

1988

**SLORC regime:** Restrictions on private trade relaxed; Fish exports permitted

1990 -  
1995

**Mechanization & more efficient gear;** Bagnets & outboard motors from Thailand; Boat size increases; Distance fished from shore increases; Inshore fishing effort doubles; Catch increases

1995 -  
2005

**Township level ice factories:** Shift from salting/drying high value fish for domestic market to selling fresh for export

1995 -  
onwards

**Engine size increasing:** Boat size increases; distance fished from shore increases; faster boats permit year round fishing effort as can evade storms

1995 -  
onwards

**Transport infrastructure:** New roads dramatically reduce travel times & costs of buying ice & distributing fish



# The Expanding Resource Frontier (2)

1995 -  
onwards

**Chinese cold stores in Ye:** Greater volumes of capital available to boat owners; Exports increase

2005 -  
onwards

**Migration to Thailand accelerating:** Tightening labor market; Rising wages

2008 –  
onwards

**Migration from Ayeyarwady accelerating:** Especially post Cyclone Nargis; Both (permanent & seasonal)

2008 &  
2012

**Ceasefires:** KNU & NMSP stop levying 'tax' of fishing boats; Increase in offshore fishing

2008 -  
onwards

**“Bone Kyaung” nets:** (Introduced by Chinese traders); Much bigger boats; Expands frontier to >100 miles offshore

2008 -  
onwards

**Precipitous decline in fish stocks:** Reported down by 1/3 to 2/3; Fishery remains profitable for larger operators as fish price increases

# Labour implications

- Bigger boats → more demand of labor in offshore fishery → fulfilled by migrants from Ayeyarwady
- Inshore fishery
  - Workers from local communities
  - Regular trips to shore
  - Advances to secure scarce labor, catch share
  - “No desire to migrate”
- Off-shore fishery
  - Migrant workers take large advances taken for survival
  - At sea for long periods
  - Extra costs
  - Dangerous working conditions (storms, no flotation devices)
  - “Locals won’t do this work”



# Conclusions

- Conjunction of regional integration, flows of capital, labor, goods, climatic events, drive expansion of fisheries frontier outward
- As frontier expands, demands for labor become greater, disembedded from communities
- Migrant labor face in off-shore fisheries arduous and sometimes exploitative working conditions
- Fish stocks decline sharply
- Need for mechanisms to improve labor conditions (pressure in Thailand has been effective, but linked to EU access – not currently relevant for Myanmar);
- Need for better fisheries management