

# The ageing of Myanmar's farmer population



## About the study

With funding from the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), HelpAge International commissioned the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford, to assess the ageing trends of Myanmar's farming population. The report, "The Ageing of Myanmar's Farmer Population: Implications for Agriculture and Food Security", considered three main questions: the future age profile of Myanmar's smallholder agriculture population, the implications of an older farming population for Myanmar's agricultural future, and the broad policy and practice steps which would help Myanmar to best position itself for this future. The methodology for the study comprised a literature review; secondary analysis of the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census; and field work in a sample of areas in the Dry Zone and Delta including focus group discussions, semi-structured key-informant and gate-keeper interviews, and a household survey (600 households). The full study is available online at <http://ageingasia.org/ageing-myanmar-farmer-population>.

As its population ages in the coming decades, Myanmar will experience both an increase in the average age of its farming community and a decrease in the availability of younger workers for farm labour. It is thus important to understand how the ageing of Myanmar's farming population will affect agricultural livelihood patterns and agricultural productivity.

Around 70 per cent of Myanmar's population live in rural areas, and agriculture is still the largest sector of the economy. Most of Myanmar's agricultural land is made up of small-scale farms, and smallholder farmers provide much of the country's local food production. The World Bank notes that the agriculture sector is where the majority of the poor work, yet "the potential of agriculture as a driver of rapid poverty reduction has yet to be fully unleashed."<sup>1</sup>

This study estimated the future age profile of the smallholder population and the possible impact of population ageing on Myanmar's farming population.<sup>2</sup> The most common type of farming household is projected to decrease in number from 2014 to 2044 by over a quarter, from 4.2 to 3.2 million.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 World Bank, *An Analysis of Poverty in Myanmar: Part One—Trends Between 2004/05 and 2015 (Vol. 2)*, 2017.
- 2 The future age profile of the smallholder population was estimated in two ways: using census data and using a smallholder survey through this study. The study assumes that the age structure of the farmer population changes in accordance with the population forecasts for the whole population as per United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*, 2015.
- 3 According to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, the common type of farming household is households containing a least one skilled farmer (farming household, type 3). Note that in the census data, an older person who spends every day farming may be classified as "retired", so the data only allow us to identify those who stated categorically that they were linked to the types of farming households specified in the census questionnaire.
- 4 Department of Population, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, *Thematic Report on Population Projections for the Union of Myanmar, States/Regions, Rural and Urban Areas, 2014-2050*, 2017.

### Population ageing in Myanmar

Myanmar's population is ageing. According to census projections, the share of persons aged 60 years and older in the population is projected to increase from about 9 per cent in 2014 to 20 per cent by 2050, and the median age rise from 26 to 35 years old.<sup>4</sup> Along with improving life expectancies, population ageing is driven largely by declines in fertility. Myanmar, like other countries in the region, has seen large declines in fertility.





This trend is driven by two main factors: the declining number of younger people entering this population and the ageing of the farming population stock itself. As a result of lower fertility, the share of the population aged under 30 years is declining. And among the most common type of farming households, the proportion aged over 60 years will rise substantially. While 24 per cent of the census-enumerated skilled farmers in these households were aged 60 years or older in 2014, the figure is projected to exceed 40 per cent by 2034.

The demographic trends raise concerns about both the ability to recruit and retain young farmers and also the sustainability of farming by an older farming population.

A key question is whether the decline in young people, not only within farming households but also from wider rural communities, will affect the availability of labour and how this decline can be compensated for. One solution to the ageing of the farming household is for children to stay in the village and work on the family farm, but this solution may prove elusive for many households.

In addition to retaining farmers within the household, a related challenge is securing local labour for hire. The seasonal nature of the farming creates demand for part-time wage work at peak periods even on small farms. This demand is likely to increase with the ageing of the farm households, while the supply of wage labourers may shrink.

As the proportion of young workers in the population is shrinking, these young workers are also moving. Another driver of demographic change is internal migration, more specifically the migration of younger people from rural areas to cities or large towns. With economic development, internal migration is likely to increase in the future.

*“Once they move out they don’t come back. No one wants to be a farmer anymore. I think it will get worse. I can hardly get any workers during the rainy season. Due to lack of workers, the workers’ wages have also risen.”*

5 Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, *The Ageing of Myanmar’s Farmer Population: Implications for Agriculture and Food Security*, 2017. Case study notes (edited).

*60-year-old widow household head with 10 acres, Mahlaing Township, Mandalay Region<sup>5</sup>*

As a result, there may be fewer workers available in future to provide short-term labour in peak farming seasons such as harvesting. The heavy dependence of farms for hired labour for various seasonal tasks means that all farm households, and not just those with older heads of household, are vulnerable to shortages in the supply of casual labour.

### **The life course: Phased transition from active farm work to inactivity**

Three-fourths of Myanmar's heads of farming households are middle-aged or older: around one quarter are aged 60 years and above and over half are aged 40-59 years.<sup>6</sup> As farmers age, there is a phased withdrawal from physical farm work, with the heaviest tasks (tilling the soil) being relinquished first. They are still perfectly capable, however, of running the farm. They have the know-how to organise and supervise work undertaken by other people, either family members or hired casual labour. At some stage in this process of withdrawal from hard work in the fields, they typically start sharing the management of the farm with another family member, usually a son or son-in-law. The ageing of the farm household is thus managed through intergenerational transfer of power and decision-making either during the farmer's lifetime or after the death of the older owner.<sup>7</sup>

In the study's field survey, a clear majority of surveyed farmers agreed that the supply of agricultural labour for key seasonal tasks is a major problem, but few saw young people leaving the village as connected to this challenge. With migration an increasing phenomenon, most households do not fully recognise the threat from their children and grandchildren leaving the land.

The study thus highlights the challenges to Myanmar's future food security which result from the pronounced ageing trend among the smallholder agricultural population and the anticipated decline in the availability of labour from younger generations.

6 Oxford Institute of Population Ageing calculations based on 2014 census data.

7 Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, 2017. Based on focus group discussions.

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### **HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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