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# Challenges and Resilience in Myanmar's Urbanization

## A Special Issue on Yangon

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## INTRODUCTION

While only 30% of the inhabitants of Myanmar live in cities (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015a), urbanization is not a recent phenomenon in the country.<sup>1</sup> Even before the arrival of the Burmans during the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the Pyu erected the first cities. Building cities in the country is a tradition not only inherited from Burmese kings, but also carried on by the British colonizers who designated Rangoon<sup>2</sup> (as Yangon was known at the time) their capital in 1853.<sup>3</sup> Rangoon remained the capital after the country's independence in 1948, and the name was officially changed to Yangon in 1989. On 6 November 2005, the military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government officially moved the capital from Yangon to the newly built city Naypyidaw.

During the last decade, we have witnessed an acceleration of the urbanization process in Myanmar, with Yangon continuing to serve as the main urban centre. The current collection of articles discusses Yangon's emerging status as Asian metropolis. The city has only recently gone through processes of urban transformation, which occurred at a later moment than for other cities in the region (Simone 2018). In addition to its acquired status as national hub for labour migrants, embassies, (I)NGOs and international companies, Yangon is increasingly being discovered by expats and tourists. A number of reports on urban growth in Yangon<sup>4</sup> were recently published, in particular by the International Growth Centre and LSE Cities, and a Dutch research project identified Yangon as "city of the future" for its artistic potential.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, we cover Yangon's ongoing process of urbanization and internationalization, and discuss some of the impacts on its inhabitants. While the city presents unique opportunities to Myanmar's people, it also increasingly faces problems of marginalization, congestion, and gentrification that contribute to rising inequalities rather than inclusive development. One of the key problems identified in this article is the lack of public consultation in the process of urban planning and decision making. This obstacle to inclusive development has plagued Myanmar's governments for decades, but is highly relevant for Yangon as it has come under increasing pressure since the start of Myanmar's political liberalization process in 2010. As Dobermann (2016) argues, cities have the potential to increase quality of life, but the benefits for their inhabitants are dependent on whether its institutions and investments are adequately regulated.

This special issue explores the consequences of these rapid changes on Yangon's urbanscape and its various users. It covers visible transformations, as well as underlying struggles. The authors comprise a variety of experienced researchers on Yangon, ranging from geographers to housing experts and social scientists, covering the perspectives of inhabitants, policy makers and urban planners. First, we will present Yangon and its challenges as an emerging metropolis. Then, while connecting it to the literature on Urban Studies, we will discuss the downtown gentrification and its corollary, informal urban outskirts. Before presenting the

three following articles, we will discuss the exclusion of groups of Yangonites and their “right to the city”.

## THE CHALLENGES OF YANGON, AN EMERGING METROPOLIS

### Yangon's Accelerated Urbanization

As Myanmar continues to open up to the outside world since the start of its political transition in 2010, Yangon, its former capital, is undergoing fast processes of change. In line with global trends, Myanmar's urban population as a whole recently started to rise rapidly. From 2000 to 2014, Yangon experienced a 22.9% population growth (Heeckt et al. 2017). Although the country is one of the least urbanized in mainland Southeast Asia, 5.2 million people live in Yangon (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015b). Yangon remains the largest city, which hosts 10% of the country's total population, and 35% of its urban one<sup>6</sup> (Mandalay, the country's second largest city, has about 1.3 million inhabitants). The macrocephaly of the economic capital is similar to Thailand, where Bangkok (which counts almost the same number of inhabitants as Yangon) hosts 8.5% of the country's population<sup>7</sup> and nearly 2/3 of its economy (Heeckt et al. 2017).

As a significant rise in research has only recently taken off in Myanmar, Yangon has thus far rarely been included in research on urbanisation (Morley 2013), compared to the broader (Southeast) Asian region (McGee 1967; Goldblum & Franck 2007; McKinnon 2011; Franck & Sanjuan 2015). We argue that Yangon's status as “emerging metropolis” warrants broad attention for its social developments, especially since Myanmar's economic development (as in many other countries) seems to disadvantage rather than benefit the poor. Gottdiener and Hutchison (2011: 77-78, quoted by Min Theik Chan Aung 2015) write about “a capitalism-induced spatial isolation of the classes and segregated neighborhoods”, and Davis (2006) points out that urban inhabitants in developing countries predominantly live in slums where they are vulnerable to all kinds of abuse, while being deprived of most social services. In Yangon, too, “new housing supply catered to an upper class (mostly foreign), instead of the middle and lower classes” (Dobermann 2016: 13). This exemplifies what Smith (1996) refers to as “gentrification and the revanchist city”, where only desirable, well off, or high potential inhabitants are welcomed.

In her discussion of the Yangon 2040 Plan, Huynh (2017) writes that

[...] the conservation of the city's unique architectural heritage [...] seems to be the main focus. [...] At worse the heritage conservation strategy will subscribe to what David Harvey has outlined as the logics of the “neoliberal urban economy”. In this case, there is little pretence that the spatial “trickle down effects” will cater to business interests and the financial elite, likely to preclude, over time, the vitality of old downtown markets, street vendors and the diversity of ethnic communities and their cultural practices.

In the remainder of this article, we will discuss the consequences of this perceived focus in urban planning in terms of the inequalities it is likely to generate.

## Democratization & Liberalization: The Strong Rural Exodus Toward Yangon

After nearly five decades of military rule, Myanmar's first quasi-civilian government was elected on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 2010, and U Thein Sein became President in 2011. Although he was a high official in the previous military junta, his policies marked a democratic breakthrough. U Thein Sein started to liberalize Myanmar's economy, opening opportunities beyond the usual partner countries (China, Singapore and ASEAN). Following the start of the political liberalization process, many economic sanctions imposed by the Western world were lifted, motivating various investors to come to this new "Eldorado", particularly, but not exclusively, in real estate. According to the *Bangkok Post* (2016), the price for office space in Yangon surpassed that of downtown Manhattan in 2013, although the rise came to a hold in the run-up to the 2015 elections (Kyaw Lat 2018). The cities, especially Yangon and Mandalay, were considered as "the engines of economic growth" by the newly elected government (Khine Kyaw 2014), and the country's economic growth reached 6.9% in 2017 (IMF 2018). In 2015, the general elections were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), the traditional and major opposition party. Although NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was barred from presidency, her fellow party member U Htin Kyaw was elected president (in March 2018 he was succeeded by U Win Myint). More democratic improvements were expected, especially on the level of local governance, as the previous government had initiated various processes of decentralisation.

As a result of this recent political and economic transition period, opportunities for employment, education and civil society activities are drawing ever larger numbers of people towards Yangon since 2010 (Sabrié 2015; Matelski 2016; Kyaw Lat 2018), a recent phenomenon that has not yet been widely documented in academic literature. Foreign donors too continue to be headquartered in the former capital, despite the designation of Naypyidaw as the political capital in 2005.<sup>8</sup> The rural exodus is another recent process in Myanmar (Kyan Htoo & Aye Myintzu 2016). 44.2% of the people who moved to Yangon come from rural areas of its region and 55.8% from other regions.<sup>9</sup> The Yangon Region, which counted 7.4 million inhabitants in 2014, was already very urbanized in the 1970s (69.6% of the population of Yangon region was already urban according to the 1973 Census). In 2014, the urbanization rate had reached 70.1% (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015b). Technically, this means that urbanization in the Yangon Region is not a recent process and that the official urbanization rate of Yangon has not really grown a lot in the last 35 years.<sup>10</sup> However, it also means that the recent Census did not take into account all the new immigrants living in informal settlements<sup>11</sup> (Ye Mon 2016), especially if they are from minority groups (personal interviews conducted by Sabrié in 2014).

These new immigrants mostly settle in the Northern and Eastern Districts of the city<sup>12</sup> (UNPF 2016; Ye Mon 2016) which are the more dynamic ones, as they provide jobs, in particular in the 29 industrial zones of Yangon mostly based in peripheries. Of course, the new and growing attractiveness of economically active big cities has further contributed to the rising urban population, but displacements from rural areas are also caused by land dispossession (Lubeigt 1994; Dobermann 2016: 13) and natural disasters (particularly Nargis Cyclone in 2008, or the annual cyclones on the Indian Ocean Coast). These processes pose practical challenges to policy makers and service providers. Moreover, consecutive governments have forcefully relocated urban inhabitants into “satellite towns” of Yangon. In 1958 the military caretaker government created the areas of Thingangyun, North and South Okkalapa and Thaketa, and in 1988 the SLORC government relocated over 300,000 people to newly established suburbs such as Hlaing Thayar, Shwepyitha and Dagon Myothit (Lubeigt 1994: 209; Seekins 2005; see also Sabrié [2019], this volume). Similar processes have taken place in other cities such as Mandalay and Bagan (on satellite towns and slums in Mandalay, see Kim [2018]). As detailed below, forced evictions of people considered “squatters” continue to take place in contemporary Yangon.

## DOWNTOWN GENTRIFICATION AND INFORMAL URBAN OUTSKIRTS IN YANGON

The process of downtown gentrification is not specific to Myanmar. In almost every big city around the world, poor people are evicted from the city centres (Smith 1996). Similar processes have been observed in Southeast Asian cities such as Singapore (Goldblum 1998), Bangkok (Herzfeld 2016), Hanoi (Gibert & Segard 2015) and Phnom Penh (Blot 2014; Formoso & Stock 2016). However, as stated above, the accelerated speed of the changes and the way the authorities and its inhabitants face these new challenges are more particular to Yangon. Housing prices in inner Yangon have risen sharply, demands on infrastructure are increasing, and the city struggles to accommodate the growing body of traffic as its citizens become more mobile, and are forced into ever longer commutes (Sabrié 2014, see also Sabrié [2019], this volume). Dobermann (2016) and Fox (2017) identify congestion as one of Yangon's main current challenges, caused by fragmented governance; moreover, as Fox argues, it predominantly affects the poor, who are dependent on public transportation. Any visitor to Yangon will note that traffic is huge and highly congested, as a result of the growing personal motorization and an inadequate road network (Kim [2018] identifies similar challenges in Mandalay).

While the transition to a market-based economy draws in new capital, inequality increases as gentrification of the centre unfolds (Lin Zaw, Theingi Shwe & Maung Hlaing 2014; Dobermann 2016: 16). A significant percentage of the urban population lives in slums and informal habitats (Forbes 2016; see also Forbes [2019] and Kyed [2019], this volume), where inhabitants lack access to basic infrastructure, social services, and the better-paying jobs that are still concentrated in the city

centre (Dobermann 2016; Thet Htwe et al. 2017). Western style shopping malls and hotels are springing up, catering to the needs of visitors and a small middle class, rather than the average inhabitant. Foreign investment has also had a direct impact in recent years, as people have been forcibly evicted or resettled to make room for urban planning projects (Lubeigt 1994; Htet Khaung Linn 2015; Nyang Ma Nadi 2015; McPherson 2016; Wa Lone 2017). It is no coincidence that the Yangon Region “is currently receiving the most foreign investment followed by Mandalay and Bago regions” (Khin Zar Li 2017). Yangon also has the highest per capita GDP in the country, which together with Mandalay comprises 30% (Asian Development Bank 2015).

Moreover, the rapid construction and infrastructural developments have intensified ongoing (often elite-driven) initiatives aimed at heritage conservation in downtown Yangon. Huynh (2017) highlights the importance of preserving the city’s downtown colonial buildings, but questions the Yangon Heritage Strategy’s predominant focus on economic development, and the absence of a long-term, inclusive vision on urban development. Yet recent news items indicate that these conservation efforts are not free from the influence of large investors in Yangon, as even heritage-listed buildings are apparently taken down in order to facilitate new construction efforts (Kyaw Phyو Tha 2018a).

## WHO OWNS YANGON’S URBAN SPACE?

It is difficult to answer the question who owns Yangon’s urban space, and how this has changed since 2010. First, we will analyse Yangon’s urban policy, with the aim of attesting its top-down and exogenous process, before questioning if the inhabitants have the “right to Yangon city”, in order to emphasise the prevalence of social injustice and the exclusion of marginalized groups.

### Yangon’s Undemocratic and Unequal Top-Down and Exogenous Urban Policy

Asking who owns Yangon’s urban space also means questioning who takes the urban policy decisions in the city. In Yangon, three scales of decision making coexist: the Municipal, the Regional and the National levels. The Municipal scale, the Yangon City Development Committee, in its current form was created in 1990 (Seekins 2005), but the urban planning department was formed less than 10 years ago. The policies of the three authorities do not always lead in the same direction, as Marion Sabrié (2019) will develop in her article in this volume; up to now, and especially since the economic liberalization, urban planning seems disorganized, and the lack of official goals to achieve is reinforced by the influence of real estate investors and businessmen. Min Theik Chan Aung (2015: 13) points out the top-down urbanization in Yangon:

[...] even though the government is saying that the urban redevelopment is intended to help urban poor in accessing housing and urban services, only the rich and the real estate investors are able to reap the benefits emerging from the plan.

Yet even the rich may suffer from the ad hoc urban planning in Yangon. A recently approved project, for example, threatens to flood Yangon's rich but low-lying Golden Valley area, as the building site has been constructed near a neglected 92-year old water reservoir (Kyaw Phy Tha 2018b).

In the city and on its outskirts, hardly any urban policy was applied during the military junta period (Lubeigt 1994; Tainturier 2010). Instead, inhabitants built their own city under the surveillance of the local authorities, and new migrants have continued to shape the city. No public facilities (such as roads, access to water and electricity, schools, hospitals, etc.) were provided by the government, while the current government is catching up slowly. The policy led by the Municipal authorities is exogenous in nature for the following reasons: 1) the elite who drive the urban projects were mostly educated in foreign countries such as Great Britain and Singapore (interviews conducted by Marion Sabrié in 2014); 2) the real estate and construction companies that realize the work are mostly from abroad; 3) most of the investors also come from abroad with foreign models, such as the Japanese one: the main urban project is currently developed in cooperation between the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and 4) the Yangonites do not have a say in the urban vision of Yangon's future.

As Dobermann writes: "A single actor with authority to make decisions at a local level is missing. Across urban areas in Myanmar, the result is a strongly hierarchical and compartmentalized governance structure" (Dobermann 2016: 16). Another exogenous influence is the concept of heritage conservation. While this concept is often thought to be taken up by marginalized groups, it can also be applied by politically and/or economically dominant actors, who convince or coerce others to accept or endure their vision on urban development (Huynh 2017). Some of the main characteristics of Yangon's developed urban policy are the undisputed consensus on the preservation of old downtown buildings, the top-down urbanisation process, and the development of a downtown district geared towards commerce and finance (ibid.). The exogenous policy led by the authorities leads to more social injustice and inequalities, and the marginalized groups have started to resist.

## Gentrification, Social Injustice and Exclusion of Marginalized Groups

In addition to the practical challenges discussed above, analytical and ethical questions arise regarding rightful ownership of the urban space. Lefebvre's (1968) notion of "right to the city" discusses how various stakeholders in urban environments, such as inhabitants, users, planners and leaders struggle to have their visions and interests included in discussions over the city's present and future.

It asks whose voices should be included, which interests should take priority, and what methods actors may employ to further their respective goals. We argue that Lefebvre's exogenous concept "right to the city" can meaningfully be applied to the question of Yangonites' urban rights.

In fact, Lefebvre's concept is often misunderstood. He created this notion in France in 1968 in a context of functionalist urban development, which he fought against. He was opposed to the new-born urban society in which the rich occupy the city centre whereas the workers are displaced far away from the centre and its amenities. The marginalised masses are sprawled in suburbs and peripheral areas. Lefebvre did not write about "a right to the city", but defended the "right to a good urban quality of life". He was one of the first thinkers to take into account urban challenges in urban planning and policies.

Purcell (2002: 101) describes how the "right to the city", which is "at once complex and fluid", has become an increasingly progressive term used to discuss disenfranchisement of urban residents as the result of neoliberal political and economic restructuring processes. In this sense, it has become an activist rather than an academic term. Purcell argues that the theoretical concept has remained rather underdeveloped, and that the political consequences of this concept for urban residency have not been well thought through. The concept does not deal so much with human rights, but rather with questions of power relations in urban decision making. This "production of (urban) space" (Lefebvre 1991) involves not only inhabitants, but also other (commercial) users of the city, as well as urban planners. The notion of "the right to the city" explicitly looks beyond citizenship by focusing on the users rather than the "owners" of urban space; Lefebvre therefore refers to "citadins" rather than citizens (Purcell 2002: 102). Yet in the literature, it has developed mainly into an activist concept by which inhabitants attempt to take back decision making that has been taken away from them through political and economic processes. Likewise, in this issue we zoom in on Yangon's current inhabitants, including recent migrants, as we perceive them to be at the lower end of the decision making power. In the following articles, the contributors will focus on the exclusion of the Yangonites from the city centre and its immediate surroundings.

The "right to the city" may be invoked through public demonstrations against power holders, which are more or less "allowed" since the beginning of the democratization process. Yet compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia (Fauveaud 2012; Blot 2014), these demonstrations only draw a select group of participants. For example, in Yangon, some people that were evicted from Michaungkan village (in Thingangyun Township) by the military in the early 1990s are nowadays protesting, and were subsequently charged with section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law, a controversial law in Myanmar that bans peaceful demonstrations if held without prior permission. The same charges were brought against protesters settled in Tamwe Township (in front of the Myanma Gone Yaung housing development), although there were also former residents similarly removed from their land by the new regime because of newly planned real estate projects (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2014). Another protest organized

by evicted persons took place in 2013 in downtown Yangon against Ayeyawun and Yadana low cost housing projects in Dagon Myothit and Seikkan Township (*Eleven Myanmar* 2013). Yet building low cost housing projects is supposedly a first attempt in making a more inclusive city if there were no evictions or at least, if the evicted population could have access to the newly built properties, which is often not the case. However, the “right to the city” may also take the form of policing by public or private actors seeking to prioritize their financial and political interests, as described through Smith’s (1996) concept of “the revanchist city”. These debates are vital to contemporary Myanmar, where capital has started flowing in, without leading to equal distribution of wealth.

Harms (2016) argues that the growth of Asian cities has led to new and exacerbated forms of exclusion. He categorizes the different, interrelated forms of exclusion in terms of paperwork, money, violence, the environment, space, and civility. The first factor, namely paperwork such as urban plans, eviction notices and title deeds can either empower or disempower individual citizens (as described in Sabrié [2019] and Kyed [2019], this volume). Land titling, for example, is often seen as a process of granting rights, but may also formalise neoliberal views on property that result in dispossession of customary land users. Likewise “Aspirational designs for urban futures—maps, drawings, plans—express dreams, but they also demarcate who and what is excluded from cities” (Harms 2016: 47). Consumption for some may result in dispossession for others. This implies that customary city dwellers who have not had their presence officially documented are likely to be disadvantaged by urban restructuring as a result of economic development; and even for those who do have official documentation, the rule of law is applied flexibly and unpredictably in contemporary Myanmar. In Yangon’s Hlaing Thayar area, it is estimated that 50% of the almost 700,000 residents are unregistered, and therefore vulnerable to the insecurities that come with the position of “urban squatters” (Khin Wine Phyu Phyu 2015; see also Kyed 2019, this volume). The notion of “wasteland”, moreover, is often used strategically to contest the ownership of those inhabiting valuable land (Ferguson 2014; Harms 2016; see also Sabrié [2019], this volume).

Referring to the work of David Harvey (1973) and Saskia Sassen (1991), Harms (2016) next discusses the influence of “financialization” on dispossession and expulsions. While the spread of neoliberalism is identified as an important contributing factor, he argues that country-specific historical factors should also be taken into account. This is exemplified by the various episodes of evictions in Yangon detailed above, which were a consequence of both military decision making, and more recently increased pressure exerted by foreign investors.

The third factor identified relates to law enforcement through violent means, another possible feature of evictions. Such violence is often inflicted by the state, but may also be perpetrated by non-state or hybrid actors. To our knowledge, little academic research has to date been conducted on violence committed by non-state actors in Yangon, presumably due to the predominance of the government’s own violent actions (which justly preoccupied the limited number of researchers active

inside the country), as well as an absence of consistent and transparent data on urban crime rates during military rule. News reports indicate that crime rates in “satellite towns” such as Hlaing Thayar are significant (see also Kyed [2019], this volume). These reports however primarily speak of extortion in relation to drugs and gambling, and a counter-reaction inspired by self-defense exacerbated by a lack of trust in the police forces (Khin Wine Phyu Phyu 2015). It remains unclear, therefore, to what extent we can speak of organised crime on behalf of elite actors with an interest in specific urban locations. Yet some news reports mention the involvement of “plainclothes thugs and security forces” in the forced eviction of slum dwellers that reportedly takes place in order to clear land for industrial projects (Htet Khaung Linn 2015). Moreover, current narratives on crime in Yangon and elsewhere are exacerbated by the spread of false information through the newly available social media channels in the country (Htun Khaing 2016).

The fourth factor identified by Harms relates to the environment, and attempts to create a “clean, green and beautiful” city. The environmental factor, again, comprises two sides of the coin. On the one hand, “degraded environments are often the most visible markers of urban exclusion” (Harms 2016: 51). On the other hand, attempts to beautify the city may result in expulsion as part of the process of gentrification described above. Beauty, moreover, is in the eye of the beholder, and in the urban context frequently gets conflated with security, or is simply used as an excuse to push for modernisation and gentrification. Hogan et al. (2012) argue that the rising middle classes in various large cities in Asia construct their own urban spaces, a process of privatisation that is often visible through the building of gated communities. However, like Harms, they also emphasise the relevance of the individual city’s unique (colonial) history and make-up when studying urban trends. Gated communities in China, for example, may be the result of either collectivist cultural features or the more recent trend of privatization in the country, a combination of factors that may not easily be transferred to other contexts.

In Myanmar, FMI City, created in 1995, presents itself as Yangon’s first gated community, and a few other private communities, such as the Pun Hlaing Golf Club and Housing Estate and Star City, have recently expanded. Real estate agents complain that Yangon’s current supply cannot keep up with the rising demand (Chau 2017), while others worry about the lack of affordable housing to meet the demands of migrants moving into the city, and fear a disproportionate rise in housing opportunities for the rich (UN Habitat quoted in MacDonald & Phyo Thiha Cho 2016).

Gated communities obviously increase the distinction between more and less wealthy inhabitants of a country, an artificial separation, which Hogan et al. (2012: 61) attest ignores the socio-economic interdependence between these groups (see also Forbes 2019, this volume). However, they argue that inhabitants of poorer areas may also create closed-off settlements with private security systems, a development which we suspect has not yet taken off in Yangon. A more serious problem, in the view of these authors, is the lack of public facilities available to all urban residents, such as parks and other green spaces. In the absence of sufficient facilities,

urban residents may rely on services provided by private actors instead. Contemporary downtown Yangon, for example, houses far more high-end shopping malls than public parks, and these malls are serving the function of window shopping for aspiring middle classes. Meanwhile, many of Yangon's children lack outside playgrounds, and can often be found playing football in the corridors of high-end buildings.

The fifth factor identified by Harms refers to the notion of urban space as a factor that can (re)produce exclusion with reference to power relations based on gender, class, ethnicity, religion, or the urban-rural distinction. Intersectionality certainly plays a role here, as rural-urban migrations for example can change existing gender and class divisions (Harms 2016: 52). Indeed, it has been pointed out that the centralisation and lack of local expertise in Myanmar's urban planning policies might exacerbate social inequalities in terms of class, ethnicity and religion, as various groups are disenfranchised and local concerns are insufficiently addressed (Roberts 2017).

Lastly, a process described as "civility" (strongly related to dominant notions of modernisation and beautification) may increase inequality as rising middle classes place new demands on the facilities available in the city, a process to which Yangon's newly built department stores and the rising number of gated communities testify. Research in Asian cities that have undergone earlier processes of modernisation, such as Jakarta, indicate that middle classes "commonly expressed their political agency in the form of apathy and consumerism" (Harms 2016: 55).

Parnell and Pieterse (2010) emphasise the importance of research on urban issues that acknowledges the interconnectedness between civil and political rights and socio-economic rights. While the availability of a safe and clean environment and public services is of primary importance for urban populations, urban inhabitants may also be seen as constituting a collective group of rights holders. Chaw Chaw Sein (2016) describes how many squatters and slum dwellers in Yangon were ineligible to vote in Myanmar's 2015 elections, since their lack of official household registration made it impossible to register them for the elections (see also Kyed 2019, this volume). A reverse pattern may also take place, as some fishermen from the Ayeyarwady Region reportedly moved into Yangon's South Okkalapa area (in the north-east of Yangon) in order to influence the outcome of the 2010 elections (Chaw Chaw Sein 2016). This shows that urban (sub)populations constitute a significant political force that may be mobilised around important events such as national elections. Jaffe, Klaufus and Colombijn note in the context of mobilities:

In cities worldwide, the urban poor act individually and collectively in attempts to overcome not only economic deprivation, but also the obstacles posed by lack of social recognition and self-determination. (Jaffe, Klaufus & Colombijn 2012: 644.)

The activities of the fishermen in this light can be viewed as a form of resistance and reclaiming self-determination.

Jaffe et al. identify various processes that may contribute to the social mobility of urban residents, including the use of Information Technology and transpor-

tation developments as a way to increase both geographical and social mobility. In the context of Myanmar, it is relevant here to note that the country has seen an enormous rise in IT opportunities (particularly mobile phones and internet) in recent years, while the geographical mobility of Yangonites is still restricted by the (never justified) ban on motorcycles in the city, and the lack of adequate measures to combat the congestion of traffic (Fox 2017).

From the foregoing discussion on the field of urban studies, we can conclude that recent processes of modernisation and gentrification are taking place in Yangon. As a result of Myanmar's political liberalisation process, demands on high-end services for tourists, businesses and a rising middle class are increasing. Meanwhile, rural-urban migration is on the rise, as pressure on land increases and rural populations increasingly look for opportunities in Yangon. The demand for high-end services in combination with an increase of low-income residents has resulted in an expansion of informal slum areas (see also Forbes [2019] and Kyed [2019], this volume), and rising inequality despite the expanding input of capital. These escalating inequalities in Yangon "could potentially lead to social tensions" (Min Theik Chan Aung 2015 : 13). Indeed, Members of Parliament from Yangon have started raising questions about the potential consequences of the city's ongoing plans for expansion, drawing attention to the needs of existing populations before catering to new ones (Aye Nyein Win 2018; Kyaw Lat 2018). They have also noted that slum dwellers have little legal protection and are vulnerable to disproportionate violence during evictions (Htet Khaung Linn 2015). The articles that follow will discuss these inequalities from various angles, as well as the resilience shown by Yangon's inhabitants.

## INTRODUCING THE ARTICLES IN THIS VOLUME

Marion Sabrié analyses how, due to the absence of urban policy during the decades of authoritarian rule in Myanmar, the metamorphoses of Yangon, and in particular its slow and disorganized metropolization since 2010, are sources of new challenges for the authorities and the Yangonites. Yangon Municipality is dealing with numerous issues such as inadequate road infrastructures, severe traffic congestion (because of the massive import of cars, the inadequate road infrastructures and the expansion of the city linked to its growth), lack of parking spaces, noise and air pollution, gentrification of the core city, and last but not least, the insufficient housing supply and the more numerous informal settlements as the urban demographic growth is accelerating, thanks to the economic openness.

The two main questions that Sabrié covers are: how do the unprepared urban policy authorities deal with the numerous challenges of Yangon metropolization? And how do Yangonites perceive these challenges and deal with them and the inconsistent policies of the authorities? That is to say: to what extent do the Yangonites benefit from the economic openness as the environmental, cultural and social costs for them seem to be high?

Although the main applied model for Yangon urban development, particularly the transportation sector, is nowadays influenced by the Japanese who designed a much criticized urban program, the overlapping of urban prerogatives between the numerous authorities increases the competition between public projects, and also private realtors and investors. This leads to more disorganization and less efficiency; instead of an improvement, it creates an additional challenge, perhaps even the most urgent one to be taken up. Sabrié studies the resilience of Yangonites facing internationalization of their city, gentrification and competition for land, how they organize themselves, and to what extent they start protesting for their “right to the city”. Sabrié also asks if and how the actual urban policy could, in certain cases, help improve their resilience.

Helene Maria Kyed's article explores the recent migration history and the challenges of poor migrants who settled in Hlaing Thayar, one of the townships in west Yangon with the largest concentration of informal settlements. Based on interviews conducted in early 2017, she paints a vivid picture of the way its impoverished inhabitants deal with their precarious situation in the absence of government services available to them. Without any legal status they are constantly at risk of eviction, which forces them into an involuntary mode of constant mobility. These migrants, who are actually in need of assistance, are perceived negatively by other Yangonites as well as the local authorities, resulting in a reputation of Hlaing Thayar as an area that is rife with crime. Kyed argues that these crime rates are partly exacerbated, and partly caused by the absence of livelihood security for its inhabitants, rather than being a characteristic that is imported by the incoming migrants, as some government authorities seem to think. She further discusses relationships between the inhabitants themselves, which are characterised by mistrust, particularly of Muslims as a religious and ethnic minority.

Kyed highlights the unclear landownership and the lack of urban policy, especially to resolve the migrant crisis, which exacerbates their precarious living conditions. As we explained before and as will also be studied in Marion Sabrié's article, Kyed examines how the municipal authorities deal with the migrants on a daily basis and how their policies can affect them. She describes the overlapping and uncoordinated authorities operating in the area, and implicitly, the undemocratic process that leads to more disorganization and poverty. The inhabitants' forced mobility, she argues, reinforces the lack of protection of this population, although they are sometimes helped by religious leaders. Kyed further shows how local actors are taking advantage of the absence of management and urban policy. She describes how the securitization of the informal inhabitants perpetuates insecurity in the settlements and how it inhibits the development of viable forms of self-organization. The condition of these informal settlers and the policies towards them, she argues, have not visibly improved since the start of the NLD government in 2016.

Eben Forbes also sketches a context of changes happening in present-day Myanmar such as the transition to a market economy, new patterns of mobility and land occupancy, and privatization of property ownership. Based on his field research,

his work with UN Habitat in 2015 and a review of the growing number of studies on Yangon's urbanization in recent years, Forbes discusses the manifestations of rapid urbanization, particularly the growth of informal settlements, and the Myanmar government's responses to these trends. He considers the status of Yangon's informal settlement areas in detail, focusing on the challenge for policy makers of assimilating newcomers in ways that respect their right to mobility and need for basic services and recognise their contribution to the workforce, while at the same time exercising control over the city's growth. He further discusses the recurring governmental evictions of squatters from central Yangon to the new outskirt towns and their consequences such as the trauma of eviction, the lack of basic urban services to the extension area, and the increasingly unbearable commute times for those who have been relocated. Forbes' work also sheds light on the geographic origins and destinations of immigration to Yangon and its push and pull factors, as well as migrants' livelihoods, health and education, their sense of community, their security, and their financial indebtedness.

Forbes distinguishes three zones in greater Yangon, and describes the respective living conditions for informal settlers who have been largely removed from the Central Business District (CBD or Downtown area), to the central city and the periphery. While the majority of settlers has moved to the periphery (which, as a result, is continuously expanding), he argues that settling in the central city is actually more advantageous, as it locates migrants closer to middle class neighbourhoods with access to "helper jobs" for some, and an easy commute to the industrial zones in the periphery for others. In these locations, moreover, they remain connected to public and social services in the CBD, which are easily accessible by transportation options such as the Circle Line train. Forbes argues that the smaller pockets of settlements in the central city tend to have healthier community spirits and lower crime rates, as social security is somewhat higher, and wealth inequality lower than in the larger settlements in the periphery. His article uncovers the decision making processes of both informal settlers and local authorities, and the impact of these decisions on the way Yangon's urbanization unfolds.

The three articles in this volume thus provide a vivid description of contemporary Yangon, taking into account both the opportunities and the risks of the rapid urban expansion, as well as possible solutions to the challenges this poses. With this volume, we hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on ordinary life in contemporary Yangon and its outskirts.

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## Notes

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1. Kim (2018: 285) refers to Myanmar as "[o]ne of the least urbanized societies in one of the most urbanized regions of the world".
2. Preliminary remark about the use of Rangoon or Yangon: although it made sense before 2010 to use the colonial name of the city "Rangoon", nowadays most of the scholars agree to go with "Yangon", which is closer to the spelling and pronunciation in Burmese. The name was officially changed by the military regime in 1989, as were the names of other places.
3. For a discussion on the last royal capital Mandalay, see Kim (2018).
4. See Dobermann (2016), Heeckt et al. (2017) and the website of the International Growth Centre: <https://www.theigc.org/country/myanmar>.
5. The other cities covered in this project are Addis Ababa, Kinshasa, Lima, and Medellín as respectively cities known for music, fashion, gastronomy, and technology. See <http://www.futurecities.nl/en>.
6. In the Myanmar census, all inhabitants of wards are considered urban. For further discussion on urban and rural townships, see the article by Sabrié (2019) in this volume.
7. Bangkok Metropolitan Region comprises 16% of Thailand's population (Heeckt et al. 2017).
8. Yangon remains a diplomatic hub, despite frequent calls by the Thein Sein government (reiterated by Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2018) for embassies to move to Naypyidaw. Their continued presence in Yangon confirms the city's attractiveness to expats. The Netherlands, for instance, officially opened its embassy in Yangon in October 2016. While the number of diplomats and investors has risen even further in Yangon since the start of the political transition process in 2010, Naypyidaw remains a "ghost town". Very few people go there except policy makers and political analysts,

- as there is hardly any site of interest, except Ministries, one or two pagodas and a few museums.
9. Yangon Region is one of the seven administrative Regions (this new term was introduced by the 2010 Constitution; before there were “Divisions”), mostly inhabited by Burmans, whereas there are also seven States populated by ethnic minorities.
  10. Correspondingly, the city boundaries have expanded; since 1988, around 200 sq. miles (500 sq. km) have been integrated into the city area in the form of town extension projects (Kyaw Lat 2018).
  11. “The regional government estimates that there are more than 430,000 unofficial residents in Yangon Region, including 157,400 in Eastern Yangon district, 93,000 in Southern Yangon, 8100 in Western Yangon and 170,000 in Northern Yangon district” (Ye Mon 2016).
  12. “Within Yangon, the major streams of recent migrants were from West and South Yangon to North and East Yangon” (UNPF 2016).

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**Abstract:** Many large cities in Southeast Asia have undergone parallel processes of modernization, gentrification and exclusion as a result of economic development. In Yangon, Myanmar’s former capital city and still the main urban centre, this process has accelerated only recently. Since the start of the current political and economic transition period in 2010, opportunities for employment, education and business have been drawing ever larger numbers of people towards Yangon. While the city is emerging as an Asian metropolis, it faces problems of marginalization, congestion, gentrification and its corollary, the growth of informal urban outskirts that contribute to rising inequality rather than inclusive development. The exogenous, non-democratic and top-down urban policy led in an uncoordinated manner by the national, regional and municipal authorities leads to more social injustice and inequalities. Urban planning policies such as conservation heritage are also questioned in terms of the inequalities they are likely to generate. However, the marginalized groups, violently evicted or not, should also get their “right to Yangon”. In order to present the three following articles, this article aims at introducing Yangon’s metropolization and its challenges for the Yangonites, discussing the causes and consequences of these new and exacerbated forms of exclusion.

### ***Défis et résilience de l’urbanisation du Myanmar : un dossier spécial sur Yangon***

**Résumé:** Nombreuses sont les grandes villes d’Asie du Sud-Est à s’être développées économiquement et à avoir ensuite connu une modernisation, une gentrification et l’exclusion d’une partie de leur population. À Yangon, l’ancienne capitale et le principal centre urbain du Myanmar, ces processus se sont accélérés depuis peu. Résultant de la transition politique et économique commencée en 2010, les nouvelles opportunités d’emploi, d’éducation et économiques y attirent une population toujours plus nombreuse. Sa métropolisation est en marche, mais elle fait face à une marginalisation d’une partie de sa population, une gentrification et à la croissance de l’habitat informel en périphérie. Tous ces problèmes contribuent à l’augmentation des inégalités au lieu d’un développement inclusif. La politique urbaine, exogène, non-démocratique, top-down et menée de façon

*incoordonnée par les autorités gouvernementales, régionales et municipales, conduit à une plus grande injustice sociale et à des inégalités croissantes. Les politiques d'aménagement urbain, comme la conservation du patrimoine, sont à appréhender en s'interrogeant sur les inégalités qu'elles peuvent créer. Les groupes marginalisés, déplacés avec ou sans l'usage de la force, devraient obtenir leur « droit à la ville ». Afin de présenter les trois contributions suivantes, notre article présente les défis de la métropolisation de Yangon pour ses habitants et analyse les nouvelles formes exacerbées d'exclusion.*

**Keywords:** Yangon, Rangoon, Myanmar, Burma, right to the city, urban transition, metropolization, gentrification, displaced people, urban planning, urbanism.

**Mots-clés:** Yangon, Rangoun, Myanmar, Birmanie, droit à la ville, transition urbaine, métropolisation, gentrification, populations déplacées, aménagement urbain, urbanisme.

