

Documentation

Dataset M2. Key informant interviews in Shan state, 2018

February 2022

Data collection resulting from 162 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with interviewees in Shan State, eastern Myanmar. Interviews explore narratives around drugs across and within different communities, and a focus on history, political economy, health and livelihoods, and ethnography with respect to local drug problems in Shan state.

Interviews have been carried out in Shan or Burmese and were audio-recorded when interviewees allowed this. Else notes were taken. Summaries in English have been written out for all 162 interviews. A selection of 140 key interviews have been fully transcribed and 68 translated to English.

The criteria for selecting interviews to be translated in full is based on:

- the content of the interview as indicated in the summary
- interviews that relate clearly to key themes to explore in project, such as the responses of the government, civil society and local initiatives to the drugs problems, the link with militia activities and the impact of drugs on family life, the life of young people
- understanding perspectives of the impact of drugs from a cross-section of society: young and old people, male and female, niches groups such as monasteries and universities
- rural, urban);
- Interviews with people whose perspectives and insights we want to understand better, such as people who use drugs, people involved in anti-drug activities, people living in areas
- affected by armed groups (including militias)
- Interviews from research sites where we plan to conduct in-depth research in Year 2.

The dataset consists of 370 Word files (summaries, transcripts and translations) and a data list providing demographic characteristics and context information for the interviews.

Dataset location: [10.5255/UKDA-SN-854922](https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-854922)

Dataset owner: Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) and SOAS

Context

The upland areas of Kachin and Shan are perfectly suited to the cultivation of opium poppy, which has provided livelihood security in impoverished rural areas but also became a financial pillar to sustain armed conflict. In recent decades, the relationship between drugs and conflict has become more complex. The issue has extended beyond opium cultivation to the manufacture and supply of other drugs, such as methamphetamines. Local communities are some of those most vulnerable to the harms related to changing patterns of drug use, including increasing levels of heroin-injecting and methamphetamine use.

Both Shan State and Kachin State are regions of significant ethnic and linguistic diversity. The majority of research conducted has been with Shan-identifying and Kachin-identifying populations.

The interviews were framed to enable better understanding of the key meta-narratives that have developed around drugs across and within different communities; and focus on history, political economy, health and livelihoods, and ethnography with respect to local drug problems in Shan State.

Methodology

During the first year of research, the focus of the research has been to understand the wider political and economic context of the areas, including issues around conflict and violence, as well as conducting research on drug issues specifically. The aim was to generate evidence through semi-structured interviews and observational photography around five broad themes, and how they relate to drugs:

- People: exploring how people interact with drugs (and which drugs) and the drug economy
- Places: understanding the relationships between people, places and drugs
- Organisations: investigating organisations that shape people's lives across Kachin State, including those that are related to drugs
- Culture: cultural engagement with drugs for example through portrayal in literature, songs, art and media; and the insights this can offer into broader processes of social, political and economic change
- Economies: economic dynamics of the Kachin borderland regions and how they operate around drugs.

Across those themes is also a cross-cutting focus on histories and gender.

A set of questions in Shan to guide interviews was developed by SHAN in collaboration with KRC and SOAS researchers, starting from a concept note. The questions focus on drug production, consumption and drug-related interventions and the themes above. The question list was used to guide the interviews, rather than as a strict interview structure. Interviews usually lasted at least one hour.

Interviews were carried out by researchers recruited by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN). They were selected because they are active members of their community and engaged in addressing social issues, have prior experience of conducting research and are enthused by the project. Many are active within the Tai Youth Network.

Alongside the interviews also photographs were taken during fieldwork.

English summaries were written out for each interview by the respective field researcher. This explains the variability in style for those summaries. Main purpose of the summaries was to gain oversight of the information gathered, prioritize interviews for transcription and translation, and identify people for further interview.

Location

Shan State, Myanmar.

Since the 1990s, northern Shan State has become Myanmar's most important overland trade corridor, linking Mandalay to the China border. Vast revenues have been generated through logging, mining, agribusiness, hydropower dams and other infrastructural projects, such as the oil and gas pipelines linking Yunnan in China with deep-sea ports on Myanmar's western seaboard. Vast revenues also continue to be generated from the drug trade. Shan State produces more than 90% of Myanmar's opium, which has provided an important livelihood for an estimated 200,000–300,000 households. Much of this opium is converted to morphine base or heroin within Myanmar's borders and then sent to China. Shan State has also become one of the world's largest producers of methamphetamine pills, known colloquially as 'yama' or 'yaba', and more recently crystal meth or 'ice'. This is closely linked to a rise in production and consumption of the drug in neighbouring Thailand.

Interviews were conducted by teams of three field researchers each, based in northern, southern and eastern Shan state.

The townships and villages where interviews took place were selected as areas where the field researchers were most familiar and have existing networks.

- Southern Shan State: Kehsi, Kholam, Laikha, Langkho, Laukhseuk, Mongnai, Mongpan, Namhsan, Namkieng, Namzang, Nyaung Shwe, Pang Lawny, Panglong and Taunggyi
- Eastern Shan State: Mongkhak, Mongla, Mongton and Mong Yang
- Northern Shan State: Hsenwi, Hsipaw, Kutkai, Kyaukme, Lashio, Kutkai, Mangyai, Mogok, Momawk, Mong Yai, Muse, Namkham, Namlan, Nam Hsan, Namtu, Naung Cho, Tangyan and Waing Maw
- Border towns at Mong Mao, Mongla and Muse.

Time period

Interviews were carried out during June – November 2018.

Sample selection

The field research has primarily focused on interviewing youth leaders, community leaders, civilians (including women, youth, elders), Shan Nationalities League for Democracy members, organisations working on drug issues and (ex) drug users and their family.

Interviewees were mostly selected by snowballing, starting from connections SHAN already had with local media networks and youth groups. In addition, they also reached out to people and organisations such as school teachers, government administrators and local harm reduction organisations.

Anonymisation steps

The dataset has been anonymised by leaving out names and direct identifiers for all interviewees and removing detailed places names and organisational names.