In 2003 natural gas reserves were discovered in the Bay of Bengal\(^1\). In 2005 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between PetroChina and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, and a further MoU between Myanmar and China was signed in 2009\(^2\). Construction of the Shwe Gas Pipeline began in 2010 and gas flowed from 2013. Chinese companies constructed and operate the pipeline and China receives 80% of the energy produced\(^3\). Myanmar oversees the pipeline’s security. It receives 20% of the gas produced (which is demarcated for use in central Myanmar) and approximately US$1billion a year for 30 years\(^4\). A pipeline for the transfer of oil shipped from the middle east via Myanmar to China, to reduce geopolitical risks and the additional distance via the Malacca straits, was also built\(^5\). A highway and railway on the same route are rumoured.

---

2. Ibid
4. Ibid
The Shwe Gas Pipeline is 2380Kms long, 700ms of which run through Myanmar. It begins in Rakhine State and crosses the border into China after passing through Shan State.

The area traversed includes mountain ranges and virgin forests, as well as lands prone to mudslides and erosion. Local communities are profoundly dissatisfied with the process through which the pipeline was built and its continuing impact on their lives. They feel both that the pipeline has made life harder and that they do not have appropriate information and communication channels to their governments or the companies. In this context Spectrum and Shalom, supported by Norwegian Church Aid and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, listened to the experiences of youth and community leaders from areas along the pipeline to help explore ways of improving the current situation.

Community apprehension along the Shwe pipeline

Poor communication and a lack of accountability

Core to the general unease felt within communities along the Shwe pipeline was the poor communication between community members, public officials and the pipeline’s constructors. Community leaders and youths complained about a lack of transparency in government decision-making and the inadequate communication chain that connected district authorities, through local leaders to community members. This was compounded by local government departments not taking villagers’ concerns seriously and frequent staff changes in these departments.

This poor communication led to a lack of accountability within government departments and companies, with community member unsure who was responsible for monitoring the pipeline, where information might be available and who they could turn to if they had a query or complaint.

Health concerns and other fears

Community members’ belief that the pipeline was poorly monitored led to significant discomfort. Information from pipeline operators and linkages for communication between communities and any groups responsible for monitoring the pipeline were weak. Some villagers’ fears related to the negative long-term health effects of the pipeline, for example worsening land quality or water pollution. More immediate fears included the possibility of a gas leak or explosion. Communities leaders stressed that they had neither received equipment nor training to prevent or respond to the potential ill effects of the pipeline, nor been told who to inform in an emergency situation.

Health based fears and uncertainties were made worse by a perceived weakness in the local health department. Community members stressed the need for regular check-ups to measure the potential impacts of the gas and community first aid trainings in case of an emergency. They noted the companies responsible for the pipeline had not provided health support, they had committed to provide local clinics had seemingly not followed through with this obligation.

Rule of law, informed consent and corruption

Community leaders stressed how little locals knew about their rights relating to the pipeline, or the legality of the agreements many felt they were forced to be involved in. Farmers did not know if their land had been confiscated or leased to place the pipeline; the amount...
of money provided in compensation differed drastically from village to village (if it was given at all); and people felt powerless to have perceived land grabbing redressed. In this context they desired support for the rule of law, information as to what laws applied to the pipeline and transparency as to how these laws had been applied in their own lives.

Perceived corruption had led to intra-village conflict. Community members claimed that village leaders and government officers confiscated land to obtain compensation when the pipeline was placed over it and they reported being threatened by village leaders. Inside villages, the perception that some people had been favoured through the pipeline construction process has led to further conflict. Lack of transparency over all aspects of compensation mechanisms was a common complaint.

Community leaders and youths stated that the most significant aspect of reducing the disquiet caused by the pipeline’s presence was increased cooperation between the community, government and company. This could be improved through reporting on regular monitoring of the pipeline, regular information sharing sessions for stakeholders and emergency action plan in case of gas leak or explosion.

Community members wanted to form a pipeline monitoring group, with committees started in each village and active networks that connected these committees to each other and township and village governments. Ideally this mechanism could document and help action on remaining grievances.
Youths and community leaders also desired to liaise with CSOs that were currently monitoring the pipeline. They believed these organisations could assist in keeping village leaders and accountable, as well as educate the community on related issues like enhanced budget transparency and technical support for increased crop production. They also wanted more general training on land laws, pipeline policies, prevention, rehabilitation of land pipe line crossed, human rights and foreign investment policies. Assisting with the fulfilment of these desires, along with encouraging the company responsible for the pipeline to honour the commitment it made in regards to local health support, could somewhat mitigate community discomfort along the Shwe Pipeline.

Proactive information on further plans in the pipeline corridor, seem critical based on the apprehension created by the current lack of communication and grievance mechanisms.

Future land confiscation and compensation mechanisms should therefore incorporate much greater transparency. Further, the previous compensation system along the Shwe Pipeline may need to be reviewed to examine its fairness and lawfulness. Communities may need help responding to the environmental impacts of pipeline construct. This should take place both through environmental maintenance (clean-up mechanisms, land rehabilitation and reforestation) and through livelihoods support in form of training and other capacity building mechanisms.

For further information and to register for the conference, please contact us using the details below!

No 9C (ninth floor) Myaynigone Plaza Yangon, Myanmar
+95-1-516941
www.spectrumsdkn.org