

Farmer's tales: adaptive strategies for  
agricultural commercialisation and food and  
nutrition security in rural Myanmar

# KAN ZAUK VILLAGE: A SOCIAL INNOVATION INCUBATOR

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# CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>COMMUNITY CHALLENGES</b>	
Commercial agriculture	2
The Dry Zone	3
<b>SOCIAL INNOVATION</b>	
Definition	4
The community mill	5
The collective truck	6
<b>FUTURE PERSPECTIVES</b>	
Farmers' organisations	7
Partnerships	8
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	9

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# INTRODUCTION

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## KAN ZAUk VILLAGE

Kan Zauk is located in Myanmar's central Dry Zone, one of the most food insecure areas of the country. The village is composed of 192 households with a population of 606 inhabitants. The nearest market is located 37 km away, in Pakokku, an hour driving among palm trees and sandy fields.

The farmers of Kan Zauk produce a variety of cash crops: groundnut, pigeon pea, mung bean and sesame. Just as the neighbouring communities, the inhabitants of Kan Zauk are struggling with droughts, pests, heavy monsoon rains and market price fluctuations.



However, something special distinguishes the inhabitants of Kan Zauk. They strive for unity and solidarity. They have organized to pursue social goals together, developed new partnerships and found creative new forms of collaboration.

This report is about how the inhabitants of this village collectively faced challenges and developed innovative, adaptive strategies to deal with them. These concrete examples from Myanmar show the potential of social innovation in everyday practice!

P.S. Kan Zauk won a contest as the best village of the area organised by a local NGO for the solidarity and smart innovations implemented by its members!



# COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

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## Commercial agriculture

Myanmar experienced a recent intensification of agricultural development and opening of markets. This related to the fast economic and political transition started in 2010, and which cumulated in the first democratic election in 2015.

Along with this transition, a push toward more agricultural commercialisation has been seen. Agricultural commercialisation is a process stimulating farmers to shift from highly subsistence-oriented production towards more specialised, income-oriented production targeting markets.

Kan Zauk farmers, in order to be successful commercially and achieve food security, have to adapt to a difficult environment and unstable crop prices on the market.

"Working with agriculture is like playing the lottery. We cannot foresee if we will win or lose."

-Village member (F) -





## Dry Zone

This picture shows the bed of a river at the end of the rainy season. The Dry Zone is one of the most food insecure areas of the country mainly due to irregular and scarce rainfall.

The majority of the households rely on rain-fed cultivation on flatland, some have access to wet paddy and very few have access to a garden or orchard.



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“We are worried about future climate conditions and natural disasters. These events are happening more frequently than in the past. Now, we can only pray. I believe that if there is prevention, we can reduce the impacts. But we don't have the capabilities to face this. We can do it effectively through cooperation with educated persons and scientists.”

-Village leader (M) -

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02

# SOCIAL INNOVATION

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## Definition

Social innovation is "the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people organise interpersonal activities, or social interactions, to meet one or more common goals" (adapted from Mumford, 2002, p. 253).

In addition, social innovation entails 'complex processes "introducing new products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and decision-making processes, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs" (adapted from Westley and Antadze, 2010, p. 2).

In Kan Zauk strong social cohesion is promoted by the community leaders and this has translated into various economic and social opportunities and goals.





## The community mill

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“We selected 29 female members willing to manage the mill. We divided them into small groups. Each group takes care of the mill in rotation. The village committee takes the decisions”

- Village leader (M)-

Community members combined a traditional oilseed mortar and pestle with a modern fuel-driven engine to make groundnut oil themselves. The mill is managed collectively and provides job opportunities to low-income families. In this way, Kan Zauk inhabitants can have access to locally produced organic oil. Being able to consume safe and contaminant-free products is important to community members.

This bottom-up initiative is an example of an inclusive community-led organisation. The construction of the mill was supported by a local NGO.

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Watch this story! -> Video <https://youtu.be/6mBJcx5CCYc>

## The collective truck

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“In the past, we had to deal with brokers because lack of good transportation. They bought farmers' products and sold other products from the city. Since we don't have to deal with brokers anymore, farmers' household conditions economically developed. We notice that farmers received more opportunities from directly dealing with wholesalers. They get higher prices and access new knowledge about agriculture techniques and new seed varieties.”

- Village leader (M) -

The community farmers were organising themselves gradually to bypass the role of wholesalers and brokers. They collect their produce together and hire a truck to bring it to the market themselves.

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# FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

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## Farmers' organisations

While some forms of social innovation are manifesting in Kan Zauk, others are still potential opportunities growing in the mind of farmers. For example, many expressed the intention to create farmers' organisations.

Until recently, meeting with more than five individuals was forbidden in Myanmar. Several new opportunities are emerging in relation to the democratisation process taking place in the country.



"I have the ambition to organise and create a farmers' union at village level so we will be able to help with farmer's rights and create opportunities for them. I am trying to participate in trainings related to land issues as much as possible to learn new skills."

- Village member (M) -

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“We expected to receive new technology and education on agriculture and economic skills. The support role of development actors should be based on real needs of local people but it depends on donors' requirements so we can't expect too much. For technology, we want to cooperate with technicians to have better agriculture.”

- Village leader (M)-

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## Partnerships

Farmers are looking forward to partner up with the private sector, (I)NGOs and research institutes with the aim of gaining more equal access to markets and accessing new technologies, more sustainable inputs and better techniques for their farms.

“I believe that if we can organise farmer groups and directly deal with international traders, we farmers will be able to have more success in agricultural activities. We know that it is not so easy but we want to try step by step to get this.”

- Village member (M)-





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"One root of much social innovation is the experience or observation of pain and suffering, and the experience and observation of how people respond with love, care, learning, empathy or cure."

- Nicholls, Simon, Gabriel, & Whelan (2016) -

The example of Kan Zauk shows that several elements for social innovation are in place among smallholder farmers in Myanmar.

Villages as Kan Zauk face the risk to remain isolated islands while they have the potential to become multipliers of social innovations, if properly supported in successful upscaling.

Bottom-up initiatives can inspire policy makers, profit and non-profit organisations, and movements from civil society in finding better solutions with respect to the current challenges of Myanmar regarding agricultural development and food and nutrition security.

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