6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The regional breakdown of Gross Domestic Product, based on Myanmar’s 330 townships (MNPED 2015), provides more detailed information about each region’s contribution to the country’s economy. Apart from Yangon’s dominant position as Myanmar’s main economic centre, what is striking about these figures is the familiar division of the country, with a strong economy in the central lowlands and comparatively weak economic performance in the mountain regions. Within these two major regions, however, there is considerable homogeneity in the economic performance of their respective townships. Overall, the figures for the lowland townships are generally 10 to 20 times higher than for the mountain regions.

The figures for the contributions to Gross Domestic Product by township mirror the high absolute values for the cities and towns with an industrial base and service sector. Leading the field is Yangon with 11.85 million Kyats, Mandalay with 2.56 million Kyats and Nay Pyi Taw with 1.42 million Kyats (2014-2015; MNPED 2015). Yangon’s contribution is almost five times higher than Mandalay’s. Within Yangon, the contributions of the townships which host the major industrial zones stand out, particularly Hlaingtharyar, Dagon Myothit and Insein. Some regional cities are also notable on account of their high absolute values for GDP, primarily Bago and Pathein (whose administration covers the tourist areas of Chaungtha and Ngwe Hsaung). Also striking are the substantial contributions made by the specialised regions, including the productive agricultural areas such as the Ayeyarwady Delta and the central lowlands and the prosperous mining regions, e.g. Thabeikkyin with its gold mines and Kalaymyo with coal, nickel, copper and cobalt production. By contrast, most of the mountain regions are lagging far behind. The contribution made by some trade-oriented border crossings and corridors also stands out; examples are the corridors from Muse to Lashio and from Tachileik to Kengtung.

The data offer important insights into trends in the generation of GDP in Myanmar. However, their informative value should not be exaggerated, as some factors are fully or partially excluded from the calculation of GDP, such as the substantial contribution made by subsistence farming, by unremunerated domestic work or work in family businesses, and by the informal sector, shadow economy and unregistered production, all of which are typical features of a developing country. Another obvious problem with the data is underreporting: it is surprising, for example, that the figures for major tourist regions such as Bagan and Inle Lake are not particularly high. Ultimately, Gross Domestic Product is merely an expression of traded production output (to the extent that it is officially reported), not of a region’s prosperity.

Per capita GDP allows economic regions of various sizes to be compared with each other. It is also a measure of a region’s material prosperity as it shows the total output of a country broken down by the number of inhabitants. However, the mean values provide no information about the actual range of the per capita values. The regional breakdown reveals high values for some cities (mainly in Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw and Pathein) and relatively high values for central Myanmar (e.g. around Monywa and Magway) and areas around development projects (e.g. Kyaukphyu), but it is clear that the figures for some townships need to be reviewed or analysed in more detail before they can be accurately interpreted.

Frauke Kraas and Zin Nwe Myint