High-yielding agriculture is primarily practised at an altitude of about 900 m in the Shan Hills and around Inle Lake, Myanmar’s second largest inland lake. Traditionally, so-called ‘floating gardens’ (Wilhelmy 1986) are created on the lake: On artificial islands and earth-covered mats anchored in the lake floor with woven roots and climbing plants as well as wooden posts, lake sediments and plant detritus are repeatedly deposited to expand and deepen the soil layer. The main crops on these islands are tomatoes, beans, onions, leeks, aubergines and flowers. The constant supply of water from the lake makes several harvests per year possible. The cultivation and harvesting of the elongated ‘fields’ is effected from boats that access the plants along narrow canals and transport the harvested crops. On the lake banks the crop is sorted, packed and then transported, mostly by truck, to the agglomerations of Yangon and Mandalay (Nilar Aung 2007).

HIGH MOUNTAINS

The mountain regions above 2000 m in the north of Kachin State have hitherto been quite inaccessible because of a lack of transport links and are only used for agriculture in scattered locations. The mountain massifs of the eastern foothills of the Himalayas surrounding the country’s highest mountain Hkakabo Razi are largely inaccessible. The dense mountain rainforests at lower altitudes with oaks, chestnuts, tree ferns and bamboo, pines and rhododendrons give way to open bush- and grasslands at higher altitudes. Subsistence agriculture is carried out mainly in the valleys, sometimes on terraces, with rice and vegetable cultivation dominating. Taungya slash-and-burn cultivation is practised sporadically, making dry rice cultivation possible. Hunting and gathering are also common in the forests, though limited in many places by local restrictions on their use.

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Detailed analysis of the data for Myanmar’s 330 townships reveals a regional differentiation that is highly characteristic.

The share of the primary sector in total GDP by township (2014/2015; indicated by the colour of the frame of the squares) shows that the sector accounts for shares of more than 50% in predominantly rural regions without major urban centres (for instance in the west of the Ayeyarwady lowlands and delta, and in peripheral townships of the Shan Highlands and in the Sagaing and Tanintharyi Region). In larger towns and cities and their surroundings, the share of the primary sector in total GDP drops to less than 25%, as would be expected. In some locations it is less than 5%, which is due to urban and periurban industry and the high share of trade and services. Correspondingly, the lowest shares of the primary sector in GDP are found in Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, larger regional urban centres (such as Mawlamyine, Sittwe or Myitkyina) and some border towns (such as Muse and Tachileik).

A look at the shares of the ‘agriculture’ and ‘livestock and fisheries’ subsectors in the primary sector shows the huge importance of agriculture in the central lowlands of Ayeyarwady and in the peripheral highlands of Shan, Kayin and Kayah State and the Sagaing Region. Fisheries dominate along the coasts, notably aquaculture in the southern delta of the Ayeyarwady. In the peripheral mountain regions with infertile soils, high relief energy and low levels of market integration, such as in Chin State, the major importance of livestock is evident. The contribution of forestry and agroforestry to GDP is below the 25% threshold in all townships. This contribution can only be derived indirectly from the available data insofar as forestry and agroforestry play a supplementary role in GDP generation in all the locations where agriculture, livestock and fisheries do not make up more than 90%.

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Rice harvest in Ayeyarwady Delta