The regional distribution of the availability of essential household infrastructure – first, the main sources of lighting and second, the proportion of households with mobile phones – is informative as it demonstrates the general level of infrastructure available to households and allows basic conclusions to be drawn about the extent of regional inequalities. Furthermore, lighting and mobile phones are both important preconditions for the socio-economic development of the households – e.g. lighting in the evenings allows children to learn or complete their homework; mobile phones allow social contacts to be maintained or negotiations with business partners to be undertaken.

There are large countrywide disparities in the provision of households with electricity for lighting. This basic infrastructure is provided to almost all households in the inner-city districts of Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw, although it is common knowledge that temporary power cuts are also frequent in these areas. Otherwise, high percentages of households with electricity for lighting are found only in Myitkyina, several regional cities and a few townships along the eastern border; in the central lowland of Myanmar 25-50% of all households have access to electricity for lighting. Considerable supply deficits are revealed by the household information for large parts of the rural region, the mountainous regions of Chin, Kachin, Shan and Kayin States, and the Tanintharyi Region. With less than 5% of all households accessing electricity for lighting, the greatest supply deficits are found in large areas of Rakhine State and Nagaland, in the central Shan State and in the townships of Yebyu, Dawai and Thayetchaung.

The situation concerning the availability of mobile phones is similar: almost all households in the inner city areas of Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw are apparently supplied. In reality, however, several people in one household share a phone while other individuals have access to a number of phones. This gives the impression of full coverage, but it is actually a statistical effect. In many regional cities and in several of the border regions of the country more than half the population owns a mobile phone. Large parts of Chin, Kachin, Shan and Kayin States and of the Sagaing and Tanintharyi Regions are characterised by severe undersupply. The greatest deficits exist in Rakhine State, in the south of Chin State, in large parts of the Sagaing Region including Nagaland, in parts of the eastern Shan State and in the east of Kayin State.

These obvious regional disparities represent a series of other inequalities in the supply of important infrastructure. They are important in terms of (1) national justice and the realisation or guarantee of household-related development opportunities, (2) countrywide regional solidarity, countering processes of marginalisation, and (3) preventing or reducing migration, especially in the wider areas of Yangon and Mandalay, as this could impact development there. The question of national justice and solidarity is therefore relevant to decision-making about whether priority is given to continuing to privilege the most populated regions or to reducing disparities by allowing the mountainous and minority regions to catch up on development – or whether a reconciliation of interests will be found.

Frauke Kraas and Aye Aye Myint