4. POPULATION, SETTLEMENTS AND URBANISATION

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The 2014 nationwide census in Myanmar – the first since 1983 – enabled the key socio-economic data required for planning and development purposes to be updated. Regional population figures are the essential basis for all socio-economic analyses, while the figures for Myanmar’s 330 townships are a very good starting point for spatially differentiated comparisons (Kraas/Spohner 2015). The total population figure of 51,486,253 includes estimated figures of 1.09 million in Rakhine State, 69,753 in Kayin State and 46,600 in Kachin State (census findings 2014; MoIP 2015b). The slight gender imbalance (24,821,176 males (48.2%) compared with 26,598,244 females (51.8%)) reflects the fact that more men than women are labour migrants living in neighbouring countries.

The most populous areas are Yangon Region (7,360,703 inhabitants; 14.3% of the population), Ayeyarwady Region (6,184,829 inhabitants; 12.0%), Mandalay Region (6,165,723 inhabitants; 12.0%), Shan State (5,815,384 inhabitants), Sagaing Region (5,320,299 inhabitants) and Bago Region (4,863,455 inhabitants), followed by Magway Region (3,912,711 inhabitants), Rakhine State (3,188,963 inhabitants), Mon State (2,050,282 inhabitants), Kachin State (1,689,654 inhabitants), Kayin State (1,572,657 inhabitants), Tanintharyi Region (1,406,434 inhabitants) and Nay Pyi Taw Capital Region (1,158,367 inhabitants; 2.3% of the population). Chin State (478,690 inhabitants; 0.9%) and Kayah State (286,627 inhabitants; 0.6%) have the lowest population figures (all figures: MoIP 2015a: 3). Three areas of population concentration stand out on the map of the total population distribution: the area around Yangon, until 2005 capital of Myanmar in the south, close to the sea, Mandalay, the last capital of the Myanmar kings before the arrival of the British colonial powers, and Nay Pyi Taw, the country’s new capital. While Yangon officially has 5,211,431 inhabitants – which makes Yangon, according to international urban standards (Kraas 2007), an emerging megalopolis – Mandalay follows with 1,489,271 and Nay Pyi Taw with 1,160,242 inhabitants (MoIP 2015b).

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION AS A HISTORICAL LEGACY

This bipolarity mirrors the country’s history: during the era of the Burmese kingdoms, the centre of political power, population and the economy lay inland in the dry zone, the region to the north of present-day Pyay that extends across Bagan and Mandalay to Shwebo. Accordingly, most of the historical capitals were located in Central Myanmar. The Mon empire in the south in the area around present-day Mawlamyine, Thaton and Bago was, by comparison, a sparsely populated region until the early 19th century. According to different historic sources, Burma’s population in pre-British time was estimated roughly at 3-3.6 million to 17 million (as carefully analysed by Richell 2006: 8-15). Three of the sources (Burney 1795 (to be corrected: Burney 1842), Yule 1826 and Alves 1855, quoted after Richell 2006: 9) have produced similar estimates – ranging from 3 million to 4.2 million inhabitants in ‘Burma Proper’, i.e. with the exception of the Mergui Peninsula, Arakan and the Upper Chindwin – which were ‘all largely drawn from the sittan records assembled by the Burmese kings in 1783 and 1826’ (Richell 2006: 9).

This concentration of the population in the centre of the country radically changed when the British colonial powers gradually seized control of what was then Burma in the three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1826, 1852-1853