

Statement of 3rd Myanmar Opium Farmer Forum 12 September 2015

We, opium farmers and representatives of opium farming communities from Kayah State, Shan State, Kachin State and Chin State, came together in Upper Myanmar to discuss the drug policies affecting our lives and to make the following recommendations:

We grow opium in order to ensure food security for our family and to provide our basic needs, and to have access to health and education. We grow opium because of poverty and because we live in isolated and mountainous and high elevated areas, where it is difficult to grow other crops, infrastructure is weak and we face difficulties to transport crops, and where we have difficulty to access markets. We also have little access to land to grow other crops. The large majority of opium farmers are not rich and grow it for their survival. Therefore, they should not be treated as criminals.

Opium has many positive values for us. As there are few health facilities in our areas, we use opium as a traditional medicine for diarrhea, coughing, and as a painkiller and to keep us safe from poisonous insects. For some of us, we believe it protects us from evil and if offered to spirits it will bring good luck. We also use it to treat sick animals.

Many of us live in areas with armed conflict. We have to pay opium tax to many armed groups. Some local representatives of government agencies, the police and the Myanmar army also come to our village, especially during harvest time, and demand money from us, and threaten that if we do not pay they will destroy our crop. Some armed groups ban opium cultivation and carry out eradication. In some places the government also carries out eradication.

While we have many problems to feed our family, we are also facing the risk of eradication. We feel there should be no eradication of our poppy fields, until we have access to alternative sources of income. Some of us mainly rely on opium cultivation for our livelihoods.

At the moment, very few of us have benefitted from development projects. Only very few alternative development programmes are in our areas. These programmes should be designed with our involvement, and should be suitable for our local environment and climate. The efficiency of the few programmes that are operating could be much improved.

In our areas there are also many problems related to drugs use, especially ATS and heroin. This is causing problems in our families and our society. We feel threatened by these problems. But until now there are very few services and programmes available to address these problems. We hope these programmes can be improved.

In conclusion, we do not want to be regarded as criminals. We demand to be involved in decision making processes about drug policies and development programmes that are affecting our lives.