

How Burmese Farmers Look at Fertilizer Use

A study with farmer focus groups was conducted in 2017 to characterize the attitude of farmers in Myanmar towards the use of fertilizers, with the aim of identifying opportunities for responsible fertilizer market development. We used locally appropriate indicators elicited from the farmers themselves using participatory open-ended queries. Farmers were interviewed in the Irrawaddy Delta, the Mandalay agricultural production area and the Southern Shan State. Facilitated by representatives of local government organizations, we visited two to three communities in each area. Emphasis was given to the most important crops in each region, and eliciting knowledge of the circumstances related to the management of these crops:

1. Livelihood activities or resources used in good and bad years, with “good” and “bad” defined in terms of agricultural production and price. The elicited responses identified the different farm enterprises, activities, and income sources that producers relied upon and their relative importance in both good and bad years. Fertilizer market development activities would strive to reduce “bad” year outcomes and to increase years approximating what farmers describe as “good”.
2. Solutions for prioritized problems related to crop production, processing, and marketing would have clear, positive impacts on the ability of farmers to use fertilizer for the improvement of their livelihoods. Work on increasing benefit-cost ratios via problem solving and improvement of returns to factors of production within the enterprise can then be achieved through technical programs.
3. Farmer provided qualitative estimates of yield, production costs, and income, and identified issues related to the use of and knowledge about fertilizers.

Many of the findings provide promising entry points for the development of sustainable use practices of fertilizers in important Burmese crop production systems. Unlike agricultural communities in other countries, the interviewed groups often indicated similar allocation to the farm enterprise in bad and good years, demonstrating the importance of the agricultural business for livelihoods.

Farmers are aware of the need for and the benefits of fertilizers. On the other hand, current use practices often drastically mismatch the supply to and demand of nutrients by crops, providing an opportunity for fertilizer manufacturers.

Unfortunately, knowledge about sustainable fertilizer management practices is not widespread and difficult to obtain. Farmers tend to rely on peer to peer knowledge dissemination, which offers an opportunity for fertilizer manufactures and dealers to fill that knowledge gap. Interestingly, farmers are highly brand conscious and brand loyal, surely an indication of previous exposure to low quality fertilizer products, providing another entry point for responsible fertilizer suppliers to provide access to high quality products that systematically support the production of key crops.

Regional market development efforts often focus on a few prominent crops grown over large areas. Insights gained from farmers in Myanmar indicate that this misses out other significant market development opportunities provided by niche crops, or commodities grown in cropping systems jointly with the prominent crops. It is common that external nutrients are applied to prominent crops within a system that do not respond to nutrients with gains in yield and farm income. The underlying reasons are sometimes cultural, historical, or institutionally based, and several offer options for market development to improve fertilizer management practices.