

Date: (9 Dec 2020)

Re: An open letter from Thilawa community for the lack of accountability from the officials in implementing Thilawa Special Economic Zone

The officials should not ignore the local community's concern and losses due to the implementation of Thilawa Special Economic Zone project. It is necessary they engage with the community and address the issues through meaningful negotiations.

Thilawa Special Economic Zone is a joint-venture project between the governments of Myanmar and Japan with 51 percent of equity hold by Myanmar and the rest of 49 percent by Japan. The special economic zone has two phases. Currently, at the first phase, factories are operating in the 400-hectares zone. The next second phase of 70- hectares zone is being implemented without the consent of local community.

Despite being hailed as the successful project by the Myanmar government, Thilawa Special Economic Zone, in reality, wrought havoc on the community and left the community with various challenges and distress. The community has not been compensated for their agricultural lands that they have worked for many generations, and for the loss of their livelihoods and other non-economic losses. Also, the remaining households that are yet to be relocated receive no information about the project, and they are not being informed in advance of project activities. The lack of accountability in managing the project, the lack of transparency in previous compensation and negotiations, and the lack of meaningful dialogue between the two parties have become an increasing concern.

These agricultural lands have been farmed by many generations way before the project arrived and the community's livelihoods depended on those lands. After the project started, the community members could no longer continue their farm works. We, the community members of Thilawa, should not be ignored, and our concerns deserve to be urgently and fairly addressed. We wish to receive an unbiased, fair and equitable treatment in concerning with damages of the local community in an accountable manner by both the government and investors. Also, we wish that there are remedial measures and that the government meet with the local community and engage in a meaningful negotiation with the community.

The community had requested, in person, in letter or in phone, remedial measures for their losses due to the project. However, the community has received no definite response, and it only received a delayed response. The community has also received no information about the project. At the same time, there is no equality and transparency during the negotiation process. Instead, the negotiation was in a one-sided and adversarial manner. Due to these issues, our community is deeply concerned about the ongoing project.

We urgently demand a platform where a meaningful engagement and discussion between the government, investors and affected people can take place by not ignoring the challenges and concerns of the local community. This platform should be implemented effectively rather than in a nominal manner. There are various reasons why this platform is required. First, the existing grievance mechanism being utilized by investors is impractical and disproportionate. Next, the mechanism fails to reflect the true voice of local community, and it is ineffective.

The government and officials had failed to develop a proper rehabilitation plan to reduce damages from the project and provide a living standard that is not less than the original state. Also, the government had failed to conduct a meaningful public consultation. The local community is now facing the consequences of such failures. Thus, for the long-term interest of both parties, we solemnly urge government officials and the project developer to conduct negotiations with the community and create a participatory mechanism to address grievances of affected people. Meanwhile, our community is striving to meet with various officials. Due to the ongoing pandemic restrictions, we have invited officials to meet via online instead of in person.

Hence, we, the local community, demand the following points to the government, officials and investor institutions.

1. Implement a meaningful participatory mechanism based on a discussion between the parties in order to formulate a rehabilitation plan that provides a living standard to affected local people, which is not less than the original state.
2. Provide compensation in accordance with international standards for the loss of agricultural lands and livelihoods of local people at the earliest possible time.
3. Provide vocational trainings, create job opportunities, and support affected people before, during and after the rehabilitation process based on the evaluation of the livelihoods of project-affected people.
4. Implement proper remedial measures for the affected local people fairly and transparently without any biases.
5. Project officials must consider the local community's concern and voices, and both parties must provide information transparently and proportionately.
6. Recognize Thilawa Social Development Organization, Thilawa Women's Association and Thilawa Grievance Mechanism Design Committee and meet regularly with these organizations to develop a fair and effective grievance mechanism so the issues arise from Thilawa Special Economic Zone project are addressed in a participatory and proportionate manner while allowing representation of local community's voices in the process.

Thus, we call upon government officials and investors to respond our demands in an accountable manner through this open letter.

Thilawa Community