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Labours of Legibility: Poverty, Self-reliance and Entitlement to State Aid in Contemporary Myanmar

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- Speaker:** **Mr Gerard McCarthy**
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), NUS
- Chair:** **Dr Jamie Gillen**
Department of Geography, NUS
- Date/Time:** Friday 9 November, 3.30pm
- Place:** Earth Lab (AS2 #02-03), Department of Geography, NUS

Abstract

How do you make yourself worthy and legible to receive state poverty-alleviation aid in contemporary Myanmar? This seminar explores how labour and financial contributions to local welfare and development initiatives have become central to the 'politics of entitlement' (Li 2007) under partial civilian rule in Myanmar. Drawing on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and a 1000 household survey in Bago Region and Karen State, it examines how rural and urban communities work to 'take responsibility' for local development and improvement. Through survey analysis and case-studies of 'self-reliant' public goods projects, the paper demonstrates that communities who carefully render themselves as 'self-reliant' by advocating to state officials on the basis of local improvement initiatives are disproportionately likely to receive state aid. In contrast, equally poor communities who fail to make their projects of collective improvement legible to authorities are considered legitimately 'unworthy' of state aid, including by members of the ruling National League for Democracy party. The paper demonstrates that even though democratic officials are now allocating greater budget to public goods and poverty alleviation, state funding is serving to perpetuate rather than erode inequalities. The competition between communities to make themselves legible as 'self-reliant' communities thus renders rights contingent, entrenching the exclusion of the 'unworthy' poor and reinforcing a minimalist expectation of the democratic state's obligation to its citizens.

About the Speaker



Gerard McCarthy is Visiting Fellow in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore and Associate Director of the Myanmar Research Centre at Australian National University (ANU). His doctoral dissertation in the ANU Department of Political and Social Change examined the historical and contemporary dynamics of market reform and state-society relations in Myanmar. His writing and commentary on Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Sudan and Australia has been published in journals including *Conflict, Security and Development*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* and *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* as well as outlets such as *The New York Times*, Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) and *New Mandala*. He has advised and consulted for a range of agencies including International Growth Centre, United States Institute of Peace, The Carter Centre and TechChange and was a Visiting Fellow at University of Yangon's Department of International Relations throughout 2015.

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