This is Indawgyi Lake. It is Myanmar’s largest freshwater lake, a designated wildlife sanctuary and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Fishing is the main source of income for many people in the area. However, in recent decades, fishers are finding it a daily struggle to catch enough fish to support their families.

This is Au Ti Sung. He lives with his wife and two young children in the small village of Lonton located on the southwest shore of the lake. He has been fishing here his whole life and it is the family’s main source of income. His wife sells also ‘ice pop’ at the nearby school.

Au Ti Sung’s wife collects the fish to take to market. He is one of the many fishers living along the lake and has just returned home from a disappointing day at work. He only caught a single fish for her to sell today.
I don’t know how to do anything else. I’ve been fishing for almost 25 years now. Before it was ok, we’d catch about 10-20 kg per day, but now we only catch about 4-6 kg a day.

When we first came here in one village there were 2 or 3 fishers only, but now there are at least thirty boats in each village. Before we only had a few fishers and the government didn’t give us any restrictions, people were rotating all the time because there were so few of us.
Today, there are many villages surrounding Indawgyi Lake. Many of the inhabitants have migrated from Sagaing Region in search of a better life.

Meet Kyaw Thu. He is originally from Sagaing Region and moved to Indawgyi Lake over two years ago. He moved with his new wife in search of a better life. Unable to afford a house, they both live on their boat and return home for part of the summer when fishing is banned here.

They go fishing every day and say they can make 8,000 to 9,000 kyat a day compared to 3,000 to 4,000 kyat from farming at their old home. As they are new to the area, they try to stick to the unrestricted areas and not fish during the off season. They feel life is better for them here but have noticed a drop in the number of fish. Next year, if they have enough money, they would like to move off the boat and start to think about having a family.

Several factors appear to have led to the declining fishery: an influx of migrant fishers, poor fishing practices and pollution from nearby illegal gold mines.
In response, the Fisheries Department have implemented strict regulations to protect the lake. However, they do not appear to have an effective or inclusive method for securing local livelihoods or environmental sustainability and appear to be causing extra difficulties for fishers in the area.

Many fishers don’t agree with the Fishery Department’s regulations. For most, a day without fish is a day without food. With limited options, many break the rules but face heavy sanctions if caught.

If someone breaks your rice cooker, do you like it? The lake is our rice cooker. We’re not allowed our rice, who likes that? The Fisheries Department made an agreement with the village headman. Who would dare go against the village headman says Au Ti Sung?

They took away my husband’s boat and all of his nets so he hasn’t been able to fish. We have to rely on support from my son.

This is Top A Lon. Her husband was caught fishing in a restricted area. He was fined, had his fishing equipment confiscated and now faces one month in jail. She doesn’t feel like her husband should be punished so severely and she now finds herself trying to provide for her and her grandson without any means of generating an income.

Locals say the stream here was once clear but after sedimentation from nearby gold mining it now runs orange. Part of the reason Au Ti Sung is so opposed to the strict regulations is because he does not believe the declining fish population is due solely to overfishing.

Although gold mining is illegal, it is understood that mining companies, unlike local fishers, can afford to pay the fines.

It’s the mining that is destroying the lake. If they stop the gold mining the lake will be happy and healthy. Because of the mining the water is yellow, the water is dirty from all of the mining, all the chemicals are going into the lake so around here we can’t get as many fish as before.
The Fishery Department acknowledges fishers are facing some difficulties but say their restrictions are necessary. In the meantime, many fishers are forced to consider other sources of income. Au Ti Sung hopes to save enough to start a business selling fishing traps next year. This is what many fishers aspire to do.

Changing farming practices further adds to the problems on the lake. Heavy use of fertilisers and pesticides is thought to be leaching into the water. This further depletes the water quality and damages fish stocks.

The Fishery Department acknowledges fishers are facing some difficulties but say their restrictions are necessary.

We cannot completely stop people from fishing in the banned season but we are trying to make some unrestricted zones from them.

Gold mining has caused much damage to the lake. We think more than twenty-two acres of soil has been washed into the lake, with mercury also included in that. So, not only are fish are being harmed but also aquatic plants which serve as breeding habitats.

Some departments and organisations understand the effects of gold mining but businessmen don’t want to. Even many local people are not interested in stopping gold mines because they can earn a lot of money working in the mines. A wage labourer in gold mining can earn more than outside. They know it’s not good but often don’t have a choice.

In the meantime, many fishers are forced to consider other forms of income. Au Ti Sung hopes to save enough to start a business selling fishing traps next year. This is what many fishers aspire to do.
This is one of many checkpoints on the road from Indawgyi to Myitkina. There is a strong military presence in Kachin State. It follows several years of conflict between the Kachin Independence Army and the Burmese Army.

Unregulated gold mining has attracted migrant workers from neighbouring states. Locals complain about the loss of land, environmental pollution and an increase in drug and crime related problems.
This was our community. We used to farm here, plant trees here. We depended on this forest. Today, the Myanmar government and KIA have given our land to Chinese businessmen. Now we are trying to get our land back.

Lagang Hawng Dauw is a local farmer from the village of Lamyang. He shows us the land that was once a community managed forest area.

In 1998, 500 acres of community forest was taken by the military but was left fallow until 2010 when the land was given to a Chinese agricultural company despite villagers repeated attempts to regain land they feel is rightfully theirs.

Community forest land has traditionally provided a significant portion of income for households in Kachin. The loss of the community forest has therefore had negative consequences for the lives of villagers in Lamyang.

A Chinese owned banana plantation covers more than 500 acres close to the village of Lamyang in Myanmar’s Northern Kachin State. However, this land was illegally taken from local villagers who had been using the land for decades.

The plantation headquarters and warehouse are located outside of Lamyang Village. It employs a number of allegedly illegal Chinese migrants.
They told us to submit our names so that we could get community forest certificates. Still we don’t get any certificates. Whenever we go to their office just delay. I have recorded what they say and taken pictures as evidence. We know that they are on the side of the company. They got angry when we marched silently. We know in our hearts that one day we will farm on these lands again.

We have reported this to the government and KIA too. We were trying to stop this but local authorities from both sides are not taking any action and they don’t care about us. We are trying to protect our land from businessmen and raising our voices through the government and KIA. We did before, we are doing it now, and we will do it in the future until we get back our land. But they still want to take more.

Today they have a small plot of community forest compared to what they used to have. The villagers of Lamyang are conducting a community forest meeting and discussing steps they can take to regain the rights to their land. Villagers have been collecting evidence showing how the land was taken from them. U Lagang Hkawng Dauw shows us a photograph of their community forest shortly after it was taken from them.

This is Lan An Sung An, a vocal villager from Lamyang who has suffered from the loss of community forest land. In addition to the loss of livelihoods, the use of chemicals on the plantation has polluted local water sources causing a reduction in agricultural productivity and harming fish stocks.
Many families were affected by the land grab. Some were supporting their children’s education by selling wood from the community forest. After our land was taken we couldn’t support our families anymore. So, children didn't go to school because we relied on the income from the land to send them.

Maybe in two or three years we’ll get the land back.
Even though our property, land and business was there (in Tang Phre), we had to move. I still remember that morning in March 2011 when the buses arrived to pick us up and bring us to the new village. We were forced to move. We don’t know what to do here. Although they gave us two acres of land each, we don’t feel good about farming here. We could get medicinal herbs from our old place, we know how to earn money from our old forest.

Following a signed agreement between Chinese Power Investment Corporation (CPI) and the Burmese government in 2007, construction on the USD 36 billion dam began along with the relocation of numerous villages in northern Kachin State. The project has attracted fierce opposition due to its detrimental environmental impacts, including the large flooded area and the risks posed by a nearby seismic fault line. Additionally, the unequal distribution of power, with China contracted to receive more than 80%, has drawn criticism. In 2011, then President Thien Sein unexpectedly announced that the dam was suspended, with a final decision yet to be made.

This is a model village built for the resettlement of villagers located in the projected flood zone. Although villagers were promised a better life and a good resettlement package, many are not happy with the compensation they have received. Furthermore, villagers were not consulted about the dam project in a meaningful way by CPI or the government.

This is T Daw Ja Hkawn, originally from Tang Phre village which lies close to the confluence. She was moved to the new village in 2011 and like many others felt they had no option but to relocate. Here, she sits outside her new house helping her daughter get ready for school.
We could stay there (Tang Phre), look after the children and send the children to school there. The education was good there. Now, because the parents have to go to the old village for their business, we can’t look after the children so their education is not as good. This is the issue we’re facing right now.

Although residents were promised a better life in the new village, many feel the compensation provided was inadequate. The two acres of marginal land provided does not produce sufficient crops.

For those who refused to relocate, the children have to make a 14 km round trip each day to get to the school in the new village.

We could stay there (Tang Phre), look after the children and send the children to school there. The education was good there. Now, because the parents have to go to the old village for their business, we can’t look after the children so their education is not as good. This is the issue we’re facing right now.

I cannot earn a lot of money. The children’s education has been affected. I can no longer make enough money from selling fruits and vegetables. We were so happy before, we cannot describe it, we were happy for our
One night 30 people came to my house. I felt so scared when they came. I was pretending it was just animals outside my house. I was pretending the soldiers weren’t there. Then they told me to come out of my house. I was paralyzed. I put a candle out on the veranda and acted like I had an injury. I told them I couldn’t come down. The military captain said if I didn’t leave tonight, I’ll need to go to the office tomorrow to sign a paper. I don’t want to leave here.

My farm is here, my animals are here, I don’t want to move anywhere. I just keep telling them I’m sick. I’m scared but if the dam is coming, we will always be fighting against it.

Sama Zau Lum leaves his house in Tang Phre to tend to his banana farm. Staying in the village is not an easy option. He faces harassment from the authorities and fears getting arrested.

Livelihoods have been significantly disrupted for residents of Tang Phre, both for those who have been relocated and those who decided to stay. Now that Sama Zau Lum is not able to engage in shifting cultivation, his main source of income is from his banana plantation.

Local activists like Sama Zau Lum continue to oppose the dam project. Along with others in the community he has been writing letters to the president of China and Myanmar, attending rallies and speaking to the media. Although he believes the government can’t approve the project due to widespread opposition, he feels that life will never return to normal. Many have already sold off their land to wealthy individuals and for those who remain he explains that much of the land has been earmarked for recreational purposes, with bans on local user rights and shifting cultivation.
I stopped in 2010 because the family scattered so it was only me left so I couldn’t do it. Some moved to the new village, some went to the city. I was alone here so I could not do the farming.

In addition to the problems caused by the dam project, unregulated gold mining in the area has also had a negative impact on villagers in Tang Phre. A nearby illegal gold mine has depleted water stocks, making rice farming on nearby paddy fields unviable. While Sama Zau Lum can no longer grow rice here, he plans to develop the leftover water ponds into productive fish ponds. However, before investing his time and money he is waiting for a final decision on the dam project.

The policy of the government has affected us. The government policies are not stable yet, so we aren’t leading a stable life, we’re just hoping for our lives.

They are saying the dam is going to be constructed and all this land will be wasted so just sell it to us. The people who sold their land think they’re going to be wealthy, but they’re not. They bought a lot of motorbikes and are spending a lot of money. The cronies are getting richer and we villagers just have to stay far outside the village. We had to move 2-3 miles outside because we’ve sold our places. Now you see a lot of places that are occupied by the cronies says Sama Zau Lum.