Peace-building in Myanmar

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The peace process currently underway in Myanmar represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic and state–society conflicts. Critical to the success of this peace process will be the role that is played by various actors in the country's civil society. In an earlier chapter, the nature of civil society in Myanmar was examined. In this chapter on peace-building in Myanmar,[1] among other issues the actual engagement of these various actors in the peace process is explored in greater detail.[2]

Conflict and peace in Myanmar

For more than half a century, rural areas of Myanmar populated by ethnic nationalities have been affected by conflicts between ethnic insurgents and a militarized state, widely perceived to have been captured by elements of the ethnic Burman majority. For decades, communist and dozens of ethnic insurgents controlled large parts of the country. Since the 1970s, however, armed opposition groups have lost control of their once extensive 'liberated zones', precipitating further humanitarian and political crises in the borderlands. For generations, communities have been disrupted, traumatized and displaced. In 2011 there were an estimated 500,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the southeast alone, plus some 150,000 predominantly Karen refugees living in a series

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1. *Peace-making* aims to reduce and control levels of violence, without necessarily addressing root causes. *Peace-building* involves a commitment to transformative action, going beyond conflict management to address underlying (structural) issues and inequalities.
2. This chapter was first drafted in early 2013. In the year since then, much effort has gone into securing peace throughout Myanmar but to date with few concrete results. As such, the text of this chapter has been updated where appropriate but the bulk of the chapter has been left unchanged; its deft analysis of the overall peace situation has not been affected by the short passage of time. This chapter is followed by an update of the peace process as it stands in March 2014 and a timely reminder of the critical issues involved. (MG)

of camps along the Thailand–Burma border. Following lengthy ceasefire negotiations in 2011–12, the number of displaced people in southeast Myanmar was considerably reduced but it increased dramatically in Kachin and Rakhine States as a result of war and communal violence.[3]

A previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s brought considerable respite to conflict-affected civilian populations. These truces (about 25 agreements in total) provided the space for civil society networks to (re-)emerge within and between ethnic-nationality communities. However, the then military government proved unwilling to accept ethnic-nationality representatives' political demands. Therefore, despite some positive developments, the ceasefires of the 1990s did little to dispel distrust between ethnic nationalists and the government.

The election of a military-backed, semi-civilian government in November 2010 represented a clear break with the past. Although opposition groups (including most non-state armed groups, NSAGs) continue to object strongly to elements of the 2008 constitution, this has nevertheless seen the introduction of limited decentralization to seven States, predominantly populated by ethnic nationalities.

Despite such positive developments, in June 2011 the Myanmar army launched a major offensive against the KIO (Kachn Independence Organization), the main Kachin armed ethnic group in northern Myanmar, breaking a 17-year ceasefire. As a result of this resumption of armed conflict, at least 80,000 people were displaced along the Chinese border, with tens of thousands of more IDPs in the conflict zones and government-controlled areas.[4] This resurgence of armed conflict included some of the most significant battles of Myanmar's civil war, now soon in its 60th year. The reasons behind the resumption of armed conflict in Kachin areas are complex and contested, and largely beyond the scope of this chapter, including sometimes opaque political-economic and geo-strategic factors. At the time of writing (March 2014) – after several false starts – a Chinese-brokered ceasefire seemed to be holding between government forces and the KIO.

Meanwhile, in late 2011 and through 2012, preliminary ceasefires were agreed and/or re- confirmed between the government and 10 of the 11 most significant NSAGs, representing the Wa and Mongla, Chin,

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3.   For fuller details, see Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2012) and The Border Consortium (2012).

4.   Human Rights Watch (2012).

Chin Liberation Army soldier (photo courtesy of Daniel Sakhong)

Shan, Pa-O, Karen, Karenni, Arakan/Rakhine and Mon. By mid-2012, the only major group still at war was the KIO though sporadic fighting involving different NSAGs is still reported elsewhere, especially in Shan and Kachin States.

Many communities have experienced some of the benefits of the peace process. In areas where ceasefires have been effective, it is far easier to travel than previously. In the past, villagers had to fear rough handling (or worse) on the part of Tatmadaw personnel and/or insurgent forces. In contrast, 2012 travel restrictions greatly eased in many areas, so that villagers can move more freely, spending more time in their fields and getting products more easily to market. While these benefits may not seem significant to political elites, they mean a great deal to local communities. Nevertheless, the human-rights situation in remote, conflict-affected areas needs to improve further, in order to reach acceptable international standards. In the meantime, many problems remain on the ground. In particular, people living in remote, conflict-affected areas are concerned about business activities expanding in ceasefire zones. Often, commercial activity in previously inaccessible areas is focused on natural resource extraction, with little benefit to the local community and often involving very serious impacts on the natural environment.[5] The

5. Karen Human Rights Group (2013). The effect of more freedom of movement is explored in greater detail in the next chapter (p. 250).

relationship between business interests and the peace process is hugely important, but under-examined. The political economy of both armed conflict and peace in Myanmar involves significant economic interests, on the part of both government and NSAG actors. If such concerns are not addressed, the grievances of local communities (and the advocacy groups seeking to represent them) are likely to increase, in relation to the peace-business nexus. Already, some NSAG leaders have been accused of profiting personally from the peace process. Such concerns could lead to outbursts of local violence, with highly negative consequences for both communities and the peace process more broadly.

The peace process currently underway in Myanmar represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic conflicts in this troubled country. However, the political, social and economic issues at the heart of the conflict will not be easily resolved. In order to address deep-rooted, structural problems, both the government and NSAGs must act with courage and imagination. Otherwise, the present window of opportunity may close, as the peace process loses momentum. Failure of the peace process would have significant negative impacts on President U Thein Sein's reform agenda.

The most significant challenges facing the peace process are: 1) to initiate substantial political dialogue between the government and NSAGs (*broaden* the peace process); 2) to include participation of civil society and affected communities (*deepen* the peace process); and 3) to demonstrate the Myanmar Army and NSAG's willingness to support the peace agenda. Additional issues include the need to ensure free and fair elections scheduled for 2015, and to establish effective governance and rule of law – which is particularly lacking in conflict-affected areas on the periphery of state control, where civilian populations are often subject to multiple state and non-state authorities. As noted, a related issue is the need for regulation of the private sector, particularly in relation to natural resource and other extractive industries, which are making significant inroads in remote and previously armed conflict-affected areas. This should be a key topic for capacity building among newly decentralized State and Regional governments, where ethnic-nationality political parties have some voice. Also essential to sustainable transition in Myanmar will be economic reform, at the macro-level and more locally in the conflict-affected countryside.

A particularly significant, but largely unremarked, challenge lies in conceptualizing and working constructively on the relationship between government structures and those of NSAGs. Many armed opposition groups have long-established, if chronically under-resourced, para-government structures, for example in the fields of education, health and local administration. Peace talks have yet to address, let alone resolve, how these non-state local governance structures will relate to formal state structures. This is a particularly pressing question in areas of recent armed conflict, where communities are subject to multiple authorities (government, Myanmar Army and one or more NSAGs, plus local militias and other informal power-holders). For many displaced and other communities in the conflict zones, NSAG structures and personnel are perceived as more legitimate and effective than those of the state. As noted below, civil-society actors in conflict-affected areas often enjoy very close relations with (and personnel overlap with those of) NSAG service provision actors. It is essential that such individuals and networks enjoy a sense of ownership in the peace process, if momentum is to be maintained. Deepening of the peace process should therefore include participation of affected communities and other stakeholders, such as civil society and political actors, with special attention to the roles of women and young people. (However, this additional and unpredictable dynamic between NSAGs and these other actors may in the short term threaten the momentum rather than help to maintain it.)

The government's ability to deliver reforms is hampered by deep-rooted conservative-authoritarian institutional cultures, and limited technical capacities. This is also the case with Myanmar's diverse NSAGs. Furthermore, the government (composed mostly of ex-military personnel) exercises only limited control over the Myanmar Army.[6] One consequence of the Kachin conflict has been to activate and empower 'hard-line' elements within the Myanmar Army who actively oppose civilian control over the military. Perhaps the greatest challenges facing the government are therefore to ensure that the Myanmar Army implements its policy and to build new civilian institutions. For many actors and observers, such reforms will require significant changes to the 2008 constitution.

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6. Perhaps the best way of addressing this issue is through the development of codes of conduct and other monitoring mechanisms, details of which lie beyond the scope of this volume but should include significant local participation (see below).

The President having promised so much, Myanmar may experience a 'revolution of rising expectations': prospects of change have been talked up, and people may become frustrated if the government and its partners are unable to deliver. The reform process in Myanmar may be likened to taking the lid off a pressure cooker. In a society where tensions have been building for more than half a century, ethnic and other grievances can easily spill over, with disturbing consequences. One example is the recent violence and ethnic hatred in parts of Rakhine State and central Myanmar described elsewhere in this volume. These events remind us that there exist not only conflicts between the Myanmar government/ Army and various armed ethnic groups but also intra-communal conflict, with the potential to be extremely violent, between some ethnic communities. Outbursts of horrific violence in Rhakine constitute a complex phenomenon, beyond the scope of this chapter, involving deep-seated mistrust of the 'other' and the politics of citizenship, immigration and representation – issues that have been exacerbated and mobilized by local and national-level political entrepreneurs. Among other things, these events indicate that there are spoilers on the sidelines, waiting to utilize tensions to provoke violence in order to undermine the reforms.[7]

The peace process in Burma/Myanmar is indigenous, driven in the first instance by government initiative. In the context of limited international involvement, the process has been quite ad hoc in nature. Furthermore it is highly complex, with some 20 parallel sets of discussions underway between the government and various NSAGs. In 2013, more coordinated efforts to reach a nationwide peace agreement came to the fore but intractable issues at the local level still have a major influence.

Given the essentially indigenous nature of the peace process in Myanmar, the role of the international community context is necessarily limited. On the one hand, international stakeholders should continue to remind the government, and NSAGs, of their commitments and responsibilities under international human-rights and humanitarian laws, of the need to resolve outstanding armed conflicts, and of the necessity for an inclusive political dialogue, and ultimately a substantial political settlement acceptable to key stakeholders. Beyond that, the international community can support peace-building initiatives which build trust and confidence in

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7.   Arguably, among these spoilers are certain nationalist groups determined on exploiting local tensions between different ethnic and religious communities.

the peace process, and at the same time test the sincerity of the Myanmar government and Army, and NSAGs, to deliver the peace which citizens long for. One way of doing so is to engage constructively with various parties to the process including civil society actors, encouraging their participation in and principled support for the peace process.

Key stakeholders and relationships with peace-building

As noted in our earlier chapter, civil society in Myanmar has undergone a gradual re-emergence since the 1990s. Until 2011, many of the more dynamic sectors of Myanmar civil society were situated among ethnic groups. The re-emergence of civil society within and sometimes between often highly conflict-affected communities was partly a result of the previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s. Assessments of the earlier ceasefires should address both the failures (in terms of inability to achieve a political settlement) and the successes of this period, which included a dramatic decline in human-rights abuses in ceasefire areas and the re-emergence of civil society in conflict-affected areas.

Since the new government took power in Myanmar in 2011, the space for civil and political society has again expanded dramatically. Previous surveys of the sector (e.g. South 2008b) are therefore largely redundant. The following section provides an overview of key civil-society and related stakeholders in relation to peace-building in Myanmar. This is not a comprehensive overview of the civil-society sector, and even within the parameters of exploring the peace process provides only a limited sketch. Moreover, this material risks being overtaken by events. For instance, when this chapter was finalized in March 2014, a national ceasefire had still not been agreed while concerns were growing that implementation of the 2014 census would lead to widespread violence across the country. The issue of constitutional changes affecting the 2015 elections could also provoke civil disobedience in the cities and beyond.

To aid clarity and brevity, Myanmar peace-building civil society is mapped according to the following sectors: urban/Burman areas; established ethnic actors operating from government- controlled areas; the borderlands, including areas of on-going armed conflict; and refugee and diaspora communities. It should be noted that reality is more complex and messy than intellectual schema, with many actors and net-

works operating between and beyond these categories.[8] Furthermore, this mapping focuses mostly on indigenous actors, and does not include the significant new presence of 'international civil society actors', including 'think tanks' and others that have sought involvement in the peace process over the past two years.

Urban/Burman areas

As noted, the 'saffron revolution' of 2007 and the response to the following year's Cyclone Nargis, demonstrated the capacity of Myanmar civil society and its potential as a socio-political catalyst. In relation to the peace process, until very recently the repressive political environment in Myanmar has limited citizen engagement in urban areas, with the exception of some ethnic-minority communities (see below).

While urban and peri-urban dwellers include significant minority communities (including populations of Chinese and Indian origin), for analytical purposes it is possible to identify a Burman majority-orientated civil society. Before the socio-political opening of the past two years, the roles and scope of civil-society action in government-controlled areas were severely restricted. Nevertheless, Christian (mostly ethnic-minority) civil-society groups have enjoyed considerable space and been able to maintain strong international connections while remaining mostly disconnected from Burman-majority civil society. Recent positive developments include meetings (in January 2013) between Myanmar civil-society actors and the President and later, his main peace envoy, U Aung Min.

Over the past decade, urban civil society in Myanmar has grown, and also become more politicized. In part, this politicization is due to the decision by some Burman elites to engage in civil-society-based activism, with the intention of promoting democracy in their country.[9] Those aiming to 'build democracy from below' have established a number of predominantly Burman-staffed national NGOs, many of which can claim significant achievements in the fields of service delivery (e.g. education and community development). Several of these organizations

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8.   Due to the rapidly changing situation in Myanmar, there is little published material upon which to base this mapping. The following section is based on the authors' first-hand experience, when working to support the peace process in Myanmar through the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (see below).

9.   See South (2008b).

grew substantially in response to Cyclone Nargis and some are now well established. A number of these new NGOs have quite self-consciously emulated the model of Christian/ethnic minority civil-society organization. The trend towards a more politically-engaged civil society was magnified by the decision of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to engage in social work, as a way to engage with communities and mobilize support while outflanking the government, in a context where explicitly political ('big-P political') work was subject to outright suppression by the authorities. The NLD's engagement in the civil-society sector has potentially threatened the activities of longer-established actors with less explicitly political agendas.

Since mid-2011, there has been a huge increase in civil-society activism in government- controlled, and particularly urban, areas. While not exclusively identified with the majority community, activism is nevertheless focused particularly around Burman intellectual classes. A newly energized civil-society sector has engaged in public discourse and protests regarding rule-of-law and natural-resource issues – one notable achievement being pressure mobilized on the government to suspend the giant (Chinese-implemented) Myitsone Dam on the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River (this was indeed suspended by Presidential decree on 30 September 2011). More recently, civil- and political-society actors have protested against widespread land seizures and other rights violations across the country. These land protests have reached beyond urban civil society with many localized disputes in the rural countryside organized by aggrieved local farmer communities, an example being the protests against the Letpadaung copper mine in late 2013.

Some mainstream civil-society and political leaders have adopted strong and high-profile positions in relation to the peace process, including in particular members of the '88 generation'.[10] For example, on his release from jail in early 2012, veteran 'student leader' Min Ko Naing drew attention to the Kachin conflict, and since then he and colleagues have undertaken study tours to conflict-affected parts of the country, including the main KIO-HQ town of Laiza. Members of the '88 generation' have also visited the Philippines to better understand the peace process in Mindanao and how lessons might be applied to Myanmar.

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10. Political activists, prominent in the 1988 democracy uprising, who spent much of the next quarter century in jail or under close surveillance by the authorities.

Urban-based peace activists have initiated a number of public events (demonstrations in Yangon, Mandalay, Meiktilla and elsewhere as well as t-shirt campaigns, art events, public seminars, etc.) and undertaken high-profile visits to Kachin IDP camps. In the process, new understandings and alliances have developed between Burman elites and (in particular) ethnic Kachin communities. However, such activities have been accompanied by significant continued state suppression, including the arrest of a number of 'peace walk' activists (who face up to six years in jail). Although such activities have thus far produced limited results on the ground, they are nevertheless of political-cultural importance. For the first time in two decades,[11] middle-class activists and elites from the urban-Burman community (who enjoy considerable domestic political following) have expressed compassion for and solidarity with struggling ethnic nationalities. For the peace process in Myanmar to be sustained and deepened, it is essential that members of the ethnic Burman community gain better understandings of the grievances, aspirations and realities of their minority brethren.[12] In the past, under half a century of military rule, urban (particularly Burman) citizens had little exposure to the realities of armed conflict and its impacts in the ethnic-minority-populated countryside, beyond highly distorted government propaganda (plus the counter-narrative provided by news on the BBC, VOA, etc.).

These events have been covered widely in the Myanmar print and online and social media, which experienced a significant improvement in freedom of expression during 2012. The easing, and finally abolition, of censorship of the print media are some of the most visible and tangible results of the democratic reforms (though difficulties remain there – see p. 39ff.). While the (Burman-dominated) media has a limited understanding of ethnic minority affairs and conflict dynamics, the coverage

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11. Following suppression of the '1988 democracy uprising' and the government's failure to recognize the results of the 1990 general election, a wave of predominantly urban-based student and other democracy activists fled to the border areas, where many made common cause with the country's ethnic insurgents. This was the first time in a generation (since the mid-1960s and the 1974 'U Thant' protests) that elites from the Burman majority had been exposed to the realities of life for minority communities in conflict-affected areas (Smith 1999). Over the past year or so, many exiles from 1988–90 have returned to Myanmar, including prominent student activists, some of whom have contributed towards the peace process by joining the quasi-governmental Myanmar Peace Centre.

12. There is also the prospect that urban/Burman elites may seek to mobilize alliances with regard to ethnic issues for their own political purposes.

of peace activism and the peace process has increased dramatically. Moreover, the Kachin conflict has regularly been front-page news in domestic media, often highlighting the grievances of ethnic communities and the KIO. Such reporting (often facilitated by peace activists) has included interviews with local communities and ethnic leaders as well as war reporting from near the front lines. In recent times, the government has also stepped up its engagement with the media, seemingly to counter the dominance of peace activists and the KIO of the conflict narrative. However, biased media coverage of the Rakhine conflict highlights the lack of understanding of conflict-sensitive journalism in Myanmar and demonstrates how the media as part of civil society can act as a powerful factor in inciting violence or enforcing stereotyped perceptions of ethnicity, discrimination and historic narratives.

With a few exceptions, the peace process in Myanmar is heavily dominated by men. Nevertheless, women activists play more prominent roles in civil society, particularly among ethnic nationality communities (see below).

Many of those who have emerged as peace activists over the past two years are members of a younger generation who have gained valuable experience in national and international NGOs in Myanmar. Peace activism among the Myanmar majority is therefore a welcome development – so long as this remains focused on peace-building rather than on the mobilization of ethnic issues for essentially political ends. As well as the political elites mentioned above (who by some definitions would not be included in civil society), other urban-based civil and political society networks have (re-)emerged over the past few years. These include activities extending into rural areas and ethnic nationality communities – illustrating the arbitrary nature of 'inside'/'outside' majority/minority distinctions in the rapidly changing context of Myanmar politics. Initiatives such as Paung Ku and others have developed contacts between Burman and ethnic-nationality communities, and between urban areas and the conflict-affected countryside. In doing so, they have engaged constructively with civil-society actors in the borderlands (see below).

In addition to 'traditional' organizations (see below), other CBOs operating in securely government-controlled areas include farmer-interest and village-development groups, community-savings groups, early-

childhood centre committees and local Parent–Teacher Associations. Some are staffed by retired state officials.[13]

Ethnic actors in government-controlled areas

As noted, civil-society actors in government-controlled areas of Myanmar have long been subject to state suppression and penetration, and thus have had to work with great caution.[14] Ardeth Thawnghmung (2011) describes and analyses how ethnic-nationality communities in government-controlled areas have adopted a variety of (public and private) positions in relation to state–society and armed conflicts. Often, a surprising amount of space has been available to ethnic communities, providing they have been careful to situate themselves under the 'protective umbrella' of well-connected patrons, and have situated their discourse and activities within an overall pro-Union narrative.

Over the past few years, ethnic-nationality civil-society actors in Myanmar have enjoyed more space for action. The dynamics of this fast-changing situation vary, according to the context of particular conflict and peace processes. Among several communities (e.g. Shan, Karen), there have been long-standing, low-profile contacts between ethnic civil-society actors in government-controlled areas and those in the conflict-affected borderlands and in neighbouring Thailand. Often, these networks have been mediated by religious leaders (monks, pastors, priests). Since 2012, these contacts have been practised more openly, with a number of meetings convened in both Thailand and Myanmar. However, the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act (Section 17/1) still exercises a major restraint on relations between civilian populations and NSAGs, with the former fearing that contact with the latter could expose them to retaliation on the part of the state.

For the Shan, growing NSAG–community contact have involved major gatherings in Yangon (November 2012) and Taunggyi (January 2013), bringing together civil-society and political actors from inside, and activist groups and representatives of armed groups from the borderlands. For the Karen, a number of community leaders have travelled to Thailand, to discuss the peace process with the KNU and border-based civil-society groups, and represent the concerns and aspirations

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13. Lorch (2006).
14. South (2008b).

of communities living in or accessible to government-controlled areas. In its engagement with the peace process, the KNU has undertaken a number of community consultations in the borderlands (and online), as well as high-profile missions to government-controlled areas. For example, KNU leaders met Yangon- and Karen State-based civil society leaders, immediately following the historic 4 April 2012 talks in Yangon, which consolidated the KNU–government ceasefire. Other consultations have been organized more independently, including a large event held during the 2012 rainy season in KNU/KNLA 2 Brigade territory (Taungoo District), which was brokered by trusted local civil-society intermediaries. Like other ethnic groups in Myanmar, the Karen community is highly diverse in terms of language-culture and religion (fuller details in 'Who are the Karen'). This diversity is reflected in the broad range of Karen civil-society actors, and in tensions between Yangon-based elites (mainly Christian and Sgaw dialect-speaking) and political and civil society networks in Karen State (and also, to a lesser degree, in the Irrawaddy Delta). The challenge for peace-building in Karen and other communities in Myanmar extends beyond relations between minority groups and the central (historically militarized and assimilationist) state, to include the need for trust and confidence-building between sub-groups of the ethnic community. Furthermore, civil society in Karen and other ethnic communities extends beyond Western-oriented (and often internationally-funded) CBOs and national NGOs, to include faith-based and other more traditional types of association. While the latter may 'fall beneath the radar' of Western observers (and particularly donors, with their understandable requirements for 'programmability'), this indigenous civil society constitutes the heart of the communities in question, being a great reservoir of 'human capital' and strategic capacity for change.

In contrast to the larger and more diverse Karen community, Mon populations in southeast Myanmar are numerically smaller and generally more homogenous culturally.[15] In many areas, the two ethnic

15. Demographic data in Myanmar are notoriously unreliable. The *CIA Factbook* estimates the ethnic breakdown to be Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2% and other 5%. At time of writing, preparations were underway to conduct a new national census in April 2014 (i.e. prior to the 2015 elections). While this may give better data, there is also a risk of reinforcing unhelpful essentializations of ethnicity in Myanmar. As Sadan and Robinne observe (2007), ethnicity is a fluid category, subject to re-imaginations. While the fixing of ethnic identity may be convenient for administrative

communities live side-by-side, providing opportunities for cultural interchange as well as potential for inter-communal tensions. A ceasefire was agreed between the government and NMSP in 1995. Although political relations broke down in 2010, and tensions remained very high for some time, fighting did not break out again between government forces and the NMSP (unlike in the case of Kachin). In this context, Mon civil-society actors have long enjoyed close relations and much overlap between those working 'inside' Myanmar, those operating out of the NMSP-controlled ceasefire zones and in neighbouring Thailand which overlap with NMSP service-providing NSAG–GONGOs. Mon women have been prominent in the peace process, particularly in relation to community development and education activities.[16]

Until two years ago, similar observations could be made regarding Kachin civil society. In the decade and a half following the 1994 KIO ceasefire, Kachin civil society flourished in many sectors. Among the best-known NGOs to emerge were the Shalom (*Nyein*, peace) and Metta foundations, both of which originated in the Kachin community but grew to encompass nationwide networks with a special connection to ethnic-nationality communities and well- connected to international civil-society actors. Inevitably, with the breakdown of the KIO ceasefire in June 2011, security concerns have curtailed the work of Shalom and Metta in some localities. Furthermore, in some (but not all) Kachin circles, the breakdown of the earlier ceasefire has somewhat undermined Shalom's credibility, due to its founder's close association with the 1994 agreement.[17] The roles of these two Kachin foundations have been particularly important due to the committed engagement of Kachin women involved. In the context of the resumption of armed conflict in Kachin areas, a number of CBOs and national NGOs have supported IDP and other vulnerable communities. These include pioneering Kachin groups operating in KIO-controlled areas along the Chinese border. Like their Karen counterparts on the Thailand border (see below), Kachin CBOs

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and political elites, this does not necessarily reflect lived realities; see also Sadan (2013). A key challenge in the census will be to decide who is considered a citizen, in which state or region.

16. Mon education is discussed by Ashley South in the next chapter (from p. 250).

17. Shalom has been closely involved with a number of initiatives in relation to the current peace process, including supporting community-based monitoring networks in some areas.

are characterized by a variety of relationships with the KIO, ranging from 'GONGO' status as the armed group's relief wings through being much more independent community-based groups to being more activist-orientated groups. In the Kachin IDP camps, local organizations (often channelling international funding but also in receipt of money from the KIO and the Kachin diaspora) have been the only agencies assisting highly vulnerable communities. In government-controlled areas, the Kachin Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church (KMSS/ Karuna), as well as Metta and Shalom, have been active in helping such communities. A number of Kachin civil society actors and individuals in Myanmar have also engaged in peace advocacy, including the Kachin Peace Network. Kachin civil society is marked by relatively high levels of participation on the part of women.

There is a widespread perception among Kachin civil- and political-society actors that it is inappropriate for the broader national peace process to move forward too quickly while the KIO armed conflict is unresolved. Indeed, some consider that efforts by the government and international community to promote the national peace process at this time is counter-productive as it undermines the Kachin cause. More broadly, civil-society actors in Myanmar tend to feel excluded from the peace process. Perhaps inevitably, thus far this has consisted of ceasefire negotiations between armed actors: the government (and, more problematically, the Myanmar Army) and NSAGs. As noted, in order for the peace process to be representative of the community/communities, it will be necessary to deepen participation to include civil society and political actors. This will be particularly important, as and when the peace processes is 'broadened' to include substantive political discussions. If political talks are to contemplate structural changes within a more decentralized state and address citizens' key grievances and aspirations, they must include discussion of issues concerning all in the country – including the Burman majority.[18] Given the lack of opinion surveys in Myanmar over the past half-century, observers may be surprised by some of the issues and concerns identified as priorities by various communities.

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18. For an overview of political, social and economic issues for possible inclusion in the peace process, see p. 250 ff, also South (2012).

Discussion of mainstream civil society in Myanmar tends to focus on cosmopolitan elements, following a broadly democratic-progressive agenda. However, this narrow framing reproduces some widespread and unhelpful assumptions regarding civil society in Myanmar, and beyond. While the sector can certainly be a vehicle for progressive political change, recent grassroots violence in Rakhine State shows that Myanmar civil society is not necessarily cosmopolitan in nature but can include dark elements working towards decidedly non-liberal aims. The combination of populism, contested identities and interests with long suppressed political and communal passions can be a volatile mix.

Returning from issues of intra-communal violence, to discuss armed conflict in the borderlands, those most directly affected by the peace process include communities in areas of on-going or recent armed conflict. Efforts to support the peace process, such as the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI),[19] have worked with communities in areas where access was previously heavily restricted, to undertake assessments of participatory needs, in order to implement locally-owned projects helping households/villages recover from decades of insurgency, and brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. In the process, spaces have been created, allowing for substantive discussions between representatives of the Myanmar Army and government, NSAGs, the international community and displaced ethnic-minority villagers. These unprecedented engagements have been profound and moving experiences for those involved (including the authors of this paper).

It is essential that such efforts are extended and replicated, in order to bring the victims of armed conflict in Burma/Myanmar into dialogue with both the government and the NSAGs (i.e. to win recognition of

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19. The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative aims to build trust and confidence in (and test) the peace process by supporting peace agreements between the government and NSAGs. The MPSI was initiated in January 2012 when Myanmar asked the Norwegian government to help support the peace process. Since then, a number of other governments and donors have become involved. The MPSI has sought to move quickly in response to political imperatives in a fast-changing context. It is committed to substantial consultations with conflict-affected communities, civil society, and government and non-government political and military actors, and to consulting and sharing information with a broad range of stakeholders. The MPSI is committed to working in a manner that does not expose vulnerable populations or other partners to increased danger (including due to any breakdown in the peace process). It is supporting local partners and NSAGs to implement projects in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Karen and Mon States, and in Bago and Tanintharyi Regions. For regularly updated information on the MPSI (in English, Burmese and minority languages), see http://www.emb-norway.or.th/News_and_events/MPSI/.

civilians as autonomous actors). In such efforts to test the emerging peace, the roles of women and youth will be particularly important. Other ways in which the MPSI has sought to deepen participation in the peace process include supporting consultations between NSAGs and the communities that they seek to represent, and also working with civil society and NSAGs to support community-based monitoring of the peace process.[20]

The borderlands; areas of ongoing armed conflict

Most literature on armed conflict and its humanitarian impacts in Myanmar distinguishes between areas of ongoing conflict (and assistance provided mostly cross-border from Thailand and other neighbouring countries) and ceasefire and government-controlled areas (e.g. South 2008b). As the peace process gains ground (with the important caveat of recent heavy fighting in Kachin areas and elsewhere in Shan State), this distinction is beginning to break down. Vulnerable, armed-conflict-affected communities in remote areas are increasingly accessible from inside the country, making the case for cross-border assistance more problematic (see below).

In areas where ceasefires have taken hold, conditions on the ground have improved for civilians. However, conflict-affected communities and other non-armed actors have so far been largely excluded from meaningful participation in ceasefire negotiations (which constitute the initial door-opening stage of a longer peace process). Initiatives such as the MPSI are endeavouring to build trust and confidence in (and test) the peace process by facilitating engagement on the ground between conflict-affected communities, NSAGs and Myanmar government/Army. As noted above, Myanmar civil-society actors are also engaged in processes of trust and confidence-building, developing networks between previously isolated (and sometimes mutually fearful) communities.

Myanmar civil-society networks include those based in the insurgent-influenced and opposition-oriented borderlands, as well as actors work-

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20. Other elements of Myanmar society with a claim to be key stakeholders include ethnic political parties, representatives of which were elected to provincial and national-level parliaments in 2010. These parties have a credible claim to represent their communities – but have so far been largely excluded from the peace process. Increasingly, above ground, civilian ethnic politicians are demanding a voice in the peace process, and particularly in emerging political discussions. To a degree, such actors are rivals to the NSAGs for the support of ethnic communities.

ing out of government-controlled areas. Over the past two decades, a veritable 'aid industry' has grown up along the Thai border, under the broad patronage and protection provided by the refugee camps (home to some 150,000 ethnic-minority refugees, mostly Karen and Karenni).[21] Under Western/donor tutelage, a number of civil-society groups have flourished, staffed by dedicated Myanmar personnel as well as long-term foreign actors.

During the many years of armed conflict and state suppression in Myanmar, border and exile- based civil-society networks were among the few viable mechanisms for supporting anti- government and pro-democracy activities in ethnic-nationality-populated areas. During this period, enterprising and committed local actors learned to orient their rhetoric and activities along lines favoured by Western donors and solidarity networks, and were able to communicate the plight of their communities to international audiences. From the late 1990s, increasing amounts of cross-border assistance were provided to highly vulnerable IDP and other conflict-affected civilians, particularly in southeast Myanmar (in areas broadly adjacent to the refugee camps in Thailand). Some cross-border organizations have the characteristics of CBOs, or at least local NGOs, cooperating with (but fundamentally being quite independent from) NSAGs; others constitute the relief wings of armed groups. Donors have encouraged the latter to distance themselves from their 'mother organizations' and focus on the impartiality and supposed neutrality of their work. While most cross-border NSAG–GONGOs can be said to be impartial, inasmuch as assistance is provided regardless of beneficiaries' ethnic/religious identity, most are far from neutral, being actively engaged in anti-government and solidarity struggles. Indeed, some border-based organizations resent their patrons' insistence on camouflaging the political nature of relief work in the borderlands.

A number of cross-border groups have undertaken important work in the fields of community development and the provision of essential health and education services. As the peace process in Myanmar moves forwards, these activities should be integrated constructively with existing state governance and service-delivery mechanisms rather than displaced by the latter.

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21. Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2012).

Other cross-border groups and networks focus mostly on advocacy work. Their activities include documenting and denouncing the systematic human-rights abuses which occur (primarily, but not exclusively, on the part of Myanmar Army) in conflict areas, as well as more general anti-government messaging. The changes in Myanmar over the last three years have caught many of these actors by surprise, challenging long-held assumptions. Rather than a radical decapitation of the military regime – in the context of some kind of popular uprising, with the expectation that exiled political elites would be parachuted into positions of power – there has instead been a pacted, incremental and still very fragile and uncertain transition. Many border-based groups have responded to the changes in Myanmar with strategic vision. As noted, there are growing contacts between civil-society and political actors 'inside' the country, and those in the borderlands and overseas. Large numbers of exile activists have returned home, either permanently or on scoping visits, including some 'intellectuals' who have been drawn into the President's 'advisory group' working in support of the peace process. However, for some border- and exile-based activist groups, the changes in Myanmar are perceived as threatening. Over the past two decades exile-based activist groups and networks have become used to controlling the political agenda, framing ethnic conflict in Myanmar for international consumption, and in the process channelling donor funds to their own conflict-affected client populations. Local opposition groups face a dilemma: whether and how to reinvent themselves and work for change around the new peace scenario, or to become increasingly marginalized in the borderlands and overseas, frustrated and angry as the political narrative shifts 'inside' Myanmar.[22] In many respects of course, concerns regarding the trajectory of the peace process are both credible and legitimate. The peace process in Myanmar is fragile and unfinished, and many stakeholders remain understandably sceptical regarding the true intentions of the government (and in particular of the Myanmar Army).

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22. Meanwhile, civil-society actors in Kachin State enjoy no such luxuries. Local communities and CBOs have been struggling to respond to a humanitarian crisis, with the Myanmar Army and KIO engaged in intensive armed conflict. The recent negotiation of a tentative ceasefire in Kachin State may prove a very positive development, moving the peace process in Myanmar onto a constructive new phase.

Such issues raise key questions. Who speaks on behalf of civil society? Whom does civil society represent? In the past, exile-based organizations could represent themselves as spokespeople for conflict-affected ethnic communities in Myanmar, despite having access to the conflict zones only. However, as and if the peace process (and broader reform agenda) gathers momentum, communities will increasingly be able to speak for themselves, and should be supported to have direct access to political dialogue and to donors and diplomats seeking to support the reform and peace processes in their country.

The peace process is also raising interesting questions along another dimension of state–(NSAG)–society relations. As noted, ethnic civil-society Myanmar is highly diverse, including in the borderlands. In the past, there was generally little distinction between the (sometimes implicit) political positions of opposition-orientated civil-society groups and the NSAGs with whom they cooperated closely. However, as the peace process gains momentum, some (e.g. Shan and Karen) civil-society actors have grown critical of the NSAGs they have long worked alongside, accusing the latter of lacking transparency and failing effectively to engage with local communities (or at least in the ceasefire negotiations failing to take account of the positions of well-established border-based activist groups).

Refugee and diaspora communities

Over the past several decades, millions of (predominantly, but not exclusively) ethnic-nationality civilians have been internally displaced in Myanmar. In 2012, up to half a million IDPs still remained in southeastern Myanmar but the numbers are falling.[23] Their plight and prospects are covered above, in relation to situations of ongoing armed conflict in recent ceasefires.

Among those with the greatest stake in the peace process in Myanmar are refugee communities in Thailand and elsewhere. Many of these people have legitimate concerns regarding agendas for possible repatriation (on the part of the Thai and Myanmar governments, UNHCR and perhaps NGOs), which have not been widely discussed with beneficiary communities. As the peace process gathers momentum, it can be expected that large numbers of refugees (and IDPs) will return 'spontaneously' to Myanmar, rather than wait for assistance through officially

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23.   Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2012).

sanctioned and organized packages. Such patterns of migration have the potential to provoke conflicts over land and resources, as well as to increase the danger of accidents in the context of widespread landmine contamination in conflict-affected areas.

Besides the refugee communities in Thailand, there are some two–three million migrant workers and their dependents in the kingdom. Many of these have fled for similar reasons as those who enter the refugee camps but, instead of seeking asylum in the border areas, have sought to enter the 'grey' and 'black' economies. Some may return to Myanmar once political conditions allow but most will presumably require significant social and economic changes before deciding to return home. Their situation is explored in greater detail later (see p. 364ff.).

Refugee and migrant communities have been largely excluded from discussion of the peace process, except for some limited opportunities to communicate their concerns and aspirations to the KNU and other NSAGs. As noted, many activist and exile groups in Thailand and beyond have sought to play constructive roles in the peace process while others feel more threatened by the changes in Myanmar, and have positioned themselves as 'spoilers'. Such dilemmas are particularly acute for refugees in third countries and other members of the diaspora. To the extent that the reality of change in Myanmar is recognized, this raises issues regarding whether refugee and exile communities may be willing to return home.

Opportunities – potential entry points, mechanisms and issues

As recently as ten years ago, observers – and donors – were asking whether civil society existed in Myanmar. Since then, commentary has shifted towards mapping this dynamic sector, and discussion of which actors to engage with, and how. Although such deliberations have sometimes proceeded according to a rather simplistic understanding of civil society, they nevertheless represent a positive development.

During the previous round of ceasefires in Myanmar in the 1990s, international donors failed to adequately support the peace process, resulting in lost opportunities to move from peace- making towards an environment of genuine peace-building.[24] It is essential that these mistakes are not repeated. The reforms underway over the past three years,

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24.   South (2008b).

and particularly the peace process since late 2011, remain fragile, incomplete – and still problematic. In particular, the relationship between the government and Myanmar Army remains fraught with tension, with serious implications for the long-term prospects for peace. Nevertheless, this represents the best opportunity in many decades to address issues that have long structured state–society and armed conflicts in Myanmar. In order to succeed, the peace process must be broadened (to include political talks), and deepened (to include participation on the part of civil society and other key stakeholders).

As well as their underlying strategic-political and emerging peace-building roles, civil-society actors have for some years been involved in service delivery in Myanmar. In the context of a militarized and predatory state, civil-society actors have provided services that in other countries are more commonly provided (at least in part) as part of government health and welfare programmes. In Myanmar, in areas of on-going armed conflict, such activities have included assistance to highly vulnerable communities. From the 1990s until very recently, many conflict-affected communities, particularly in the southeast, were accessible only – or mostly – to local agencies working across-border from Thailand. Such cross-border aid has saved many lives, and also served to build the capacity of local actors; it has largely been complementary to relief and community-development assistance provided by actors working 'inside' the country. In areas where the security situation still precludes access to vulnerable communities from 'inside' Myanmar (such as much of Kachin State), cross-border assistance remains viable, and indeed often the only way to access highly vulnerable groups. However, in areas where the peace process is taking hold, such as most of southeast Myanmar, access is increasingly possible from inside the country. Cross-border assistance can be limited to situations where vulnerable communities can *only* be accessed from the neighbouring country. Rather than being the default approach to providing assistance, continued cross-border assistance needs to be justified on the case-by-case basis. That said, groups previously characterized primarily by cross-border modes of operation will often continue to have important roles to play if they can re-imagine their work in relation to supporting – and testing – the peace and broader reform processes.

In this context, it is important to address emerging relationships between government structures and those of (or associated with) NSAGs. As noted, many armed opposition groups have long-established, if chronically under-resourced, para-governmental structures, for example in the fields of education, health and local administration. Peace talks have yet to resolve how these non-state local governance structures will relate to formal state structures. This is the case also for border-based civil society actors, some of which have access to vulnerable communities, and whose should be supported to enhance their capacity, rather than being marginalized in the peace process. Such an approach can help to build trust and confidence in the peace process.

Opportunities for support of civil society engagement in the peace process include to:

- Support the engagement of mainstream mainly Burman civil (and political) society with the peace process – including activities to expose the majority community to the realities, grievances and aspirations of ethnic-nationality groups, and people in conflict-affected areas.

- Encourage the government (including, but not limited, to the Myanmar Peace Centre) to continue engagement with Myanmar civil society – and to extend this to groups working in conflict-affected areas, including border-based actors.

- Build the capacity of Myanmar media (including ethnic-nationality media), in relation to the peace process and political reforms more generally.

- Engage sensitively with 'traditional' civil society, building capacity and providing resources where appropriate, while avoiding tendency to re-configure local groups in line with donors' expectations/demands.

- Provide financial and capacity-building resources in line with the needs of civil society actors, rather than top-down, donor-driven priorities. This should include donor support that facilitates the evolution of civil society actors' priorities.

- Support voices of women and youth in the peace process, including through awareness-raising and information-sharing activities.

- Support constructive engagement of Myanmar (particularly ethnic-nationality) political parties with the civil-society sector, and the peace process more broadly.
- Support the agreement (between government and NSAGs, in the first instance) of Codes of Conduct and monitoring mechanisms; support community and civil society participation in ceasefire and peace-process monitoring.[25]
- Provide political and timely financial support to peace mechanisms: support consultations between NSAGs and conflict-affected communities (including civil society and political actors); support local peace-monitoring networks (capacity-building, financial support and encouragement to government and NSAGs).

Civil society participation in political consultations, as part of the peace process, could be facilitated by establishing sectoral 'working groups' to address key issues, eliciting significant input from a broad range of stakeholders.[26] Issues likely to elicit substantial engagement from civil society actors include:

- Land rights issues and land-use conflicts (including compensation for and/or restitution of property confiscated from or abandoned by forced migrants);
- Environmental regulation and natural resource management (including revenue sharing between the central and State/local governments);
- Language policy and education (including the status of minority languages in government administration, the justice system and schools, and the situation of non- state ethnic education regimes);
- IDP and refugee resettlement, including the complex issue of secondary settlement (where displaced or other communities have resettled on land previously occupied by people who themselves have been displaced), and roles of local, national and international agencies; and
- Economic development, job creation and vocational training.

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25. Continue facilitating exposure of state and non-state actors to other country contexts in which monitoring mechanisms have been used successfully, particularly those that have included participation by civil society and affected communities (e.g. the southern Philippines).

26. For details of such an approach, see South (2012).

Caveats, assumptions, risks

As noted, intra-communal violence in Rakhine State, and elsewhere, and the on-going conflict in Kachin State threaten to undermine the peace process and potentially derail still fragile nationwide reforms. Clashes in southwest Myanmar are a salient reminder that grassroots activism and popular mobilization can be undertaken in a spirit far removed from the normative progressive–cosmopolitan framework within which most discussions of civil society are framed.

This issue touches upon another concern: to a significant degree, civil-society actors working on the peace process are identified with particular ethnic communities. There is a need to continue building bridges between ethnic nationality and Burman majority communities, developing Myanmar's long-suppressed civic traditions, rather than encouraging a further 'ghettoization' of civil society. The risk otherwise is that an expanded civil society may take the form of separate networks of ethnically and religiously based associations, reflecting existing lines of ethnic and political conflict, rather than bridging such divides.

Peace is an issue that affects all sectors of society, and everyone in Myanmar is a stakeholder. The exclusion of conflict-affected communities, and more broadly of civil-society actors and networks, is both unjust and liable to cause resentments that could undermine the peace process itself. In this context, the question of who speaks for communities will become increasingly urgent. Those working to support the peace process in Myanmar have a responsibility to ensure that they engage respectfully and constructively – and above all, safely – with communities which have suffered so much, for so many years.

On the relationship between conflict-affected communities and peace-building support, it is essential that outside interventions respect local agency and operate in a manner that does not expose vulnerable (and often traumatized) individuals and communities to further risk. Well-intentioned international agencies visiting previously inaccessible areas should be cautious about the impact of their brief visits on longer-term security and political dynamics in remote areas. When engaging with civil-society actors and conflict-affected communities, those supporting the peace process in Myanmar should ensure clarity regarding the distinctions between information sharing (engaging with a wide range of stakeholders,

to ensure that they are informed) and consultations (which imply some kind of veto on the part of interlocutors).

Another risk is that the influx of peace-building 'think tanks' and other support networks currently entering Myanmar can severely stretch the limited capacities and time of local actors. Therefore, those seeking to support the peace process in Myanmar should consider carefully what added value they bring, and not over-tax local resources.

A further concern of many communities in relation to the peace process is widespread environmental damage, especially in the context of increased business activities in previously inaccessible, conflict-affected areas – a problem which is on the increase.[27] Those supporting the peace process should work to address these concerns, in partnership with affected communities, civil society actors, government and NSAGs. Issues of environmental protection and business regulation should be placed on the agenda for forthcoming political talks.

If civil-society and political parties are not included, there is a risk that Myanmar may experience a backlash in relation to the peace process. If they do not feel a sense of ownership and participation, civil-society and political actors – especially ethnic political parties and urban-based civil society – may begin to mobilize to demand their inclusion as stakeholders. This could lead to protests on the part of groups who should be partners in the peace process.

As Myanmar approaches the 2015 elections, these concerns are likely to become more pressing, as national politics enters a zero-sum mode. Given the demands of the country's chairmanship of ASEAN from January 2014, followed by the elections, there remains a small window of opportunity. Despite the many problems, there are great possibilities for social and political progress in Myanmar, including in the peace process. However, more needs to be done to engage the broad spectrum of actors in the peace process, or these opportunities may be missed.

Authors' Note

As with the earlier description of civil society (see p. 87), this chapter is based on (and updates) material from the background paper 'Mapping of Myanmar Peacebuilding Civil Society', which was prepared by the authors for a meeting of the Civil Society Dialogue Network focused on the evolv-

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27. Karen Human Rights Group (2013).

ing peace processes in Myanmar and held in Brussels on 7 March 2013 (more details at http://www.eplo.org/civil-society-dialogue-network.html). Part of this extracted material is drawn from South (2012b).

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Update on the peace process

Ashley South[1]

The lives of civilians affected by decades of armed conflict in Myanmar are undergoing profound transformations for the better, thanks to the ceasefires agreed since late 2011 between the government and more than a dozen ethnic armed groups. However, the emerging peace process is unlikely to be sustainable unless negotiations soon begin regarding the underlying political, social and economic causes of conflict.

Part of the problem is that different actors, from the military to donors to conflict-affected communities, have different understandings of what 'peace' is, and act accordingly. Because key stakeholders often fail to define what they mean by peace, dominant positions and actors tend to prevail.

For most ethnic stakeholders, the primary need is for structural changes to the state and real autonomy for ethnic communities (usually expressed as an aspiration for constitutional federalism). However, historically in Myanmar, the Army has opposed such changes as threatening to national unity and sovereignty. The government has sought to escape this thorny issue by focusing primarily on the perceived development needs of ethnic communities.

Unfortunately, international support to the peace process has largely supported the government's view of what peace-building means, proceeding in accordance with donors' assumptions and agendas rather than an understanding of political concerns and local needs and realities. There is a risk of missing opportunities for long-term peace if donors continue to support activities that mostly suit aid agency agendas and are understood by many ethnic stakeholders as playing into the government's hands.

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1.   This article is based on 'Inside the peace process', an op-ed by Ashley South that appeared in *The Myanmar Times* on 6 January 2014. It builds on the situation in Myanmar as at the end of February 2014.

Conflict-affected communities: hopes and fears

The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI)[2] has recently completed the first phase of a 'listening project' with conflict-affected communities in remote parts of Myanmar. The aim is to listen to Karen, Mon and Karenni (Kayah) communities – particularly women – to better understand their experiences before and after the ceasefires. Initial findings indicate that many people have benefited greatly from preliminary ceasefires between the government and the Karen National Union, New Mon State Party and Karenni National Progressive Party. For example, before the KNU ceasefire, villagers often had to flee from fighting and to avoid forced conscription and portering. Today people report greatly decreased levels of fear. Many of those who spoke with the MPSI said that for the first time in decades they did not have to worry about fleeing into the jungle to avoid being subjected to serious human-rights abuses. In some cases, displaced people are beginning to return to previous settlements and attempting to rebuild their lives. Many villagers mentioned that before the ceasefire they were unable to travel or visit their farms – or could only do so by paying bribes. Even then, villagers were severely restricted in terms of the amount of food or other supplies that they could carry while travelling, as they risked being accused of supporting the KNU. Villagers told terrible stories of abuse at the hands of the Tatmadaw, including beatings and killings – even the beheading of suspected insurgents.

After the ceasefire, however, villagers have been able to travel much more freely and to tend their rice fields. Levels of taxation, paid to either the Tatmadaw or ethnic armed groups, have decreased significantly over the past two years in both Karen and Mon areas. In many communities, livelihoods have improved as a result of villagers' better access to their farms and a reduction in predatory taxation. Villagers greatly appreciate these changes although they worry whether the ceasefire and emerging peace process can be maintained. "Since the ceasefire, I can go to my rice fields and weed regularly, so I got more rice for my family", one villager said. "Now I can also travel freely and, unlike before, sleep out in the rice

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2. The MPSI was launched in March 2012 following a request from the Government of Myanmar to the Government of Norway to lead international support to the peace process. The MPSI facilitates projects implemented by conflict-affected communities, civil society actors and ethnic armed groups, which aim to build trust and confidence in – and test – the ceasefires, disseminates lessons learned from these experiences and seeks to strengthen local and international coordination of assistance to the peace process.

fields in a hut without having to fear for my life. Now the Tatmadaw still move around but we don't have to fear meeting them." Another man told the MPSI that "our villagers are like ducklings that have been in a cage for so long, and now they are released. They are so pleased to leave their cage! Our villagers are free to travel day and night, and are more busy and productive than before."

Despite such positive views, there is widespread anxiety that the government and ethnic armed groups may fail to reach a political settlement and the peace process may yet break down. One man told us: "If the ceasefire breaks down, it's not worth living for me."

Supporting the peace process: missed opportunities?

The agreement of ceasefires is a historically important achievement of peace-making. In order to sustain the peace process and move towards a genuine peace-building phase, it will be necessary to start a multi-stakeholder political dialogue and consolidate the existing ceasefire agreements. The government and most ethnic armed groups have agreed to continue negotiations towards a nationwide ceasefire to address these issues. However, many ethnic stakeholders remain sceptical about whether the government is willing or able to deliver. The govern-

Intense discussions at national ceasefire negotiations in May 2014 (photo: Lian Sakhong)

ment can maintain the present truces more or less indefinitely without reaching a political settlement; for ethnic communities, the status quo is a losing game. Political dialogue is essential.

As of February 2014, there are still important differences between the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement drafted by the ethnic armed groups' Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT) and provisions acceptable to the government (and particularly the Myanmar Army). Nevertheless, a positive outcome from recent negotiations is the emergence of greater clarity regarding positions on both sides. Since November 2013, when representatives of ethnic armed groups met at a historic conference in the KIO headquarters at Laiza, a fairly cohesive approach to the peace process has emerged on the part of the groups in the NCCT. Likewise, on the government side, since late 2013 the military has been more engaged in the peace process. This is extremely important, given previous concerns that the Myanmar Army was not sufficiently involved in negotiations.

The peace process in Myanmar is unique in many ways, not least because of the limited role of the international community: negotiations are undertaken between the government and ethnic armed groups with no significant external mediation and only limited international facilitation. Outsiders, however, can help communities to recover from conflict while supporting initiatives that build trust and confidence in the peace process and test the sincerity of the government, Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups. A number of international donors have pledged financial support to the peace process. Already some funds have been distributed, including to MPSI-supported projects in a number of conflict-affected areas that are implemented by local communities, civil society actors and ethnic armed groups. Several key donors are keen to expand their assistance on the understanding that supporting the peace process can help to consolidate the wider government-led reform process. Of course, there are very substantial needs among conflict-affected communities.

Unfortunately, international support to the peace process has been mostly characterized by a lack of direction and by strategic drift. Donors seem largely content to provide funding channelled through traditional – and generally government-controlled – structures. This is an easier approach than seeking out appropriate local partners on the ground.

This situation is not unique to Myanmar. Around the world, aid donors tend to frame the concerns of vulnerable communities as techni-

cal problems to be fixed by professional aid regimes rather than sites of contestation requiring political solutions. The exceptions are in contexts where a state's legitimacy is very clearly and persistently challenged, such as Myanmar before 2011, or when regional or global powers' interests are directly involved.

As a result, it is not uncommon for peace-support initiatives to fail to engage with the real issues affecting communities and other stakeholders; instead they fall in behind government-led development and rehabilitation projects. However, the problem in Myanmar is not primarily one of a failing or weak state that needs to be strengthened or fixed but rather an urgent need to re-imagine and negotiate state–society relations – and in particular mend relationships between the Burman majority and ethnic-nationality communities.

The commitments made by international donors under the Busan New Deal in 2011 are meant to guide the international community toward addressing the causes of conflict.[3] Donor support to the Myanmar peace process demonstrates the difficulties of implementing this approach. For example, most Asian governments' support to the peace process is channelled almost exclusively through Myanmar state structures, demonstrating very limited consultation with conflict-affected communities or ethnic armed groups. This approach to peace-building frames armed conflicts as problems to be resolved through foreign aid, rather than expressions of deep-rooted social and political grievances.

Aid agencies working in conflict-affected areas need to better understand local political cultures and perceptions, and the dynamics of peace and conflict. Illustrating how peace means different things to different people, ethnic communities are concerned that the government has an 'economic development first' agenda and wants to use aid as an alternative to political dialogue. They also worry that aid activities constitute efforts by the government to intensify its presence in and control over ethnic communities. This is deeply problematic for many ethnic stakeholders, who still regard the government as largely illegitimate and whose experience of the Tatmadaw is as a violent and predatory force. As the leader of a major ethnic armed group recently told me, "We are

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3.   The New Deal addresses the many issues relating to fragile states (development, security, engagement, etc.). It is an agreement aiming at strengthening partnerships and ownership in peace-building and state-building between donor organizations and the fragile states where they operate.

worried that the government and donors are pushing ahead with their own plans, without consulting us – and that the aid agenda is getting ahead of the political agenda."

Meanwhile, a number of needs articulated by key stakeholders in the peace process are going unmet. For example, there is a need to provide funding and training to more than thirty liaison offices established by ethnic armed groups under an agreement with the government. The liaison offices play important roles in sustaining the peace process but, apart from some start-up funding, donors have mostly failed to support this key component of the peace process.

Another example of unmet needs is the failure properly to support education activities in conflict-affected ethnic minority areas. Despite requests to donors dating back more than a year, ethnic-nationality schools in Mon areas, for example, are still unable to pay their teachers. This is leading to a local perception that international donors are happy to support the government – in this case through the state education system – but are unwilling to engage constructively with ethnic na-tionality systems of service provision. The Mon National Schools are administered by the NMSP, and provide an ethnic-language introduc-tion to schooling for minority children – most of whom do not speak Burmese – allowing them the best possible start in education. At the same time, the Mon National Schools teach the Myanmar language and mostly follow the government curriculum, ensuring that graduates can sit state matriculation exams and enter the higher education system. The Mon National Schools represent the best of both worlds: a locally owned and delivered education regime which is closely linked to the state system, producing students who are proud of their ethnic cultures, but also equipped to be citizens of the Union. Despite widespread recognition that the Mon National Schools represent a model of best practice – which is in line with the government's reformed education policies – donors have so far provided only limited amounts of funding to the Mon school system.

International donors and diplomats need to better demonstrate their understanding of the complexities in Myanmar and play a more strategic role in supporting the peace process. Failure to brighten the glimmers of hope experienced by conflict-affected communities would constitute a terrible lost opportunity to support lasting peace in Myanmar.