

LETTING THE OTHER IN

Conflict Prevention in Myanmar

by Emma Leslie

Kyoko Okumoto, a well-respected Japanese peacebuilder, once said to me, “I firmly believe that to be an effective peacebuilder you need to be able to trust.” By trust she did not mean a blind, naïve faith in whomever or whatever comes along; she meant a willingness, across cultures, faiths, political affiliations, and gender, to allow the other in—that is, to suspend all our prejudices and stereotypes. Such trust requires us to show our vulnerabilities to people we might not ordinarily reveal them to, in order to demonstrate that we have flawed humanity in common. This means entering into a place of insecurity and entrusting our host or guide to lead us and take care of us. This position of cultural humility is the foundation of peace work, allowing practitioners to connect with people on a basic level that is both informative and insightful in shaping effective peace practices and programs.

In December 2011, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) was invited to meet Minister U Aung Min, a former general and minister for railways in Myanmar whom the president had tasked

with establishing a peace process. At the time, CPCS had been working in Myanmar for a decade to strengthen its peace infrastructure (and ability to establish peace), even as the country had been beset by a series of civil wars and struggles for ethnic and subnational autonomy. Amid the diverse actors drawn into the complex conflict, the center identified a lack of political analysis, strategic planning, knowledge of comparative cases, and strong leadership as significant challenges to creating a durable peace in Myanmar. Over the years, the organization has worked extensively to address these challenges by supporting civil society leaders, organizing and leading training programs to strengthen local peacebuilders’ knowledge, skills, and potential, and forming a network of peace practitioners to promote sustainable peace in the country.

Corruption and nepotism among top officials in Myanmar’s government further fueled the country’s social fragmentation and conflict, requiring CPCS to conduct its work discreetly. It thus was extremely daunting when the organization was invited, by name, to meet one

of Myanmar’s generals. Its leadership—myself included—agonized for two days over the right response. In the end, we decided to suspend our fears, make a psychological shift, take a risk, and accept U Aung Min’s invitation to engage on a more official level, supporting peace negotiations. Despite our reservations about affiliating ourselves with government officials, initial meetings with the minister and other representatives revealed a surprising level of government commitment to establishing peace. U Aung Min’s personal involvement in the conflict had become a catalyst for change, convincing him of the need to end the decades-long bloody armed conflict in Myanmar. Recognizing his own lack of experience and skills in peacebuilding, U Aung Min had humbly approached CPCS, among other long-term peacebuilders in Myanmar, for assistance in developing an effective peace process.

Once we agreed to work alongside the government to support the emerging peace process, CPCS had to adapt to the continuously evolving context of conflict in the country. The peace process began by establishing ceasefires between the Myanmar

government and several armed groups, requiring us to move our work from inside Myanmar to the Thai-Myanmar border, where many of the groups were based. Furthermore, the organization needed to build new relationships with these groups, which were deeply suspicious of anyone affiliated with the regime, even as they moved into negotiations. This put CPCS at a disadvantage in two respects: First, as we had entered the peace process initially at the invitation of the Myanmar government and had worked inside Myanmar for over a decade, we were perceived as being pro-regime. We were also accustomed to saying Myanmar and Yangon, terms commonly associated with the regime, whereas border groups maintained the names Burma and Rangoon. Second, CPCS's previous focus

confidential information. This meant working in a vacuum, but CPCS believed this decision was crucial to building a solid relationship of mutual trust.

While the grand plan worked in theory, progress was initially slow. One of CPCS's first programs was a workshop for the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), an armed group that had been fighting against the government since 1988 and had no previous relationship with CPCS. The ABSDF had requested the training on the recommendations of other armed groups, but they were, understandably, hesitant and reserved during the workshop's first day. Few people spoke or were willing to participate. To address the lack of trust among group members, CPCS

As we entered into relationships with armed groups like the ABSDF, our reputation as a trusted organization spread throughout the country, granting us access to a number of more isolated and neglected armed groups that the official peace process had overlooked or failed to include. Our extensive experience working in the country for the past decade has placed us in a unique position to forge further relationships with a diverse group of stakeholders in Myanmar's peace process, including civil society organizations, government officials, and various armed groups. With the assistance of long-time supporters of peace in Myanmar, CPCS has become a key link among these stakeholders, connecting individuals committed to establishing a durable peace in a strained and fragmented society. The organization has helped establish a platform for peace in the country, laying the groundwork for the development of an effective peace process.

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on civil societies meant the organization lacked significant knowledge about the situation near the border, including the backgrounds of and dynamics between the armed groups there.

The only way to establish any kind of relationship with the armed groups at the border, we decided, was to be completely honest and open. Total transparency about our past analysis, work, and motivations would be crucial. We needed to reveal all of our conversations with the government so there would be no secrets or suspicions from other parties. We had to explain clearly that CPCS was a completely neutral entity, aiming to work with both the government and armed groups to achieve a just and lasting peace for Myanmar. To prove CPCS's goodwill and neutrality in supporting negotiations, we did not demand information from armed groups but gave them the space to decide when to release

worked hard to establish an open approach, making it clear that ABSDF members did not have to release any information they did not feel comfortable sharing. Instead, CPCS would continue to share information and support the ABSDF in initial peace talks, facilitating candid discussions of the groups' needs, demands, and aspirations to develop a coherent approach to negotiating with the government. CPCS also offered workshops that focused on expanding media and political analysis skills and provided leadership development training. Over time, CPCS mentored and advised the ABSDF as they navigated negotiations with the government, maintaining an open approach to build trust. The ABSDF eventually reciprocated, laying the foundations for a deeper and more valuable relationship that has led to more effective and open negotiations between the ABSDF and the government.

Having worked with civil society groups that suffered under a corrupt and ineffective government, CPCS had significant reservations about accepting the government's invitation to enter official peace negotiations. In the end, though, we learned that implicit in peacebuilding was the willingness to allow others in, despite cultural, faith, or political affiliations. When the time came, CPCS realized that it had to practice the same principles of cultural humility it was advocating. This meant dispelling our prejudices, accepting our insecurities, and placing some trust in the government's commitment. Our experience in Myanmar has taught us the value of an open approach and the importance of trust in fostering relationships that allow for more effective peace practices and programs. ■

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