Listening to communities

Karen (Kayin) State

Myanmar

Listening to Communities of Karen (Kayin) State, Myanmar

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Contents

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADB	Asia Development Bank
BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CPCS	Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CWS	Church World Services
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KNA	Karen National Association
KNU	Karen National Union
KPF	Karen Peace Force
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NSAGs	Non-State Armed Groups
TEO	Town Education Office

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Finally, we would like to thank Church World Service (CWS) for their support throughout the project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication elevates the voices from communities in Kayin State. It provides an opportunity for these voices to be heard in Myanmar's peace process and to participate in events that will affect their futures. Using *listening methodology*, conversations were held with one hundred and eleven individuals from a cross-section of communities in Kayin State. During these conversations community members shared their opinions on the current situation, their needs, perceived challenges as well as hopes for the future. Key themes and commonalities have been identified and are detailed in the following sections.

The official state name is *Kayin State*, yet the name *Karen State* is still commonly used and is often more widely recognised. For this reason the name Karen State has been used in the publication title and the official name, Kayin State, has been used throughout the publication text.

Summary of Key Findings

Desires for peace and for the peace process to be successful were identified as the most prevalent area of concern for communities. In addition, communities shared their opinions and suggestions for strengthening the peace process, followed by the need for community participation in the peace process. The next most pressing concerns for communities were issues of security. The final set of opinions focused on governance and development related problems. Listed below are the key findings under these thematic areas, as explained during the conversations.

Most Commonly Heard Themes: The Peace Process

1. *The Myanmar government and non-state armed group (NSAG) leadership need to be accountable, negotiate on equal terms and compromise to achieve peace.*
2. *There is a need to bridge ethnic discrimination and feelings of ethnic nationalism in Kayin State to move forward in the peace process.*
3. *Communities desire peace, freedom and equal rights.*
4. *Communities are concerned about a potential breakdown in the ceasefire agreement. If the ceasefire breaks down, the situation will be far worse than before.*
5. *Communities desire more than a ceasefire agreement, and want leaders from the Myanmar government and NSAGs to achieve real peace.*
6. *Communities have seen improvements since the beginning of the peace process, but do not completely trust the process.*
7. *The peace process needs to be genuine and sincere, and agreements must be ensured.*

Most Commonly Heard Themes: Participation and Representation in the Peace Process

1. *Communities want to select their own capable leaders who can take a community-centred approach to engagement in the peace process.*
2. *Communities need support to engage in the peace process. Currently there is no opportunity for community engagement.*
3. *Communities need more information about news, current events and the peace process.*

Most Commonly Heard Themes: Security Situation

1. *Communities are vulnerable to lawlessness and have no protection from criminal activities.*
2. *There is still a heavy military presence of both Tatmadaw and NSAG soldiers in villages. Communities want both sides to reduce military forces, withdraw from front lines and cease new troop recruitment.*
3. *Landmines need to be cleared.*
4. *Communities are currently experiencing forced taxation from multiple armed groups[1] and want taxation reduced.*
5. *Some communities are experiencing more freedom of movement, while some places still have restrictions.*

Most Commonly Heard Themes: Administrative and Community Affairs

1. *Communities face difficulties because of competing administrative systems (Myanmar government and Karen National Union) including rule of law, accountability and excessive taxation.*
2. *Communities desire development assistance: services (education, health care), infrastructure (road, transportation) and economic opportunity.*
3. *Communities desire programs that can support youth with job opportunities and drug prevention.*
4. *Communities are concerned over exploitation of resource extraction and development due to a lack of visible community benefits and environmental impacts.*
5. *Land grabbing is a significant concern for communities.*

[1] Participants consistently used the term taxation to refer to extortion or unregulated collection of money and goods by soldiers. In this publication we present ideas as they were expressed by community members, and thus, have used the term taxation throughout the publication. Armed groups who were mentioned to be enforcing taxation were: Tatmadaw, KNU, DKBA and BGF groups.

Synthesis and Analysis

Overall, the situation for communities in Kayin State was reported to have improved since the beginning of the peace process in 2012. Communities reported increased freedom of movement, stating that they were able to travel and trade commodities in and out of Kayin State. Thus, increased freedom of movement created more economic opportunity. Communities reported a reduction in civilians being forced to porter for armed groups as a notable improvement. Despite improvements, communities highlighted on-going challenges and want to see more tangible benefits. Many community members were concerned that ceasefire agreements had not achieved real peace and felt a continued lack of security, fear and widespread concern that fighting would resume.

Overarching trends that have emerged show that communities are most concerned with achieving peace followed by establishing security and then desires for development assistance and a better standard of living.

Leadership Approaches to the Peace Process: Despite the lack of information that communities are receiving about the peace process, the most prominent theme concerned community desire for leaders from the Myanmar government and NSAGs to be more accountable, negotiate on equal terms and compromise to a greater degree. Through this theme, communities identify problematic areas that are impeding the success of the peace process.

Community Engagement: Communities expressed strong desires to engage in the peace process, felt unrepresented and their non-ability to engage has engendered feelings of disempowerment. Additionally, the need for communities to be able to select their own leaders was expressed strongly,

and is a higher priority for communities than the desire for development. Throughout the project, participants shared more sympathetic attitudes towards the KNU when compared to the Tatmadaw and Myanmar government. However, the strong desire for representation by leaders indicates that communities are not being represented by armed groups or by the government.

A similar theme detailing the desire expressed by communities for representative leaders who will take a community-centred approach to the peace process and governance, reinforces community needs to be represented, engaged and empowered in the peace process and more generally. Communities reflected that limited representation, the lack of community level leaders and a community-centred approach from leadership caused distrust towards the peace process and caused many participants to question if it was a genuine attempt to achieve peace.

Military Presence in Communities: The prevalence of soldiers from the Tatmadaw and the various NSAGs living in an around villages was seen as the most prevalent security concern by communities, citing up to six different groups exerting control in Kayin State (Myanmar government officials, Tatmadaw soldiers, Karen National Union, New Mon State Party, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and Border Guard Force). Continued military presence in villages had not been reduced since the signing of ceasefire agreements. Additionally, the exact areas of control for each group lacked clear demarcation and caused problems for communities who must live under the authority of multiple competing groups.

Administrative Concerns: Inconsistencies or competition between administrative systems (Myanmar government and Karen National Union) in areas of Kayin State are of high

concern for communities. These inconsistencies contribute to the lack of security, established rule of law and authoritative control. One problem identified was the lack of security for community members living in Kayin State and the vulnerability of communities to experiencing violence and criminal activities by soldiers who are not held accountable for this behaviour. Additionally, many people were afraid to voice their opinions or support a particular group for the fear of being punished by another armed group.

Unregulated Taxation: Since the Karen National Union (KNU) signed a ceasefire agreement in January 2012, taxation was reported to have decreased. Participants explained that soldiers enforcing taxation visit villages less frequently. Yet, despite reductions, taxation remained a main concern for participants who experience high travel costs due to taxes collected at multiple checkpoints by different armed groups. These payments were dependent on the type and amount of goods that were being carried, which was causing an increase in commodity prices. This further compounded the economic problems for residents of Kayin State who were already dealing with lack of job opportunities and high levels of poverty.

Standard of Living: Communities were concerned with their standard of living and reported the lack of services and economic opportunity in Kayin State. Participants explained that Kayin State lacked health care services; education; transport and village infrastructure; telecommunication; and electricity. In this context, resource and business development was an emerging issue for communities who want to see community benefits when these activities are taking place in their areas. Land grabbing, facilitated through corrupt practices to fast track the implementation of mega projects was another significant concern for community members.

Ethnic Divisions and Nationalism: Ethnic division and discrimination between ethnic groups within Kayin State were highlighted. Communities identified ethnic segregation and nationalism as a challenge to the peace process, and expressed the need to bridge these divisions for the people of Kayin State to move forward with unity. While communities identified unity as a challenge to peace, they did not provide any specific recommendations for ways to reduce ethnic divisions and strong ethnic nationalism that exist.

Readiness for Change: Although not listed in the main themes table, communities expressed a desire for action and a readiness for change. Overwhelmingly, participants spoke about their desire to see change and an opportunity to engage in the peace process and their own futures. Communities remain hopeful for the future, were primarily concerned with the achievement of peace and had clear suggestions for the things that they needed in order to progress and strengthen the peace process as well as the main needs for their futures.

Recommendations

The most prominent themes and messages heard from communities should be acknowledged and supported by all groups working for peace and development in Myanmar. Through the conversations, communities provided some broad desires for the future to overcome the challenges they face.

Community Recommendations

For the peace process:

1) Peace talks should be approached with sincerity, mutual respect and a willingness to make greater compromises to progress past initial ceasefire stages.
2) Access to information on the peace process and current events should be provided to communities in all areas of Kayin State.
3) Opportunities for engagement in the peace process should be provided for all communities living in Kayin State.
4) Leaders , from both sides should take a community-centred approach to decisions made relating to negotiations and the peace process.
5) Initiatives to resolve ethnic discrimination and feelings of ethnic nationalism in Kayin State should be undertaken so that the peace process can progress.
6) All armed groups should reduce military presence in Kayin State by withdrawing from front lines and decreasing the presence of armed soldiers in villages.
7) Areas of administrative control should be clearly defined and further efforts made to ensure established rule of law, accountability and excessive taxation for communities.

General recommendations:

1) Taxation should be legally regulated and reduced.
2) Landmines must be cleared so that communities can conduct agricultural activities on arable land in Kayin State.
3) Job opportunities and drug prevention initiatives should be provided for youth in Kayin State.
4) Increased health care, education and road infrastructure should be provided for communities.
5) Education opportunities to develop community-level leadership should be provided.
6) Resource extraction and business development in Kayin State should provide benefits for communities, including job opportunities for local residents.

The most commonly heard themes have been combined with situation updates and internal analysis. From an outsider perspective through a conflict transformation lens, CPCS employs its expertise to provide the following recommendations for key actors in the peace process and in the development of Myanmar.

CPCS Recommendations

To the Myanmar government and NSAG leadership:

1) All armed groups should reduce military presence in Kayin State by withdrawing from front lines and decreasing the presence of armed soldiers in villages.
2) A community consultation initiative and venue for dialogue and information sharing should be supported by Myanmar government and NSAG leaders providing opportunities for communities to engage in the peace process and access information.
3) Rule of law focusing on accountability for violence and criminal actions should be established and enforced in all areas of Kayin State, including legal mechanisms that ensure soldiers are accountable for criminal activities.
4) Continued dialogue between the Myanmar government and NSAG leadership should be increased to overcome problems relating to competing administrative systems, establishing clear boundaries of jurisdiction, rule of law and accountability.
5) A clear legal framework for taxation in villages and at check points for civilians travelling should be established, enforced and monitored by Myanmar government and NSAG.
6) Increased service provisions for communities should be made a priority including health care, education and road infrastructure.
7) A socially responsible approach to resource extraction and business development must be implemented, including social impact assessments, community consultations, financial or infrastructure benefits for communities and local employment opportunities.

CPCS Recommendations

To NGOs and INGOs:

1) Programming initiatives should be developed to address ethnic divisions in Kayin State focusing on reconciliation, relationship and trust-building between different ethnic groups.
2) Community leadership development training should be implemented focusing on developing leadership capacity at the community level.
3) A community consultation process should be supported to provide community access to information regarding the peace process and current events.
4) In order to address youth unemployment and increasing drug use, drug prevention programming and livelihood opportunities should be provided and directed at youth in Kayin State.
5) Support to provide delivery of basic service provisions should be implemented including basic health care, education and transport infrastructure and develop of livelihood opportunities as a poverty reduction strategy.

INTRODUCTION

To date, the Myanmar peace process has focused on dialogue between the multiple NSAGs, and government actors in an attempt to increase the engagement of NSAGs in the political sphere, address their immediate needs and create ceasefire agreements. Progress has been made with the signing of fourteen peace-related agreements since 2011, which has reduced fighting in many areas across the country and successfully created space for a more diverse range of voices to be heard in top-level discussions.

As a conflict transformation organisation, CPCS recognises the importance of building inclusivity in peace processes through engagement with communities. Communities need to be engaged so that their needs and aspirations are addressed and reflected in top-level agreements. This will ultimately result in more legitimate, robust and sustainable agreements. Civilian populations are the largest groups whose lives will be affected by peace agreements, and often have the greatest insights into the causes and resolution of conflict.

The Myanmar peace process has increased inclusivity at the top level by successfully engaging more political and formal actors, but it has yet to expand these opportunities to communities. In order to develop a more sustainable peace process in Myanmar, this is a crucial time to listen to communities. As changes continue to occur in Kayin State, listening to the voices of communities and understanding their opinions, perceived challenges and aspirations in the peace process will better inform policy decisions and effective planning. In effect, allowing communities to play a more active role in shaping their futures.

Background: Kayin State

Kayin State, also commonly known as Karen State, is located in south-eastern Myanmar. It shares its longest border with Thailand to the east and with Mon State to the south-west. It also borders several states and divisions including Kayah, Bago, Shan and Mandalay.

Agriculture and farming have traditionally sustained the livelihoods of people across Kayin State, which continues and is coupled with animal husbandry. More recently, there have been several extractive and business development initiatives introduced in Kayin State due to improved stability, untapped economic potential and the accompanying commercial and investment opportunities.[2] Notably, plans for the development of transportation and manufacturing industries facilitated through the Asia Development Bank (ADB) plan to construct the Asia Highway through Kayin State.

Kayin State has four administrative districts: Hpa'An, Myawaddy, Hpa-pun and Kawkareik and seven townships. Administration of Kayin State is divided between the Myanmar government and the KNU. The KNU defines its territory as a semi-autonomous state called Kawthoolei and divides this territory into seven districts, each controlled by a separate brigade. There is considerable inconsistency and overlap between the government and KNU-controlled divisions. The KNU has a developed administrative system with departments of education, health, law and forestry.[3]

Services are limited in Kayin State. Education, electricity and telecommunications are available in the capital, Hpa'An, but

[2] UNHCR (2014) Kayin State Profile. Retrieved 21 August, 2014, from *data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=223*
[3] UNHCR (2014) Kayin State Profile. Retrieved 21 August, 2014, from *data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=223*

extremely limited in rural areas, which have poor infrastructure and limited economic opportunity.

Communities living in Kayin State have endured over six decades of conflict. Individuals have been forced to flee their homes and been subjected to forced labour and violence. In addition, over one hundred thousand people are currently living in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps along the Thai-Kayin State border[4] and some reports detail that up to eighty per cent of young to middle-aged men and women from villages in Kayin State have relocated to neighbouring countries as migrant workers.[5]

Animosity between the Karen[6] and Bamar ethnic groups can be traced back to early encounters between Karen settlers and ruling Burmese kings. These divisions were solidified during the colonial era when the Karen supported British rule and received more education and government service opportunities. Calls for Karen independence date back to the 1880s with the formation of the Karen National Association (KNA). This cause was taken up by the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1948 but has since been replaced with a focus on ethnic equal rights and more acceptance of federalism.

Since Myanmar's independence, conflict between the Tatmadaw[7] and the KNU[8] has been a consistent presence in Kayin State. Conflict ceased briefly during an informal ceasefire in 2004, but this peace was quickly broken. Over the years the region has become increasingly militarised with the presence

[4] The Border Consortium (20014). Retrieved 5 June, 2014, from http://theborderconsortium.org/camps/2014-02-feb-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf.
[5] Karen News, *Migrants Find Life in Thailand is Hard Work (2014).* Retrieved 7 May, 2014 from http://karennews.org/2013/11/migrants-find-life-in-thailand-is-hard-work.html/.
[6] People of Karen ethnicity make up the majority of the population in Kayin State, which was previously known as both Kayin State and Karen State. Now, the official name is Kayin State.
[7] Myanmar National Army.
[8] The KNU are the most long-standing non-state armed group operating in Kayin State; formed in 1947 the KNU is considered one of Myanmar's most well organised non-state armed groups with one of the largest militaries.

of the Myanmar National Army; the Tatmadaw, and five non-state armed groups; the KNU, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)[9], Karen Peace Force (KPF), New Mon State Party (NMSP) and more recently Border Guard Force (BGF) groups.

The KNU is the most prominent NSAG operating in Kayin State and holds significant areas of control within the state. The DKBA and KPF, splinter groups of the KNU, are also active and control territory, but to a lesser degree. The Karen Peace Force (KPF) was created in 1997, when soldiers from the KNU Brigade 16 defected to create their own group. The KPF agreed to assimilate into the BGF, a state security force affiliated with the DKBA.

BGF groups were created by soldiers from NSAGs whose groups had signed ceasefire agreements in 1994. Battalion leaders were from NSAGs, but the group would operate under the overarching authority of the Myanmar National Army. The 1994 ceasefires broke down quickly, yet some soldiers who had joined BGF stayed in their new groups.

The NMSP is the main NSAG operating in Mon State. NMSP presence in Kayin State was negotiated by NMSP and KNU leadership allowing the NMSP to control some areas in south-east Kayin State on the border with Mon State where the population is mostly comprised of people of Mon ethnicity.

In Kayin State dual administrative systems are present in certain areas, where there is competition or lack of coordination between the KNU administrative system and the Myanmar government administrative system. Since the signing of the ceasefire agreement there has been tension as some government administrative resources have been inserted into

[9] A defection of a significant group of Buddhist soldiers from the KNU in 1994 became the foundation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).

KNU-controlled territories and are overlapping and competing with pre-established KNU administrative services such as schools.

Following the widespread political changes of 2011, President Thein Sein initiated ceasefire negotiations with armed groups in Myanmar and KNU became one of the first groups to sign a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government on 12 January 2012. With these developments, considerable international funding was directed to Kayin State, which was forecasted to be the first area to receive returnees, refugees and IDPs.

Top-level discussions between NSAG leadership and Myanmar government officials continues to evolve, thus making this an opportune time to hear voices of the citizens of Kayin State who are directly affected by any peace and development plans. Listening to community voices in Kayin State will help build a sustainable peace process, as well as create contextually relevant programming and policy decisions that meet the needs of those who will experience their outcomes. It is also important that communities begin to envisage the future, so that they can play an active role in rebuilding Kayin State.

Research Design

CPCS' research publications are primarily motivated by practical lessons learned from on-the-ground experience, as well as situational analysis of conflict dynamics. Through these on-going analyses, and from our experience and consultation with a range of individuals within Myanmar, CPCS has identified that voices of communities from Kayin State are critical to strengthen the peace process.

Since 2008, CPCS has raised voices using listening methodology to publicise less heard viewpoints from within Myanmar through our *listening projects*. The findings of this ongoing work aims to continually inform debate, policy and programming with a stronger understanding of conflict dynamics inside the country.

In this project, emphasis was placed on accessing a cross-section of people living in Kayin State. In February 2014, one hundred and eleven individuals were spoken to including men and women who were a range of ages and from different ethnic groups including Karen, Mon, Pa'O and Bamar. Additionally, individuals held various occupations including teachers, church workers/religious leaders, fishermen, village administrators, farmers, traders, weavers and health workers.

Research Objectives

This project had two main research objectives:

1) To gain an understanding of the opinions, needs and challenges as perceived by people living in Kayin State on the topics of peace, the peace process and the future.

2) To provide specific recommendations to the Myanmar government, the international community and NSAG leadership on future policy and programming that will affect people living in Kayin State, especially with relation to peace, the peace process and the future.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Listening methodology was chosen to access and elevate the voices of communities in Kayin State. This method acknowledges that those living in any given situation have the best understanding of the on-the-ground dynamics, and thus must be heard from. The methodology allows for a relaxed atmosphere by conducting informal conversations with individuals instead of more formal interviews. This creates a situation where participants feel comfortable sharing opinions and concerns most important to them, but still provides for a guided discussion. Listening methodology is an effective method to access community opinions through a systematic process of analysis and synthesis, which identifies broad themes, common issues and important differences from an expansive discussion.

CPCS has used listening methodology since 2008 to publicise voices from within Myanmar through our *Listening Series*. We have adopted and slightly modified the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects - Collaborative Learning Development's version of listening methodology to better suit our primary goal of elevating a diversity of voices to strengthen peace processes.

Due to the sensitivities of working in a conflict context and the distrust of outsiders by locals, CPCS facilitation staff does not accompany the listening teams to speak to the participants. Instead we have developed a daily processing tool that can be used by listening teams at the end of each day to synthesise information without the help of the facilitation team. Additionally, an effort is made to choose listeners who are familiar with the area where the research is being conducted and, where possible, who have pre-established access to the area.

Facilitation and Listening teams

The CPCS facilitation team for this project consisted of two CPCS staff and one CPCS research consultant. The facilitation team was responsible for logistic arrangements, training and processing workshops, documentation, internal analysis of the results and the production of the publication.

This project relied on the support of individuals who generously agreed to assist in the listening teams. Listeners travelled to various locations around Kayin State visiting multiple townships and villages to speak to a variety of people living in the area. NGOs from Kayin State generously connected CPCS with thirteen individuals who were from Kayin State or familiar with the region. This project relied on the pre-established relationships and access that these individuals had to communities living in Kayin State, and their familiarity with travel logistics to remote areas.

Stage One: Training Workshop

The first stage of this project consisted of a two-day training workshop with the selected listeners. The main objective of the training workshop was to share information about the project and the listening methodology, equip listeners with the skills to conduct effective conversations and work with them to establish listening teams. They were also provided support for their travel and other logistical arrangements.

Stage Two: Conducting Listening Conversations

Immediately after the training workshop, listeners travelled to various townships and villages across a range of locations in Kayin State. Two listeners were present at each listening conversation. The conversations discussed opinions, needs, and challenges relevant to the Myanmar peace process and

hopes for the future. Guide questions[10] were used as a loose framework but were not strictly adhered to, allowing for more flexible conversations. Emphasis was also placed on gathering a range of opinions from a cross-section of individuals from Kayin State and conversations were undertaken in the language that participants felt most comfortable.

The listening teams spoke with one hundred and eleven individuals from communities in Kayin State. Listeners from each team aimed to speak with key groups including men and women from different age-ranges and ethnic diversities (Karen, Mon, Pa-o, and Bamar). They represented business and trade, agriculture and farming, health, education, religious affiliation, governmental and NGO sectors. Groups were identified as residing in rural, urban, KNU-controlled areas and Myanmar government-controlled areas. The following tables detail the gender, age-range, sector and ethnic group of participants.

Gender	Total Number	Percentage
Female	35	31.5%
Male	76	68.5%

Age Range	Total Number	Percentage
20-29	22	19.8%
30-39	20	18.0%
40-49	28	25.2%
50-59	24	21.6%
60-69	9	8.1%
70-79	7	6.3%
Unspecified	1	0.9%

[10] See Appendix.

Sector	Total Number	Percentage
Farming/Agriculture[11]	54	48.6%
Government/Administration[12]	6	5.4%
Religious Sector[13]	5	4.5%
Unspecified	13	11.7%
Education Sector[14]	9	8.1%
Other self-employed[15]	15	13.5%
Professional[16]	2	1.8%
Health sector	3	2.7%
Development Worker	4	3.6%

Ethnic Group	Total Number	Percentage
Karen	94	84.7%
Mon	12	10.8%
Pa'O	4	3.6%
Bamar	1	0.9%

Stage Three: Recording, Processing and Synthesis

The listening teams used notebooks, logbooks and recorded quotations to record data. Listeners were encouraged to avoid taking notes during conversations and, instead, recorded everything they could remember from each conversation immediately afterwards in a notebook. While conducting the conversations, the listeners only recorded a quote if they felt that it captured the essence of the on-going discussion.

[11] Includes participants who identified as farmer and housewife/farmer.
[12] Includes participants who identified as retired government officials and village administration.
[13] Includes participants who identified as church workers and monks.
[14] Includes participants who identified as teachers and youth workers.
[15] Includes participants who identified as fisherman, weaver, writer, seller/shop keepers and housewives.
[16] Includes participants who identified as computer technician and lawyer.

At the end of each day, listeners met together to discuss the most commonly heard themes as well as differences from all conversations conducted. These were recorded in a logbook and they helped to identify and consolidate key themes and differences at later stages.

Stage Four: Processing Workshop

All the listening teams reconvened for a two-day processing workshop once all the conversations were completed. The most commonly-heard themes were relayed to the larger group by each listening team. After each group had presented, the information was synthesised by the CPCS facilitation team and then prioritised again by the listeners. The same process was repeated with the most commonly heard themes for each guide question, followed by discussion on differences, similarities and patterns that listening teams had observed during conversations.

Stage Five: CPCS Internal Analysis

The final stage consisted of review and analysis of notebooks, logbooks, recorded quotations and documentation from the processing workshop. The facilitation team reassessed all documentation to ensure key themes, common issues, as well as differences were identified. The team also triangulated all primary data to ensure consistency between all sources.

Limitations

Using this research methodology presents some limitations. Firstly, it must be recognised that this research provides a snapshot of the community opinions at one given time. As the context evolves, these opinions will continue to change to reflect the new set of circumstances.

This project spoke with a cross-section of individuals living in Kayin State and all attempts were made to avail to a diverse group of voices for the conversations. However, owing to logistical restrictions, the participants spoken to were not a random sample of the population of Kayin State, but a cross-section identified through consultations with key stakeholders who have a high level of knowledge of the region.

Lastly, it should be noted that this project highlights a number of very important issues for communities, but does not provide a space for them to be explored in-depth. Certain key issues raised in this publication will be explored further in future research.

KEY THEMES

This section provides a detailed description of the key themes that emerged from the listening exercise. The listening methodology opens a space for people to share the issues that are most important to them. The discussion that is presented below is a consolidation of the key findings that emerged organically in our conversations across Kayin State. Through this process the conversations gravitated towards four key thematic areas: the peace process, participation and representation in the peace process, the security situation, and administrative and community affairs. The description that follows synthesises the opinions of the participants along these arcs and have been presented accordingly.

The Peace Process

Desires for peace and for the success of the peace process were the primary concern for communities. Experiences and opinions on the peace process differed greatly across the conversations, ranging from positive perceptions and optimism for its success to overtly negative and cynical attitudes. Overall, while communities have experienced improvements in their villages since the beginning of the peace process, they continue to foster skepticism towards the process. They reported a high level of distrust towards the government and feelings of uncertainty regarding the permanence of the changes that the peace process will achieve. Opinions relating to the peace process are explained in detail below.

Opinions on the Peace Process: A Positive Development

A strong desire for peace was shared across all conversations, but there were also fears that the process would break down.

One participant noted, “Communities want peace. Most Karen people love their community and don’t want to destroy the peace process”, and went on to assert that the community will support the peace process to the best of its ability. Another participant echoed the desires of the larger group by saying, “I hope that we will get real peace”. For many of the participants, their desire for peace was motivated by the hope that peace would bring increased security and development to Kayin State. One participant explained, “If we don’t get peace, our country will not be able to develop…peace in our villages will lead to development and [our] children will be able go to school”.

Some participants were optimistic about the peace process. One participant noted that being in peace is bliss and the peace process is a good process, while another believed, “I think that we will get real peace because the leaders of the country have initiated and are leading this peace process”. A participant likened the emergence of the peace process to moving from darkness to light. These conversations explained their positive impressions of the peace process by an improved sense of security and freedom for communities. One community member elaborated, “Our village does not worry like before, as the situation is getting better and better.”

Specific improvements reported included increased ability to travel with less taxation, a reduction in the number of checkpoints, more economic opportunities and the cessation of community members being forced to work as porters for the Tatmadaw. One participant recalled, “Our village used to be in the black area[17] and things were hopeless. In comparison, it has changed a lot now”. For some participants, the peace process has been positive as it has put an end to fear, robbery, taxation,

[17] Black area refers to an area that is experiencing open combat and travel is restricted for civilians in this region.

and forced labour as porters from the community. Many people hoped that peace process would continue to bring dividends in the future.

Opinions on the Peace Process: A Skeptical Perspective

On the contrary, other participants were skeptical of drawing quick conclusions on the success of the peace process. One participant explained, "I think that the peace process is good, but we need to wait and see. I don't think it will be permanent." Another participant said, "Everyone is hoping for genuine peace, but I feel like we still can't decide whether it is real or not". There was also a significant amount of cynicism and negative feeling towards the peace process. Many people reported continued restrictions, and felt that they were still suffering from armed conflict, and therefore maintained that the peace process had not yet delivered any real changes. One participant expressed his opinion:

> *We are not free from taxation yet. Armed groups have weapons, so villagers are afraid of them and have to give tax. Villagers still live under fear. The ideology from the previous era still influences the villagers. Although authorities do their part, there is no success in the peace process yet.*

Others deemed the peace process a waste of time and expressed worries that the peace process will not succeed fully. Many participants thus maintained ambivalent feelings towards it, where they were glad that it had been initiated, but did not dare expect too much from it. One community member explained his reservations as:

In my opinion, there are good things as well as bad things for the results of the peace process… for the time being I think the peace agreements are just a sham. In our village education and health are still weak as the education and health status of the people is still low.

Many of the negative feelings towards the peace process were linked to distrust in the process and the government. The participants related to the experience of past ceasefires and peace agreements breaking down. For many, they had lived their entire lives in a conflict setting and had their hopes for peace quashed multiple times. Some community members spoke about the experience of living with sixty years of armed conflict, the suffering they had endured and the impact that this continues to have on their lives. One community member explained that he did not trust the peace process because historically, the government has lied to the community for generations. Another participant argued that communities need to curb their urge to trust easily by exercising greater caution through critical thinking on issues.

Concerns were relayed that the peace process might be a strategy used by the government. For these participants, the government's claims were not being supported by its actions and they viewed the peace process as "a political trick" being employed by the government. Past experiences with the government led many of the participants to state that they still did not trust the government. One participant voiced this as:

[In the past], we had this experience when the armed groups gave their weapons to the government, the government forces came in and arrested the former members. That's why people do not want to trust the Government Army. If the government will remain true to its promises then it will get peace.

Additionally, many feelings of mistrust were attributed to the lack of community engagement in the peace process. There was a broad feeling that the attempts for peace were fake as they had failed to involve communities. One community member stated, "It is not a real peace process because no communities are involved". Participants consistently expressed their cynicism in the peace process because they felt unrepresented and unable to engage in the peace process.

Part of the distrust towards the government was linked to the Tatmadaw not withdrawing frontline troops, and the continued military presence in the midst of communities. This was described as the biggest challenge to the peace process. One participant explained that the Tatmadaw was using the peace process to extend their military presence in order to expand their territorial zone of control. Communities thought that reduction in military presence by the government, as agreed to in the ceasefire agreement, would indicate the government's sincerity towards the peace process.

Concerns about Ceasefire Agreements Breaking Down

A central concern for communities was that the ceasefire agreements would break down. One participant shared his apprehensions, "We are afraid that peace will fade away. Villagers were bullied [before] because they do not have

weapons. I don't want this again". Another added, "We feel fear that the ceasefire will break down, and fighting will resume". Some participants were concerned that there would be a military coup d'état.

There were also fears that if the peace process were to break down this time, the communities would suffer more than they did in the past. "This time we will suffer more than ever before", said one person echoing the feelings of many who were present. This sentiment was reinforced by one woman who asserted, "If the peace process is not successful, I am worried that there will be battles again, and the situation will become worse than the previous occurrences".

Unease that conflict will start again was reported as the main concern for many communities. One participant expressed, "[We must] avoid the battles from occurring again. We should not create a situation that will cause villagers to move away from their homes in fear and have to hide in other places again". Communities felt that it would be difficult to begin the process again if ceasefire agreements break down. One community member believed, "If the on-going ceasefire agreements and the peace process are not successful, we will face a difficult situation. They will never negotiate again".

Progressing Beyond Ceasefire Agreements: A Desire for Real Peace

A main theme emphasised throughout conversations was a desire for the peace process to move beyond the ceasefire stage. Communities observed a high level of uncertainty concerning the effectiveness of ceasefire agreements, and felt that there would be a greater chance of achieving real peace, if the process were to mature. One participant explained, "I want

a total ceasefire, not just an initial one. We need to stop fighting, to trust each other and have more freedom of movement". Another participant further qualified this concern by saying, "[We] cannot build peace with only a ceasefire agreement. If Karen and other groups cooperate to solve problems together then we will get real peace".

Many community members believed that they did not have real peace yet. One participant stated, "I think that the present situation seems good and peaceful but...I think there is no real peace yet because there are still tax collections". The meaning of real peace, which varied between individuals, was explained by one participant, "real peace means that both sides need to be accountable – we want both peace and justice". Another community member thought that to achieve real peace, a peace agreement would need "collaboration between the religious leaders, the government and the community". Another suggestion put forward an even more inclusive definition of real peace, where no harm is inflicted on people, environment and to women's rights.

Sincerity and Willingness to Compromise

Communities stressed the importance for government and armed groups to be sincere and genuine in their approach to the peace process. Many participants were concerned that both sides lack sincerity and were engaged in the peace process with ulterior motives. A participant voiced his concern as, "I want the peace process to be done correctly for all the ethnic groups. If it is not sincere, we will end up in a similar situation to the one before. There will be real peace, only if the government has good intentions towards the people". Another community member explained his feelings:

In my view making peace between KNU and the government is like walking on a rope. Peace can be done easily depending on how each group is acting and what they are doing. Therefore, I think making [peace] will be successful if only [they] follow the already set policy and course with a stable mind. If the one who is leading has a true [and] genuine attitude, only then will true peace be achieved. The ceasefire-negotiation [that they] are conducting right now cannot be peace yet. Trust between two sides depends mostly on [the way they] communicate, talk and act. Therefore, keeping [and] respecting promises is important. [Other important issues] are the already set policy, peoples' attitude, keeping, respecting and valuing promises [and] genuine actions.

Many participants felt that top-level actors were only engaging in the peace process for their own gain. One participant pointed towards the culpability of the armed groups:

The armed groups are making peace for their own profit. This is an opportunity for them to take vacant lands and virgin soils. The government side pretend to do it to show off to world.

Community members felt that they could not trust the government, as it has not backed up words with actions. They pointed to the fact that despite a ceasefire agreement being in place, the government has been expanding troops on the ground and fighting has broken out on occasion. The participants continued to question the sincerity of the leaders in the process. They demanded that the negotiating parties, both the

government and the armed groups, should demonstrate their sincerity "on paper, and through their actions on the ground". One participant summed it up as, "Sincerity is fundamental. All of us need to try hard to work together".

Communities were concerned that insincerity may lead to the breakdown of ceasefire agreements. "It is a worry that there can be battles again due to the insincerity on both sides," said one participant. Many participants recommended that for the success of the peace process, leaders must demonstrate honourable intentions and not use peace brought on by the ceasefire for their own benefits. One individual articulated this concern as, "The biggest challenge is that people believe that the leaders from both sides have a hidden agenda. In reality the people may smile, but underneath they feel anger".

Accountability for Leaders in the Peace Process

The need for leaders to have sincerity and approach the peace process with genuine desire to achieve peace was closely linked to the need for leaders to be accountable and to adhere to the stipulations of the peace agreements. One participant asserted that in a peace process, equity is necessary and the responsibility for making and adhering to agreements must be shared between the armed groups and the government equally. Many participants suggested that the government and NSAGs could be held accountable by the international community. They believed that increased communication with the international community would help to achieve transparency and accountability. One participant elaborated, "To get peace, we need international involvement and support; it [the peace process] should be held accountable by the international community". Another suggested that these barriers could be overcome by publicly signing peace agreements and holding negotiations with the international community as witness.

In the course of discussion, many participants also associated demonstration of sincerity in the leadership with a change in the attitude of the leaders. As one of the most prevalent themes heard throughout all conversations, communities felt that currently both sides do not have attitudes conducive to achieving peace. Instead, the government and NSAGs are focused on fulfilling personal goals, and are unwilling to compromise. One participant explained, "If we can cut the roots of strict mind-sets, we will achieve [success in] the peace process".

Communities emphasised the need for all leaders to move away from having strict and single-minded attitudes towards each other. One community member expressed his message to leaders, "In order to move forward, you should put away your negative attitude and past experience, as well as the stubbornness because of the past experience". Another community member argued, "[they] need to throw away their pride or ego – not be one-sided or selfish, both the government and KNU need to do that. Take out the 'I'm always right' mentality". A community member advised the leadership, "Don't position yourselves as enemies. He continued to explain, "They say they are working for the people, but, in reality, they are not thinking of the people. They need to change the attitude, [they need] power sharing among the armed groups and the government".

Others asked the negotiating parties to be willing to compromise. "To develop a good relationship and to cultivate a 'win-win' approach, the government should come down and the armed group should compromise", said one individual. A participant pointed out that negotiating parties were dwelling too much on past experience and that this attitude must be changed.

The participants also called for a change in mind-sets. A participant stated, "What the government and all armed groups should accept is that they are only engaging the peace process

for the people, and not for the power and wealth of one party". And another felt, "If everyone has empathy, the peace process will be successful". Lastly, a community member suggested, "While engaging in the negotiations, they need to put away their own pride, power and belief".

Trust Building and Mutual Understanding

Communities emphasised the need for trust and relationship building between the government and NSAGs. They also highlighted the importance of achieving mutual understanding and of defining a common goal.

Communities highlighted distrust between the government and NSAGs as one of the biggest obstacles to the peace process. One community member stated, "The government and the armed groups cannot understand each other and cannot negotiate yet. It is the biggest challenge. To overcome these challenges, they need to build trust to improve understanding. I also think that the public should participate actively". Another participant explained:

> *The biggest challenge is the mistrust between the government and armed group. Even though they are talking about a ceasefire agreement on paper, in reality there are no actions; they don't trust each other.*

Observations from many participants echoed this sentiment. One participant explained, "Trust is essential. Trust should be present from the beginning of the peace process to its end. If there is no mutual understanding, then they will fight again, and the country will become poorer".

Mutual understanding and creating a common goal was also seen as essential to achieving peace. One participant explained: "We can only build trust when we have a mutual relationship. Only then we will get peace". The need for mutual understanding between the government and NSAGs was reinforced with further comments such as, "If I had the chance to participate in the peace process discussion, I would like to request that groups negotiate with mutual understanding for the welfare of the people", and, "mutual understanding must exist between top-level leaders of the government, NSAGs, and the community – a triangle approach where everyone understands each other". Possessing a common goal was also seen as integral to the success of the peace process, one participant explained the "need to have common goals for community and leaders to put into the peace process".

Continued Negotiations

The participants called for persisting with the negotiations process to develop a positive relationship between the negotiating partners. A community member believed, "I think the biggest hindrance in [the] peace process is not being able to negotiate between the two parties. If there is constructive negotiation, all the hardships and hindrance will be overcome and we will get peace that the ethnic groups have demanded". Another participant stated, "To get real peace, [the Myanmar government and NSAGs] need to build trust and reconciliation. Through negotiation, common perceptions are to be strengthened while non-negotiable matters are to be rid of".

Further support for equity in negotiations was explained, "When you do the peace process you need equity, share responsibility between armed groups and the government", and, "If I have chance to participate in the peace process, I would like to say to them to be in good terms through negotiation. The

most important thing is to have a mutual relationship. I don't know much about the biggest challenges. But I think after the discussion, things will become better".

Building Unity in Kayin State

Communities expressed a strong desire to build unity between the different ethnic groups present in Kayin State. A participant said, "My hope is to build a real union with no racial discrimination so that our country will become a beautiful country with all its ethnic groups".

Many community members highlighted ethnic discrimination and disunity as obstacles to achieving peace. One participant noted that the peace process must address feelings of ill-will and hate between the ethnic groups in Kayin State. "[The] main challenge is nationalism. In Kayin State, different groups have strong [sub] nationalism". Participants expressed a strong desire to tone-down the ethnic-nationalism narrative as it was fostering differences in the communities.

A strong view that reconciliation between ethnic groups in Kayin State was important to achieve peace emerged through the course of the conversations. One participant reiterated the necessity of listening to the voices of all the ethnic groups and another extended this to include other religious groups as well.

Community members also highlighted the need for unity among the various NSAGs, the Myanmar government and within communities in Kayin State. It was thought that unity among the people in Kayin State would strengthen the peace process and help to solve problems, but participants articulated this in vague terms. Participants felt that divide-and-rule strategies of governance were still being used by the government and

demanded that such efforts be reversed. They believe that it was essential to unify all groups for a successful peace process. One participant expressed this as, "[We need] unity between all Karen groups and between all [other] ethnic groups. I believe that the government is strategically speaking to everyone separately. [We] need all ethnic armed groups to come together with the same voice. The government uses divide-and-rule strategy, and we don't like that".

One participant noted that leadership from all ethnic groups should be present in the peace process dialogue, while another added, "We need to unite. I believe the government and the public need to collaborate to achieve peace". Further support for unity was expressed by one participant, "If I have to participate in the peace process discussion, I would like to tell people to get on well. The most important thing is unity. The peace process is being harmed because that we are not in unity. In order to overcome this hindrance, we need to be united".

The need for unity between the government and communities was also expressed. One participant communicated, "All actors in the peace process should have a unified goal, and come together to talk with the government". While another communicated, "we need to unite. I believe the government and the public need to collaborate, it will get peace; we want all our leaders to unite".

Participation and Representation in the Peace Process

A range of opinions were shared in relation to the issue of community engagement in the peace process. Many people had limited knowledge and understanding about the peace process and some thought that it was not their business to

become involved. Nonetheless, the most prevalent opinion heard across conversations concerned communities' inability to engage in the peace process. Underlying the strong desire to be engaged in the peace process was a sense that the peace process was not genuine or sincere because it failed to involve the communities in the process. The participants focused on the concept of unity in the peace process. Unity emerged as a multidimensional theme: the need for unity amongst different Karen groups living in Kayin State; the need for unity between different ethnic groups that live in Kayin State; and the need to have a united goal.

Community Participation/Engagement in the Peace Process

The participants were frustrated with the lack of opportunities available for participation in the process. One participant explained, "[The success of the peace process] depends on the authorities because they never listen to community voices". Another participant believed that the success of the peace process was predicated on providing people from Kayin State with a chance to participate. They believed, "Instead of paying attention to only one voice, we should take heed of voices from all the ethnic groups". Another participant further qualified this by saying:

> *In the discussions and negotiations undertaken [in] the peace process, sole participation of armed groups and government authorities is not effective. People also need to participate in the discussions. All the ethnic groups should be represented…and attempts to increase the welfare of the villages.*

There were also concerns expressed that it was unsafe for community members to become involved in the peace process. They were concerned that if they shared their feelings on a particular policy or problem relating to the peace process, it may be perceived as support for one side, and thus resulting in threats from either a NSAG or the government. Another community member noted a restriction, "There is no opportunity to talk about what sort of challenges we face. We are not allowed to conduct capacity building and build awareness in the community on peace building. This is the biggest challenge".

There was a strong desire expressed for leaders from both the NSAGs and the government to take a community-centred approach to the peace process. One participant said, "I want the authorities to listen to the village's voice and to pay attention to their needs, and then to carry out things for them. [I] don't want the process done in the past, but I want true democracy". Another continued in the same vein, "The most important point is to give priority to the Karen people's wishes. I want community needs and challenges heard in the peace process".

Further opinions went on to reiterate the need for the negotiating parties to address the needs and problems of the communities. This was seen as the most critical element for moving towards 'real' peace. One member said, "Currently, the peace agreement between the government and the armed group is only for their sake - there is nothing in it for the people." Further suggestions relating to a community-centred approach highlighted a "need for every group's participation and cooperation" in working together towards peace.

Desire for Sincere Leadership

In an important point, communities expressed that they lack representation or adequate leadership that understood their concerns. Participants felt that the government did not take

their concerns into consideration and spoke about the lack of capable leaders from Kayin State. One participant explained, “The government does not practically take action for people’s demands and needs. This is my worry for getting true peace”. “We want a government which supports and takes care of people”, one participant stated.

Many participants highlighted the fact that the Kayin State Minister was not from the Karen ethnic group, believing that someone from the Karen ethnic group would be better placed to represent community needs for people living in Kayin State. One participant expressed his dissatisfaction in the current leadership asserting, “In both the government and armed group, there are some leaders who do not consider the (needs of the) people and they only look for their self-interest”. There was a firm belief that good leaders, who are genuine and can guide their people were essential for the peace process to be meaningful. Finally, another community member noted, “I want leaders with the right attitude towards justice to administrate the village”.

Representation from within communities

Communities wanted to have the opportunity to choose their own leaders. However, they felt there was no one with leadership capacity in their communities who could represent them adequately. Many participants explained that the lack of human resources in Kayin State meant that community and district level leaders lacked capacity and could not effectively represent communities. They believed that the primary reason for this was the low levels of education in their communities, where educated individuals could be counted on one hand.

In light of this discussion, the participants identified a desire for capacity building of community-level leaders. One participant explained this further, “My opinion on the peace process is that

I want a leader who represents the public and ethnic groups, and [who is able to] build acceptable peace". Another stated, "We need to build capacity of the villagers with help from NGOs. The village administrators can play their role by listening to the voice of villagers and attending to their needs, and parents can encourage their children's participation [in community affairs]".

Many people spoke about their inability to engage in the peace process because they did not know how to participate, but expressed a willingness to help in any way that they could. Some participants had not considered that they could have a role and many could not think of a way to participate. A consistent suggestion was for community members to contribute to the peace process depending on their own capacity and knowledge. One participant explained this as, "People should participate in areas that they know about – teachers should teach, religious leaders can participate from that point of view, farmers can contribute in a farming way". Many participants agreed with this sentiment. One community member simply stated, "I will take responsibility in any task assigned to me".

A popular suggestion was that community members could assist the peace process by teaching younger people and spreading awareness in their villages. One participant elaborated on this:

> *[I] want to play a role in mobilising people to participate in the peace process, engage in more conversation about the peace process by sharing information, talking more and adopting a peer-to-peer approach. I think that when you get paid by an agency to talk about the peace process it is not good. Instead we need to synthesise the community so that members can play a role without needing someone to organise them.*

Opinions on the matter also suggested that community members can start small and try to mobilise at the level of their communities. Many people felt that communities must work together to participate, which was articulated as, “I would advocate for people to be aware of the peace process and conduct awareness training for young people. And also, people need to work together”. One participant expressed her desire to participate:

> *Even if I can do nothing, I want to encourage others to become involved. I will attempt to involve the next generation in trainings, and then encourage them to share their knowledge with the rest of the village. I want to attend many trainings. People from the higher level just say they will work for peace, I will do whatever I need to do.*

While another community member suggested that he would like to participate by voting, saying “in the peace process I want to participate just by giving a vote”, many people felt that the only way that communities could have the opportunity to participate was with support from international organisations or the civil society. One participant believed that to create genuine peace, “We need support from the peacemakers – agencies or groups who are doing peace education or supporting peace processes”.

Communities highlighted the lack of opportunity and education as obstacles to participating in the peace process. One community member identified the biggest challenges as, “[There is] no right to talk, strict control [from the political authorities] and we are not allowed to conduct awareness on peace process”. Additionally, communities expressed that they

had limited knowledge about the peace process and wanted more information on what it entailed.

Better Access to Information

Participants expressed the difficulty they had accessing information. When discussing the peace process community members explained they had limited knowledge about the peace process and more generally about national news and current affairs. Participants emphasised their desire for more information in general and suggested they could access information more easily if newspapers were made available.

Security in Kayin State

Across the conversations in Kayin State, participants prioritised physical security as an essential need. Participants reported that the overall security situation has improved but fears persisted. The continued presence of armed forces in the midst of villagers also fostered a sense of insecurity. The ambivalence of the source of authority in communities and the subsequent sense of lawlessness has led to a rise in criminal activities and confusion over the application of laws. It was also noted that freedom of movement has improved, but it has been undermined by the problem of excessive tax collections by the armed entities.

Administrative and Authoritative Concerns

Participants expressed challenges relating to dual administrative systems and multiple groups enforcing authority in Kayin State. Community members explained that there were up to six different groups (Myanmar government officials, Tatmadaw soldiers, KNU, NMSP, DKBA and BGF) exerting control, often in overlapping areas, in Kayin State. The exact areas of control for each of these groups were often fluid and not clearly

demarcated. This administrative ambiguity created problems for communities who had to live under the authority of multiple groups and juggle multiple sets of rules. Communities reported that challenges were compounded when travelling and transiting through areas controlled by different groups.

Taxation for Communities

One of the most significant challenges reported by communities was high taxation enforced by different armed groups. While participants reported a decrease in the amount of taxation enforced since the beginning of the peace process, illegal taxation from armed groups still remained a considerable concern. Taxation was enforced by soldiers from various armed groups in villages and at checkpoints that civilians must pass through when travelling. One participant explained the phenomenon as, "When the villagers travel from one place to another, they have to pass through military checkpoints and have to pay tax. They feel disturbed." Another participant felt that the situation had worsened as the community is now required to pay extortion money to different armed groups at the same time.

The ability to travel was reported to have increased in many areas, but participants experienced frequently rising travel costs inflated by the checkpoint-extortion problem. Not only did individuals need to pay money to multiple armed groups, but the amount was dependent on the mode of travel, and the type and quantity of goods being carried.

Increasing prices of essential food and non-food items as a result of multiple taxation points adds burden to the economic life of the community. One participant explained this as, "Now there are many tax collecting gates for each party. Because of tax collection commodity prices are getting high". It was further noted that a meagre income is insufficient to bear the burden of

high taxes. The participants believed that in this environment, there was a lack of job opportunities and a need for more income generating sources for subsistence living. To overcome these economic difficulties, community members called for curbing excessive taxation and reducing the level of taxes.

Security and Lawlessness

Insecurity and lawlessness emerged as a significant concern for communities in Kayin State. Specifically, accountability for the actions of armed groups has fostered a sense of lawlessness and insecurity in villages. Participants commonly pointed to a lack of basic security, to reports of violence from armed groups, and to forced recruitment of villagers as soldiers from both sides. These developments augmented the general feelings of fear felt by the communities.

Villagers pointed to multiple sources for an increasing sense of insecurity in their communal lives. One community member spoke about his situation, "As our village is located between the two armies, I am still a little afraid. Business is not flourishing. In the past, I had to fear both sides", and another demanded that the government and NSAGs need to stop practicing forced labour, violence and their corrupted ways. Vulnerable groups such as women were at higher risk in the communities. One participant articulated it as, "Women don't feel safe because of the Tatmadaw rape cases happening now".[18] Another villager described the situation in his village, "Both sides treat the people of the village as scapegoats because they cannot defeat each other. There are a lot of reported rape cases and murders. Women are very afraid of the Tatmadaw. Women and girls in my village no longer feel safe walking on the street."

[18] This comment references a specific rape case that is currently being investigated.

Contested Administration and Rule of Law

Absence of the rule of law was reported as a big problem in Kayin State. Communities pointed to overlapping areas of administrative control by the government and the KNU as a huge challenge. The resulting confusion permeates into the poor enforcement of the rule of law as community members have to deal with contending points of authority. One participant believed:

> *There should be clear laws, rules and regulations. The laws should clearly define a source of authority. Authorities, armed groups and the people should all cooperate. What we need most is the presence of laws for the betterment of the people.*

Government and NSAGs areas of control are not always clearly demarcated, which makes it difficult for community members to understand the right set of rules to be followed. Another participant explained the duality in rules and administrative systems which creates confusion for the community. One participant explained:

> *[We] don't have any rural laws between these areas; they are controlled by both the government and NSAGs. Both have their own policies and dual systems. We need consensus and encompassing rules and regulations because now they are confused.*

Another community member explained that often permission granted by one authority for certain action would be considered illegitimate by the other.

A pressing concern reported by communities was the lack of accountability for armed group members. Communities reported numerous occurrences of Tatmadaw and NSAG members committing criminal activities and felt frustrated for not having access to a fair judicial system to enforce accountability for these behaviours. One participant emphatically described the presence of fear in ordinary person's life:

> *The most difficult situation in Kayin State is that those with arms do as they like. Villagers and people still have fear. To overcome these difficulties, we need help and support from authorities.*

Another explained, "Some armed groups still use violence and the armed groups must obey the law and respect human rights". Community members expressed their desires for armed group members to abide by the law. The government should address this situation." Communal and individual lives are mainly devoid of access to formal or traditional legal systems. Informal or traditional laws are equally ineffective in delivering justice to the community.

Communities asserted that they have their own traditional rules and regulations but these rules do not extend to Tatmadaw or NSAGs and are not capable of regulating armed individuals and soldiers. One community member explained, "There are no clear laws. Armed groups and the Tatmadaw abuse community members since there is no rule of law and justice system functioning in the community. For law enforcement we have cultural laws but they can't be applied to armed groups, they don't cater to the power of the gun". Many community members suggested changes in the laws. One participant suggested, "To begin we need to establish an internationally recognised peace.

We can then set up a constitution for the welfare of the people and which stands for the people."

Abuse of power by Tatmadaw and NSAG soldiers was also a common problem identified across all conversations with the community members. One participant asserted that they should avoid power abuse. Many participants spoke about the prevalence of corruption in government officials, and soldiers from the Tatmadaw and NSAGs. They pointed to the rise of black markets in their localities. People suffer due to abuse of power by those who have authority.

Military Presence in Civilian Communities

Military presence in communities is perceived as closely linked to concerns over security, lawlessness, and the lack of accountability for armed groups. Participants were concerned about Tatmadaw soldiers living in or near to their villages describing it as being "uncomfortable for local people and a big challenge for the peace process". Another participant opined, "The Tatmadaw's role is to protect people, not for the people to protect them. Instead of settling around the village, the military camp is in the middle of the village. That disturbs me". Participants also relayed stories where Tatmadaw soldiers had entered villages and taken ownership of community homes forcing villagers to leave their homes and relocate to other areas.

Many people were also concerned about increased militarisation observed in communities highlighting the fact that both the Tatmadaw and NSAGs continued to recruit troops, and had not yet withdrawn from the front lines as committed to in ceasefire agreements. Further, communities were concerned about the presence of people's militia, which created additional armed presence in every village.

One participant further stressed the need for a reduction in military presence in Kayin State, explaining the current situation, "The Burmese Army is expanding their troops. [We] are now in the middle of the two armies. The village administration committee does not get along with the villages. The government does not get along with the Karen armed group and has been threatening people with guns now".

Another participant added, "In the nearby village, there are KNU check points and the DKBA also expanded the checkpoints. That's why I don't know what will happen next. The DKBA is expanding their troops. Because DKBA is also expanding their troops, I am worried. As for all people, I want to be united under one group so that we all can give a unanimous voice in the peace-process".

Role of Government

Community members strongly believed that the government was not fulfilling its duty of safeguarding the fundamental human rights of the community. Many participants were afraid to share their opinions due to fear of the government. One participant narrated the situation in Kayin State as:

> *It is a challenge for people to talk about peace. The government comes and asks questions and will call the administrative office. The government uses the people's militia as an informant so they are afraid to talk about peace.*

Many of the others present reiterated feeling this sense of fear. One participant told us, "We are worried that those who come

and help in the peace process will be arrested". One community pointed to the Myanmar Army's dominance in Kayin State. He said, "In Kayin State, the army is in control, and punishes [citizens] using false accusations. People do not have the freedom to talk or act, or have any human rights". Others present reported that people were threatened with guns and they could not sell and buy freely at the marketplace.

The lack of basic human rights in villages was voiced as a significant concern for communities. One participant felt that the peace process had failed to ensure basic human rights, and felt that it was difficult to run a business in this context. Another noted, "It is important that there is ceasefire in place and there is no forced labour as porters by community members. The torturing must stop and the government must treat people as humans."

Forced Recruitments

Some community members were still fearful of forced recruitment to either the NSAGs or Tatmadaw forces. One participant reported that one person from every family was still required to serve in the armed group. The participant elaborated on this:

> *I do not know about the whole of Kayin State, but in this brigade 2 area, one person from every family has to serve in the army. I hope that we can get a peace (-agreement). I think (we) will not need to serve in the army once peace is established. I want to stop the army from asking one person from every family to serve.*

One participant told us that many community members are willing to join the KNU, but not the Tatmadaw:

> *We fall under the administration of two governments, the KNU and Myanmar government. We do not like it and feel fear from both sides because of new recruitment from the Tatmadaw and KNU soldiers. The difference is that the majority of people are willing to join the KNU, but not the government force.*

Freedom of Movement

Overall participants reported an increase in the freedom of movement in Kayin State. Many participants explained that their villages were no longer categorised as black areas. Black areas indicate areas that are experiencing open combat and travel in and out of these areas is restricted. One participant stated, "There are no battles. Now we have more freedom of movement. Even the KNU can travel freely in uniform". Community members reported that, previously, civilians were restricted from carrying uncooked rice as it was thought that this could be used to feed soldiers from opposing groups. Participants reported that uncooked rice could now be transported freely in Kayin State.

Community members were happy about the increased freedom to travel but expressed a strong desire for even more freedom of movement. Expressed here by one participant, "I don't know. The villagers don't get full freedom of movement yet". The high cost of travelling due to taxation at checkpoints, explained in previous sections, continued to restrict people from travelling freely. Many participants wanted the number of check-points to be reduced, which would make travelling easier for civilians.

Some participants explained that while freedom of movement and their ability to travel had increased, they were afraid to travel because of security concerns. Participants explained that women travelling in Kayin State felt threatened by the presence of soldiers, and were scared of being attacked.

Administrative and Community Affairs

Many community members spoke about the lack of development in Kayin State, highlighting the lack of health care, education, economic opportunities and poor transportation infrastructure as challenges for daily life. The pressing demand for holistic development was made by all communities. Participants repeatedly related that the development status of the villages is very low in all sectors. They aspired for the same level of development as seen in urban areas, and held development and modernisation of their villages as a barometer for the success of the peace process.

Lack of Job Opportunities

The lack of job opportunities in Kayin State was identified as a main theme in many of the conversations. Specific concerns were expressed for the limited economic opportunities available for youth. One participant explained, "With limited job opportunities, daily wages are restricted to 3000kyat or 4000kyat[19] in my village. The government and private companies must work to increase economic opportunities in our region". This problem has forced many people from Kayin State to go overseas to work as migrant workers. One participant expressed his desire for people in Kayin State to have opportunities in their own villages instead of having to go overseas to find work. As discussed earlier, communities reported that their

[19] At the time of writing a US dollar ($) exchanged at approximately 974 Myanmar Kyat (K)."

economic problems had been compounded by high taxation enforced in villages and at checkpoints controlled by various armed groups.

Economic problems in Kayin State were also linked to the scarcity of arable land available for planting and the presence of landmines. This has restricted farming and other agricultural activities. One participant pointed out that most of land is not arable as it is very rocky, and communities are afraid to use the little arable land available because of the fear of landmines. Therefore, the need for landmines to be cleared was another significant concern for communities.

Some community members thought that low levels of education for people living in Kayin State contributed to difficulties faced by youth in finding employment. One participant shared his opinion, “There is a lack of quality education. They [students] only get quantity, but not quality and thus job opportunities are rare for them too”. Others felt that even when individuals were well-educated, the economic environment in Kayin State did not open any avenues for them.

Community members expressed their desires to have access to start-up loans to begin small businesses and thought that assistance could come from the government, community based organisations (CBO), civil society organisation (CSO), NGOs and INGOs. One participant said, “I hope that the government will provide loans with low interest and I want reduction in taxation”. Another participant elaborated a need to review the government loan program for farmers:

Currently, the government provides a loan program for farmers through a bank system. The loan period is eight months. They need to repay all loans at the end of eight months, along with the interest money. Some farmers are unable to manage this during these eight months. The famers need a ten-month loan period, as their success to repay will depend on the quality of their crops.

One community member pointed to a lack of funds available for investment in Kayin State, "We have only manpower. The government and international organisations should invest in the development of Kayin State".

Economic Development

The desire for economic development was a serious concern for communities in Kayin State. Many community members reported improvements in their ability to conduct economic activities such as business and agriculture since the beginning of the peace process, but felt a strong need for further improvement. "I am hoping for development", said a community member, while another sought the freedom to work for private industries and businesses.

There was a strong feeling that business development in Kayin State only benefited wealthy businessmen and a minority of already wealthy individuals in Kayin State. The overarching opinion was that economic development did not benefit everyone in Kayin State. Participants felt that most development projects failed to provide employment for people from Kayin State, often employing individuals from outside of Kayin State. This was viewed as unfair to local communities who felt they should receive employment opportunities in projects that were being undertaken in their state. One individual elaborated:

In general, it seems there is improvement and the economic status has improved. However, when big companies come and invest, the educated and wealthy people become wealthier, whereas the majority of uneducated people have no job opportunities presented to them.

Communities felt that companies involved in business in Kayin State (especially resource development) had a responsibility to communities in their area of operation. Participants suggested that companies could invest in small business cooperatives, trademark and fair-trade initiatives to create job opportunities for communities in Kayin State.

Land Grabbing

Land grabbing was reported a prevalent concern for communities. Participants linked the issue of land grabbing to corruption and collusion. Different activities involving corruption were observed taking place between Tatmadaw and Myanmar government officials. An inadequate legal system (rule of law), which exempts authorities in Kayin State from accountability allows back-door deals to become common-place. One participant explained, "Some leaders and ministers are using the land we own; they think they own the land. People do not like this type of leadership style. We need good leaders who take care of the people". Other participants were worried that outside investors will exploit the situation and also indulge in land grabbing. Participants also held the Tatmadaw as being responsible for the practice, "In the past, Tatmadaw seized our land and paid only 15,000 kyat for a piece of land worth 300,000 kyat. We want to get back our land".[20]

[20] At the time of writing a US dollar ($) exchanged at approximately 974 Myanmar Kyat (K)

Communities suffer greatly due to land grabbing and expressed the need for land protection to become an issue of priority at the national level. Business investors often exploit and confiscate community-owned land after receiving ownership documents from the government. One participant explained, “I want to discuss about the land grabbing issue; I do not want to have to abandon my native place”.

The issue of land grabbing was also linked to business development and resources extraction in Kayin State. Many participants felt that land was being confiscated illegally to undertake resource development and business development in Kayin State. Communities had three main concerns regarding resources and business development: lack of community-centric benefits, concerns about the environmental and health impacts. One participant felt that, “Due to mega projects and land grabbing, environment hassles are becoming great disturbances”. Another participant articulated, “I am worried that due to mega projects, land grabbing and development projects, the natural environment of Kayin State will be destroyed and the situation for Karen people will become worse than ever”.

Environmental destruction caused by cement mining was mentioned by several participants. One participant shared that it had already destroyed half of the mountain where he lived. Another participant explained his feelings, “I worry most about forest depletion and another thing is that factories and industries affect people’s health”. Another community member worried about unfettered deterioration of the natural environment by the on-going mega projects.

Communities reported that they were not the beneficiaries of resource and business development projects in the community, but they wanted to benefit from them. One participant explained, “We have an electricity generating dam, but we do not have

any electricity". Another participant asserted, "I want to know more about business or trading of the natural resources. I want to know where the natural resources are sent and what they do with the resources. I want to know whether we can also benefit from these resources".

Concern was expressed over mega projects and investment from international companies from China and Thailand. One participant explained, "I am also worried about other countries exploiting the local natural resources; they will take advantage by cooperating in peace building process". Another participant was concerned about locals losing their jobs to outsiders, "Although it is good for Karen people, we are worried about negative impacts. Since other people, like the Chinese, come and extend their business, there can be losses for Karen people, especially among daily wagers". Further skepticism was shared over foreign investment by another community member:

> *Now with extraction from our region and export to China, China undertakes road construction to transport the materials, but the road condition is very bad now. We cannot enjoy our natural resources; instead we are only inhaling dust.*

Lack of Health Services

Many community members spoke about their difficulties in accessing health care. Participants reported the lack of basic health care in communities in Kayin State. One participant talked about the situation in his village:

The need of this village is health services. Although organisations that provide health service come here, they only visit once every six months. So, when there is an emergency during their absence, we don't know where to go. The hospital is only in Kyar Inn Seik Gyi town. Kyar Inn Seik Gyi is a bit far from here. The connecting road is not good and its condition worsens during the rainy season. Therefore, I think it will be good if there is a clinic and medicines made available in the village.

Some participants reported the backpack health worker team[21] as the only access they have to health care, while others said they could access limited health services provided by the KNU administrative system. One participant explained, "There are some schools and health care clinics at present, but they are just present for show. I think only some part of the assistance from the international community reaches the people". Another community member said that in the current health care system, treatment is only made available if an individual can pay for it.

In some communities, malaria and diarrhea were the most common health problems and the villagers requested outside help in this regard. Many of those present believed that the health care system was in need of improvements and the health care workers needed better training. One participant pointed out that any community member with any knowledge of the use of drugs was considered to be a doctor. For example, if a community member knew that paracetamol is used as a pain killer or could reduce fever, they were consulted on many medical problems in their village. One participant highlighted the difficulties communities face in accessing vaccines.

[21] The backpack health worker team is a community based team who visits and provides health care to communities who have no local health services. More information can be found at: http://www.backpackteam.org/?p=195

Across the conversations, participants strongly demanded significant improvements in the health care system in Kayin State. It was hoped that if the peace process is successful, health care would improve in communities.

Poor Quality of Education

Another strong theme reported by communities was the limited access to education in Kayin State. Many of the participants believed that the education system was in need of significant improvement. A participant expressed this as, "I want a proper and effective education system", while another hoped for "at least one middle school in our village". Communities spoke about the lack of quality teachers, explaining that some areas have primary and middle schools, but the education quality was low.

Many teachers were community volunteers. Government-appointed teachers were reported to open schools only on days that suited them (10 consecutive days per month only) at Township Education Office [TEO]. Communities also reported instances of corruption in some NGO-funded schools, where it was thought that teachers kept money that was meant to be spent on school supplies. Many participants thought that government teachers did not have genuine commitment to their job as educators.

Communities also spoke about their desire for the education system to incorporate Karen language and literature teachings. One participant expressed his concerns, "I am worried that [Karen] culture and literature will disappear". Others were concerned about providing universal education. A participant opined, "The main thing is to give all children an equal right to education. Support should be given to children of needy families. I believe then we should be concerned about keeping

Karen culture, literature and tradition alive in the education system".

Drug Problems

Considerable concern was expressed regarding youth social problems such as drug use and the lack of employment opportunities. Many participants observed an increase in drug trade in Kayin State. This increase was facilitated by the improved freedom of movement and the new ability to travel and bring goods into Kayin State. This increased freedom of movement coupled with reports of corruption and black-market trade undertaken by the government officials, Tatmadaw soldiers and NSAG soldiers created an environment where an increase in the use of methamphetamine-based drugs was observed. Communities reported that the youth undertook the greatest consumption of this drug and many participants felt that drug dealers specifically targeted the youth.

One participant feared, "I am also worried about drug abuse and its related issues. I am worried that the morality of people will be destroyed. I am worried that due to producing narcotic drugs, the nation will be destroyed and then also the country will be destroyed". Another participant argued that in the society buying and selling of narcotic drugs should be eliminated.

Transportation Infrastructure

Communities also spoke about poor transportation infrastructure in Kayin State. The road network was in poor condition, with roads dusty and unusable in the rainy season. Dusty roads emerged as a health issues, as well as a cause of concern due to the high number of road accidents. One participant listed related problems in Kayin State as, "It is difficult to travel; we lack infrastructure, telecommunications and electricity". Another added, "Currently, in this ceasefire, the community repairs on

the road are self-supported". Villagers emphasised the need for the repair of the roads and bridges in Kayin State. A well-maintained transportation infrastructure was a desire held by many participants, who saw it as a catalyst for improved provision of electricity and communication networks in their areas.

Many participants explained that improvements had been made to roads that provide access to resource sites, and were frustrated that the road improvements benefited business development, but not the people living in Kayin State. Participants were frustrated that an improvement in roads and bridges has allowed for foreign extraction of valuable resources.

Desires for improvements to transport infrastructure were also closely linked to the desire for technological improvements, such as improved telecommunications, and better access to information. One participant explained, "What I hope for is governmental support for smooth transportation in the village. To keep abreast with other countries, I want the development of transportation and communication in my own village". Another participant envisioned, "In the future, our villages will prosper and have access to the Internet, and will be able to keep abreast with the age of IT. We need help from international organisations, the government and businessmen".

The importance of listening to community voices

Listening to voices of communities in Kayin State has provided an opportunity for people to express their opinions on Myanmar's peace process. Through greater engagement, participation and access to information about processes that directly affect their lives, people from Kayin Sate can help to strengthen the peace process and shape their future.

APPENDIX

Guide Questions

What are your opinions and feelings about the peace process?
Key Words: opinion, peace process

What would you talk about if you were at the peace negotiations?
Key words: topics, peace negotiations

For you, what are the most important things that need to be included in the peace process?
Key words: peace process, issues of importance

What are the biggest challenges in the peace process?
Key words: challenges, peace process

What would help to overcome these challenges/concerns?
Key words: assistance, challenges, peace process

What do you hope the peace process will achieve?
Key words: outcomes, peace process

What things have changed since the beginning of the peace process?
Key words: changes, peace process

What is still a challenge/concern?
Key words: current challenges

What do you want to see in the future in your community?
Key words: future, hopes/wants

What would help you achieve that?
Key words: needs, future

What role could you have/how could you assist to achieve that?
Key words: your role, the future

What is the biggest challenge for the future in Kayin State?
Key words: challenges, future, Kayin State

What would help you overcome these challenges?
Key words: assistance, challenges

Most Heard Themes (uncategorised)

1. *Both sides (Myanmar Government and NSAGs) need to be accountable, negotiate on equal terms and be prepared to compromise to achieve peace.*

2. *Communities face difficulties because of competing administrative systems (Myanmar government and KNU systems) including rule of law, accountability and excessive taxation.*

3. *Communities are vulnerable to lawlessness and have no protection from criminal activities.*

4. *Communities want to select their own capable leaders who can take a community-centred approach to engagement in the peace process.*

5. *Communities desire development assistance: services (education, health care), infrastructure (road, transportation) and economic opportunity*

6. *Communities desire programs that can support youth with job opportunities and drug prevention.*

7. *Communities need support to engage in the peace process. Currently there is no opportunity for community engagement.*

8. *There is a need to bridge ethnic discrimination and feelings of ethnic nationalism in Kayin State to move forward in the peace process.*

9. *Communities desire peace, freedom and equal rights.*

10. *Communities are concerned over exploitation of resource extraction and development due to a lack of visible community benefits and environmental impacts.*

11. *Communities are concerned about a potential breakdown in the ceasefire agreement. If the ceasefire breaks down, the situation will be far worse than before.*

12. *Communities desire more than a ceasefire agreement, and want leaders from the Myanmar government and NSAGs to achieve real peace.*

13. *There is still a heavy military presence (both Tatmadaw and NSAG soldiers) in villages. Communities want both sides to reduce military forces, withdraw from front lines and cease new troop recruitment.*

14. *Communities have seen improvements since the beginning of the peace process, but do not completely trust the process.*

15. *Landmines need to be cleared.*

16. *Land grabbing is a significant concern for communities.*

17. *Communities need more information about news, current events and the peace process.*

18. *The peace process needs to be genuine and sincere, and agreements must be ensured.*

19. *Communities are currently experiencing forced taxation from multiple armed groups[22] and want taxation reduced.*

20. *Some communities are experiencing more freedom of movement, while some places still have restrictions.*

[22] Armed groups who were mentioned to be enforcing taxation were: Tatmadaw, KNU, DKBA and BGF groups.




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"Sincerity is fundamental. All of us need to try hard to work together."
– A community member in Karen (Kayin) State

Conversations with over 100 people from all walks of life across Karen (Kayin) State in Myanmar took place to better understand different views on the peace process and the current needs of their communities. Employing listening methodology as the primary research method, analysis pulled out common and reoccurring themes in the minds of those who participated. This publication raises their voices and draws upon the insight and wisdom of people directly affected by ongoing conflict and the Myanmar peace process.

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