



Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

Strategic Peacebuilding for Asia

Listening to Communities of Karen State

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, and 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 frontlines and cease new troop recruitment.*
3. *Land mines need to be cleared.*
4. *Communities are currently experiencing forced taxation from multiple armed groups¹ 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, healthcare), 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 peace process and caused many participants to question if it is 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 to 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 are concerned with their standard of living and reported the lack of services and economic opportunity in Kayin State. Participants explained that Kayin State lacked healthcare services; education; transport and village infrastructure; telecommunication; and electricity. In this context, resource and business development is 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 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 frontlines 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. Land mines 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 healthcare, 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.

CPCS Recommendations

CPCS has combined the most commonly heard themes with the situation update and internal analysis of the Myanmar context to formulate recommendations for key actors.

To the Myanmar government and NSAG leadership:

- 1) All armed groups should reduce military presence in Kayin State by withdrawing from frontlines and decrease 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 to 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 legal framework for taxation in villages and at checkpoints 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 healthcare, 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.

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 healthcare, education and transport infrastructure and develop of livelihood opportunities as a poverty reduction strategy.