



*Working inside the triangles:
engaging with locally led
peace initiatives in Myanmar*

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About the Author

Sarah Clarke is a member of the Board of Directors of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies. In New York, she works on peacebuilding and peacemaking issues at the UN. She has also worked with a wide variety of NGOs in Southeast Asia, and with policy advisors and academics in China.

I grew up in a Western country where winters were cold and the snow piled up very deep. However, from a young age my map of the world included Southeast Asia as my parents spent much of their lives working and living in the region. This shaped my own focus and, as a young adult out of university, I had the opportunity to spend several years working with a variety of Thai and Cambodian NGOs.

From those years, my most memorable experience was a twelve-month period in the late 1990s I spent supporting a training for ethnic community leaders from Myanmar. It was the only training of its kind and involved bringing a group of about 25 men and women from different ethnic nationalities to spend 13 weeks in Thailand as well as a two-week visit to the Philippines. The curriculum focused on a broad range of issues such as participatory community development, non-violent direct action, gender issues, HIV/AIDS and drug addiction treatment, different models of community organizing and potential roles for religious leaders.

Hundreds of graduates have passed through the course over the years. When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, the training was in its eleventh year. The devastation and loss of life from the storm was mind-boggling. While the international community spent precious days and weeks blocked from accessing those most in need, local actors, some of whom had been through the training in Thailand, came together and organized assistance to those in need, using their inside knowledge of the context to deliver emergency assistance to those in the Irrawaddy Delta.

By 2008, I was living and working in New York with a small NGO accredited to the UN. We focused on a variety of peacemaking and peacebuilding issues, and Myanmar and the role of the UN in Myanmar became one of my own areas of focus. Working with partners in the region, we were able to build connections with actors inside the country who were eager to find quiet ways to share their stories and analysis at the international level. I found colleagues in New York – UN staff and diplomats – eager for the chance to talk and learn from people whom they could not meet otherwise. At times these connections put our friends from Myanmar at personal risk. They took on the risk despite the fact that there was little that anyone at the international level could do to be of assistance, particularly the UN, which walked a fine line, balancing demands of western actors who advocated tough engagement with Myanmar’s military government around human rights issues, and those of powerful actors in the region who emphasized non-interference. This latter perspective coincided closely with the perspective of the Myanmar authorities, which remained deeply suspicious and unwelcoming of outside efforts to “help”.

From the period of about 2008 to 2011, I could always be sure of at least 2 – 3 visits a year by Myanmar colleagues who would

come to New York to share their stories and provide a glimpse into a country that many western media sources only covered through limited and often highly biased sources.

Then, things began to change in Myanmar. After elections in 2010, the new president launched an ambitious program of reform: a reconciliation that few had anticipated took place between the president and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and an ambitious effort emerged to launch a peace process between the government and many of the country's ethnic armed groups. The speed of change and new openings took everyone by surprise. For me, sitting in New York, the result was that visits from colleagues in Myanmar stopped – they had new opportunities and tremendous demands on their time. Travelling to New York, understandably, fell far down their list of priorities.

Since then, I have found ways to keep in touch with partners working in Myanmar. But it became increasingly clear to me that, in order to better understand something of the situation, I would need to pack up my bags and go there myself. I had the good fortune to be able to base myself with the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Siem Reap, Cambodia. During my time in Southeast Asia I travelled to Yangon and was able to sit down with many wonderful friends and colleagues to hear about their exciting work and their hopes and fears for their country and their communities. I met with Myanmar NGO activists, religious leaders, young members of the 88 Generation movement, ethnic leaders, journalists, former political prisoners, consultants who have lived and worked inside Myanmar for many years, and spent long hours with members of the CPCS staff who work on peacebuilding challenges inside the country. I am deeply grateful for the time all these individuals spent

with me and am honored to be able to share and reflect on some of their stories.

This paper does not provide an in-depth analysis of the country's current context or a detailed history of how it got to where it is now. Many other excellent papers exist that serve that purpose. Also it is written from the subjective viewpoint of an outsider who can never know or understand the whole story. At the same time, my distance from the day to day, puts me in a position to stand back and consider the big picture in a way that those who are down in the trenches may not have the luxury to do.

Thus, this paper is intended as a quick snapshot taken at a moment in time. Its purpose is to communicate to the reader some of the concerns and challenges that friends and colleagues shared, as well as insights into the exciting and innovative approaches that are being carried forward by local actors to address those challenges; I want to share how those approaches, informed by an in-depth understanding of the context that can come only from local actors, offer lessons to long-term peacebuilding work. My goal is to also share this snapshot so that it might raise awareness among international actors as they think about their own engagement in a highly complex conflict situation, and the potential that their interventions have for either making the situation worse or supporting long-term peacebuilding.

Recommendations:

International actors need to consider the following strategies when engaging in Myanmar:

Complexity and locally led

Acknowledge the level of complexity at play in Myanmar, and the key importance of seeking out and supporting locally led solutions with the capacity to navigate the complex landscape

Long-term

Adopt long-term perspectives that embrace and support initiatives in the areas of capacity and unity building over time

Working inside the triangle

Focus efforts and resources not only on newly accessible communities, groups in crisis, or those at the poles of Myanmar's power constellation, but to balance these with the needs of the Burman majority who remain key actors in building lasting peace.

Myanmar Politics and Power Struggles: the domestic triangle

From sophisticated Myanmar analysts to armchair pundits, commentators on Myanmar will quickly point to an ongoing three-way power struggle taking place within Myanmar's central political structures. The principle poles of this triangle can be summarized as the executive (President Thein Sein and his close advisors), the parliament, and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw).

Within this struggle, President Thein Sein, with support from a number of key advisors, has pushed for an ambitious program of reforms and changes. His advisors have also taken the lead in moving peace talks forward with a myriad of ethnic armed groups. The profile and personalities of key advisors have had a profound impact on the reforms and peace process.

At the same time, the parliament, led by Speaker Shwe Mann, has worked to develop its own role in national politics and has taken the lead around key pieces of legislature. It is important to remember that the parliament contains a multiplicity of actors, including democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, representatives of ethnic parties, a large segment of representatives from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) with its informal links to the Tatamadaw, as well as direct representation of the Tatamadaw.

The significant change seen in Myanmar since the 2010 elections has brought a distinct advantage: insiders and outsiders alike now have a much better understanding of the internal workings of what used to be viewed by outsiders as an opaque, monolithic regime. Now, a

more nuanced view of differences, alliances and fault-lines allows an opportunity for more sophisticated engagement by outsiders. At the same time, aspects of Myanmar's political structures still remain murky, including speculation by many inside Myanmar and in the region that General Than Shwe remains an actor pulling strings in the shadows, particularly with respect to the Tatmadaw.

The third pole of the domestic triangle is the Tatmadaw itself. Among Myanmar political structures, the Tatmadaw represents the actor around which western observers struggle the most in their understanding as to its motivations, strategies, and even its command structure (this is not necessarily true for neighbors in the region who have regular and direct links with the Tatmadaw). From further away there is a tendency to see the Tatmadaw as monolithic. It is essential to recognize that, as with the other two poles of this constellation, the Burmese military is not a unitary actor and includes a diversity of players with different interests and perspectives.

Significant challenges emerge from this three-way power struggle. For one thing, the president has been pushing a reform agenda challenging either one, or both, of the other two poles at any given time. The reform agenda has also proceeded so quickly that it has been difficult for the other two poles to keep abreast of changes.

This context of a three-way power struggle means that there is a constant shifting in the pulls and pushes driving Myanmar politics at any given moment. Alliances within the triangle shift rapidly and relations remain fluid and complex. For instance, recent months have seen increased speculation regarding the emergence of an alliance between Aung San Suu Kyi and USDP leader Shwe Mann pushing a reform agenda that attempts to undercut that of President Thein Sein.

Given the fluidity and complexity of this situation, observers monitoring the situation from a distance will be hard pressed to gain a firm understanding of any corner of the triangle, and how it relates

to other poles at any one time. Likewise, observers would be naïve to think that the poles of the triangle, particularly the parliament and Tatmadaw, are made up of unitary actors. Within each of these camps a myriad of divisions and internal power structures exist that remain fluid.

The challenges in a situation like this are illustrated through a brief look at the peace process.

The Peace Process

While talks between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups have been initiated at a breathtaking pace, the executive branch of government has led them. Thus far, the parliament has had only a limited role, despite the fact that, ultimately, it will have to ratify and create legislation that allows for the implementation of any agreements that emerge out of the various peace processes.¹ Likewise, most peace talks have taken place with one major party to the conflict, the Tatmadaw, absent from the table. Obviously the Tatmadaw have their own interests and concerns related to any peace efforts and this was highlighted on a number of occasions when the president called for unilateral ceasefires that were not followed by local military commanders. Most Myanmar watchers will immediately acknowledge that, at this point in its transition, the executive, as is the case in many other nation states plagued by conflict, does not have clear command and control over the military. Indeed, as should be expected given Myanmar's past, analysts in the region acknowledge that the military maintains a degree of influence and control over the executive.

Significant developments have emerged from the peace process: talks have established contacts and communication mechanisms between armed groups and central political structures. These have served to

¹ Tensions between President Thein Sein, and Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann around this situation were made quite explicit in 3 July 2013 Irrawaddy article 'Shwe Mann Demands Parliament's Involvement in Burma's Peace Process'.

reduce clashes in some areas. Also, new spaces have opened for dialogue, movement, and on-the-ground-work by civil society. At the same time, much work remains to be done.

The current challenge is to move the peace process beyond tenuous ceasefires and “talks about talks”. The next task will be to transform the peace process from a fragile shell to something more robust, built on support and unity of powerful actors. This strong foundation will be needed so the peace process can progress to agreement on key underlying political issues such as transformation of armed groups (security sector reform), revision of the constitution, land reform, federalism and autonomy, resource governance, as well as a process to explore and acknowledge long-standing grievances and violations, committed by all parties to the conflict, after decades of violence.

Key actors in the peace process will need to find ways to not only engage with each other and negotiate on meaningful issues, they will need to reach out so that the center of the domestic triangle has a sense of ownership, is prepared to make concessions, and feels a genuine stake in a positive outcome.

Beyond failing to genuinely engage all three poles of the triangle, the peace process has fallen short in another significant dimension: it has failed to engage the center of the triangle – the Burmese majority, a constituency who will ultimately need to make significant concessions in order to build genuine and lasting peace. To implement measures that address underlying grievances the Burmese majority will need to be prepared to give up privileges and make concessions after living quite far removed from the direct consequences of the conflict. Key actors in the peace process will need to find ways to not only engage with each other and negotiate on meaningful issues, they will need to reach out so that the center of the domestic triangle has a sense of ownership, is prepared to make concessions, and feels a genuine stake in a positive outcome.

Geo-politics and outside actors: the international triangle

On top of the shifting triangle of domestic politics and power struggles, an additional triangle of competing poles has been overlaid on the country at the international level. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on an international triangle whose primary poles include China, the United States, and the role of the international and donor community more broadly.

China

With its shared border and the presence of ethnic groups that straddle this border, China and Myanmar have always had a necessarily close relationship. The nature of this relationship has shifted at different points in history, but in recent years it has reached new depths through the development of significant Chinese investment and infrastructure projects including hydroelectric dams and a major gas pipeline, ongoing relations around extractive industries, as well as significant military-to-military relations. However, interests in Myanmar are also deep and complex as China is by no means a unitary actor. Indeed, the wide variety of Chinese interests and agendas easily create headaches for Beijing, which often finds itself having to manage public diplomacy in response to Myanmar events that provoke reactions from diverse Chinese actors.

This tight relationship has not come without its strains and tensions. These came to a head in September 2011 when the Myanmar government announced it would not move forward with plans to build the Myitsone dam. Tensions in the relationship have also come to prominence around

fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in northern Kachin state: after shells fell on the Chinese side of the border, China became involved in applying pressure on both parties to the conflict and briefly assuming a mediation role that was not welcomed by either side.

Despite these stumbling blocks, the Myanmar government still describes its relationship with China as a “strategic partnership”². Many in Myanmar continue to see it as the primary bilateral relationship, and acknowledge that its magnitude remains so great that a new emerging relationship with the US has been welcomed to provide balance and a source of leverage in relation to Myanmar’s northern neighbor.

United States

In parallel with tensions and pressures surfacing in the relationship with China, Myanmar has also seen a shift and renewed interest from a more distant international actor: the United States. As part of a larger overall “pivot to Asia”³, the US has increased their engagement in Myanmar with remarkable speed and depth. This increased engagement culminated with a visit by US President Barak Obama in November 2012. But additional developments, such as reestablishment of diplomatic ties and appointment of a new ambassador, increased humanitarian assistance and engagement around peace talks between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups have also taken place.

The challenge facing Myanmar is that this engagement has emerged within the broader context of rising Sino-US competition in the region. As the US has deepened its engagement in Southeast Asia, Myanmar risks becoming a pawn in an ongoing chess game between competing

² For more background on this strategic partnership see: 28 May 2011 People’s Daily Online article ‘Newly-forged China-Myanmar strategic partnership of great significance: Premier Wen’.

³ For more background on the Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’, see: *A Conversation with Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, moderated by Robert Kagan, the Brookings Institution & Foreign Policy Initiative* from 2011: <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/obama-administrations-pivot-asia>

global rivals. Officials from both the US and China repeatedly deny this dynamic in public. But for actors in Myanmar and those observing closely, the reality of this dynamic is undeniable.

The context of this larger superpower competition reveals much about Myanmar's unfolding relationship with the US as well as their ongoing relationship with China. Myanmar finds itself in a position of needing to balance one actor against the other. At times, this provides a source of leverage for the Myanmar government as well as other domestic actors, including ethnic armed groups.

The International Community – Donors, UN, INGOs

From a position of relative isolation, Myanmar has seen a tremendous change in engagement by broader actors within the international community, particularly major bilateral donors, the UN, and international NGOs. All of these actors have waded in with enthusiasm in an effort to address areas of tremendous need that are now accessible because of new openings.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this can be seen in the case of donors, including Australia, Finland, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK who have all announced substantial increases in bilateral assistance to be applied towards humanitarian, development and peacebuilding needs. One area of work that has received particular attention and an influx of donor support has been the peace process. A number of donors, particularly Norway, Switzerland, Australia, and Japan, came in quickly to support the process providing essential support. That said, the influx of new funding brought chaos around where and how funds should be spent: confusion emerged about what constitutes 'peace funding', for instance did work with refugees constitute 'peace work'? In other instances, outside donors pushed for a broad range of reforms producing a lack of traction or progress around any one key issue.

Emerging from the turmoil of the early days, a Donor Peace Support Group was formed with the purpose of strengthening donor coordination. For its part, the EU has launched a major effort to build civil service capacity as well as support to help establish the Myanmar Peace Center. Given that assistance of this nature has only made its way into the country since late 2011, significant infrastructure support has emerged in a short space of time. Criticism remains about ongoing needs for coordination and transparency, but given the range and diversity of donors more work remains.

While many other significant international actors play a major role in current Myanmar politics (including members of ASEAN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, India, and a myriad of foreign investors), this simple triangle highlights three key actors. When overlaid on top of the trio of key actors at the domestic level, the triangles, with their constantly shifting and competing poles, present an unstable and dangerous constellation that pushes and pulls in different directions. Like the triangle at the domestic level, actors from the international community have tended to focus their attention on areas of crisis, particularly around the peace process and violence in Rakhine state, while giving little thought to engaging actors at the center of the triangle, a need that we will explore in further depth.

Impact on the Ground

In the context of these shifting pushes and pulls, we have seen a complex situation unfold on the ground. To say that the level of complexity is new or heightened would overlook decades of immense complexity in Myanmar, often oversimplified in interpretations by the international community, media and campaign groups. But the rapid rate of change and shifting alliances between actors within the domestic and international triangles have produced new challenges and crises on the ground. For the purposes of this paper, I will look at two domestic issues that have gained importance over recent months and where these strains are manifest: the spread of anti-Muslim violence and threats to the peace process.

The Spread of Anti-Muslim violence

Through 2012 media headlines focused on developments such as the release of political prisoners and the new role of Aung San Suu Kyi as an elected member of parliament. But this had shifted by May 2012 when media, inside and outside Myanmar, also broadcast stories about spiraling inter-communal violence taking place first in northern Rakhine state and then spreading to other parts of Myanmar. What began as violence against a population based in northern Rakhine, known internationally as the Rohingya⁴, has more recently spread, posing grave danger against Muslim communities throughout the country.

⁴ For helpful background on the origins of this term, please see "Rohingya" A historical and linguistic note' by Jacques P. Leider available at <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF13/jacques-leider.pdf>. This term is deeply controversial within Myanmar.

Fanning the flames from Rakhine state to larger Myanmar

In conversations, Myanmar colleagues acknowledged that while there are significant connections between violence against Rohingya in northern Rakhine state and anti-Muslim violence elsewhere, they caution against seeing false links. In their view, anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine state emerges not only from deep-held racism against the Rohingya, but also out of long-standing discrimination against the Rakhine ethnic group by the larger Burmese society and other ethnic nationalities. One Burmese colleague working with an international organization used a Burmese proverb to illustrate the depths of discrimination against the Rakhine within Myanmar society: *“When walking down the road and you meet a snake and a Rakhine, what do you do first? Kill the Rakhine.”* The expression illustrates the extreme fear and oppression that the Rakhine people have lived with for generations. Their situation of insecurity must be addressed as part of any genuine process to address inter-communal Rakhine-Rohingya violence, and Burmese-Rohingya violence.

While divisions and resentment between Burmese, Rakhine and Rohingya communities have their roots in discrimination against and between ethnic groups, they are also inadvertently reinforced by actions taken by outsiders: international assistance – both humanitarian and development – has often focused on one group over the other despite the dire needs faced by all. During a recent workshop with Myanmar civil society, one participant reflected on his own approach in providing assistance:

“My organization delivered emergency aid to people affected by communal violence who were displaced. Now looking back I feel I was not impartial. I feel I leaned towards the Buddhist beneficiaries in the way I acted and interacted and my colleague was sympathetic towards the Muslims. Now I realize this was not good. I think the beneficiaries can see how I felt and it only makes the conflict worse even though I was doing a good thing.”⁵

⁵ Comment by community organization member from Rakhine State who was involved in delivering aid to Buddhist and Muslims, during recent conflict transformation training.

Within this context of division, distrust and marginalization, it is possible to see how a spark was able to quickly ignite anti-Rohingya violence in May 2012. This occurred following the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men. By October violence had flared again spreading from northern Rakhine state to the whole of Rakhine state where it was no longer directed specifically against Rohingya, but at the larger Muslim population.

By early 2013, serious anti-Muslim incidents had spread to parts of central Myanmar. Observers highlighted the leadership of key monks and individuals within the Burmese Buddhist Sangha who had fanned the flames, particularly through the 969 movement⁶. At the same time, media reporting and colleagues in Myanmar have alluded to a role being played behind the scenes by powerful political actors who saw potential benefits emerging from the instability. One NGO activist and journalist cautioned against attributing the violence solely to monks working at the community level, which risks overlooking how powerful political actors are manipulating and exploiting the situation for their own gain.

In this vein, a number of Myanmar colleagues pointed to urgent work around the constitutional reform process in advance of the 2015 elections. In their view, anti-Muslim violence has created a useful distraction away from this contentious process. Ironically, some key elements of constitutional reform, such as strengthening laws against hate speech, protection of minority rights and revisions to citizenship laws would all make a contribution to curbing inter-communal violence.

Besides work on the constitution, some note the existence of actors who feel threatened by the broader reform. This has led them to stand back and let the violence take place as a way to secure and maintain their interests.⁷

⁶ See International Crisis Group report 1 October 2013, 'The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar' pages 17-18

⁷ See Analysis of Religious Violence against Muslims in Myanmar, page 3, by Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

While actors working in the shadows have a mix of motivations and roles, labeling the violence as solely the result of backroom manipulation by political elites also risks letting key monks and religious leaders off the hook for their role in the violence. Myanmar colleagues identified the dual emergence of religious leaders, who have drawn false links that connect the Rohingya in the West and Muslims elsewhere in the country, while political actors have stood back and allowed these myths to emerge, creating the opportunity for immense instability and

increasing the likelihood that a strong security approach will be needed and accepted in the future.

While actors may have a variety of motivations for sparking the fire and fanning the flames, it raises the risk that separate fires join together and become an inferno burning out of control.

In this complex situation Myanmar colleagues pointed out that outsiders need to differentiate between the phenomena of anti-Rohyinga and anti-Muslim violence. The two situations emerge out of different root causes and, as a result, require different strategies. Failure to do so plays into forces that have created false linkages for political gain.

Finally, it is essential for all actors to recognize that what originally emerged as a limited flame burning in northern Rakhine state has now spread. While actors may have a variety of motivations for sparking the fire and fanning the flames, it raises the risk that separate fires join together and become an inferno burning out of control.

The Tinder Box

As outsiders, it is difficult to appreciate the level of complexity and the web of networks that allow the fire to spread. Also, it is hard to understand that bridges are burned and constraints imposed on domestic actors because of the fire. Finally, focusing only on the current situation in Rakhine, or wider anti-Muslim violence, fails to see the

larger historical context where the roots of the violence, indeed, inter-communal violence in Myanmar more broadly, lie.

These historical roots stretch back before the colonial era. As with other monarchies within Southeast Asia, Burmese kings emphasized accumulation of power in the center with marginalization of the periphery as a strategy for controlling a vast and diverse territory. During the period of British colonial rule, this approach was flipped on its head with the effect of further deepening divisions: divide-and-rule reinforced colonial power at the center but many members of ethnic minorities were used to suppress the Burman majority further deepening conflict, hatred and grievances.

The military regime under General Ne Win and his *Burmese Road to Socialism* reinforced strong prejudice against non-Burmese and “outsiders” by building on these divisions. Ne Win was highly successful in playing on fear in order to create a national identity that was Burmese above all else. In fact, fear of non-Burmese threats to the Union provided a handy justification for military rule. Today we see this xenophobic foundation is so strong that it is easily invoked and used by political actors as a tool to manipulate others. Failing to take these larger dynamics and their historical roots into consideration misses structural realities and allows for the success of manipulative strategies.

In this context, the impact of outside actors on inside dynamics often has unintended or counter-intuitive consequences. While international human rights groups and International Organizations have a clear obligation to voice concern and objections to actions that violate the rights of minorities, in the Myanmar case they do so in a context where anti-western sentiment combined with animosity against outsiders, or people considered to be “non-Burmese” are easily drawn upon and manipulated with disastrous effect. In making public statements and releasing reports in this complex setting, outside actors point to the gravity of the situation, but they may also inadvertently strengthen hardliners and undermine moderates.

An example of this can be seen in a statement made by UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, to his Group of Friends on Myanmar during July 2013 in which he expressed concern “about the plight of the Rohingya population and their disturbing humanitarian situation”⁸. While intended to voice support for victims of human rights abuses

A statement that was intended to strengthen protection of minority rights inside the country had the unintended effect of undermining the ability of local actors to play a leadership role in carrying this work out on their own.

within the country, the statement was greeted with dismay by many moderate Myanmar peace activists: a leader within Myanmar’s democracy movement had been preparing to speak out regarding ongoing and spreading violence against Muslims within the country; this required taking great personal and political risks. When the Secretary General’s statement became available in Myanmar, the backlash saw a swell in support for hardline anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim attitudes making it impossible for the more moderate leader to speak out. A statement

that was intended to strengthen protection of minority rights inside the country had the unintended effect of undermining the ability of local actors to play a leadership role in carrying this work out on their own.

Threats to the Peace Process

The Myanmar government has engaged twenty armed groups and some of the associated splinter groups in peace talks. For many, armed struggle has been defined for decades around greater ethnic autonomy and secession from the Union of Myanmar. From the government perspective, these insurgent movements have posed a significant threat to border stability and control over natural resources in the border areas.

⁸ Secretary General Ban Ki Moon’s opening remarks to the Group of Friends on Myanmar, 10 July 2013

A wealth of excellent books and papers has been written on the ethnic conflicts and various attempts at peace negotiations. A summary is beyond the remit of this paper, but it is important to recall that during the 1990's, many armed groups and the military-led government achieved ceasefire agreements, but these remained simply ceasefires unable to build a framework for further political agreements or to provide communities with significant peace dividends.

positive peace: a peace that benefits not only from the absence of violence, but from creative and vigorous approaches to reconciliation that bring the capacity to acknowledge and address past injustices as part of the long road towards sustainable peace.

With twenty concurrent sets of peace talks taking place by mid-2013, the current challenge is to see what capacity exists for a peace process that is able to go beyond ceasefire talks and the existence of negative peace (defined as the absence of overt violence) to genuine peacemaking and peacebuilding that leads to a more profound positive peace: a peace that benefits not only from the absence of violence, but from creative and vigorous approaches to reconciliation that bring the capacity to acknowledge and address past injustices as part of the long road towards sustainable peace.

Threats from the Government's Side

As highlighted earlier, one initial challenge facing the government is mechanistic in nature: thus far, advisors to the president and representatives of the armed groups have led peace talks. The executive needs to find ways to broaden ownership for the peace process to include other key stakeholders, namely the newly established parliament and the Tatmadaw.

In the case of the parliament, the challenge lies in engaging with peace discussions as a formal actor that can take on a role and assume responsibilities related to the talks. To leave parliament out of the peace

process risks a situation where actors at the table forge agreements around difficult political issues, but government representatives are then unable to secure necessary support in parliament to make corresponding legislative changes. Currently, this disconnect greatly limits the ability of Union Level Peace Team⁹ negotiators to fully engage around key areas of the peace agenda.

No less important is the need to include the Tatmadaw, as a stakeholder in the peace process. The urgency around this challenge has been dramatically illustrated on a number of occasions when attempts by the president to impose unilateral ceasefires have not been respected or carried out by the military. In addition to surfacing issues around command and control, this situation also points to deep-rooted interests that have emerged for actors within the Tatmadaw after over 60 years of active conflict. These are often economic, particularly in terms of control, ownership and rents generated by access to land and extractive industries. These and other factors combine to create very real motivations that drive armed conflict. Without engaging actors within the Tatmadaw and including them as stakeholders in the peace process, these underlying drivers will continue to sabotage steps towards progress.

Whether the challenge is one of linking with the parliament or the Tatmadaw, the further hurdle lies in the reality that neither institution acts as a unitary actor. They each contain tremendous diversity of perspectives, from parliamentarians who actively oppose peace talks with ethnic armed groups because they perceive them as a threat to their own economic and political interests, through to military commanders who are willing to find backdoor channels in order engage with armed groups in the hopes of protecting and minimizing loss of life among troops under their command.

⁹ For a very thorough overview of the wide variety of structures and institutions created by the Myanmar government, ethnic armed groups, as well as international donors please see 'Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process, a Reference Guide, 2013, by Burma News International.

Threats from the Armed Groups' Side

Finally, the armed groups also face significant challenges in terms of their own engagement in the peace process. Especially for groups that took part in ceasefire agreements in the 1990s, a great deal of skepticism exists about the degree to which peacemaking has the potential to go beyond handshakes, photographs for the media, and backroom deals around business interests, to a real difference for communities. The danger becomes one of managing expectations and avoiding repeated experience of disappointment. While outside observers and donors have advocated for increased public participation in the peace process, inviting additional stakeholders into the empty shell of the negotiations risks overestimating progress and, as in the 1990's, raising false hope at the community level regarding what can be achieved.

Ultimately, key actors in the peace process all face significant work that needs to take place in terms of building greater unity and cohesion within their own constituencies so that peace talks represent genuine opportunities for engagement over issues that, at their heart, will require difficult concessions.

Navigating the triangles – strategies for engagement

For donors, International Organizations and International Non-Governmental Organizations, Myanmar represents an irresistible draw, ripe for engagement and intervention after years of isolation and in the face of desperate need in so many fields. Yet, given the context of shifting tensions between poles at the domestic and international levels, as well as the pushes and pulls between superimposed triangles, we see a context of immense complexity aggravated by rapid change and limited information.

The preceding overview outlines some of the current challenges facing Myanmar. While considering the challenges and constraints, outside actors also have a responsibility to seek out and better understand the opportunities and wealth of positive stories that exist. Media sources and outside commentators often focus on the negative while many courageous, creative, and inspiring examples of work go unnoticed, unrecognized and lack in support.

These stories also point to valuable lessons and strategies that can guide outside engagement. These strategies apply to the Myanmar context, but could be applied in so many other post-conflict and fragile state settings. They include:

Complexity and locally led

International actors must develop an awareness of the intricate complexity of the Myanmar context and actively seek out and support locally led work that accepts and embraces this complexity in order to better navigate the local environment.

Long-term

These levels of complexity have emerged over centuries. International actors must adopt a long-term perspective that takes a realistic view of the time needed for substantive change to emerge. This approach will require a significant commitment of resources and the horizon does not lie in a matter of months, or even in the lead-up to elections in 2015. Instead, change will come through long-term sustained work over decades.

Working inside the triangle

Finally, actors at the international and domestic levels need to engage not only with actors at the poles of Myanmar's political constellation, but also the vast center of the constellation that has, so far, been largely ignored. In the Myanmar context, this center is made up of the ethnic Burman majority who play an important role as civil servants (at both the local and national levels); they are producers and consumers of popular media; they are represented by emerging political parties, unions, students' groups, and identify as rural farmers, urban workers, democracy leaders, or former political prisoners. Whether confronted by the instability and threat of inter-communal violence, the impact of foreign direct investment or the implications of agreements emerging from a multi-stake holder peace agreement, these actors will have a key role in making the concessions and changes required to build lasting and positive peace.

A number of cases, illustrated below, have already been successful and they provide practical examples of how these strategies have been applied within work currently taking place on the ground. These initiatives indicate possible directions forward and avenues for engagement and support by outsiders.

Complexity and locally led

For outsiders, the greatest resource available in navigating this complex setting is, indeed, the many remarkable examples of work already taking place and led by local Myanmar actors. This is illustrated by initiatives taking place in different parts of the country. Myanmar-led work in Rakhine demonstrates the potential role that local actors can play using their own conflict analysis to identify entry points. Ongoing efforts to negotiate peace in Kachin state reminds us how important local ownership remains, even in the context of high-level political relationships.

Confronting Violence in Rakhine State – locally led peace initiatives

While media coverage and international human rights organizations in the west have focused on horrendous human rights violations, ensuing segregation and volatile tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities, many colleagues in Myanmar have approached the situation differently. They acknowledge the serious nature of the crimes and violence. Their conflict analysis also includes the experience and reality facing the Rakhine community, living with its own experience of marginalization and discrimination. While many international interventions have focused on providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine state, some local Myanmar organizations have identified the value of seeking openings that allow them to work with members of the Rakhine community as a starting point in order to build bridges.

One Myanmar NGO described efforts to carry out a series of trust-building workshops with members of the Rakhine community. Workshops included listening exercises, sharing conflict analysis tools and open reflection sessions in which they were able to raise questions to community members and challenge them on perceptions and assumptions around recent and historical events.

NGO workers described the significant challenges they faced in carrying out this work: starting out they faced deep hostility, and rumors and accusations were circulated within the community regarding the organization's motivations. The organization continued to work with those who welcomed them, slowly building trust and broadening participation. Much of the focus was based on traditional teachings of Buddhism, the shared religion within the community, and particularly the teachings that encourage individuals to make use of contemplation as a path to understanding the root causes of conflict and for each person to find peace within themselves.

The work spanned months with repeated sessions that came to involve a wide diversity of actors including local members of parliament. Eventually, a baseline of trust was built and it was possible to raise the most sensitive issues regarding perceptions of Rohingya communities. Out of this work, Rakhine leaders eventually requested support of the organization to facilitate dialogue with Rohingya community members.

The success of this work lay in the ability of Myanmar actors to embrace a conflict analysis where the complexity of the situation was carefully considered. The resulting strategies responded to underlying root causes and enabled the community to expand and explore new avenues in ways that felt appropriate and were welcome.

Myanmar government – KIA talks

In the current peace process between the Myanmar government and armed groups one of the most challenging sets of negotiations has been seen around the conflict in Kachin state. Talks have been made all the more difficult by ongoing, active conflict, and this flashpoint has attracted much concern and interest of international actors eager to offer their services as outside mediators.

The Kachin situation reached a new level of crisis towards the end of 2012 and early 2013 when a government offensive caused significant

losses to the KIA as well as severe displacement of civilians and a deepening humanitarian crisis. For the Chinese government the conflict provoked its own crisis necessitating an emergency response to Kachin refugees pouring across the border. Crisis management was also required to manage popular anger in China in response to shells falling on Chinese territory and concern for members of the Kachin ethnic group which straddles the Myanmar-China border. As a result, Beijing sent some of the strongest and most public messages to Naypyidaw demanding that it not engage in any further violations of Chinese sovereignty.¹⁰

In this situation, the central Chinese government stepped in to take control over talks that had previously been hosted in the Chinese town of Ruili. While the talks were successful in limiting the scope of violence and producing a joint statement between the two sides, Myanmar government and KIA actors bristled at emerging claims that China was mediating the talks. Actors close to the talks were quick to point out that China was hardly the ideal candidate for an outside mediator as it was not seen a neutral. Indeed, its vast economic interests in Kachin state, as well as various forms of formal and informal support to the government and Kachin forces, made it a party to the conflict. Making matters worse, participants expressed private frustration that China acted to control the agenda during talks, insisting that certain issues, such as humanitarian assistance, be left off the table. Also, China had ignored the first essential guiding principle for an outside mediator: it was attempting to play the role without the invitation or consent of either the Myanmar government or the KIA.

After two rounds of talks, the Myanmar government was successful in holding a third round of talks in Myitkina, the government-controlled capital of Kachin State. In this instance, China shifted from playing the role of “mediator” to that of “observer”. They still had great influence over the talks objecting to participation by certain international and Myanmar

¹⁰ See ‘A Tentative Peace in Myanmar’s Kachin Conflict, page 12, Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°140, 12 June 2013

actors, but this shift moved them out of the driver's seat and cast them more accurately as a party at the table with key interests and influence over the conflict. This third round of talks led to the establishment of a KIA liaison office in Myitkina, and the creation of a peace support group to advise the KIA and conduct broad-based consultations with the Kachin public regarding the direction of talks. At the time of writing, the Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) had just signed a seven-point agreement intended to pave the way towards closer cooperation and greater political dialogue.

The case of the Myanmar government – KIA talks illustrates the shared desire on both sides for a locally led process. Despite active conflict, Myanmar actors, with the most detailed understanding of on-the-ground complexities and constraints, have sought a Myanmar-led solution, even in the face of pressure from powerful neighbors.

Long-term

Myanmar has seen an immense influx of outside resources and support to many sectors, including in the area of peacemaking and peacebuilding. As is seen in so many conflict and post-conflict situations, actors on the ground often find themselves caught in a cruel catch-22 funding dilemma: on the one hand donors offer resources that would enable them to finally do important work that has the potential to transform conflict and build on local capacities for peace; on the other hand, the funding cycles and donor requirements lack a long-term view often imposing unrealistic and unreachable goals and timelines. In reality, Myanmar's ethnic conflict and current challenges have roots that stretch back over centuries. Change will require a significant commitment of resources and the horizon for implementation and success does not lie in a matter of months, or even in the run-up to the 2015 elections. Instead, change will come through long-term sustained work over decades.

Within current work around the peace process many examples highlight the need for a long-term approach.

Karen model for women's and community inclusion

An examination of current efforts around the government and Karen National Union (KNU) peace talks illustrates the importance of a long-term approach. Many Myanmar colleagues noted ways in which these talks have been more inclusive than other sets of negotiations. On the KNU side, civil society organizations have asserted roles for themselves, serving as record keepers and arranging community consultations. In describing this development, one Karen leader involved with the talks pointed quickly to the benefit that the KNU has enjoyed because of their many decades living on the Thai-Myanmar border. While years of ongoing conflict took a terrible toll on communities in terms of displacement, human rights violations, and loss of life, groups on the border were the beneficiaries of significant donor assistance. Substantial resources and support were devoted to building the capacity of civil society organizations as this represented a more appealing and viable option than providing assistance inside Myanmar.

As a result, a wide variety of organizations and leaders emerged within the Karen community. While women have had, thus far, a fairly limited role within the Myanmar peace process¹¹, the situation has been quite different in the Karen case. For one thing, a woman has come to play a significant role within the KNU leadership with Naw Zipporah Sein serving as general secretary. Secondly, the KNU benefits from a variety of strong and active women's organizations and networks such as the Karen Women's Organization, and the Karen Women Action Group. These organizations and their active role in the peace process have emerged out of the experience on the border and support of donors over the course of many years and point to the importance on long-term, sustained support.

¹¹ See *December 2013 Opinion – Myanmar's current peace processes: a new role for women?* By Ja Nan Lahtaw and Nang Raw, published by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and available at http://www.hdcentre.org/uploads/tx_news/41MyanmarFINAL.pdf

Building Unity

An examination of ongoing efforts to build unity among and between armed groups provides a further illustration of the need for a long-term approach. Just as President Thein Sein faces the need to build linkages with the legislature, the Tatmadaw, as well as the majority Burman population, ethnic armed groups likewise face challenges around divisions within their own communities. Often times these have been described as instances of hardliners vs. moderates, as well as deep resentment at the community-level towards leadership that is seen as corrupt. In addition, while ethnic communities may share an ethnic identity, important differences exist in terms of religion, relationship with Myanmar's previous military government, and the experience of living in exile or remaining inside the country.

In this situation, it has been just as important for ethnic armed groups to seek out and build internal unity. A Karen and veteran politician artfully illustrate this challenge:

*The KNU leadership needs to be wise enough to recognize and respect these differences and smart enough to find ways of fitting the bricks together. The wall cannot be strong by throwing out the bricks that have a different shape or size.*¹²

Yet, despite the challenge, significant work has been taking place around internal unity building among ethnic groups. While these are not stories that media or observers are picking up in their reporting or analysis, they are well worth noting because of the significant contribution they make towards building the foundation essential to long-term peace efforts. Examples can be seen both in terms of internal unity building within ethnic groups, and between ethnic groups.

¹² See 'Demolishing Unity is Political Suicide', by Poo Ta the pseudonym for a Karen veteran politician who still serves the KNU in various ways including as a participant to the 2012 peace talks with the Myanmar government.

a) Internal Unity Building – Karenni National Progressive Party and community consultations

After securing a ceasefire agreement in March 2012, leadership within the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was faced with the challenge of building linkages and shoring up legitimacy within their own communities. After decades of conflict, extreme isolation, and factionalism, they needed to transform from a non-state armed group, towards a political group with responsibility towards multiple constituencies: splinter Karenni armed groups, civil society organizations – both those that had been working from outside the country on the Thai border, and those based in Yangon – as well as connecting directly with Karenni communities.

In response to this need, KNPP leadership embarked on a process of community consultations that offered a dual opportunity to both explain the peace process to communities, while providing the opportunity to better understand communities concerns and aspirations.

During a September 2013 workshop hosted by the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative¹³, KNPP representatives described their experience of the consultation process thus far where civil society, community-based organizations, and religious leaders were brought together in planning and implementation. KNPP leadership shared their optimism emerging from the experience of being welcomed by community members, even those who had previously been hostile.

The consultation process confirmed the long-term nature of the work that needs to be done. KNPP leadership noted that capacity needs to be built among their community-based organizations so they could better contribute in the consultative processes; for future meetings they hoped to shift the consultation focus from development to more challenging political concerns; and as a long-term aspiration they noted the need

¹³ MPSI Field Report Community Consultation Workshop, 11-12 Sept 2013, Chiangmai

for stronger agreement among stakeholders so that they would be able to organize a Karenni conference.

The experience of the KNPP points to impressive work led by local actors that has begun a long-term process of unity building.

b) Building Unity – Karen – Shan collaboration

Karen and the Shan actors, recognizing the urgent need to build unity between ethnic groups in order to strengthen their position at the bargaining table, have focused on putting their respective houses in order and strengthening ties. The release of a Joint Statement by the KNU and Restoration Council of the Shan State (RCSS), put out on 17 July 2013, provides a vivid illustration of the success of this strategy. The statement reflects unity-building work that has taken place over many months and concludes by observing that:

*For the first time ever, all of Burma's stakeholders will sit together to discuss and design how to bring lasting and just peace to all of Burma's citizens. The process is based in unity and consensus, and all of the stakeholders will have to move together for the process to succeed.*¹⁴

It serves as a vivid reminder of the long-term efforts that are required and need support in order to build peace over time.

Colleagues working around the peace process have held up examples such as these with deep admiration. They emphasize instances where local Myanmar actors have begun to fit the bricks together, building a foundation that will be essential to success of the peace process over time. There is an appreciation that this work cannot be delayed, as progress is needed sooner rather than later, tempered by the realism that the endeavor will require sustained support and hard work over time.

¹⁴ See JOINT STATEMENT Karen National Union & Restoration Council of the Shan State 17 July, 2013 available at <http://www.english.panglong.org>

While these examples point to impressive initiatives taking place among ethnic actors, the need for a commitment to locally led work over the long-term is just as urgent for the Burman majority. Whether looking at existing pro-democracy groupings such as the 88 Generation, emerging actors such as unions, media, new political parties, or developing actors such as the USDP, or the parliament more broadly, internal divisions and fractures need to be explored and commonalities built upon. The end goal should be a Myanmar-led effort that embraces the country's rich diversity while maintaining a sense of unity capable of resisting divide and rule tactics from whatever sources.

Working inside the triangle

For years, outside assistance to Myanmar, particularly from western donors, focused on support to ethnic and pro-democracy groups based on the border. The opening of the country has seen an influx of donor funding and the possibility to reach previously isolated communities. In particular, significant sums have become available to support work around the peace process through mechanisms such as the Peace Donors Support Group¹⁵.

Ironically, assistance for initiatives working with the larger Myanmar population has not kept pace. As we have seen in previous sections, this leaves the risk of a majority-Burmese population that find themselves unsupported and disconnected from the political and peacebuilding developments taking place around them.

Despite this shortfall, impressive examples of locally led work that reach out and engage the larger Burmese majority exist.

¹⁵ For further background on the PDSG, please see 'Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process, a Reference Guide, 2013, by Burma News International

Confronting Anti-Muslim Violence – locally led initiatives around anti-Muslim Violence

In response to rapidly spreading anti-Muslim violence, a Myanmar journalist and civil society activist shared his own experience of working collaboratively with a well known literary figure to develop methods of engagement that challenged emerging currents of violence. Participants came together through a photo exhibit to look at aspects of Myanmar environmental resources, cultural traditions, and history of social harmony and cohesion that were at risk as a result of rapid socio-economic changes and social upheaval taking place.

Beyond the exhibit, the journalist and writer have been collaborating to hold a series of public inter-religious forums between Buddhists and Muslims. Working with communities in rural areas outside of Mandalay, the facilitators focused on issues of cultural heritage. The writer offered reflections on the tradition of story telling in Myanmar upholding the contributions that Muslim leaders and communities have played in that vibrant tradition. The journalist, who self-identifies as Burmese of Indian decent, looked at the current violence from a media perspective and engaged community members around questions of where stereotypes come from and the need for responsible journalism. He challenged participants to go beyond stereotypes and consider diversity in Myanmar and the ways in which Myanmar people have multiple identities that have served as a source of societal strength.

Engaging key actors from the Burman majority

In addition to this community-based work, a variety of civil society actors shared their experience of engaging with key governmental actors and power brokers. Their experience reminds us to avoid the pitfall of painting any group as monolithic.

More specifically, civil society partners have shared their experience of identifying key individuals within institutions – civil servants, or

government ministers from the local or national level – who have a critical view of developments and are willing to use their positions of power and the protection they enjoy to speak out or to explore creative ways to engage at the community level.

In one case, colleagues referred to a minister from Kayin state who was very willing to speak out publically and critically regarding anti-Muslim violence, using his position of authority and the protection he enjoyed to express frank views on what he saw as a dangerous situation. In fact, during training sessions with civil servants, the Minister not only shared his view openly, but also articulated how he saw it as his responsibility to speak out.

Finally, a number of civil society organizations shared their experience of conducting workshops with civil servants that aimed at raising awareness among actors with the potential to play a leadership role in national politics. Some workshops have engaged high-ranking civil servants such as state ministers for Kayin State, and officials from Department of Immigration and Police. Other workshops and trainings have directly included parliamentarians as participants and aimed to deepen a shared understanding and trust around ongoing peace efforts.

All of these locally led efforts provide concrete examples of initiatives to engage actors in the center of the triangle whose participation and sense of ownership will be key in the success of any long-term peace and reform efforts.

Conclusion & Recommendations

A consideration of the preceding cases provides concrete examples that highlight the need for international actors to

- Acknowledge the level of complexity at play in Myanmar, and the key importance of seeking out and supporting locally led solutions with the capacity to navigate the complex landscape
- Adopt long-term perspectives that embrace and support initiatives in the areas of capacity and unity building over time
- Focus efforts and resources not only on newly accessible communities, groups in crisis, or those at the poles of Myanmar's power constellation, but to balance these with the needs of the Burman majority who remain key actors in building lasting peace.

The exciting story in Myanmar today is one about being at the beginning of a long winding road with many potential pitfalls ahead. But it is a road that, for the first time in decades, has the possibility of leading to a new and different place. While most of the population has seen very little in terms of positive developments in their everyday lives – wide spread poverty remains, only a small handful of new laws and guarantees have been implemented, active conflicts and displacement remain a reality for many, and new instances of inter-community violence have erupted – more subtle forms of change are taking place. These are seen in new spaces and small initiatives that did not previously exist.

Success stories such as these need to be sought out and celebrated. They exemplify the bravery and creativity of local actors to initiate conversations and processes even without the formal safety provided by rule of law and institutional changes. They deserve to be supported and built upon so that even in the face of future divide-and-rule tactics the resilience and unity of a diverse Myanmar will make return to authoritarian rule an impossibility.



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The Embassy of Finland in Bangkok is supporting selected small-scale development projects in the lower Mekong Region through Fund for Local Cooperation (FLC). The fund is an instrument of the Finnish government to complement its development cooperation efforts in peace building and conflict transformation and promotion of human and civil rights.

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