

Listening to Voices from Inside: Ethnic People Speak



Myanmar

**Listening to Voices
from Inside:
Ethnic People Speak**

Table of Contents

Preface	4
Acknowledgements	7
Executive Summary	9
Recommendations	16
List of Acronyms	21
Glossary/Terminology	23
Introduction	25
PART A: ANALYSIS	35
Cultural Context	37
General Context	69
Inter-Group Interaction	129
Ethnic Vision and International Community Support	160
Conclusion	205
PART B: CASE STUDIES	209
Chin Case Study	211
Kachin Case Study	228
Karen Case Study	247
Kayah Case Study	266
Mon Case Study	280
Rakhine Case Study	294
Shan Case Study	311
Bamar Case Study	331
REFERENCE LIST	350

Preface

This publication of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies is the product of a research project undertaken in 2009 at the request of a group of civil society leaders from different ethnic nationalities who live and work in Myanmar. It was felt that internationally, little is known about the experiences and context of ethnic groups in Myanmar. The civil society leaders expressed a desire for a publication that could educate the international community and could also be used as a tool within Myanmar to support dialogue between different ethnic groups, including the predominant Bamar majority.

The research informing this report is based on eighty-seven qualitative interviews with civil society members from the eight major ethnic nationalities in Myanmar—Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, Shan and Bamar. An average of ten people from each ethnic nationality was interviewed. Interviewees included men and women from rural and urban areas, students, business people, farmers, housewives, NGO workers, government employees, religious leaders, medical officers and lawyers. The interviews were conducted in urban and regional parts of Myanmar.

Gaining an understanding of the contemporary context of different ethnic groups in Myanmar is critical for the international actors who work on issues such as human rights, trade, development, conflict transformation and humanitarian aid. This publication provides a snapshot of that context. It documents civil society perceptions of culture, and opportunities and challenges in key areas such as health, education, employment, government and military relations, and elections. It records civil society views of interactions among ethnic groups. It records people's visions for the future and documents their views on how external organisations can support those visions.

The political environment in which these interviews took place also renders this snapshot unique. At the time of the interviews, inter-ethnic issues had entered a new phase, heralded by the government's requirement that armed ceasefire groups turn themselves into Border Guard Forces (BGF) with central oversight; the US announcement of its decision to revisit its policy on Myanmar, and intense speculation about the trial of Aung San Syu Kyi and the planned 2010 elections. This highly charged environment influenced the subject matter of the interviews.

Those involved in this publication acknowledge that '**ethnic**', '**ethnic group**,' and '**ethnicity**' are contested and often highly charged terms. We use this language in the absence of better alternatives. We employ these terms—ethnic, ethnic group and ethnicity—knowing that ethnicity is subjective, fluid, and plural. Some people may identify with a number of ethnic groups or none at all. We also acknowledge that currently and historically, these identities are embodied with assumptions and stereotypes. Our starting point for this publication has been to rely upon how people identified their own ethnicity.

This foundational study brought to light a significant number of issues on a broad range of topics. Enormous scope was found for further research. Exploring the data collected, we make the following conclusions:

- Inter-ethnic conflict is a fundamental dynamic of the conflict in Myanmar. This needs to be understood in order for effective work to take place to build peace and social change.
- Inter-ethnic understanding, particularly in relation to cultural norms and practices, should be promoted across the top, middle and grassroots levels. This can address cultural stereotyping and prejudice that has existed for generations.
- Selecting strategic issues common to all ethnic groups around which to organise, such as the environment, can bring ethnic groups together and towards a common goal. Unity, working across different groups, is critical.

- NGOs should look to existing groups and structures that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and cultural preservation and channel funds to support and boost these initiatives, such as the Culture and Literature Associations and the Network of Ethnic Youth. These organisations could consider further including the Bamar majority in some of their initiatives as a way of breaking down existing barriers.
- There is a need for capacity building in numerous areas including: infrastructure, agriculture and technology, civic education, election monitoring, and social science.
- Working strategically with the government as part of a constructive engagement approach has led to developments and has the potential to move the country forward on key issues such as education and infrastructure.
- International actors should work to find ways to facilitate dialogue between the government, the National League of Democracy (NLD) and other significant political parties and ethnic nationalities. They can also play a role in lobbying key international actors such as China, India and Russia.

Like the last publication of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis*, this publication amplifies the voices of those living on inside Myanmar on inter-ethnic interactions and ethnic nationalities. The voices of these people who work closely on the conflict and bear the consequences of its impact, ought to be heard as loudly and as clearly as those who live and speak outside the country.

Acknowledgements

Many people have said it is near impossible to do peace work inside Myanmar. Even more say it is impossible to do research inside the country. It is not impossible, but it is indeed a difficult and challenging task.

For this reason we would like to thank the research team who conducted the interviews throughout the country. They showed a particular flair for the sensitive yet rigorous approach required for such an undertaking. They spent many days of their own time checking and re-checking facts, writing up and editing transcripts and synthesising the findings. It was no small feat, and they excelled at the task.

All involved in this project were deeply touched by those who came forward to be interviewed. As we all know, agreeing to speak openly about such topics in Myanmar is risky, yet over and over again people seized the chance to have their perspectives told and hopefully heard outside of their country. This report would not have been possible without their willingness to share from their hearts their plights as well as their vision and hopes for the future.

Helping the research team connect to the interviewees was a small but deeply committed group of ethnic civil society leaders who first laid down the challenge to CPCS to produce such a manual of ethnic voices. They have read and re-read numerous drafts of this publication and have been challenged and inspired by what they have learned along the way. Thank you to them for their vision and leadership.

We would also like to acknowledge those who resourced this project. Naturally it is what oiled the wheels of the work.

While we can not name the multitude of people who have contributed and participated in the production of this important documentation, you know who you are and we are deeply grateful. Together we look forward to the day when this book can be re-printed naming those who spoke their minds freely!

Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, June 2010

Executive Summary

Listening to Voices from Inside: Ethnic People Speak showcases the voices of people from civil society, and of different ethnic groups, who are rarely heard. Myanmar is an extremely ethnically diverse country. Regrettably, inter-ethnic conflict is a fundamental dynamic in Myanmar's protracted civil war. Despite this, ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic conflict seldom capture the attention of the international community who have a tendency to see inter-ethnic conflict as adjunct to the quest for peace and democracy in Myanmar. This publication, the result of a foundational study, presents the voices of eighty-seven civil society members from different ethnic groups who live in Myanmar. It documents their perceptions of opportunities and challenges in key areas of interactions with other ethnic groups, government and military relations, education, employment, health, and culture. It records their vision for the future and how external organisations can support that vision. *Listening to Voices from Inside: Ethnic People Speak* creates a channel for local people to be heard on inter-ethnic issues in Myanmar and is a resource to increase understanding of the issues among external and domestic actors. It brings inter-ethnic conflict back from the periphery to argue that transforming inter-ethnic conflict is central to building peace and democracy in Myanmar. The following summarises the key points under each section.

Culture

- Without exception, civil society members of all ethnic nationality groups spoke of constraints on cultural expression and limitations experienced as a result of belonging to a certain cultural grouping. The data suggests the development of ethnic nationality identities, culture, histories and language and literature are generally not supported by the government. Bamar-centred government policy is reflected in everything

from education curricula through to popular culture (as expressed through media such as TV, radio and newspapers). The requirement that Burmese be the only language of instruction in government schools, combined with the absence of a curriculum to support ethnic nationality languages and the use of textbooks that reinforce a Bamar-centred perspective, is seen as effecting the corrosion of ethnic nationality languages and culture.

- In the absence of government support, civil society actors have adopted strategies to preserve ethnic nationality languages, culture and history. Under considerable constraints, families, religious institutions and community-based organisations engage in activities such as summer schools and festivals, and produce literature, to ensure nationality cultures survive.

General Context

- For the civil society members interviewed through this research, education emerged as the single biggest concern facing all ethnic groups. It was widely felt that the education system was under-resourced, corruption-prone, fostered a Bamar-centred bias and failed to equip young people with the skills to face their future. There was a common call for its improvement.
- The lack of investment in infrastructure and the economy were amongst the range of additional concerns that persistently surfaced. In the business sector, it was perceived that big companies dominated and small businesses were forced out or faced a very difficult time generating a profit. Poor infrastructure compounded these problems. Corruption was said to be endemic and a central practice of government, military and business. People also associated forced labour and sexual violence with the military. Sanctions were criticised for squeezing the civilian population more than the government. It was felt that there was a lack of investment in modern and technology-based agricultural practices that could enhance food

security. Collectively, these factors were pushing internal and external migration.

- There was consistency amongst the ethnic nationalities interviewed as regards what was termed ‘Burmanisation’. Interviewees felt there were constraints placed on cultural expression and a silencing of alternative historical narratives. The dominant media representations subordinated ethnic nationalities. Ethnic nationalities experienced racial and religious discrimination in employment, particularly in the civil service and in terms of progressing to higher ranks in the civil service. Men and women spoke of the military targeting women from ethnic nationalities for sexual violence. The Border Guard Forces issue, alive during the field research in Myanmar, was perceived as inflaming current tensions and increasing the chances for armed conflict.
- The migration phenomenon was keenly felt by all ethnic nationalities. Many people of all ages, but particularly young people above school age, were migrating legally and illegally to other countries for work. Remittances were said to be a primary source of income for many households. Migrants’ experience of other countries was sometimes precarious. Some interviewees had worked overseas and returned to Myanmar to work for civil society. They expressed the view that more people wish to return to Myanmar but the conditions are such that they cannot, as the opportunities do not exist in Myanmar to sustain them or they do not have the documents to gain re-entry.

Intergroup Relations

Relationship of Ethnic Nationalities with the Government

- Almost all interviewees from the ethnic nationality groups and the Bamar majority characterised their relationship with the government as negative and difficult. Many described that

they did not like or trust the government. From the ethnic nationality's perspective mistrust has been exacerbated by: perceived government failures as regards the Panglong Agreement¹ and ceasefire agreements; exhaustive natural resource extraction activities in the seven states; corruption; discrimination in the military and government sector; and loss of land.

- Interviewees felt the government had a strategy to promote division amongst ethnic nationality groups and the Bamar. People said the government divided them according to differences in religion and ethnicity, both within and between the various ethnic groups. Geographic location and infrastructure problems further exacerbated division, in addition to government restrictions on gathering in public spaces. Bamar interviewees said the government manufactured divisions using class, occupation and political affiliation. Soldiers were also said to be divided from civil society.
- Despite their concerns with the government, many interviewees felt the government was inevitably part of any future solution to the country's problems. Whilst it was clear interviewees are not satisfied with the government, they maintained the importance of engagement, dialogue, and cooperation. They explained that in the government there are people who want to do good things, and if they want change in the country they need to work cooperatively with those people to build the national capacity. People spoke of adopting a good relationship with the government for their survival.

Intra- and Inter-Group Interaction

- Interviewees felt there is some level of interaction with other ethnic groups yet few examples were heard of this interaction,

¹ The Panglong Agreement, signed on 12 February 1947 by General Aung San and Shan, Kachin and Chin representatives, stipulates autonomy in internal administration 'in principle' for the so-called "Frontier Areas." For the text of the Panglong Agreement, see: Burma Library, "The Panglong Agreement, 1947," http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong_agreement.htm (accessed on 22 January 2010).

particularly across states. Interaction appears to have increased after Cyclone Nargis, and amongst young people active in an ethnic youth network. Religion is also playing a role in connecting ethnic groups.

- Almost all of the interviewees from ethnic nationality groups mentioned they have a difficult relationship with the Bamar. Interviewees from ethnic nationalities often synonymously used the terms 'Bamar', 'government' and 'soldiers', rarely distinguishing between Bamar civil society and the authorities. Often, negative perceptions remained strong despite a lack of negative personal experience. Instead, bad experiences were passed down from one generation to the next.
- It was felt that there is not enough understanding of ethnic diversity amongst the ethnic groups as regards cultural practices and norms, and that the government does not do enough to create space to facilitate inter-ethnic understanding.
- There was a strong perception held by some interviewees from ethnic nationality groups that to marry a Bamar threatened their ethnic nationality culture. Those interviewed who participate in inter-ethnic marriages felt isolated and excluded from the Bamar majority and ethnic nationalities.
- All interviewees from different ethnic groups expressed that religious networks and community based organisations (CBOs) are vital as they promote positive interaction by bringing different ethnic groups together for development work, training and capacity building.

Ethnic Vision and Role of the International Community

Elections

- Of the eighty-seven civil society members interviewed, forty-one individuals from seven different ethnic groups spoke of the upcoming election. There were six perspectives adopted amongst the civil society members interviewed: 'Don't Believe

Election will be Fair—The Government will Win like the 2008 Referendum’; ‘Do Not Participate’; ‘Election will Happen... But It won’t Bring any Changes’; It is an Opportunity—Change can Happen—It will Take Time; Civil Society has No Time or Opportunity to Prepare; Election May Not Happen.’ The majority of people felt the election signified gradual change and did not expect much from it, believing it would be like the 2008 constitutional referendum.

Vision for the Future

- Despite the difficult situation of each ethnic group in Myanmar, people still have strong hopes that positive change will be possible one day, though many said it will be a long and slow process. The following is a summary of the voices of civil society members of different ethnic groups on their vision for Myanmar: ‘Treat Everyone Fairly’; ‘Give all Full Rights and Equal Opportunity’; ‘Democracy, Federal Democracy’; ‘Peaceful Society and Development’; ‘Cooperation with Government and Others’; ‘Unity among Different Ethnic Groups’; ‘Change Government...Government that Represents Us’; ‘Awareness and Education’; and finally, ‘Be the Agents of Change...Change in Attitudes and Systems.’

International Community Role in Supporting the Ethnic Groups and Positive Change in Myanmar

- Some interviewees said they didn’t see much room for the international community in Myanmar, primarily stemming from the perceived lack of progress made by UN representatives, including the Secretary General. Conversely, others indicated that there is indeed space for the international community to operate in Myanmar and that there are many ways they can influence the Myanmar context. It was said, however, that there needs to be greater levels of cooperation and strategy between international actors when attempting an intervention in Myanmar. Interviewees called for the

international community to create more connections with domestic actors, and to more fully understand the situation and its complexity, particularly regarding ethnic issues. Civil society views on the role of the international community can be summarised as follows: Raise awareness and support capacity development; Create stronger linkages and foster cooperation across civil society organisations and government; Provide humanitarian support; Listen to local people and understand the context; Cooperate with other international governments...Foster more dialogue with ASEAN, China and India.

Messages to the International Community

- In addition to the above, civil society members had several specific messages for the international community, such as, “The people are not the government.” “We need your support to help us change the government, we also need humanitarian assistance. We need you to come to Myanmar to understand our situation. Please understand the situation is now very dangerous. Living in Myanmar is good. I love Myanmar because we have a lot of resources. We have kind people, lots of interesting places to visit. We have a beautiful land. So if the government opened and changed, it would be a lot of joy living here.”

Recommendations

To the International Community

- It is critical that the international community understands the context, dynamics, history and issues facing ethnic groups in Myanmar. This includes an appreciation of: the policy of the government towards ethnic groups; the history of divisions between armed groups and the government, including the conditions under which the civil war broke out after independence; the impact of colonialism; and the shifting lines of authority pre- and post-independence.
- There is a role for the international community to facilitate the space for dialogue between conflicting actors, such as, the government, ethnic nationality leaders, the NLD. This includes bridging the gap between civil society actors as well. The international community can work towards bringing actors together to discuss, debate and negotiate. This includes working with groups on the border on the Myanmar side and in other countries. Dialogue needs to occur so that groups can work out how to help those on the inside and outside and operate with a mutual understanding or coordinated strategy for change in Myanmar.
- Engage with ceasefire groups and build their capacity to govern, run their administrations and effect community development. At the moment the international community works with the NGOs and rarely engages the ceasefire groups, yet these are important and hold a particular status in the minds of the people they claim to represent.
- Overwhelmingly, sanctions are viewed negatively by civil society. Sanctions exacerbate existing tensions and result in further isolation and a reduction in industry. It is suggested that the international community should give consideration

to other strategies besides sanctions. Further research is required to determine the advantages and disadvantages of sanctions in the Myanmar context.

- There is a huge need for capacity building for civil society in diverse areas such as social science, civic education, and agriculture. Where capacity building may be contentious, like elections or civic education, it is important to rename the training so as to come under the safe umbrella of alternate language such as development or leadership.
- There is a great need for humanitarian assistance in not just the Nargis affected areas but in other locations where food security is a major issue. There is also a great need for development assistance to encourage and foster community initiatives that are currently implementing.
- With the elections in sight, capacity building for people inside Myanmar to get involved with the elections and monitor their progress is of high importance.
- There were strong calls by civil society members for the international community to lobby key countries such as Russia, China and India and encourage them to take a greater stake in Myanmar's future. People wanted to see the international community lobby for the establishment of dialogue between groups and for greater involvement from ASEAN in leading the Myanmar government to change.
- Non-government organisations, local and international, have a tendency to work in their own sectors in isolation. Instead, they ought to seek out opportunities for collaboration and networking across the NGO sphere. Such cooperation is seen as essential to bringing about social change in Myanmar and creating a shared vision. It also provides necessary leadership to people at the grassroots level.
- The international community should make every effort to seek ways to bring the government, NLD and ethnic nationality leaders to the negotiating table for dialogue.

To Local Actors:

NGO and Civil Society

- Working strategically with the government as part of a constructive engagement approach has led to developments and has the potential to move the country forward on key issues such as education and infrastructure.
- NGOs should look to existing groups and structures that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and cultural preservation and channel funds to support and boost these initiatives, such as the Culture and Literature associations and an Ethnic Youth Network. These organisations could consider including the Bamar majority in some of their initiatives as a way of breaking down existing barriers.
- Continue to support and foster inter-religious dialogue and engagement between leaders and young people on religious issues. This has developed in recent years as a result of shared understanding that there are advantages to working together. Potential exists for expansion.
- Selecting strategic issues common to all ethnic groups around which to organise, such as, the environment, can bring ethnic groups together and towards a common goal. Unity, working across different groups, is critical.
- During Nargis, the cluster groups organised by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) worked effectively to share information amongst different organisations. A similar model could be considered in this context in order to promote an understanding of each other's activities and minimise isolation. This would create a space to come together to share experiences and ideas.
- NGOs should look to include more Bamar people in their networks and organisations so as to end the sectoral divide that has the government and NGOs in opposition.

- Elections should be supported as a marker of gradual change but expectations should not be high.

The Government of Myanmar

- The government has to take steps to build trust between itself and civil society. Its current approach is fostering division and suspicion. Any strategy should include support for inter-ethnic dialogue and the creation of spaces for greater interaction.
- The government should seek out dialogue with ethnic nationality leaders to open up negotiations on contentious issues.
- The education system requires immediate attention. Resources should be made available to adequately provide equipment. Teacher's salaries need increasing so as to encourage them to earn just one income and to stamp out corruption.
- Inter-ethnic understanding, particularly in relation to cultural norms and practices, should be promoted by the government and civil society across the top, middle and grassroots levels. This can address cultural stereotyping and prejudice that has existed for generations.
- The government should work to build the capacity of its citizens to engage in the election process.
- The government should take steps to remove the barriers that prevent people from ethnic nationalities rising to higher ranks within the civil service.
- The government should take more steps to ensure the freedom to practice one's culture is respected and recognised as a vital human right. Language is a central component of cultural expression. For ethnic nationality languages, greater government support is required to support their development and preservation. There should be scope for ethnic nationality languages to be recognised as official languages of Myanmar. Moreover, there should be greater freedom to conduct

festivals, celebrations and ceremonies involving ethnic nationality groups throughout Myanmar.

- Government and non-government schools should be able to teach in ethnic nationality languages. At the very least, greater opportunity to undertake study in ethnic nationality languages should exist at all levels of education.
- Censorship and restrictions on the publication of literature in ethnic languages should be lifted and resources made available to publish in local languages to record culture and history.
- Religious freedom is a cornerstone of a functioning democracy and should receive greater support from the government.
- Greater investment in infrastructure in all states and regions is required to build better hospitals, schools, and systems of transport that can boost business opportunities and attract industries.
- The government needs to take steps to end corruption in Myanmar in the government, military, education and business sectors. The levying of informal fees erodes the space for small business in the economy and detracts from jobs creation.
- Access to methods of redress for those who experience racial, gender and religious discrimination is required. Information regarding the availability of legal protections should be disseminated to all and in particular, the grassroots.
- Policies to address the military's waging of gendered harassment, violence and forced labour on local people need to be enacted and enforced.
- To prevent the exporting of raw materials at low prices, greater investment in industry should occur to enable local Myanmar people to benefit from value-adding to their product.
- The provision of job pathways for people leaving university, and for those who choose not to attend university is required. These measures would prevent people having to leave Myanmar to find work.

List of Acronyms

AIDS	Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ALD	Arakan League for Democracy
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Service
BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CPI	China Power Investment
CRPP	Council Representing the People's Parliament
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EU	European Union
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ICC	International Criminal Court
ILO	International Labor Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KDA	Kachin Defence Army
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNDP	Karenni National Democratic Party
KNLF	Karenni National Liberation Front
KNLP	Kayan New Land Party
KNPLF	Karenni National People's Liberation Front
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation
MSDN	Mon Social Development Network
MWAF	Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDAK	National Defence Army Kachin
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party

OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SNLD	Shan National League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
TB	Tuberculosis
TPDC	Township Peace and Development Council
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
US	United States [of America]
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
VOA	Voice of America
VPDC	Village Peace and Development Council

Glossary/Terminology

Conflict	A relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have, or think they have, incompatible goals. ²
Ethnic Group	A group of people distinguished by cultural similarities (which are shared among members of that group) and differences (between that group and others); ethnic group members share beliefs, values, habits, customs and norms, and a common language, religion, history, geography, kinship and/or race. ³
Ethnicity	Identification with, and feeling part of, an ethnic group and exclusion from certain other groups because of this affiliation. ⁴
Inter-Ethnic Conflict	Incompatible goals or values, or the perception of incompatibility, between, but not restricted to, one ethnic group and another.
Inter-Group	Inter is a prefix used to signify relationship(s) between or amongst at least two objects or entities, in this case the eight major ethnic groups in Myanmar.
International Community	Individuals, organisations or governments who are capable of influencing Myanmar society from outside the country.
Intra-Group	Intra is a prefix used to signify relationship(s) within an object or entity, in this case within one of the eight

² Mitchell, Chris, *The Structure of International Conflict* (London: Macmillan, 1981). Quoted in Fisher, Simon, Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, Jawed Ludin, Richard Smith, Steve Williams, and Sue Williams, *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action* (London: Zed Books and Responding to Conflict, 2000).

³ Kottack, Conrad Phillip, *Cultural Anthropology*, Eighth Edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000).

⁴ Kottack, "Cultural Anthropology."

major ethnic groups, including all sub-groups which claim membership of that ethnic group.

Local Actors Domestic and international individuals and organisations that operate inside Myanmar, including the Myanmar government.

Tatmadaw Burmese word for the Myanmar armed forces

Introduction

Myanmar's population is extremely diverse, with over 135 groups officially recognised by the government.⁵ Regrettably, inter-ethnic conflict is a critical dynamic of Myanmar's protracted civil war. Despite this, ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic conflict is often pushed to the periphery in international dialogues and seen as adjunct to the chief task of building peace and democracy in Myanmar. This publication presents the voices of over eighty civil society members from different ethnic groups who live in Myanmar. This research was conducted in order to gain a wider understanding of the experiences of ethnic group members of civil society. It documents their perceptions of opportunities and challenges in key areas of interactions with other ethnic groups, government and military relations, education, employment, health and culture and elections, their vision for the future, and how external organisations can support their vision. It is the product of a foundational study aimed at increasing the understanding of external actors on inter-ethnic issues in Myanmar. Listening to the diverse voices of these civil society members from different ethnic groups, it was heard that inter-ethnic issues are central to building peace and democracy in Myanmar.

How it Emerged

A core group of civil society leaders, comprised of various ethnic nationalities, identified the core objective of this research—that is, to listen to and document the voices of those inside Myanmar on ethnic issues, and to educate the international community and Myanmar civil society on the complexities of ethnicity in Myanmar. This research stems from an observation by the core group that international discourses on Myanmar are increasingly shaped by those “outside” the country, while the voices of those on the “inside” are rarely heard.

⁵ International Crisis Group, (2003) *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Nationality Politics*, Asia Report No. 52, at http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/report_archive/A400967_07052003.pdf (Accessed on 18 January 2010).

This group of leaders worked with the research team throughout the preparation of this publication.

This research took place in mid-2009, at a particularly sensitive time in inter-ethnic relations in Myanmar. In preparation for the elections in 2010, the government was in the process of negotiating with the various armed groups to become Border Guard Forces, under the central authority of the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar armed forces. Almost two decades ago, the first ceasefire agreements were signed between the military government and some ethnic armed groups fighting for rights and autonomy. This led to a cessation in direct violence and degrees of autonomous control in some areas. Some groups have not yet signed any ceasefire agreement.⁶ These issues form the backdrop in which the current research was undertaken.

Second in a Series

This is the second publication in a series dedicated to creating channels for people inside Myanmar to be heard outside the country. The first publication, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis*,⁷ sought to document the role of civil society in responding to the devastating cyclone that struck southwestern Myanmar in early May 2008. It collected narratives from civil society members who spoke of how civil society had organised to respond to the destruction brought about by the cyclone, how civil society had been strengthened in the wake of community efforts, and how external organisations could support this growth. The overwhelming response to the first publication led to the creation of this series.

⁶ Kramer, Tom, (2009) *Neither War Nor Peace: The Future of Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute). For more information on the background of ethnic conflict in Myanmar and the present situation, see also Lorch, J. & Will, G., (2009) *Burma's Forgotten Conflict*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin.

⁷ The publication is available for download, as is this publication, on our website, at www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/research

Ethnic Groups in Myanmar

This book interviews civil society members who identify as being a part of different ethnic groups in Myanmar. ‘Grouping’ ethnicity is a problematic task. It is over-simplifying a complex and conceptually rugged terrain. This has been done to try and ensure the sample is representative, but there are shortcomings here that must be acknowledged (see ‘A Note on Terminology’ below). Moreover, population statistics for Myanmar are inherently unreliable. As a result, estimates on group composition are unlikely to be accurate, but are provided herein with their source as a general guide.

For this research project, it was decided to seek out voices from the eight ethnic groups who are officially recognised by the government as constituting the ‘eight major national ethnic races.’ Based on government reports, Myanmar has 135 different ethnic groups and the ‘eight major national ethnic races’ consist of the Bamar, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Shan, Mon, Kachin, and Rakhine.⁸ Outside of these government groupings, Myanmar has significant numbers of unrecognised ethnic groups including people from Indian, Chinese, Anglo-Burmese and Rohingya ethno-cultural backgrounds. The Bamar are the largest ethnic group. Reportedly, the Bamar comprise about 60 percent of Myanmar’s overall population, with other ethnic groups constituting about 40 percent of the population.⁹

As this research demonstrates, the 1948 Panglong Agreement¹⁰ has served as a source of modern tension between the Bamar majority and the ethnic nationality groups. Signed on 12 February 1947, the document stipulates autonomy in internal administration for the so-called “Frontier Areas,” and set forth the “desire” to establish a separated Kachin State within a unified Burma. Ethnic leaders from the Kachin, Chin, and Shan ethnic nationalities, as well as

⁸ Hla Min (2000) *Political Situation of Myanmar and its Role in the Region* Office of Strategic Studies, Ministry of Defense, Union of Myanmar, Yangon.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ For the text of the Panglong Agreement, see: Burma Library, “The Panglong Agreement, 1947,” http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong_agreement.htm (accessed on 22 January 2010).

representatives from the proposed interim Burmese government, were the primary attendees.

Myanmar is divided into seven states and seven divisions, as per its constitution of 1974. The seven divisions cluster around the central plains in Myanmar whilst the states line the mountainous border regions. Each of the seven states are named after ethnic nationality groups, i.e. Mon, Chin, Kayin, Kayah, Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin. Two points arise here: not all ethnic nationality groups have a state in their name; and whilst the Burma majority are said to reside primarily in the divisions, ethnic nationality groups do not live solely in their state of the same name. There is ethnic diversity in all states and divisions, albeit to varying degrees. The divisions and states will change under the new constitution, ratified in 2008, in which ‘divisions’ are renamed as ‘regions’.

[A Note on Terminology—‘Ethnic’, ‘Ethnic Group’, ‘Ethnicity’](#)

Those involved in this publication acknowledge that ‘ethnic’, ‘ethnic group’, and ‘ethnicity’ are contested and often highly charged terms. This language is used in the absence of better alternatives. These terms—ethnic, ethnic group and ethnicity—are employed knowing that ethnicity is subjective, fluid, and plural. Some people may identify with a number of ethnic groups or none at all. The researchers also acknowledge that currently and historically, these identities are embodied with assumptions and stereotypes. The starting point for this publication has been to rely upon how people identified their own ethnicity. Throughout this book the term ‘ethnic nationality’ is used to refer to ethnic groups other than the Bamar majority. This was the preferred terminology of the core group of ethnic leaders directing this research.

[Rationale for the Research](#)

As identified above, this research project was the initiative of a group of civil society leaders from different ethnic nationality groups living and working in Myanmar. It was felt that internationally little is known about the experiences and context of ethnic groups in Myanmar. The

civil society leaders expressed a desire for a publication that can educate the international community, and also be used as a tool within Myanmar to support dialogue between different ethnic groups.

Gaining an understanding of the contemporary context of different ethnic groups in Myanmar is critical for those international actors who work on issues such as human rights, trade, development, conflict transformation and humanitarian aid. This publication provides a snapshot of that context for civil society. It is hoped this publication can inform debate, policy, and conflict dynamics in the Myanmar context.

As a conflict transformation organisation our overarching goal is to conduct peace research that leads to positive change. In contrast to conflict resolution—which carries with it the possibility of co-optation in that it aims to achieve an agreement and solution to the problem creating the crisis—conflict transformation seeks to include and go beyond the resolution of particular problems by promoting constructive change processes that are inclusive of, but not limited to, immediate solutions.¹¹ Similarly, peace research is interested in voices. It sets out to “examine, explore and understand the conditions that both block and promote peace in society, as well as work towards reducing the conditions in society that support or promote war.”¹² This explicit focus distinguishes us from other human rights organisations, which may set out to document or monitor human rights violations. As such, the researchers seek to work with these organisations to promote peace and social transformation.

This publication tries to plug some of the gaps in the existing literature on the protracted conflict in Myanmar. A significant majority of this scholarship focuses on elite-level decision-making, economic sanctions, and problem-solving and solution-seeking from the outside. Voices from civil society members living in Myanmar are rarely heard. This publication

¹¹ Lederach, John Paul, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2003), 1-13.

¹² Soth, P. N. and T. Miletic (2006). *Introduction to Peace Studies and Research Methods*. Phnom Penh, The Alliance for Conflict Transformation.

departs from this well-trodden path by recording the voices of civil society members. To supplement this, a section of this book is devoted to analysis. The analysis aims to synthesise some common themes and common talking points between all the civil society members of different ethnic groups represented in the research sample.

Deliberately, this publication does not contain a literature review or lay down a theoretical framework. The primary focus is creating channels for people to be heard. However, the research team's background reading prior to undertaking this project included reading widely on ethnic conflict in Asia, ethnicity in Myanmar and specific reports on the involvement of ethnic nationalities in armed conflict in Myanmar. Moreover, the core group directing this research has extensive experience working on ethnic conflict, and each of the research team members has experience working on conflict transformation in the Myanmar context. The rationale for the research is to create channels for people to be heard on inter-ethnic issues outside the country.

Research Objectives:

The specific research objectives around which this project centres are listed below. These were formulated jointly by the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and its research team, as well as the core group of civil society leaders from different ethnic nationality groups in Myanmar.

- To document voices of ethnic peoples in Myanmar around themes of culture, interaction amongst different ethnic groups, and a vision for the future;
- To highlight shared commonalities and differences in the situation of the different ethnic nationalities in Myanmar;
- To achieve a cross-section of perspectives to gain insights and understanding of the complexities of ethnic situation in Myanmar; and,

- To produce recommendations to the international community and local actors on how to better engage the complex ethnic situation inside Myanmar.

Methodology

The data informing this analysis was collected over a period of three months in mid-2009. Two separate visits to Myanmar took place. The research team conducted a total of eighty-seven interviews with civil society members from different ethnic groups. The interviews took place in urban and regional settings in Myanmar. Four broad topic areas were identified for this research as areas of inquiry—opportunities and challenges to inter- and intra-group interaction, people’s vision for the future of Myanmar, how the international community can support that vision, and the local situation of the ethnic groups, including their culture and traditions. Within these broad areas a schedule of questions was developed to guide the interviews. Each of the interviews, however, walked a different path in terms of structure, content, length, and topic range and therefore each interview contained slightly different queries to draw out topics and issues most important to the interviewee. In summary, a qualitative research method was employed.

The common language for the research team was English, and approximately half of the interviews were conducted in English. A translator was used in the remaining interviews. Where the translator did not speak the first language of the interviewee, generally Burmese was used as a common language and was then translated to English. Individual interviews were the primary form of data collection to gain a deeper understanding of that individual’s perspective and voice, and to ensure greater security and confidentiality for the interviewees, translators, and researchers. Some interviews were conducted in groups of no larger than three individuals, and in these handful of cases the interviewees were always notified ahead of time to ensure their comfort with the alternative interview format. The overall approach meant that individual voices and not group perspectives were

heard. The semi-structured and open-ended interview method was the chosen methodology as it is more effective in generating an honest and sincere dialogue with interviewees, across the key topic areas. This was recognised by the research team as important because it allowed for interviewees to raise the issues which were most pertinent to their lives and which mattered most to them.

The researchers encountered several challenges during the first ten interviews, and as a result the format and questions of the interview were slightly amended to fully address the challenges encountered. One of those was the difficulty in getting conversation to flow with female interviewees. The researchers had relied upon a male translator to that point and it was identified that a female translator should be availed as a mechanism for increasing dialogue. This did have an impact on the data sourced from the female interviewees. In addition, in many cases the interviewee was previously acquainted with the translator, which allowed for rapport to be quickly established amongst those involved in the interview. The researchers were also invited to reflect on the English language used and how that translated. For example, it was discovered that 'culture' in Burmese has a narrow meaning, limited to arts and dance. The researchers were subsequently invited to consider alternatives to this word that would convey its expansive English meaning.

The researchers were put in contact with many of the people interviewed through the group of civil society leaders from different ethnic groups directing this research. They took on facilitation roles and sought to introduce the researchers to a broad spectrum of people from all over Myanmar. The researchers also relied on their own contacts in Myanmar, developed through their own years of work inside Myanmar. A diverse sample was sought, a mix of gender, religion, age, occupation, and class. A diverse sample was not always achieved. This 'snow ball' method was the most appropriate research strategy in the Myanmar context where security and confidentiality are essential.

The Research Team

The research team comprised four people from outside Myanmar. These people were nationals of Cambodia, England, the United States, and Australia. Researchers were assisted during the interviews by translators from Myanmar. The translators improved the interviews and the questionnaires and gave constant feedback on the process. Data was improved through their cooperation and insights were gained not possible if operating without the translators.

The composition of the research team in terms of ethnicity and gender, amongst other factors, influenced the collection of the data. The research teams received questions on what they thought of the situation, but only the first team received requests for donor dollars, aid, or their recommendations to the Myanmar situation. Researchers had to work carefully to manage expectations and ensure people were briefed on the purpose of this research: to convey their message and views to increase the understanding of those on the outside.

Data Sample Statistics			
Sex and Religion	%	Age	%
Male	66.66%	18-30	24.13%
Female	33.33%	31-40	41.37%
		41-50	14.94%
Buddhist	47%	51-60	12.64%
Christian	42.52%	61-70	5.75%
Unknown	10.34%	Unknown	1.14%

Bamar Inclusion

The primary focus of this book is to document ethnic voices in Myanmar, with a specific focus on ethnic nationalities. This is done because ethnic nationalities grievances against the military government, and as this book demonstrates against the Bamar as an extension of the military government, is a major underlying factor in

the broader conflict in Myanmar. The research includes the Bamar voices to give a more holistic picture of the commonalities and divergences between the varying perspectives.

Part A

Analysing

37	Cultural Context
69	General Context
129	Inter-Group Interaction
160	Ethnic Vision and International Community Support
205	Conclusion

CULTURAL CONTEXT

One of the key drivers of this research was the perceived need to foster a greater understanding of Myanmar's ethnic diversity, and to communicate that transforming ethnic conflict is central to building peace and democracy in Myanmar. The aim was to create a resource, for use by international and domestic actors, that would amplify the voices of civil society members of different ethnic groups, on topics such as culture, opportunities and challenges, their vision for the future and the role of the International community. To achieve this aim the researchers spent at least a third of every interview listening to people talk about 'culture', as they understood it. As the case studies in Part B attest, people raised a cross-section of views which are analysed in this chapter. Illustrations of cultural expression such as language, dress, food, festivals and literature were provided. Some people spoke in historical terms of how their ethnic group came to Myanmar and what kingdom, or system of government, had previously existed.

Without exception, interviewees of the ethnic nationality groups spoke of constraints on cultural expression experienced as a result of belonging to a certain cultural grouping. These were presented as manifesting in areas of daily life such as, education, employment, and economic opportunities. For those living in an active armed conflict zone, the limitations faced were all encompassing.

General Observations Informing this Research

Before embarking on an analysis of 'culture', the research team make the following observations. In talking about culture, the importance of **context** cannot be overstated. Context becomes all the more important in the case of Myanmar as the country is so culturally diverse. Differences within and between ethnic groups vary widely according to factors such as where in Myanmar people live, where in towns or cities they reside, to

which ethnic group or sub-ethnic group they identify, age, gender, occupation, education level etc, and according to how these factors intersect. This informs our understanding that culture is fluid and not static. The researchers have sought to present this analysis as contextually grounded and have provided direct quotes from interviewees where possible.

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar

Population statistics in the Myanmar context are inherently inaccurate and unreliable. A population census has not been completed for decades. Despite this however, popularly cited reports suggest there are 135 different ethnic groups, although this is understood to be originally a government figure. The eight major ethnic groups are the Chin, Rakhine, Mon, Shan, Kachin, Karen, Kayah and Bamar. The Bamar are the largest single ethnic group.¹³

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the official title for Myanmar according to the recent 2008 constitution, is made up of seven regions (formerly known as divisions) and seven states. The states are named after the seven largest ethnic nationality groups. These states are geographically clustered around the borders of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and occupy about 57 percent of Myanmar's total land area.¹⁴ In general terms, ethnic nationality populations predominantly live in the states, whilst the Bamar population predominantly live in the central regions. Whilst this is generally the case, ethnic nationalities live all over Myanmar and people from the majority ethnic group, the Bamar, also reside in the seven states as well as the seven regions. The borders making up Myanmar and its various states and regions have changed over time. The current borders are set out at Figure 1. The border areas are generally the mountainous areas and some say where most of the natural resources exist.

¹³ Kramer, T. (2009) *Neither War Nor Peace – The Future of the Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma*. Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. Available at <http://www.tni.org/report/never-war-nor-peace> (accessed 10/01/10) at 4.

¹⁴ Kramer, T. (2009), *ibid*.

Figure 1: Map of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar



Culture in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar—The Official Account

Legal protection of certain rights relating to cultural expression are listed in the most recent *Republic of the Union of Myanmar Constitution 2008*, and the previous constitution of 1974, albeit suspended from 1988 to 2008. Officially, every citizen of Myanmar should enjoy rights in relation to culture. The constitution of 2008 sets out in Section 354 as follows:

354. Every citizen shall be at liberty in the exercise of the following rights, if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality:

- (a) To express and publish freely their convictions and opinions;
- (b) To assemble peacefully without arms and holding procession;
- (c) To form associations and organisations;
- (d) To develop their language, literature, culture they cherish, religion they profess, and customs without prejudice to the relations between one national race and another or among national races and to other faiths.

On paper, the constitution affirms ethno-cultural diversity and encourages cultural expression to flourish. The research shows that significant departure is made from the official account set out above.

We can't express our culture freely.

Young Mon man who works in a Culture and Literature Association

Data suggests the development of ethnic nationality identities, culture, histories and language, are not supported and are largely suppressed by the government. Bamar-centred policy is reflected in everything from the education curriculum through to popular culture (as expressed through media forums such as TV, radio and newspapers).

For example, Burmese is the language of instruction in the government school system. Textbooks are in Burmese, carrying pictures of Burmese-style clothing, housing etc. History lessons favour a Bamar-centred version of history and are silent on the role of ethnic nationality leaders. Interviewees across ethnic group felt the government's education system failed to encourage or promote awareness or knowledge of ethnic nationality cultures and traditions. The responsibility fell to religious and non-state schools to address this imbalance. The National ID Card system was also felt to be a mechanism for suppressing ethnic diversity in that ethnicity was not being recorded accurately. In several instances, people described these policies as "Burmanisation".

To preserve heritage, culture and language, various strategies have been put in place by civil society members. Culture and Literature Associations work at a community level to meet these ends. Such organisations promote and preserve cultural knowledge, practices, literature, and languages. However there is very little cooperation and coordination between these groups, which tend to be based on cities and villages. Moreover, as mentioned above, religious schools and institutions have played a large role in preserving and maintaining language and culture. Families are also preserving language and culture through oral histories and maintaining languages at home. Under extremely difficult conditions, languages are being documented, taught and learnt by younger generations. Culture is being celebrated and practiced despite the numerous constraints.

Language

It is our duty and responsibility to maintain culture, identity and language.

Older Karen monk

This research captures several key insights regarding linguistic diversity in Myanmar. Language was cited by most interviewees as a key factor that reflects the culture of ethnic nationalities and is a marker of difference between cultures. Language is a great source of pride for

ethnic groups. Language emerges as critical to the maintenance of culture and, as a result, if languages are perceived as threatened, cultures are also perceived as vulnerable.

Whilst Burmese is the only language to have official status in the constitution, linguistic diversity within Myanmar is vast. Negotiating daily life in Myanmar can necessitate the acquisition of many languages beyond your first. It was not uncommon to speak a different language at home to that which was used for school, work or business. Many interviewees spoke at least Burmese, English and an ethnic nationality language. Linguistic diversity exists not only between the eight major ethnic groups, but is also significant within several of the eight major ethnic groups. Burmese is primarily used as the common language between ethnic groups and in some instances, within ethnic groups.

Language as Intrinsic to Culture

The importance of language was emphasised by the civil society members interviewed for this project. In responding to questions about culture, cultural expression, and the similarities and differences between cultures, the issue of language emerged as the most prominent reflection of culture and was seen as critical to maintaining culture. One participant gave this response to a question about how culture is maintained:

It's maintained through language primarily. In my family when we were young, we didn't know anything about it [culture]. We just spoke Myanmar at school and at home. But then my father scolded and beat us to get us to speak Karen as much as we could at home. My parents also got us to try our own food so we weren't too far from our culture.

Young Karen female INGO staff

Speaking one's own language was a great source of pride and satisfaction.

When we speak our own language it is very delicious. Very tasty.
Older Karen male

In addition, threats to language were perceived as a threat to the culture's existence as a whole.

Race is going to be eliminated, and dialect will go first. If an ethnic groups' dialects go, the group is finished. The BBC says that every fourteen days, five dialects are eliminated in the world. Now they are history. This is dangerous. The southern group could be finished. In Burma, Byu people were once very famous. First went the dialect, now there are no more Byu people. Only in history. It is important that culture is not abandoned.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician from southern Chin State

The intrinsic link between language and culture was made clear by the civil society members interviewed in this project.

Linguistic Diversity Within and Between Ethnic Groups

This research gave a taste of how people perceive linguistic diversity within their own ethnic group. People from the Mon, Kayah and Bamar ethnic groups felt there was a common language for their ethnic group but the accents and dialects slightly differed according to region. On the whole, interviewees from the Karen ethnic group perceived there were two major languages, Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The Rakhine were thought to have two major dialects, Sittwe and Ramree. Under British rule and immediately after independence, Chin students used English as a common language as the language variation from subgroup to subgroup was great. Despite numerous efforts over the years to develop a common language from within the Chin group of languages, Burmese is now the common language for Chin people.

Amongst the Shan people interviewed, most said that there is a common Shan language although pronunciation differed around the state. For Kachin people there were also several languages but the

majority of people spoke Jingpo. On the whole, communication across ethnic groups is commonly conducted in Burmese.

With regard to all languages but particularly but often nationality languages, listening and speaking skills were strong, often reading and writing skills were poor. This was seen as a consequence of constraints on ethnic nationality languages and their preservation. Such constraints were said to include restrictions on the production of literature in ethnic nationality languages. As expanded on below under Literature, books have to be translated into Burmese and government permission obtained before publication and dissemination. Some people also spoke of the difficulties associated with actually settling on a particular alphabet. A lack of access to schooling in ethnic nationality languages was also raised as a key constraint.

The origin of language was raised by interviewees. Mon people spoke of the origins of Burmese in their own language and how language had changed over time.

In ancient times all people spoke Mon. Now the language has changed to Burmese. This is the Myanmar language. In the towns and cities you will speak Burmese. In the villages, it is Mon language. People migrate to towns and mix with the Burmese community.

Young Mon man who works with a Culture and Literature
Association

Government Policy—Burmese as the Official Language

The constitution of 2008 states the official language of Myanmar is ‘Myanmar language’.¹⁵ This is taken to mean Burmese, the language of the majority Bamar ethnic group. Under current conditions, knowledge of Burmese was seen as important on many levels including employment, education (particularly in government schools), in liaising with the

¹⁵ Chapter XV of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008.

military, and, in many instances, to avoid exclusion and discrimination. Some said that historically, Burmese was not as important. English is now seen as important in the area of NGO work.

Feelings were strong that the dominance of Burmese, particularly throughout the education system, was corroding ethnic nationality languages and contributing to a decrease in their usage and prominence.

The main problem is government policy. Burmese is the national language. To get a job and communicate with others you have to learn Burmese. So when people start adopting the Burmese language, the Mon language is left behind.

Older Mon male retired teacher

Some perceived this policy was a deliberate attempt at undermining ethnic nationality languages.

My parents taught me our language. The government does not allow native language teaching, only Burmese [in schools]. In theory, the government helps teach ethnic languages, but not in practice. As a matter of fact, they are systematically destroying our languages. This has been happening since 1948.

Young Rakhine female NGO staff

In contrast, one woman from the Shan community felt that the government did provide support, albeit indirectly, to the preservation of language and culture. It was her perception that there was freedom to learn ethnic nationality languages and that the government supported Shan New Year. This view was in the minority however.

The government's education policy in relation to languages appears to have shifted over time. Now, Burmese is the language of the national curriculum. However, adherence to this policy fluctuated according to the region in which you lived and the type of school you attended.

Language of Educational Instruction

Amongst the people from ethnic nationalities interviewed, very few reported having undertaken schooling in their first language. Most teachers were Bamar and textbooks were written in Burmese. The content and the accompanying illustrations reflected the majority Bamar culture. Most reported having to use Burmese as the language of instruction and being required to learn about such things as Bamar culture, practice, architecture, dress and dance.

Studying in a second language can create difficulties for students, particularly when learning a third language such as, English. Interviewees spoke of several initiatives where textbooks were being created to translate directly from English into ethnic nationality languages, so as to avoid having to learn through Burmese.

I translate directly from English to Shan. Shan students can learn English and can understand it well; more easily than Burmese, because the grammar is the same in English.

Middle-aged Shan woman who works with a Culture
and Literature Association

For those in rural areas populated by ethnic nationalities, the provision of schooling in Burmese, an unknown language for children, became a disincentive to attend school.

School lessons are taught in Burmese. Some children from the villages are not able to speak Burmese. They try, but it is very difficult. Some children don't attend primary school because of the language problem.

Young Kachin female NGO staff

One interviewee from Chin State who had completed his schooling in Chin languages felt it was good government policy to prescribe that education had to be in a common language. This was seen as making it easier to travel, communicate and work.

I think it is a good thing that they teach in Burmese. You need to know Burmese to move to another state. Teachers expect you to

know it. I learned in Chin language when I was at school, and when I came to Yangon I struggled.

Middle-aged Chin male journalist

This language challenge faced by ethnic nationalities living in village areas follows them throughout their schooling. Often they will not score highly enough in matriculation exams to enable them to get to university, as their Burmese is unable to compete with students who are more practiced at using Burmese at home as well as at school. Even if students can clear considerable infrastructure hurdles to get them to town to study at high school, they can be disallowed entry as a result of their poor Burmese language skills. Alternatively, some people feel marginalized in villages without knowledge of the dominant ethnic nationality language. This quote reflects the complexity.

Previously, the Shan language was neglected; most people would speak Burmese. But this is changing. Some villagers only speak in Shan language, so when they go to a city they are discriminated against because they do not speak Burmese. In the city people do not speak Shan, only Burmese. Because only Burmese is taught in school, when children go back to the villages they feel small because they cannot speak in Shan language.

Young Shan male university student

Shifts in government policy meant that some interviewees said they had undertaken their schooling in local languages. Some interviewees who attended school prior to 1988 reported being able to study in their own language.

The regime prohibits Chin people from studying Chin language. Under the socialist government, in state schools every tribe was allowed to have a language curriculum. But since the regime came in, no Chin can speak the language, so how can they write it? This happened after 1988.

Middle-aged Chin female pastor

Under the socialists, Karen could study the Karen language. Now,

if you teach Karen in the villages, it is very difficult. In some villages it is OK, in others, the village leaders cannot accept it. They are afraid. The government has a lot of power in the villages. They say how to do things. They say how people are to think.

Middle-aged Karen businessman

Religious groups, both Buddhist and Christian, emerged as key organisations for providing spaces for schooling where ethnic nationality languages could be spoken and ethnic nationality cultures promoted and preserved. Government tolerance of this practice varied.

The only opportunities for us to teach our dialect are in self-help primary or kindergarten schools, such as faith-based schools that are not government owned... So far the government has not stopped it. We have to be careful not to teach anything against the government. Teaching dialect has to be done without permission of the government. Some provincial officials are aware of it but don't acknowledge it is happening. We don't know how long we will be able to do this. Faith-based communities are encouraging the teaching of native languages and traditional literature.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

We are mostly Buddhist. We use Shan language, it is the only language for Shan people but there is a different dialect and words between east and west Shan people. We can mostly understand each other. Most people speak Shan language. We speak only Shan at home, but in school we learn Burmese. We can learn our language from Shan monasteries or from outside teachers.

Young Shan male INGO staff

In addition to schooling administered by religious groups, several other exceptions to the general rule that Burmese would be the language of instruction emerged. Some Mon children in Mon national schools and government schools in the ceasefire areas were able to study in their own language.

The main language in government schools is Burmese. In Mon national schools the main language is Mon. They also teach the Burmese language. Most people try and maintain the Mon language but this will be difficult to maintain into the future. There is no chance to teach in the Mon language in government schools. In some ceasefire areas the government allows them to teach in the Mon language in the schools. But only for forty-five minutes a day.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

Finally, some schools in rural areas used the local language. In these instances, teachers used their initiative to go against government policy.

According to the government they teach in Burmese, but actually people teach in their dialect.

Middle-aged Chin male NGO staff

Whilst some exceptions existed, Burmese enjoyed prominence within the education system as the language of instruction to the exclusion of ethnic nationality languages.

Additional Challenges and Strategies for Maintaining Language and Culture

Given the importance placed on language and its link to culture, interviewees spoke a great deal about the linguistic challenges people faced and the ways in which they surmounted these obstacles. Under challenging conditions, a great deal of effort is being made to ensure language is maintained. Two key strategies for maintaining and preserving language were through religious institutions and through the family. The role of religious institutions is discussed under 'Religion' and will not be repeated here. To try and maintain languages, families taught languages other than Burmese to their children.

My parents taught me the Karen language. In my city people, including us, don't write or listen to the Karen language. Many children learn it from their parents.

Middle-aged Karen man from the Delta

Here in Yangon we try to promote our Chin songs to our children as they are learning Burmese. We try to produce Chin-language VCDs and CDs.

Middle-aged Chin male journalist

One interviewee believed families were ill equipped to transfer knowledge of languages and culture to their children. In turn this made children reluctant to learn of their nationality language and culture. More resources are required to tackle this challenge.

Families cannot teach the children. We are weak in teaching our children to speak, showing them we love our people and our ethnic group and culture. So the children can't understand our culture. They are not interested to speak the language. We must try to encourage parents to teach children in the Karen language.

Middle-aged Karen woman who works on women's issues

On several occasions interviewees spoke about how generations of migration and time spent in refugee camps can impact upon the preservation of ethnic nationality languages.

We saw an exodus of our Karen people to refugee camps. They have now become international people. Now, after two or three generations, some forget to speak their language and forget their culture. So, we have a problem. If we can understand the problem, we can lead a peaceful life. If we cannot understand it, we will continue to have the problem.

Older Karen male academic

Some refugees living overseas played a role in generating resources for language training as a way of keeping these ties intact. This was a source of support to the Chin people living in Myanmar.

In Australia and Norway, they encourage Chin to learn the mother tongue and they give funding for this. Many refugees ask for this information in order to practice, and they invite Chin singers to perform.

Young Chin male NGO staff

Ethnic Nationality Languages and Popular Culture

Popular culture presented its own unique challenges in maintaining ethnic nationality languages. Civil society members spoke of TV, radio and print mediums as saturated by Burmese language programming and content. Access to these media for people from ethnic nationalities was minimal; there was some radio programming but this was sparse and the content limited and subjected to censorship. Comparisons were drawn to other countries where language diversity was promoted.

In popular culture, using Burmese is very common. It's the majority culture. Even the songs. It's a weakness maybe that our youth want to sing Burmese songs. It is very important to get DVDs in our own language. All radio is in Burmese. In Mizo [Mizoram] State in India, they have good media. They have three Mizo language channels and every township has its own radio station and art. They don't want to sing Hindu songs, they have their own productions. In the past, when we had democracy, there were radio stations.

Young Chin male university student

Settling on a Common Language and Alphabet

Some interviewees of ethnic nationality groups spoke of the difficulties associated with settling on a common language or alphabet. To illustrate, in the past, Chin people had made numerous attempts to develop a common language for the Chin people from the Chin group of languages.

During 1965, some Chin elders wanted to make a change in the dialects to the Burmese alphabet. I was one of the leaders. We had a discussion and wrote pamphlets. Readers of up to secondary

standard, were produced, to teach in schools. Now the Roman alphabet is used to write. This is in the south only.

Older Chin man from southern Chin State

Similarly, the Kayah participants spoke of difficulties establishing a universal script for their ethnic group. The adoption of the Latin alphabet of Italian missionaries in the 18th century was not subscribed to by Kayah Buddhists and animists until the 1970s. Formulating and reaching consensus on a common language constitutes an additional challenge for some ethnic nationality groups.

The Role of Evolution

There was some recognition of the role of evolution in the survival or existence of languages. This had prompted the Chin ethnic nationality group to push for a common language amongst their own ethnic group.

On the whole, it is difficult to maintain dialects because it depends on evolution. And according to evolution, our common tongue will be Burmese. When I was chairman, we formed a committee and went to townships and took their views and made a report on their views. Before we made a decision, our commander said ‘nothing, do nothing’. According to that decision, there were two main dialects that could be taken for Chin: Hakha and T’Dum (majority). Getting a common dialect is a problem. It depends on your viewpoint.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician

Other interviewees pointed out that evolution, a process accelerated by globalization, had occurred elsewhere without the complete decimation of ethnic nationality language and identity.

We need to uplift and maintain our culture and dignity. We need to maintain it for a long time, although globalisation and cultural evolution... like the European Union. They maintain their culture and dress, although there is globalisation.

Older Karen monk

International Modelling

Several interviewees shared their insights on how linguistic diversity was handled in other countries and what that offered the Myanmar context. Comparisons were drawn with Indonesia, India, China and Singapore, in addition to the European Union as cited above. Interviewees felt it useful to consider and draw upon other contexts where diverse languages and cultures coexisted peacefully.

I told the people that in Indonesia, the most uncommon dialect was chosen but in China, Mandarin was chosen as the main dialect. It depends on your viewpoint.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician

India is a big democracy that has lots of languages. English is the common language but they maintain all of their other languages. In Singapore, there are four main races—Malay, Hindu etc, but they call themselves ‘Singaporian’. What they do, they do for Singapore. They have separate languages, colours and shapes, but they are very happy.

Older Karen monk

Tool for Inclusion and Exclusion

These interviews make clear the way in which language can be a tool for inclusion and exclusion. As the official language and the language of government and the military, Burmese is a social indicator of status and ethnicity.

Two civil society members from separate states provided the same example of how exclusion and intimidation through language can start from a young age. The civil society members, one from Chin State and the other from Kayah State, said soldiers would ask children questions in Burmese. Failing to understand or respond to the soldiers’ questions would illicit harsh responses from the soldiers.

People dare not speak because their education level is very low. In some villages, parents are not able to support the children and some are not interested in supporting their children's education. I went to one area, where they only had a primary school, and they only spoke in a Kayah language. When soldiers came and asked them questions they could not respond because they could not speak Burmese properly, and so they were tortured by the soldiers.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

The military will come to the village and say [to a child] in Burmese, 'show me your identity card'. How can they reply? The soldiers scold them saying 'You don't even know how to speak Burmese!'

Young Chin male university student

Generational Language Gaps

There were some differences in perspective between older people and young people in relation to language. Many older people interviewed felt that the young people were not as well versed in the language of their ethnic nationality as older people.

Some Karen cannot speak Karen very well. Most older people can speak Karen. Because of a lack of Karen schools or religious teaching young people have no chance to practice it.

Middle-aged Karen male village chief from the delta

To an extent, some young people acknowledged this issue.

Our only language is Myanmar. Our great- great-grandparents worried about our language. In this generation, we want to speak Burmese but we also learn our own language in church summer schools. But the main language is Myanmar.

Middle-aged Karen woman who work in women's education

Overall however, the majority of young people interviewed were actively engaged with the preservation of ethnic nationality language. This took place through attending and assisting with summer schools,

Culture and Literature Associations and through their church or monastery.

Festivals

People spoke a great deal about the different festivals enjoyed by each ethnic group. Each of the major ethnic nationality groups has a particular day set aside to commemorate that ethnic nationality, and often festivals will take place on these days. Only the Karen ethnic holiday is declared a National holiday. The Kayah have a Kayah State Day, with the title suggesting that everyone in Kayah State can participate, not just Kayah people. Festivals have varying degrees of support from government. Some receive support and the government participates.

We have the Water Festival, Full Moon Festival, and Shan New Year—the date changes each year for Shan New Year, but it is always in November. All our festivals are the same as on the Myanmar calendar because we are all Buddhists and celebrate on the same day. We have Shan National Day on February 7. We celebrate it at monasteries. We have singing, traditional dance, and traditional food. The government does not attend because it [Shan New Year] is not an official holiday.

Young Shan man from eastern Shan State

When our military officer from Taunggyi comes to our Water Festival we dance to traditional music and he participates with the public.

Young Shan-Pa-O woman from southern Shan State

Festivals are an opportunity for rural village people to come together, an opportunity not as readily available as for those who live in cities. But festivals are not always celebratory. Whilst they can be an opportunity to practice cultural expression, many people spoke about festivals as a source of conflict between ethnic groups and the government.

During traditional festivals soldiers and Rakhine youth fight. Sometimes soldiers drink and when they are dancing they touch the Rakhine and start violence. I don't like this.

Young Rakhine male university student

This tension appeared particularly great between those who share the same religion as the government. Some Buddhists from ethnic nationalities felt forced to assume Bamar customs to celebrate Buddhist festivals. Interviewees from Rakhine and Shan States spoke of having to observe the Water Festival according to Bamar and not their own traditions.

Also, about culture during the Thingyan festival, we Shan people have our own culture, including making our own Shan cakes. But when the Burmese government comes to Shan State, we can't even do our dances. We have to wear Burmese dress, sing Burmese songs and do Burmese dances. There is a traditional song contest and all ethnic groups participate, but they don't use the Shan traditional songs.

Middle-aged Shan woman who works with a Culture and Literature Association

At times the handling of festivals has to be very delicate and a great deal of effort goes into their facilitation, under considerable constraints.

I want to protect Shan culture and literature. I don't want to go against the government because I am afraid. When we celebrate Shan New Year we have to be careful because youths want to speak their minds freely, but this would cause conflict with the government. Traditionally we open our minds in the New Year celebration, but we cannot do this anymore. Now we have to ask permission to have the festival, and it is difficult to get permission.

Young Shan male university student

Bamar interviewees also spoke of pressures associated with liaising with government. The Bamar have to get permission from the government to conduct festivals. Older people handle arrangements

with the government over permits for festivals. This makes it difficult for young people to get involved, be innovative and contribute.

We have some cooperation within Bamar at community level. Cooperation can be accomplished, but if people over 40-50 years old are involved, they have a hard time cooperating and talking to each other. When they do the Sun Festival for Bamar people the older people don't think about the young people; they go their own way. Youths have an easier time cooperating. Even if one older person is with a youth group, all cooperation will be lost because the older person refuses to sign the government permission form [for the Sun Festival] and often objects to our ideas.

Young Bamar male NGO staff

In the past, festivals served as a way for different ethnic groups across Myanmar to get together and build relationships through a common focus, such as, sport. Unfortunately this has been discontinued. This aspect of interaction is developed further in the 'Group Interactions' section.

When I was in school we had a sports festival. One year it was in Kachin State, the next year in Shan State, and so on. There might be between seventy to one-hundred people from each ethnic group attending. We got to know each other and formed networks and relationships. But this programme stopped in 1988, and I don't know why, it was government policy.

Middle-aged Bamar who is the son of a retired high-level government official

As an additional sign of changing times, Chinese festivals are now celebrated in areas close to the Chinese border. One civil society member felt this shows a general increase in the Chinese population, and Chinese influence, in that area.

The Chinese population is becoming enormous in Shan State, so I think Shan people will be dominated by Chinese in terms of culture and business. In Lashio, over 50 percent of the population is Chinese

I think. For example, we have school days off for Chinese festivals, even though they are not national holidays.

Young Shan male INGO staff

Festivals are a type of cultural expression and in the Myanmar context there are differing levels of participation and conflict. The government provides varying levels of support to festivals. Ethnic nationality groups who are Buddhist, struggle to contest what they see as the government assumption that all Buddhist cultures celebrate religious festivals in the same way.

Access to Literature

In the Myanmar context, access to literature for all ethnic groups, including the Burmese, is challenging. There is a scarcity of literature published in ethnic nationality languages and on topics pertaining to ethnic nationality groups. Accessing books in ethnic nationality languages is difficult and, in their absence, oral histories are a key source of information. To the question about the existence of books in Rakhine language, one civil society member responded:

No, only in Burmese. We are not allowed to learn the Rakhine language in Rakhine State. If people teach it, they are detained! People don't dare to do that.

Young Rakhine woman from Rakhine State

Culture and Literature Associations exist in many ethnic nationality groups to address the lack of literature and the preservation of culture. They are a mainstay for this purpose. Cultural and Literature Associations are loosely networked and possess potential to benefit from a more coordinated and resourced network. Considerable constraints exist in relation to the publication of material.

Restrictions on Publishing and Censorship

Restrictions on the right to practice one's own culture through

literature was repeatedly raised as an issue by civil society members. Many spoke of the challenges of having literature published in a language other than Burmese. Translating documents into Burmese in order to get permission to publish material is onerous. There was also a strong likelihood that permission would be denied.

Sometimes, we want to publish things about education and health for Shan people but we have to apply to get a permit. We have to translate the whole document into Burmese. Our young people can't learn Burmese: they don't have the right to learn about health if they don't speak Burmese.

Middle-aged Shan woman who works with a Culture and Literature Association

Where groups do get permission to publish literature, obtaining the funding to carry out publication is a further problem.

I write books and pamphlets. This is one of the books we finished [hands us a book with drawings of Chin people on the front—it is written in a Chin language]. It is called The Origin of Chins. I am doing a lot I think, but it is nothing. What we do, must be produced, otherwise, it is nothing. We have published seventeen books. If we want to do something, we need money. We have to maintain folk songs, history, culture, for our prosperity. We need money.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician

In fact, it is easier to obtain material from overseas about ethnic nationality groups.

Personally I am interested in history and politics, but it is difficult to find facts. The government makes it like this. If I want to find information on Shan history, it's not there. It's hidden. If I want to find books on Shan matters I have to go to out of the country like Thailand etc; there are lots of books there! But inside, no, I have to go to a person with knowledge of such things. How will future generations know of the past with a situation like that? They will

have no idea of what to do for Shan State or their country. Without such knowledge the spirit of nationalism, and the attitude of loving Shan State and committing to work for state and country will not happen, I think.

Young Rakhine woman from Sittwe, Rakhine State

The inaccessibility of literature makes it difficult for knowledge about one's ethnic nationality to be understood and promoted. This weakens the potential for collective identity and organising and places considerable emphasis on oral history.

Obstacles preventing publication are having a big impact on this and potentially the next generations.

Young people don't know who we are descended from, or our own language. I am very sorry about that. There is no reference book on who we are, and where we came from.

Young Shan man from

Despite these many restraints, people are taking on the challenge of producing literature in their own languages. People's desire to preserve language and literature is evidenced through the great personal risks people undertake to benefit their own ethnic nationality.

I got a book from my friend at the UN. It was about plans to teach housewives. I am going to translate it. We try to publish some books about the nature of science, computers etc. I translate directly from English to Shan. Shan students can learn English and can understand it well, more than Burmese, because the grammar is the same. We are looking for books that are good for them. Sometimes, we have to publish on the black market. We have no permit. They can arrest us any time. In this country, if they want to arrest us, it is very easy for them.

Young Shan male journalist

Again, religious institutions—churches and monasteries—play a key role in promoting literature and language for ethnic nationalities.

Most people can't read or access the Mon language. The monastery is the main place where people can learn and maintain the language. It is our duty to teach Mon people and others to go the right way, through Buddhist teachings.

Middle-aged Mon monk

For Karen people we have the Bible, which provides a basic education for us. This is the main way people can read.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Yangon

Some people from the Chin and Kayah groups also spoke about difficulties writing in a common language or alphabet, which can further constrain production and publication of literature.

Religion

Over eighty interviewees from different ethnic groups who identified as Buddhist and Christian were interviewed for this project. The sample did not access Muslim, animist, or atheist populations. This is an area for further research. The analysis that follows reflects upon the role of religion for Buddhist and Christian people.

It is clear that the role of religion is varied, far-reaching and significant to people across all ethnic groups. Interviewees from all ethnic groups were animated on the role of religion for themselves, their communities and their ethnic group. Whilst this research supports the contention that the eight major ethnic groups each has a majority religion, there is religious diversity within ethnic groups.

The overwhelming majority of people interviewed from the Mon, Rakhine, Shan and Bamar ethnic groups were Buddhist. The overwhelming majority of people interviewed from the Karen, Kayah, Kachin and Chin ethnic groups were Christian. Other religions people spoke of were the animist or traditional belief system, and Islam. Both Buddhist and Christian interviewees spoke of positive relations between people of the same ethnic group and different religions. Some experiences of religious tension were also shared.

A Significant and Diverse Role in Daily Life

Religious institutions played a significant role in a broad array of areas of daily life such as, education, employment, literature, language and culture, health and conflict resolution, and as providers of personal development programmes such as leadership and capacity building training. People from the Mon ethnic group spoke of monks running systems akin to banks and micro-credit schemes in villages, and facilitating health appointments for villagers who venture to urban areas for healthcare. In some Christian communities, pastors would mediate disputes between villagers. Buddhist and Christian organisations take on community development and community education. Their role in providing education to ethnic nationalities is abundantly clear. Religious institutions took on various leadership roles as the quotes below highlight.

We don't have leaders in the villages. Nobody wants to be a village chief because you have to work for the government for free, and you don't have a chance to take care of your family. So people go to the monks. Anything they want to know, they discuss with the monks—strategy, knowledge, education, children.

Middle-aged Shan woman who works with a Culture and Literature Organisation

As NGOs and INGOs have formed, our youngsters can get jobs easily because Chin are Christians and they have learned English. This is one way in which Christianity has supported us. In southern Chin State, every priest has to have a building for educating youngsters. As boarders, they are trained in religion and education. Good students will be sent on for further education.

Older Chin man from southern Chin State

Religion creates safe spaces for people to undertake activities that may not have otherwise have been able to go ahead.

If Karen nationals want to do a programme, they can do it under the church umbrella. [Our organisation] is not legal. They have

meetings in the church compound; there they can do it! Within religions organisations it is very free. Outside, government organisations can watch.

Older Karen businessman

Some interviewees made the point that sharing the same religion as other ethnic nationalities made them culturally similar on some levels. It would be incorrect however, to presume that these similarities extended to all customs and traditions.

We are not similar in clothing, but otherwise we are similar to the Burmese. We are all Buddhists so we are culturally similar. Our culture is based on religious festivals. Mostly, the religious festivals are the same, but some customs are not. Our dancing is very different from Burmese and our cultural songs and traditional food are also very different.

Middle-aged Mon male CBO staff

Some Buddhist people commented that networking amongst Christian organisations, domestically and internationally, was more common. There was a perception that Christian people have more contacts and better English and as a result, a better chance of securing employment in the NGO sector:

Being Buddhist, we are disconnected from NGOs, because here in Yangon, most NGO leaders are Christian and so are connected to people from the outside. Church organisations have many connections. They can go on summer courses and make connections.

Young Rakhine woman from Rakhine State

Religion played a varied but significant role in people's lives in Myanmar. It provided an institution whereby ethnic nationality languages and cultures could be studied and preserved. It also created a safe place for activities that would otherwise have not been able to go ahead. In some instances it could foster employment opportunities.

Religious Freedom and Restrictions

Constraints on religious freedom were raised by interviewees from all ethnic groups and amongst both Christian and Buddhist communities. Some Christian civil society members felt that conditions were more onerous for Christians as they are a minority religion in Myanmar.

In Myanmar we don't have religious rights, only worship rights. We can worship anywhere, at a pagoda, a market, or under a tree, but we do not have religious rights. There is no law to protect minority religions. There is a Buddhist majority and a Christian minority. Until today we don't have a big problem between Buddhist and Christian, but the government gives favour to Buddhism and neglects Christianity.

Middle-aged Kachin man who works with a religious organisation

It is very difficult to build a temple or a church. Authorities say you have to get recommendations from the authorities. When you go that way, it takes a very, very long time but for Buddhists it is very, very easy to build a pagoda anywhere, with no disturbance from the authorities. Traditionally, some famous monasteries got a lot of offerings from Myanmar and Thailand. But if one or two foreigners come to our church and meet people, there will be many subsequent checks and inquiries. For Buddhists, it is easy to organise worship. For Christians it is difficult to organise even a small thing, to organise even a few people. We always have to make an understanding with the authorities.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor from eastern Shan State

Whilst there are difficulties faced by Christians in observing religious rights, Buddhist interviewees also spoke of challenges and constraints on their religious freedom. These restrictions were observed to be particularly acute since the 2007 protests in Yangon by Buddhist monks.

There are no rights for the monks. They must inform the government even if they want to go somewhere. After the uprising, most of the

leaders were Rakhine monks. We fight again to be free.

Young Rakhine woman from Sittwe, Rakhine State

There was a strong perception amongst some Christian interviewees that their religious rights were subject to a larger number of constraints and restrictions than Buddhists. Whilst there is no conclusion on this point, Buddhist interviewees also raised concerns about government restrictions on their rights to worship.

Religion as a Source of Conflict

Religious diversity is of particular significance for the Karen ethnic nationality, which have a large population of Buddhist and Christian groups. These groups have at times engaged in armed conflict against each other and against the government. Civil society members from the Karen ethnic group expressed their awareness of the potential for religion to divide people.

Every human being has their own faith and religion. Some are Buddhists, some Christian, some animists, some traditional believers, some worship the sun, the moon, the river, the forest, some their father, mother or grandmother. There are many diverse faiths amongst the Karen. We speak the same language. We have good relations. But the Burmese want to disintegrate us. They want to drive a wedge between us, and they use religious differences to do it. Buddhist and Christian groups get separated. They kill each other. It's a very sad thing. There are only a small number of animists and they are less educated. But that is no problem. We all know that when we talk about race, we should keep our people's issues top priority. As for religion, we should pray how we like. Buddhists should pray for Karen. Christians should pray for Karen. We join together because united we stand, divided we fall. Religion is our change opportunity. It is a good thing but it can turn into a dangerous thing. The Burmese can divide us by using religion. Religion can be used as a weapon. Religion can be used as a scapegoat.

Older Karen monk

Unity amongst different religions was seen as important for Karen ethnic nationality. Equally, unity within the same religion and amongst different ethnic nationality groups was also viewed as fundamental. Emerging links between Christian communities had formed in the wake of Cyclone Nargis relief work. In one instance, an exchange programme was initiated after Cyclone Nargis to enable Karen people from the affected area in the Delta to visit Kachin communities in Kachin State.

Through the fellowship programme, connections improved. We went on an invited exchange to Kachin State. It was very good for relations.

Middle-aged Karen man from the Delta

Interviewees spoke of religion as a tool for connecting and dividing ethnic nationalities. This is elaborated upon further in the 'Interactions' section.

'Burmanisation' Through Religion

Concerns were raised that religion was used as a tool for 'Burmanisation'. This was particularly an issue where the ethnic nationality shared the same religion as the dominant Bamar majority, such as the Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. These ethnic nationalities spoke of feeling marginalised within the dominant Buddhist Bamar majority. An emphasis and priority was placed on Burmese language and customs ahead of those of ethnic nationalities.

Buddhist religious development puts importance on being 'Burmanised'. We have eight monasteries where I live. The priority is to mainstream. Even if all the people there are Shan or if only one or two are Burmese, they have to talk Burmese.

Middle-aged Shan woman from Shan State

People felt that their right to practice religious ceremonies and festivals differently to the Bamar was not respected. Instead they were being

forced to observe Buddhist traditions according to Bamar customs. Christians of ethnic nationalities said that some people convert from Christianity to Buddhism in order to win favourable treatment in the civil service.

Secularism

The need for secular leadership was addressed by some Karen interviewees who felt that it was important to clearly state your affiliation, or otherwise work in a secular way. The Karen members were the only ethnic group to talk of a desire for secular leadership.

We need leadership of the Karen people. Not Christian or Buddhist. We need secular leadership.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Yangon

Sometimes I see the help that comes through international organisations. It comes maybe because the local organisation's mission and vision coincides with their political or religious interests. If your organisation is based on church or religion, OK. But if your organisation has a free base, then it is better not to be coloured by that kind of thing. I think in our group, when we get scholarships, out of thirteen, only three of us are from [one school]. The others all represent some kind of group. Sometimes there are other groups that would like to help us, but they also want to have some kind of influence. I want to see pure intentions. A pure secular opportunity... People want to know, who is the person behind you? A low profile is important.

Young Karen female INGO staff

Interviewees provided many examples of the constraints on cultural expression they experience in their day-to-day lives. These are manifested in areas such as language, education, employment, the conduct of festivals and religion. The interviewees have reinforced the importance of language to the maintenance of culture. They have also highlighted how language can be a tool for exclusion and inclusion. A

Bamar-centred education system, the saturation of popular culture with Bamar language and culture, restrictions on festivals and religious rights, make culture expression challenging for ethnic nationalities. Several interviewees used the expression 'Burmanisation' to describe this practice. Despite the considerable obstacles, families, religious institutions, community associations and in some instances individual teachers, are resisting these constraints and maintaining culture and language.

GENERAL CONTEXT

Education emerged as the single biggest concern facing all ethnic groups. It was widely felt that the education system was under-resourced, corruption-prone, fostered a Bamar-centred bias and failed to equip young people with the skills to face their future. Other concerns persistently surfaced, such as, poverty and the lack of investment in infrastructure and the economy. In the business sector, it was perceived that big companies dominated and small businesses were forced out or faced a very difficult time generating a profit. Poor infrastructure compounded these problems.

Corruption was said to be endemic and a central practice of government, military and business. People also associated forced labour and sexual violence with the military. Additionally, gender discrimination surfaced as regards pay equity, equal access to employment and education opportunities. There was a perceived inability to access the justice system and gain legal protection. Sanctions were criticised for burdening the civilian population more than the government. It was felt that there was a lack of investment in modern and technology-based agricultural practices that could enhance food security. Conditions seemed to be better in Yangon than other places, although the lack of information about the economy compromised any accurate comparative assessment. Collectively, these factors are pushing internal and external migration.

Perception of ‘Burmanisation’ continued to surface in discussions about the education system, employment and infrastructure. Interviewees felt there is silencing of historical narratives involving ethnic nationalities. The way the government deals with population data almost certainly undervalues the population size of ethnic nationalities. Media representations subordinate ethnic nationalities. Ethnic nationalities experience racial and religious discrimination in employment, particularly in the civil service in terms of progressing to higher ranks. The Border Guard Forces issue inflamed current tensions and increased the chances for armed conflict.

Education

It's clear that education for the whole country is in a woeful state. It has become a fake and a sham education. It's just about numbers. The quality is zero or maybe minus that. There is no quality, just quantity.

Older Karen male academic

The education system in Myanmar was the most talked about issue across all ethnic groups. Civil society members criticised the present education system for being grossly under-resourced and prone to corruption. It was widely felt that education standards had deteriorated to such an extent that the financial resources of a student, and their family, now dictate a student's results and their successful passage through the system. Some people expressed frustration at the deterioration of what had been a good education system.

Twenty years ago, teachers were very professional. They used to teach not for the money. The standard has gradually decreased. Nowadays, teachers are poor because their pay is so low. They try to make money out of teaching and they compete with each other. The rich and middle classes try to send their children to Rangoon and Mandalay.

Young Kachin female NGO staff

People also reported significant discrepancies in education standards for rural and remote communities, and provided illustrations of problems in the education system in primary school, high school and university sector. This research was unable to determine whether these issues are confined to government-run schools or are present in non-government schools. People repeatedly told of the problems in the system and people's desire to see improvements so that the next generation would be educated.

Bamar-Centred Education

Interviewees from all ethnic nationality groups, and some from the Bamar ethnic group, criticised the education system as Bamar-centred in language and culture, and as silencing narratives and historical accounts of ethnic nationalities. Burmese has become the language of instruction in all government-run schools in Myanmar. Whilst some people reported their schooling had departed from this policy, particularly where the teacher was from the same ethnic group as the pupils, in the main this policy is enforced. Problematically, the policy on language is coupled with the use of education aids, such as textbooks etc, which contain a Bamar-centred historical and cultural perspective.

In the national curricula, you always see Burmese. You always see the longyi. Children notice this. This is cultural assimilation. All pictures are of Burmese culture, eg. pagodas, dress, lifestyle etc. It's all Burmese. Every student automatically sees this as the norm. There is the language problem also. The national education syllabus prescribes the language of instruction to be Burmese. It's always in Burmese, in every state.

Young Chin male university student

The Shwegadon [pagoda] is Mon but they try to hide this. They don't mention the history of the pagoda. They don't mention the real history.

Young Mon man who works with a Culture and Literature Association

In the present system, people felt the narratives of ethnic nationalities were excluded. The failure to promote the role of ethnic nationalities in Myanmar's history was readily acknowledged and criticised by some of the Bamar interviewees.

There were many ethnic heroes in the revolution for independence. But in the textbooks, they just teach about Burmese heroes. I am very sorry and angry about that.

Middle-age Bamar male NGO staff

One outcome of this mono-culture approach to education is that people from the ethnic nationalities know a great deal about Bamar language, history and culture. This familiarity increases their ability to move through the system from school to university.

Now in school curricula they teach about Bamar culture and tradition and do not allow teaching about the Kachin. When you hear the same thing every day, it becomes like music for you. So now we say that we don't like the curriculum, but we are taught Bamar are good, so when we reach university, we are already familiar with them.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Kachin State

Conversely however, some Bamar people who had been taught a mono-cultural perspective were unaware of ethnic conflict in Myanmar. This meant they were not equipped with a contextual understanding of the problems nor had the skills and tools to navigate ethnic conflict when eventually confronted with it.

Before, I felt we lived together peacefully with other groups [from the textbooks]. In the field, the last two years, I have attended religious/inter-ethnic dialogues. I have heard the ethnic voice. If you are Bamar, they have feelings of distrust about you. I thought, 'I didn't do anything wrong, so why distrust me?' I feel very sorry. For example, Karen don't believe Bamar because Bamar soldiers killed Karen and Shan people. Ethnic people see soldiers and Bamar as the same, so they hate us because they think we are soldiers. I was shocked by this because I did not do anything wrong! After a few years I have got to know some ethnic people and we have good relationships, but still many Karen and Shan don't like Bamar because we are Bamar; and Bamar don't like them because they are ethnic.

Middle-age Bamar male NGO staff

The view that the education system promoted a Bamar-centred perspective was keenly felt across all ethnic populations interviewed. In particular it was felt that textbooks portrayed only Bamar history and culture. This results in ethnic groups having a lack of knowledge about each other and about ethnic diversity in Myanmar.

Lack of Government Financial Support to Education Leads to Corruption and Deteriorating Standards

There was significant discontent across all ethnic groups with regard to the way education was financed in Myanmar. People said that it sometimes fell to civil society and not the government, despite the paying of government taxes, to furnish schools with essential equipment. There was also a sense that the government failed to invest in intellectual life for civil society. One interviewee felt that the lack of investment was deliberate so that civil society would be easier to control. A failure to invest in the education system resulted in a funding deficit in which corruption flourished, pushing the cost of education beyond the reach of many.

People complained of the rising cost of education from primary school through the university level. An overwhelming majority said corruption in the education system was widespread. The low salaries of teaching staff were seen as making the system susceptible to corruption. Teachers were seen as supplementing low wages by providing extra tutorials for paying students and special treatment for those with the resources to support it. Many teachers and students would not turn up to normal classes and instead only attended the classes for which they had specifically paid. Teachers favoured students who could pay.

They collect many fees. Apart from that, they have other tuition classes from other teachers. This costs parents a lot of money. Teachers favour people who can pay more. Teachers favour students by giving them the best places in the classroom and giving them exam tips.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor

Cheating by students was implicitly accepted. The system lacked the engagement of its key stakeholders, teachers and student.

Nobody adjudicates the exams. We just open the text books and copy the information. Teachers and most students don't care about teaching.

Young Chin male university graduate

Moreover, government teachers were perceived to be unwilling to work and stay in remote regions, where their ability to supplement their insufficient government salary was limited.

Many people from the middle part of Myanmar come and work in our state, but when they get promoted they go back to the middle part of Burma or their home place. They cannot get any additional income in our state so they don't stay long.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

The emphasis on private sources of funding meant that only the wealthy could enter and succeed in the system. This was common to all ethnic groups.

The thing is, in the education system, you need a lot of investment by your parents. If you are poor, you cannot have that. It is difficult for parents to invest the money. This is why we can't get into some professional schools.

Middle-age Chin male INGO staff

Only rich people and middle-class people can attend high school and university. The poor cannot afford it. They have to shoulder everything themselves—taxes are high, the cost is high, very high.

Older Mon retired male teacher

A funding deficit was seen as the source of many problems within Myanmar's education system. This was an extra burden for students from rural and regional areas.

Urban v Rural Education Standards

It was perceived that there was a sharp disparity between education standards in urban and rural areas. The quality of the education system was said to deteriorate the further one is from a major city or town; in remote regions the closest school may be several hours away and the resources limited. There were two key ways in which the discrepancy in education standards and opportunities between urban and rural areas manifested. Firstly, educational opportunities and resources in urban areas were thought to be better than rural or regional areas. In villages in ethnic nationality areas, Burmese might not be spoken at school or in the community, and hence people's ability to learn in Burmese was compromised.

In our town, most people can speak Burmese fluently. It is difficult if you are from the village as it is less likely that you will speak Burmese. In school, most of the teachers cannot speak the Kachin language and teach in Burmese. Some of the people from the village try to attend school in town. They want a good education in the village school, but the teachers they are often not qualified so they try to send children to schools in town. The first big problem is poor transport, which makes it very difficult to get to school. Secondly, there are different entrance requirements. The teachers are afraid: they think these children from the village are not qualified. Most of the high school teachers in our town compete; they want to show how many of their students pass the tenth standard matriculation. It is important for their reputation. So they cannot accept students from the village because they are not qualified. Only some can attend middle school.

Young Kachin woman from Kachin State

Secondly, those who had to travel to urban areas to undertake further study, an opportunity unavailable to them in their own hometowns, were thought to be at a significant financial disadvantage that was then compounded by their language skills. Only those with solid financial means or support in urban areas could contemplate this

opportunity. In essence, those who live in urban areas have more opportunities when it comes to where and what to study. For some in remote areas, this was an issue driving migration.

Many young people go overseas—they can't think about their life. They don't go to school, and they convince themselves education not important. They are too busy with daily life.

Young Chin male NGO staff

In contrast, people felt the ethnic nationality language skills of those who lived in major cities were not as good as those who lived in the villages. Religious groups took up this disparity.

In Yangon and Mandalay many youth cannot speak Karen languages. The church tries to teach them to speak and write Karen.

Middle-aged Karen female church organisation staff

In sum, there are significant disadvantages for students from rural and regional areas, and for those without financial means.

Teacher-Centred and Not Student-Centred—No Critical Thinking or Creativity

The current teaching and learning strategy is to teach for the exams. This ensures that a certain number of students will pass. It is teacher-centred and exam-centred.

Older Mon retired male teacher

Another common complaint about the education system is that it is teacher, and fact, oriented; students are not taught or encouraged to use critical thinking skills or their creativity. It was suggested that learning by memorising was the dominant teaching style and the development of critical thinking skills were actively discouraged.

In Rakhine State there is no chance for education. In my township there are over 50,000 people; there are 8,000 students at school and only five teachers. We have no critical thinking, we cannot be

creative because we only do the learning-by-heart method of education. It is a one-way education system. We have no right to respond to the teachers. Whatever teachers say we think they are right.

Middle-aged Rakhine woman born in Rakhine State

Our education system is not very effective. It's not a quality education. All of it is not good quality, especially at the basic level. Teachers use a teacher-centred approach—whatever the teacher says, the students learn—there is no chance for creativity.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

It was also thought that the government created a misleading perception that students were doing well and were passing exams. One retired teacher and former Education Department bureaucrat from an ethnic nationality put it thus:

When I worked for the Director General of Education the pass rate for exams was 40 [percent]; already pretty low, right? But so few people passed that he asked us to lower it, to see if people would pass. We did, but he was annoyed again because only marginally few more people passed. We had to lower it a third time.

Older Mon retired male teacher

The level of expertise within the higher echelons of the Department of Education was also raised as an issue. It was said that the Director General was not an education specialist. This was thought to diminish the emphasis on the value of teaching and learning strategies and practices, from the top down.

Multiple interviewees commented that the poor education system is a deliberate strategy of the government to prevent an educated, informed, and active citizenry from emerging and challenging the government's authority. Accordingly, the desire for education to be improved and capacity building to take place amongst young people was strongly advocated for by interviewees.

University

For the reasons outlined above, a large section of the potential student population is prevented from accessing higher education as a result of structural disadvantage. Only a select number has the opportunity to pursue higher education. That select minority has to negotiate the numerous challenges that afflict the university sector. These range from issues around quality of education, to corruption, disruption and poor attendance by teachers and students. This quote showcases some of the issues faced by students.

The university movement now is very small. In the past, universities were places you could organise easily and be strong and influential. When we were young, we were crazy about uni. People printed magazines and did performances on Chin National day. They organised Chin traditional food on campus. So when we were young, university was cool. When I arrived at university in 2001, the teachers didn't come. It was useless. Over two years, you would go to the university for maybe three weeks. The chief of department for English came only one time....over the whole degree. There were over five-hundred English literature students.

Young Chin male university graduate

Every university student interviewed expressed concern over the teaching methods at university. Some said they would not turn up and only attended exams. Others would only attend the sessions in which they paid the teacher.

Some interviewees spoke of gender discrimination in the university entrance system. For some university courses in Myanmar, people said there is a discrepancy between the entrance rates of men and women.

After 10th grade for example, men will need to get 480 marks and women 500 marks to get into medical school.

Middle-aged Karen woman who works in women's development

For the subject of agriculture in the forestry institute, women's marks must be higher than guys'. Forestry, agriculture and veterinary institutes all practice the same policy.

Young Karen female NGO staff

Completing a degree at university was sometimes prolonged for reasons beyond a student's control. University for some people was interrupted for several years when the government shut down universities as a result of perceived political disturbances.

I went in October 1998 but then after two-and-a-half months the university closed down for two-and-a-half years because it was the time of the second university movement of '98. I finished my first year three years later. Because of that, I finished first year at age twenty-two.

Young Karen female university graduate

The cost of education has become prohibitive for those wanting to attend university in Yangon and Mandalay. Further compounding the issue of costs were constraints on enrolment, matriculation has to be set in the state in which you attend university. This drives up the costs for those in regional areas and is seen as an opportunity only available to those with adequate financial means. Although having accessible universities in the ethnic states is to be encouraged, some people felt this was a deliberate strategy to prevent ethnic nationalities from moving inter-state.

Most people try to attend university at Yangon and Mandalay but it is difficult to get this chance because students from Kachin State must attend at Kachin State, this is their rule. They also say that you have to pass 10th standard in that state to be able to attend university. This is difficult because it costs money to go to Mandalay or Yangon to finish school. Most Chinese and Burmese people can do it, because they have the money.

Young Kachin woman from southern Kachin State

There was one university that was the exception. Here the teachers encouraged students to think critically and to debate each other. Students from different ethnic groups studied together and exchanged perspectives. This led to the establishment of a strong network of students across ethno-cultural differences.

In fact, they peel off a layer in you that makes you think broadmindedly and actively. I didn't see things like that before. They give you critical thinking and show you how to speak out on what you believe, and to respect others' opinions. They develop in you the courage to say what you want. I didn't have that before. Maybe for a Masters holder, that sounds funny, but for a Bachelor of Arts student, it was fantastic. It was the subjects and the method of teaching that were so good. You have to debate, give papers, make speeches.

Young Karen female university graduate

On the whole however, the university experience seemed to lack meaning for students and was not thought of as a rigorous intellectual pursuit that qualified people for professional life. This was driving interest in correspondence courses from universities within Myanmar and abroad. At the conclusion of university however, people also felt there were no jobs out there for people to apply what learning they did gain.

Job Prospects Upon Graduation

Job prospects upon graduation were seen as a major problem. Having overcome access issues to gain entry to university, graduates were disappointed to find that earning a degree does not necessarily result in better job opportunities.

The education system is not good. Even though I have a Masters degree, there is nowhere to apply for a job. If I wanted to create my own business—and I am not a rich person—even if I wanted to, I would have to pay a lot of tax. Most people either have to be

networked with the government or use family funds.

Young Kachin female university graduate

The lack of job opportunities is the main problem. There are no opportunities for young people. Although they are graduates, they go home and stay in the village and can't apply for any work.

Older Mon businessman

Many people expressed difficulty in finding work related to their university degree. People are then forced to find work in an unrelated field, such as assisting the family business, house duties or agriculture and farming. Moreover, the lack of job opportunities and job security is pushing large-scale migration of people to other areas within Myanmar and abroad in search of work and opportunities.

To find employment is a big issue. There is a shortage of jobs. After education and training, people cannot get jobs. Job security is also a big problem. You might have a job for six months or a year but that's it. We have to look outside the country to get a job, and there we get half the salary of a national. We get half of what their citizens get. Only those who are smart and clever have a chance. There is a brain drain.

Older Karen male academic

As this quote demonstrates, working conditions in neighbouring countries are challenging for Myanmar nationals. The loss of educated people, particularly from ethnic nationality populations, magnifies the effects of brain drain on the local population. Conversely, it is also supplementing the income of poor families, and funds initiatives and communities through remittances.

Economic Situation

This section deals with issues raised in relation to employment, sanctions, corruption, forced labour and the lack of government support to the economy.

Employment

In analysing what was heard from civil society members, it appeared that people from different ethnic groups would cluster in certain occupations. Generally, it was perceived that ethnic nationalities were discriminated against in civil sector employment. Religious and ethnic discrimination was also an issue in the government and NGO sector.

Civil Service

Civil society members from different ethnic groups spoke of discrimination in the civil service. Most civil servants are from the majority Bamar ethnic group. Where ethnic nationalities are given jobs in the public sector, they are prevented from rising to higher ranks.

If a person is an educated man worthy of a high position, and is a member of an ethnic group, he doesn't get the post. For example, the job of Director General we will never get. The job of general in the army we will never get. Because we are minorities—Karen, Chin Rakhine, Mon. Those high positions are not open for us.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician

Corruption was another issue identified by interviewees as endemic in the civil service. People spoke of having to bribe their way into the civil service.

Ethnic people are not allowed to get very high positions in the government. If they do get there, someone will try to get rid of them. It is very difficult to get a job. It is very shameful. We have to give a bribe to get a job.

Young Rakhine female NGO staff

One female from the Rakhine ethnic nationality group reported having no problems in government on the basis of her ethnic nationality status, but confirmed corruption was more the problem.

If I mention that I am Rakhine to the government, they have no problem with me. I have friends in the military. They are Rakhine and are not promoted, but I don't know if it is because of being Rakhine. It is difficult and bureaucratic to work with government. I had to pay 50,000 kyats [US\$5,000] to quit my government job in the Ministry of Agriculture. They wanted me to work for ten more years, but I did not want to. The fee I had to pay was so that I could resign and get a formal resignation letter, because if we don't get that, we cannot go abroad for further study etc ... we do not know what will happen to us.

Middle-aged Rakhine female NGO staff

Structural discrimination, such as unequal access to education, also hampered people's ability to gain employment in the civil service. It was felt that ethnic nationalities missed out on opportunities for further education that would have furnished them with qualifications necessary to be eligible for civil service employment.

In this area, the civil service demands educational attainments and many Karen are not qualified. A lot of Karen students finish at middle school. It is very different at the township level of education. They learn a little bit of a higher level there, but don't pass the matriculation exams. If you try to sit them twice and fail, you leave and do farming or fishing.

Middle-aged Karen male from the Delta

Others felt religion, rather than ethnicity, was the main factor that affected one's prospects of employment and promotion in the civil service. Christian people felt that if you were Christian, you would not get promoted up the ranks.

For the civil service, you will be given employment if you convert to Buddhism. Otherwise there will be no opportunity.

Middle-aged Chin male NGO staff

What I saw was that if you are this kind of ethnic or 'C' [Christian] you may not get a higher position. You cannot reach above a

general. Your highest position will be three stars. Your friends are generals. First, there is religious discrimination, second, there is ethnicity. This is the same for the civil service as well.

Young Karen female INGO staff

One Bamar interviewee acknowledged there was a high prevalence of Bamar in government roles, but rejected this type of employment as a result of unethical practices associated with civil service employment.

Most government servants are Myanmar. Teachers are mostly Myanmar, like my father. The government makes corruption anywhere, so there are bad habits in the government. My grandfather, a Bamar, said that when you grow up, don't work in government because you will not be a good person.

Middle-aged Bamar female NGO staff

People of ethnic nationalities who chose to work in the civil service also faced some animosity from their own and other ethnic nationalities.

When I was young I lived in a military compound because my parents were government servants; they worked at the government hospital. When I was age twelve I moved to a real Shan community. I didn't like the Shan community very much because of my background. Shan don't like other people and they didn't like us because my father is Rakhine. They also don't like the military and my father is a soldier. My family, like my uncles, think we are Bamar. My mother has a brother who married a Shan. Shan from northern, southern, and eastern Shan State are different. Their kids are real Shan and I am not; they think we are Bamar.

Middle-aged Shan-Rakhine female NGO staff

The Bamar appeared to dominate the civil sector in both the public service and the military, whilst ethnic nationalities felt marginalised in these areas. People from all ethnic groups agreed it is unlikely for ethnic or religious minorities to receive high level positions in the

government sector, be it military or department level positions. Many commented that high-level government positions are reserved solely for Bamar and Buddhists. Corruption plagued the system and was further compounded issues of discrimination.

NGO Sector

In contrast to the civil service above, many of those from ethnic nationalities said that the NGO sector was a primary employer of people from ethnic nationalities. Some Bamar felt their English was not as good as those of ethnic nationalities and so they missed out on employment in NGOs for language reasons. Bamar people suggested they were discriminated against when it came to NGO employment.

In the NGO arena Myanmar is the minority and ethnic groups the majority. This is because most NGO leaders are from ethnic groups and are concerned for their group. They don't want to involve Myanmar people. I have a friend, he is from the police. Before, he tried many times to work for NGOs but couldn't, because he is Bamar and does not have very good English. So he ended up doing a police job and serving in the government.

Middle-aged Bamar female NGO staff

Some Burmese also felt that a lack of access to networks among the Christian religious organisations hindered their ability to secure employment in the NGO sector. Buddhist people from ethnic nationalities shared this perception. They felt at a disadvantage when it came to getting started in the NGO sector as the networking amongst the ethnic nationality Christian communities was so highly organised.

Being Buddhist, we are disconnected with NGOs because here in Yangon, most NGO leaders and heads are Christian and so are connected to people from the outside. Church organisations have many connections. They can go on summer courses and make connections.

Young Rakhine female NGO staff

The majority Buddhist Bamar appeared to dominate the civil service in both the public service and the military, whilst ethnic nationalities felt marginalised in these areas. Conversely, Bamar people felt excluded from NGO employment as a result of an inability to activate networks and poor English language skills.

Employment Divide Mirrors Tension Between Sectors—NGO and Government

Interestingly, this divide in employment was mirrored in terms of engagement across sectors. The NGO sector had varying degrees of contact with the government and military institutions. A good relationship minimised obstacles whereas a hostile relationship between the government and NGOs created all sorts of problems.

Community work is not mixed up with politics. But some NGOs mix it up with politics and if the government finds out you cannot continue with trainings.

Middle-aged Karen woman from the Delta

When we build civil society we have to think about political motivation. If we are not politically motivated all progress will be useless. Here many NGOs work but they don't change the situation. They need political motivation. It must be part of their activities. People don't think of politics here, they think politicians will take care of it.

Middle-aged Rakhine male INGO staff

A lack of collaboration between government, military and the NGO sector may be linked with the exclusionary employment practices of both sectors.

Gender

Gender was a factor that resulted in clustering of some occupations. Many women reported that they did not work outside the home, but

did the bulk of the household work and food preparation. Many were said to be dependent on their husbands and lacked independent income. Some reported being dissatisfied with this role. The majority of women interviewed were engaged in paid employment outside the home. One woman who worked for an NGO expressed the view of her friends that they too would like to find employment but the opportunities do not exist for them to pursue. Many of these women had university qualifications.

You know, most of the Kachin women work for NGOs, but actually very few educated Kachin women work in NGOs. Most Kachin women are educated but they are at home. They want to do a job but they can't. They have no chance to work.

Young Kachin female NGO staff

Where women undertook the same jobs, pay equity was an issue. One interviewee spoke of a significant discrepancy in remuneration between male and female pastors.

The perceived gender breakdown of those involved in trade along the border areas showed mixed result. Some felt that women were less of a threat to the military and could therefore trade easily across the border. Others felt women were more vulnerable and therefore less likely to trade. For Chin, many women participated in border trade. Some Mon people also reported fewer difficulties for women crossing borders into Thailand and dealing with the military than for men.

My wife imports from Thailand and trades there. She is an import merchant. There are many transaction costs for just a small amount of goods. The taxes are on many things—cosmetics, women's utility, slippers, clothes. Things that come from China and Thailand. More women are doing this work. Women do it as it's easier for them to cross the border. When men go they get a lot of security checks. Women have a free pass.

Older Mon businessman

Some women expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of employment opportunities available to women upon graduation. The NGO sector was a significant employer for women.

Gender Discrimination

It surfaced throughout the interviews that prejudice was experienced differently by men and women. Gendered relations of power created further obstacles for women who faced an intersection of racial and gender discrimination. Civil society members felt that women were targeted by the military and the government for being a part of an ethnic nationality and for being women. There is little access to mechanisms to redress this abuse.

Sometimes ethnic women meet with pressure. The government puts pressure on them. The military are everywhere. Women don't know the law, so they don't know what to do. We give awareness to them. Sometimes we face rape by the military. There is not enough knowledge. The women are afraid. In the villages, they meet the military and talk about issues.

Middle-aged Chin female NGO staff

Other interviewees also spoke of women they knew being subject to sexual violence.

Some women are also raped by the soldiers. There is a license to rape, especially in the rural areas. It is government policy to systematically destroy peoples. Ethnic people are the majority in Myanmar. They want us to be in the minority. We think that it is about systematically killing off our ethnic groups. They want to mix up the blood lines so there is no pure ethnic blood. There are pregnancies and the soldiers just leave the women with the babies.

Young Rakhine woman who works on women's issues

Access to the legal system was a difficult for women. One woman revealed her experience of trying to obtain a divorce from her husband. She was unable to exercise her property rights and unable to seek legal redress.

I divorced my husband five years ago. He had an affair and left me and my child. He left us some property, but I am not allowed to sell the land, a rubber plantation. I can use it but not sell it. He gives me no money to support the child. I went to court but in five years they haven't considered the case. Until now, I have to use only my own money to bring up the child.

Middle-aged Mon woman from Moulmein, Mon State

For women, the risks of complication during pregnancy were increased by an expensive hospital that was inaccessible for many. This quote also demonstrates the bulk of heavy labour women undertake.

[Women] give birth at home. At hospital, it is very expensive. You have to go to Hakha. Women have womb problems and breast cancer. They work hard, they have walk a lot and carry very heavy things. For example, they carry water far. They get up early, come back late. They are full of aches and joint pains when they are older.

Middle-aged Chin female pastor

Women confirmed that progress had been made in the area of gender relations. In the past, women had fewer opportunities to attend university and work. Now these chances could be taken up by women.

The intersection of gender, religion and ethnicity, had complex outcomes for women. Christian and Buddhist women spoke of challenges within their own religions with regard to pay equity and equal participation. It was reported that the number of women present on village authorities was few. To what extent women were excluded from public life requires further research.

Forced Labour

In some remote areas in Karen State, the military often call villagers for forced portering.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Hpa-An, Kayin State

Interviewees of different ethnic nationalities spoke of witnessing, or knowing of, the presence of forced labour. This has been a contentious issue in Myanmar for some time and has prompted a great deal of attention from international human rights groups, in particular, the International Labour Organisation. The form most talked of by those interviewed involved the military using civilians to carry luggage and goods or to build certain infrastructure projects.

Forced labour is also a problem. They work on the railways and roads, and many kinds of things.

Middle-aged Mon woman from Mon State

Rakhine people are forced to do labour they don't like, and they can be beaten by the soldiers. Near Maung Ra village there was a bridge and I saw the military beat forced labourers there.

Middle-aged Rakhine man from Rakhine State

This has been an issue that has gone on for generations. It generates considerable anxiety amongst those who are exposed to this conduct and creates tension between ethnic nationalities and the military, and between ethnic nationalities and the Bamar.

From generation to generation we have experienced forced labour—portering; people are captured and asked to carry ammunition or something. So in our lives when we see the army, we hide and escape from them. My father hides under the house when soldiers come. We always see Bamar and soldiers together, so people say Bamar are not good.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

Access to legal mechanisms for addressing this conduct were seen as

unavailable and unattainable.

The military keep all the power. Under the military the law is not available to help us. If they want to kill us or use forced labour, they can. There is no law. They do what they want. We are afraid of them, even when we have nothing to hide.

Middle-aged Chin man from the highlands in Chin State

Forced labour was identified as an issue faced by ethnic nationalities in Myanmar. People felt they had very few avenues for redress of this type of government behaviour.

Lack of Government Support to the Economy

Economically, I feel like the best is being taken from us by the government and it doesn't want the people to be developed and civilised. Whatever we want to do, even if it's just a small business, we will be taxed a lot. For example: if we want to sell petrol, when a VIP visits the area, we either hide the petrol gallons or give the VIP a gallon. These are the challenges that the people are facing.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

Interviewees from all ethnic groups spoke of the lack of government support to the economy. People complained of corruption, high taxes, the discretionary levying of fees, and of land grabbing by the government. People also felt the schemes devised by government, such as the industrial zone, hindered conduct of their business, not supported it. Poor infrastructure exacerbated the problem. This made it difficult for Myanmar to compete with other countries and was forcing some businesses to close their doors.

The Prevalence of Corruption

People expressed their frustration over the extent of corruption in Myanmar. As highlighted above, people had to pay to get a job in some

sectors and corruption was seen as endemic in the education system. When travelling, a fee has to be paid to soldiers to pass through particular areas and to cross borders.

There are a lot of bamboo beggars in Karen State. To get around, you have to pay money. The Burmese ask for money. They think they can demand money easily and they do. 500 or 1000 kyats. They should help the people, but instead they ask for money. If you have a good car, they want more money. If you talk in Karen, they ask for more money. We Karen are treated like second class citizens.

Older Karen monk

Even trips to government offices for services normally provided at no cost would incur a charge.

Every time we go to [a government] office, we have to pay. If I don't really need something, I don't go to government offices. If you don't pay for something you need there, it takes a long time to get what you need, like documents, etc. For example, when we apply for a passport we have to go to an office. They ask for 20,000 kyats for one passport, though they are supposed to be free.

Young Shan man who works for the SNLD

People felt this issue was not confined to ethnic nationalities and Burmese people were also subject to additional fees and charges. The fee or tax however, would be higher for ethnic nationalities when compared to a Bamar person.

Land Issues

People were concerned that the government was taking over their land and declaring it under government control. This would often occur in the context of large companies coming in and monopolising an industry. This was raised particularly by people from the Kachin ethnic group.

In Kachin State we have land ownership issues. Many companies

come and occupy a lot of land; the government permits this. The companies say that they want to plant trees but then they started to put up many buildings. We have a ceasefire but maybe someday we will have fighting because of this type of situation. They favour Chinese business people more. Many companies in Kachin State are Chinese. Some companies are owned by the government. They [the government] set very high criteria to get land ownership to set up a company and the Kachin people cannot meet that criteria and cannot compete. Kachin people rely on paddy fields. The government wants to own the paddy fields and own our land, and sells it to companies to do something else.

Older Kachin male NGO staff

We have many companies entering Kachin State. They occupy land. They only ask to use the land at a government department. Villagers don't know land law. Many companies are owned by government people or their sons or relatives. They take as much as 200,000 hectares, many big portions of land. So many villagers are landless. Native people don't know their options so they just give up the land. There are many land conflicts in Kachin State.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

Land grabbing was seen as an issue particularly by those interviewees who resided in Kachin State. There was a perception that the government and companies work hand in hand in seize land and then evict the local population. Again, there were understood to be few venues that people could utilize to dissent to this type of conflict.

Monopoly of Big Companies

Large companies had come to dominate the business sector, forcing out many small businesses. People stated this had occurred primarily in the trade and resources sectors. People wished for a loosening of restrictions to encourage more small businesses and a cessation of fees and levies.

Big companies are trading very well as they have understandings or agreements with government. But small grassroots people just do very small trading and things interfere with their businesses, like checks and other things at the border.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor

Interviewees suggested smaller companies could not compete in key business sectors and were burdened with operating conditions that larger companies avoided.

Economic Ties with Border Countries

Myanmar is a country with many borders and its economic link with each country is different. People in the Shan and Kachin ethnic groups who lived in border areas spoke a great deal about the involvement of China in trade and commercial enterprises within those states. It was suggested that Chinese companies bring a great deal of investment in these areas, and several industries support that, including the sex industry and gambling through casinos. These industries attracted many migrant workers from other parts of Myanmar, which was at times a source of conflict. The KIO was said to be involved in conducting these industries.

The situation is not the same in all of Kachin State. I come from the China border area. We face conflicts in that area, in our society. On the Burma side there is logging. The KIO wants to build a casino along the border. The Chinese government does not like this casino, but they have built a casino in Myanmar. The KIO is looking for income; there are many prostitutes in that area and many young people have an HIV problem. We have a big problem with illegal logging. The government army and the KIO do logging to send to China. More and more people are poor and jobless.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

In terms of extractive industries, it was felt that neighbouring countries bargained hard for their interests but people had mixed feelings on their involvement. Some were happy with the investment and the products brought into Myanmar under flexible trade arrangements. Others were unhappy with the gains made by foreign companies, believing them to be undervaluing the products extracted.

The economy becomes low, and we have to sell out, everything we have. They dig out all the resources: oil, teak, minerals... they are sold at a low value. We have poor value-added. If we could turn minerals into products, we could make millions. We sell the raw materials, without upgrading the value. Gems, teak, gold, we sell them all raw to India, China, Korea and Singapore. We have to depend on other people's technology. There is no facility to dig for offshore oil. All the people suffer because the economy is down and there is poor leadership.

Older Karen male academic

Chin interviewees spoke of receiving a lot of support from Chin people living in India. For example in Mizoram there is a Chin language station and an active network of Chin people. Interviewees thought that neighbouring India gave Chin people a familiarity with democracy and this was an advantage.

When it came to political lobbying, neighbouring countries were invited to take a stand. This included organised economic bodies like ASEAN.

The neighbouring countries are especially important, they should be putting pressure on this government. Like China, India, Thailand etc... We want to see ASEAN to play a greater role in Myanmar and pressure the government to come to the negotiation table, and especially pressure China. We want ASEAN, not just the US and European countries, to be more active.

Middle-aged Kachin male NGO staff

This issue is expanded upon in the later sections on ‘Vision’ and the ‘International Community’.

Sanctions

I think all these sanctions have no direct impact on the government, but have very serious impacts on the people. The property of individuals in government is not decreasing, but the life of the people is becoming terrible. All EU and US sanctions do is cause a mass loss of jobs for Myanmar. The economy is really bad so I am not sure it has an impact on the government, but surely on the people of Myanmar. I don't believe in sanctions.

Young Shan male NGO staff

Interviewees across all ethnic groups spoke of sanctions as overwhelmingly negative. Many spoke of their persistent inability to influence the government and bring about change in Myanmar. People saw this as reflecting on the UN and the weakness of the international system. The international community was invited to consider other strategies. The disproportionate and detrimental impact on civilians was a focus of civil society opinion. People expressed frustration that an ineffectual strategy was continually maintained despite the evidence that existed to challenge the utility of sanctions. People also felt that the UN, ASEAN and other key players in the international community were not doing enough to bring about change in Myanmar.

A voice from the business community felt that sanctions had little impact because there were an abundance of natural resources. Sanctions could be circumvented, as depicted by one interviewee from Mon State. He described that sanctions only increased the fees paid by people to soldiers on the border. Sanctions were seen as harmful to small business and job creation. They affect the grassroots in their ability to earn a daily income to feed their families.

Rice prices are so low at the moment because we cannot export our rice. If the sanctions were not there, we would be able to export

and get a higher price for rice. My family are farmers and they do not make enough money.

Young Mon female university student

It was felt that sanctions destabilise the economy and act as a deterrent to investment. They further compound an already strained economic environment.

The economy is very terrible, because the government does not have good governance and the leadership is poor. Relations with other countries are poor. The government is very arrogant and isolates itself. They are corrupt, they shout abuse and don't care about the UN. Then we have embargoes and sanctions, so less and less investment. The economy is then low, and we have to sell out, sell everything that we have. They have to dig out all the resources: oil, teak, minerals... they are sold at a low value.

Older Karen male academic

One interviewee took an alternate perspective on sanctions, requesting an increase in sanctions in order to increase the influence on government.

Tell the UN, EU, NATO, and the rest of the international community that I want you to be strong enough. I don't wish you to remove sanctions because we the people will get no benefit from that, only businessmen who focus on getting money and are not interested in the people who are affected. Sanctions should be stronger, like on North Korea. They cut off everything! We must be starved so we will be motivated to change the government. Now people don't think of politics because they have rice to eat.

Young Rakhine male university student

Overwhelmingly, people interviewed felt that sanctions were detrimentally affecting civil society with no impact on loosening restrictive government policies. Many examples were provided of this. Alternate strategies were suggested by civil society such as constructive engagement.

General Socio-Political Context

Ceasefires

Ceasefire agreements are signed in many of the ethnic nationality states and interviewees had mixed impressions of their impact. Areas that were negotiated over in the course of a ceasefire agreement were thought to have better infrastructure than those that were not subject to these agreements.

Telephone access is very weak in the non-ceasefire region. Ye region has no telephone access. Railways and roads are also poor. There is only one road from Ye to Moulmein. There is only one airport in Mon State.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

An interviewee from Chin State commented that he wished there was a more active insurgency in his state, so that a ceasefire could be negotiated and benefits flow.

If there is insurgency, there might be a push for a ceasefire. If we have that, we might have more investment. But insurgency doesn't have a strong name, it's only a few people. Before there was insurgency, our telephone and transport systems were really poor. After there was insurgency, we got interest from government. But Chin people feel insurgency is not useful to their lives. The Chin insurgency collects money from the people, there is lots of trouble. The insurgency is not accepted as a positive way.

Middle-aged Chin female pastor

This quote also reflects a fading satisfaction with armed groups. This sentiment was repeated in the voices of other interviewees from Kachin and Kayah ethnic nationalities.

The relationships between ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups with the people are not so different. We don't get benefits from either

group. Both work only for their own interests and benefits. One ceasefire group, Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), has organised transportation from Loikaw to Yangon, so that group is OK because at least we can travel.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) are Kachin, but now the KIO also have a ceasefire. They have peace. One aspect of the ceasefire is they don't have to fight. The other is that now the leaders spend their time making money. They are enjoying the benefits from natural resources. We have the Irrawaddy River, and gold mining, but that is very dangerous. There are so many poisons in the river because they use cyanide to get the gold, so we cannot drink out of the river. The KIO and government know what is happening but they ignore it because they are making profits. These problems are not known about in our society.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

The ceasefires have brought in business opportunities for Kachin State, but there is a perception that Kachin civil society has not benefited from this economic bounty. Instead the government, China and the Bamar majority are seen as having reaped the rewards.

Before the ceasefire, most of the houses in town were owned by Kachin people. Year after year after the ceasefire they have been sold. We have also lost a lot of opportunities to do with jade and gold mines. This is because Kachin people don't know about formal business. They have now introduced a more Western system. Other businesses come and invest and buy up things. The people who now own these businesses are the government, Chinese and Burmese.

Middle-aged Kachin male NGO staff

Kachin interviewees who live in Kachin State strongly felt that natural resources were being illicitly drained from the area. This was giving rise to a range of social problems.

The ceasefire started in 1994. Before that, we rebelled for over forty-five years. Since the ceasefire we have nonstop illegal logging. We are losing our resources: trees and minerals, gold and jade. Kachin also suffer from drug abuse, STD, corruption, and land loss issues. There is land loss because of Chinese encroachment with logging, roads, and bridges.

Older Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Many interviewees from the Kayah and Kachin ethnic group raised the impact of ceasefires on resource extraction, saying it had sped up this process enormously. This was having a significant impact on people's ability to obtain food security.

The Kachin people want the KIO to fight because our natural resources are nearly gone. When we had civil war our resources were maintained because there was no extraction. But we have had a ceasefire for fourteen years and the natural resources are almost gone.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

Before the ceasefire in Kachin State most of civil society depended on the forest. The forest, we can say, is the supermarket of the Kachin people. We can have everything from the forest! After the ceasefire our leaders, especially the KIO, changed and transformed. They traded the ceasefire for the forest. The Burmese army gave the ceasefire and Kachin leaders take from the forests. Our supermarket is destroyed after the ceasefire! We are losing our natural resources. Many people have lost their jobs and farms and are unemployed because their living depended on the forest. Before the ceasefire we did not have domestic animals because we did not need them, but now [after the ceasefire] we do. Civil society depends on natural resources: gold, jade. We don't take much, only what you can take by hand, not by machines. We have a lot of natural resources. But because of machines we have become lazy, we do not do hard work.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Life in the cease-fire and non-ceasefire areas can be extremely challenging for people. In the active armed conflict zones, the situation is dangerous and forces many people to leave. For those who remain, having to negotiate with different authorities is a constant challenge and a skillful task. The situation is complex and requires careful planning and foresight as evidenced by this interviewee from Kayah State.

There are lots of armed groups in Kayah State, ceasefire and non-ceasefire; some of them are the KNDP and KNPP armed groups. I come from “Special Region 2” in Kayah State. We have the military government and armed groups. Sometimes the government helps the people and sometimes the armed groups help the people. If something happens, like an accident, we will ask for help. Who we ask depends on the relationships we have as individuals; if we have relatives in the KNPP and KNDP we ask them for help, and if we have friends in the government we ask the government for help.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Special Region 2, Kayah State

On a positive note, ceasefires had introduced a negative peace. One Kayah interviewee said the ceasefire had brought a reprieve from the government’s policy of forced migration.

We have had many internally displaced persons (IDPs) since the 1980s; many moved to the Thai border because they were starving. People are still starving. The government asked villages to move, or to move into camps. They make us guard railroads and power plants. But this has gotten better since the ceasefire agreements in 1996.

Older Kayah male farmer

The Kachin and Kayah interviewees spoke about their mixed impressions of the impact of the ceasefires. Interestingly, the interviewees from the Mon ethnic group were not critical of the New Mon State Party, for reasons which have not been brought to the surface by this research. For others, fatigue was present in the relationship between civil society and the ceasefire groups.

Border Guard Forces

The issue of Border Guard Forces was current while the research was carried out in Myanmar.¹⁶ In short, the government is seeking to transform the ceasefire groups along the border into a Border Guard Force with central military oversight. Under the proposed scheme, BGF members would be paid the same as the Tatmadaw and be responsible for the territory in which they currently operate. The government proposes that for every BGF a small portion of soldiers, and one of the three commanding officers, would be from the Tatmadaw. Some ceasefire groups were in the midst of consultations with civil society members over the proposal when this project was undertaken. Others had completed their negotiations and had either agreed or disagreed with the government's plan.

A total of ten interviewees raised the issue of the Border Guard Forces. These ten people identified as Kachin, Mon, Kayah, and Shan.

Interviewees expressed several concerns about the Border Guard Force issue. Firstly, people felt it would not be a mutually beneficial opportunity nor lead to greater cooperation between ceasefire groups and the government. Instead people felt that becoming a Border Guard Force would mean the ceasefire groups would be controlled by the military.

At the moment Kachin people don't want the KIO to be border guards because we don't want to be under the control of the Burmese. If KIO are border guards they will work for the Burmese.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

Some said they had knowledge of ceasefire groups who had agreed to the arrangement and were now subject to the strict command of the military.

Among the Kachin groups there are two or three groups who have

¹⁶ Further information on this issue can be found in Kramer, T. (2009) *Neither War Nor Peace – The Future of the Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. Available at <http://www.tni.org/report/neither-war-nor-peace> (accessed 10/01/10). See also ICG (2009) *Myanmar: Towards the Elections*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report 174, 20 August 2009.

already accepted the BGF proposal. But now they regret it because there are military personnel along with them, and the major and those who used to have authority are now being controlled (they had some quota agreement in the proposal to have Burmese military in their administration and there was some flexibility, but when they are there, they control things). So the groups regret the change and don't want the KIO to accept this proposal.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

Secondly, there were concerns that this issue would effectively dislodge what remained of the ceasefire agreements, sparking a return to armed conflict. Some people were aware that preparations for armed conflict had already begun.

The government tries to manipulate ceasefire groups, like on the Border Guard Force issue. There are rumours that ceasefire groups will go back to their old ways and are ready to fight because they will not accept this proposal. As far as I know, the KNPLF agreed to be border guards but they are the only one. The agreement was made between government and the leadership, but from what I know the soldiers do not like the decision. Now they get training and are trying to smooth the process. However, if the differences are not ironed out we may see another split and another armed group will emerge.

Middle-aged Kayah male pastor

Moreover, people felt that if the situation did return to armed conflict, it would be worse than that previously experienced.

As far as I am concerned, the military government is trying to eliminate all the armed groups before next year's election. The Kokang have already disappeared and next will be the Wa and KIO. If the KIO will not accept the BGF proposal, fighting will surely break out. I heard from the KIA on the BBC that they will fight with anyone that comes to their territory, and so the chairman of the KIO is already telling the people in Laiza [the KIO headquarters] to be alert and they already moved to China. The house is empty now

and all the property has already moved to China. If war breaks out between the government and KIO, the situation will be much worse than before.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

There were some instances where armed groups had created scope for civil society members to voice their concerns to armed groups on the issue of Border Guard Forces. Interviewees spoke of armed groups consulting with religious leaders to obtain their views on the proposal. For the Kachin people, the KIO appeared to have a long history of consulting with the general population.

The KIO comes to organise with us often. This happens all over the area. Sometimes meetings have six-hundred people. They listen to the voice of the people on the border guard issue.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

In conclusion, there was little information on the border guard issue and some confusion between ethnic groups on which ceasefire group had consented and which had not.

Knowledge of own Ethnic Group and Other Ethnic Groups

One of the questions the research team was prompted to ask by the core group of ethnic nationality leaders directing this research was ‘*How many Ethnic Groups are there in Myanmar?*’ A majority of people answered that there were eight major ethnic groups, 135 ethnic groups in total, and some went on to say that this was a government figure they had learnt in school. People are suspicious of these figures because they are government statistics. Across the spectrum of civil society members interviewed, this question did generate a variety of answers.

Traditionally, there are supposed to just be the main groups but I suggest there are sixty to eighty.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor

What I have seen is in Shan State. They say there are 135. They say there are thirty-three Shan, but actually, we are only one.

Middle-aged Shan woman who works with a Culture and Literature Association

One factor influencing the variation in understanding is the lack of accurate and reliable information generally available on ethnic groups in Myanmar. Knowledge of one's own ethnic group also varied. Some people were unsure how many sub-ethnic groups were in their ethnic group. This example comes from the Kayah ethnic group.

In Kayah there are six main tribes: Kayah is the main group, but there is also Kayan, Kayo, Manu, Keko, and Kebah.

Middle-aged Kayah male pastor

There are eight tribes in Kayah: Kayah, Kayan, Kayo, Kebah, Keko, Menu, Yimbo, and Yintale.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

Additionally, restrictions on mobility, interaction and information about ethnic groups made understanding the context of other ethnic groups besides one's own very difficult. People felt government control of the media had also led to censorship.

I don't know much about people in other areas. I know very very little. I don't visit other areas often. Our difficulties in Yangon are electricity problems, water problems, transport difficulties, high jobless rates, and the poverty situation is very obvious. We also have restrictions on information; when we talk of ethnic people, most people, including both Bamar and ethnic people, don't know or understand each other. We don't know the reality for other ethnic groups because of government control over the media (though there are some independent media). It is very difficult to understand ethnic races because we don't know much about them.

Middle-aged Bamar male journalist

Analysing the responses as a whole, it seems ethnic groups are considerably unaware of the specific issues faced by each other. This may be attributed to constraints on interaction and the opportunity to come together and organise, and the lack of literature available on ethnic nationalities.

Perceptions of all Bamar as Synonymous with the Military

One of the consequences of misinformation in Myanmar is the strained relationships between ethnic nationalities and the Bamar, an issue explored in detail in the later 'Interactions' Section. A common thread throughout the interviews with those from an ethnic nationality is that 'Bamar' equals 'soldiers' and/or 'government'. In several instances, people were not able or inclined to distinguish between Bamar soldiers and Bamar who might not be soldiers or work for government. There was a significant perception that all Bamar were homogenous and a problem with the government became a problem with the Bamar military. This perspective had changed for some people however.

Attitudes toward the typical Burmese are really complex. When I was young, I hated them very much but now I am grown up, I understand that not all Burmese are soldiers. We have always thought that Burmese are soldiers, and this attitude still exists among the villagers. They cannot differentiate between soldiers and Burmese.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

Some interviewees were also inclined to make distinctions and said they had a good relationship with the Bamar but not the Bamar soldiers. Particularly the Kachin were more likely to clearly distinguish between Bamar and Bamar soldiers.

The relationship between ethnic groups is good, there is no problem socially even with the majority Burmar. I have a problem only with only the administration of this government and not the Bamar ethnic group.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Yet through the interviews with people it became apparent that for many, the word 'Burmese' was synonymous with 'military' or 'government'.

National ID Cards

National ID cards are administered by the government and record a citizens' ethnicity. People expressed concern as to how this system was administered. It was felt that minority ethnicities were being deliberately not recorded. In general, it was felt that government statistics were widely inaccurate.

The government says there are 3.5 million [Karen people] but I think it is more like 7 million.

Middle-aged Karen businessman

Many expressed their dissatisfaction that ID cards would wrongly carry the ethnicity of 'Bamar' as if the government were trying to distort population statistics. Interviewees said that where one parent was Bamar and another was from an ethnic nationality, the child of that union would be recognised officially as 'Bamar'. In some instances, official accounts of ethnicity appearing on ID cards would say Bamar despite both parents being of an ethnic nationality. This was a source of frustration. National ID cards were also used to distinguish between ethnic nationality groups, a strategy some saw as akin to 'ethnic cleansing'.

The total Kayah population from the four regions is about 300,000 to 400,000. The government ID cards make a difference between Kayah people. For example mountainous Karen and Kayah tribes are considered to be different than non-mountainous Karen and Kayah people. We feel that this is an ethnic cleansing policy. They are trying to make us smaller. This policy started in 1958 to prevent united ethnic groups and to keep us small and divided. About 200,000 bearing the name Kayah nationality have government ID cards. Some are known as mountain-living Karen (Tapo Karen),

and the Kayah in Shan areas are known as Pa-O. Also in Mandalay, the government don't like to call us Kayah, they call us mountain-living Karen.

Older Kayah male development worker

It was felt that National ID cards were being used by the government to divide ethnic nationalities and enhance the dominance of the majority Bamar. Without access to accurate population statistics the exact numbers of ethnic nationalities and majority Bamar is unknown.

Freedom of Movement

Many interviewees described the difficulties associated with travelling from village to village in some parts of Myanmar. For travel to occur certain areas require permits and/or a fee is charged for entry. This had significant ramifications for work opportunities.

There are many military groups. Some are very bad. They rotate platoons and check guest-lists and treat villagers very badly. Some villagers work in other villages but the military doesn't allow this. The military fines them. People don't have the kind of paperwork they demand.

Middle-aged Karen male Village Chief

As this quote highlights, guest-lists restrict mobility and are used by the military to harass villagers. It was widely felt that belonging or identifying as an ethnic nationality would increase your likelihood of experiencing racial discrimination. This was an issue when crossing borders:

As the Burmese are the majority group in Myanmar, they are very aggressive and look down on other ethnic groups. For example, when you are passing the border there are many checks and inquiries, but for Burmese there are much fewer checks than for other ethnic groups. They are favoured by the authorities.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor

One interviewee from the Shan ethnic nationality group commented that it is easier for men to move around Shan State than for women. Significant constraints on civil society mobility exist in Myanmar.

Poverty and Health Care

Poverty was an issue for all ethnic groups. Poverty was reflected in a constellation of factors: poor access to education and health; difficulties with mobility; and poor telecommunications and networks. Poverty was fuelling migration and stopping people from pursuing an education. Poor health was seen as a direct impact of poverty. People had poor access to medical treatment and hospitals. Information was difficult to obtain.

People need more health education. In the Delta area, they are very poor and have poor nutrition and poor health knowledge. They just try to survive ; they have many debts and they struggle, so they can't care for their health. There are no hospitals. Only a nurse: in one village, there is one nurse.

Middle-aged Karen woman who works in women's issues

The conflation of poverty and trade and the concomitant health ramifications were aptly described by this health worker from Shan State.

There is lots of business to do with border trade and the sex industry is well established in the Shan area: STDS and HIV/AIDS are very common. In eastern Shan State we have links with Thailand, in the north there are links with China. Those areas have a big sex industry and there are very high STD rates... According to a recent report, the Myanmar government spends the least amount on healthcare per citizen in Southeast Asia. They spend no more than US\$1 a year per person. So we must rely on donors and others to give assistance. The 3 Diseases Fund helps, but the government coverage area is minimum so many people rely on other organisations to help. The government gives no help for malaria, so it is all shouldered by others.

Young Shan male health worker

This quote highlights the lack of government buy-in to assist those in need. Patients with HIV and TB in particular, were in need of assistance. Civil society members wanted to fill the gaps but lacked the resources to do so.

We are poor people, some have HIV. Families have it very hard. The husband dies, or the father dies. The children can't attend school. I want to support them. I want to help them as a group. I can't. There is no money. I want to help with that problem, to run AIDS programmes. Eg, one child whose parents die of HIV; that child will be malnourished, it is not getting nutritious food. You might need to spend 50,000 kyats per year for that child to go to school.

Middle-aged Chin woman from the Chin highlands

Poverty was not a problem particular to ethnic nationalities only. The majority Bamar also experience poverty, a point recognised by this Rakhine interviewee.

We have a lot of challenges in Burma, not just the Rakhine people; everyone has problems. But I think ethnic nationalities have more challenges. Under military rule no one enjoys rights, and ethnic people don't enjoy ethnic rights. The situation of the people deteriorates day after day. In Rakhine State, people are extremely poor. Many young people are denied education because they cannot afford it. We have no political rights, human rights, or freedom. Rakhine State is under the most extreme pressure from the regime. The government has always been aggressive towards them. At the moment I don't want to be just Rakhine—we all have problems, including the Bamar.

Middle-aged Rakhine male NGO staff

Poverty was a systemic issue and contributed to inadequate health care. Ethnic nationalities and the Bamar majority were subject to these unsatisfactory conditions.

Substance Abuse

Alongside the health issues raised above, substance abuse also featured as an issue. Alcohol was a social problem raised by some interviewees. It was perceived that this social problem had led to stereotyping of the Karen.

In some villages women also drink, but mostly it's the men. Other ethnic groups have a joke (as some say we look Chinese), 'If you smell alcohol, you know it's a Karen'.

Middle-aged Karen woman originally from the Delta

Problems associated with drug use were raised by interviewees from the Kachin and Kayah ethnic nationality groups. One interviewee from Kachin State described how young people could readily access these drugs.

After 10th standard young people work at cutting trees for a Chinese transnational company. People are getting money very easily, so they buy drugs.

Young Kachin male KIO staff

Flush with cash from working for large companies, young people in Kachin State were battling with a drug problem that to an extent, was overcome in 2004 as a result of KIO intervention.

In 2004, the KIO government, they came to know it is killing our people. Previously, they allowed it, to have business with the Chinese, but they came to know this was not good.

Young Kachin male KIO staff

The supply of drugs was difficult to contain. For opium growers in Kachin State, poverty was seen as making opium the only option for farmers.

Many villagers grow opium; there is no choice. Most people are poor—hand to mouth—that is why we grow opium. Many organisations say 'stop', but we say there is no market demand to stop; it provides us money to buy food!

Older Kachin man from Kachin state

One interviewee from Kayah State felt that the establishment of the new capital had brought opium plantations closer.

We have more poppy plantations in the last few years. Before we didn't know much about it, but now it is an issue. I don't know why [poppy plantations have increased] but some say it is because Naypyidaw was set up nearby, so the poppy plantations that were closer to Naypyidaw had to come closer to Kayah State.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

The financial gain reaped by supplying the market with drugs make its eradication difficult.

Agriculture

Many people said subsistence farming in Myanmar is common. It is more common for ethnic nationalities in rural areas. This made people more susceptible to fluctuations in weather patterns such as drought, storms, cyclones etc. Some ethnic groups had more of an issue in terms of food security than others. For Chin interviewees, famine was reported as a real threat and a real and lived experience. The present rat plague had worsened conditions. For the Kayah, food security issues were also raised.

In 2007 there was a famine problem due to a rise in rats that came to eat the flower of the bamboo. The bamboo only flowers every fifty years. The rats destroy the crops. This is a natural hazard. In our area shifting cultivation is still used. Each family has three acres or more; they are joined together to make ten or eleven sections. Then they only farm say one section each year, as in another section it might take up to eleven years to grow trees on it, etc. We use ash as fertiliser which often gets washed away in the wet season. We need to adapt our agricultural methods. The old ways are at least a century old.

Young Chin man originally from the Chin highlands

Many of the interviewees talked of their dependence and reliance on agriculture as a means of living and earning an income. This dependence was particularly a problem for those who had their lands devastated by Cyclone Nargis.

The Delta is built on paddy farming and fishing. After Nargis, there were no buffaloes. Fishing tools were ruined. There was no cultivation.

Middle-aged Karen man from the Delta

The fluctuating prices and quality of paddy rice also affected economies for populations reliant on farming.

It is difficult to say, but when the rice price is OK, then people's income is fine, it is enough to feed the family. But when the price goes down, there are problems.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Hpa-An, Kayin State

It was felt that outdated farming methods compounded the issue. Those who used traditional farming methods could benefit from increased expertise and technology.

For subsistence livelihoods and for sustainable agriculture it would be better. People are now using shifting cultivation and our land is declining. People—farmers—they know about it better than me. They don't have other economically viable options. They have no resources and cannot invest in technology. Without both we cannot help them. Development organisations need to focus on sustainable agriculture and resource management. Link these two.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO staff

One interviewee suggested that a seed bank was one way of improving rice quality. This could increase profits and stabilise prices.

I think we need a seed bank. In Thailand, the government has a seed bank so the product is always good. We don't have a seed bank so the quality is always varied. They say, 'OK your rice is good'

and next time, 'no good'. It is inconsistent. I would like to see the seed bank idea introduced. But I think the government does not support that.

Middle-aged Karen businessman

As highlighted above, attention was drawn by some civil society members to food security issues in their areas leading to famine and malnutrition. This was a particular concern for the Chin ethnic nationality group.

There is a food crisis. We don't know how to stop it. Traditionally, we grow potatoes, corn and something like carrots called 'ba' or 'pingu' and maize. The Burmese mostly grow rice. With modernisation, our people have become crazy for rice. But we can't grow much of it. Every year we import 20,000 ... very big bags of rice from other states. It costs 15 - 16,000 kyats for each bag. So we are dependent on the outside. There is no food security in the long run. How can we survive? The Chin's land cannot feed the population.

Young Chin man originally from the Chin highlands

There are many malnourished children. UNICEF sometimes provides immunisation for them, but not enough. I want us to provide for children.

Middle-aged Chin female originally from the Chin highlands

Food security was identified as a significant problem in many part of Myanmar. Fluctuating quality and a vulnerability to environmental hazard made matters worse. Greater investment in technology could increase yield and resolve quality controls in food security in Myanmar.

Infrastructure

There was a resounding call for greater investment in infrastructure. Poor infrastructure was seen as hindering people's mobility and access to methods of communication and business. The case for infrastructure development in Myanmar, particularly in the outer states, was strongly

made. There are poor conditions of communication and transportation linking major cities and towns to rural and remote villages.

Members of the Chin population felt Chin State was the most disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure as it was the only state without an airport and a university. Many of the Chin interviewees said the only way to get to their home town was by foot, sometimes taking up to several days of walking. This correlates with a UNDP study on each of the states which found that conditions in Chin State were the most in need¹⁷.

We only have two main roads. Our roads are very dangerous—there are very big hills. People are afraid on them. Also, it is too expensive to go home—maybe 60,000 kyats. There are lots of accidents. There are fewer accidents now than before, but no one keeps records of fatalities.

Young Chin man originally from the Chin highlands

Infrastructure in other areas was repeatedly raised as a concern by interviewees. Transport in the rainy season made conditions worse.

I want my village to develop educationally and economically. I also want transportation to be improved. Especially in the rainy season, people cannot use the roads, they have to travel around on foot.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Hpa-An, Kayin State

Hospitals and trauma healer healthcare, discussed previously in this section, are another reflection of inadequate infrastructure. One woman spoke of concerns for pregnant mothers:

[Women] give birth at home. At hospital, it is very expensive.

Middle-aged Chin female pastor

¹⁷ UNDP/MOPS/UNOPS (2007) *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar*, Poverty Profile, Yangon, Myanmar.

The Impact of Poor Infrastructure

Poor infrastructure meant a significant lack of opportunities. It meant business could not invest in the area. It was also thought that the work of NGOs was limited to only those areas that were accessible under present transport systems. One Chin elder from southern Chin State said that there were more INGOs operating in the north of Chin State for several intersecting reasons, one of them infrastructure.

Transportation in the north is better and the capital, Hakha, is in the north. More elders in Yangon are from the north so they can contact INGOs.

Older Chin man from southern Chin State

Faced with this situation, some communities took it upon themselves to finance and build roads, despite handing over taxes to government.

There is no strategic interest in our state. They don't try to help us with communication, we do it ourselves and are self-reliant. Our village has been trying to make a new road. We get no support from the government to build it. We have to use our own tools and do it in our spare time. The government of India is very good, especially for communication. Hakha is close to the border so we are trying to make a new road, seventeen miles long, to [Mizoram] State. We have made eight miles already and we are trying to complete it before 2010. We are doing this in our own time with no funding. We get food rations from others while working.

Middle-aged Chin male journalist

Poor infrastructure meant people were taking it upon themselves to carry out improvements and build better transportation systems. This was integral to improving opportunities for trade, development assistance and communication.

Hydro-electric Schemes

Where infrastructure did exist, such as in the area of hydro-electricity, there was a perception that Myanmar people failed to benefit from hosting these industries as the benefits often went overseas. People reported having intermittent access to electricity and the difficulties associated with that, yet they were in close proximity to a hydro-electric plant. In some instances communities were required to maintain power lines or various technology associated with the plant, yet would get no benefit in return, including remuneration. These schemes appear to operate without making the proceeds accessible to the local population.

We Rakhine are very rich in natural resources—gas and seafood—but they are all controlled by the government. The government sells natural gas to other countries but they never show how much income they get from that. They never give any of it to us. There are no checks and balances. They only use the money for their family, the army and weapons. They never work for the community. Even though we have a gas pipeline, there is only two hours of electricity per day and yet we have to pay tax—10,000 kyats a month—for electricity.

Young Rakhine woman originally from Sittwe, Rakhine State

Forced labour is also a problem. People have to work on the railway and roads and many kinds of things and on oil, for biodiesel. There is a hydro-electric scheme at the Lawpita waterfall in Kayah State. They produce electricity but the people have no access to it; they send the power to China and Thailand. We have little electricity. We have a lot of natural resources that our people can't use. That's our fight.

Middle-aged Mon woman from Moulmein, Mon State

People complained of not receiving the benefits of large infrastructure projects like hydro-electric plants. Instead they had to maintain these projects.

Damming

Damming was also associated with hydro-electric schemes. This issue was raised by people in relation to dams in Kachin State and in Shan State. It was raised as an issue because those conducting the damming were doing so in contravention of local voices. It was felt that there was a lack of understanding of the environmental impact of these dams which were thought to affect river systems throughout Myanmar. The potential impact to food production and farming of disrupting a river system is monumental.

Hydropower dams are a big issue in all of Myanmar. It is very dangerous as dam construction destroys natural resources... The Irrawaddy river will be affected, the canals and irrigation systems ... the normal Irrawaddy flow is destroyed!... The people are organising to fight this. All villages organise and sign petitions to present to the government, but the government does not understand them.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

People were very concerned about the environmental impact of damming. People felt the government was not listening to the people on the harmful effects of such infrastructure projects.

Natural Resources

There was general agreement amongst civil society members that Myanmar has a significant supply of natural resources, and that they were a source of conflict. Concerns were raised over access to natural resources, the impact of extraction projects, and the poor distribution of profits and benefits to the local people.

As the quotes below attest, the issues surrounding access and extraction of natural resources confirm its place as a source of conflict in Myanmar. It was described as an issue between citizens and the government, between the Bamar and ethnic nationality groups, and

between ethnic nationality groups and ceasefire groups. It was also a concern that companies from other countries were benefiting from undervaluing the Myanmar resources that they bought and turned into highly valuable commodities. Fighting for control of natural resources was a particular issue in Shan and Kachin State.

It is a little different in different areas. In southern Shan State there are lots of Shan people. Each group has its own leaders. The leaders fight over the economy. The regional areas especially fight over control over natural resources. In northern Shan State, they fight with the military government.

Young Shan man from southern Shan State

People from ethnic nationalities attributed conflict over natural resources as one of the sources of conflict with Bamar people.

After independence we were forcefully incorporated into the Union. But that is not the only reason we have difficulties with the Bamar. There is a lot of exploitation of natural resources and the people. We don't like this.

Middle-aged Kayah male pastor

A Bamar civil society member provided an insightful description of how a lack of resources in Bamar-dominated areas led some Bamar to migrate to ethnic nationality regions to find work opportunities. The ability of Bamar to prosper in these environments, in contrast to ethnic nationalities, is also showcased.

Most Myanmar live in regions with fewer resources, while ethnic people live in resource-rich areas. So Myanmar migrate to the hill areas, like Shan and Kachin states, to access more resources. When they get there, they have good connections and access to the government, so they get more profits from natural resources than the ethnic people do. They run the businesses, and ethnic people do the labour. Myanmar government servants don't get good salaries, but they have more job opportunities. They can have good

relations with government servants so there are more chances for opportunity and resources.

Middle-aged Bamar-Shan female NGO staff

This quote demonstrates how Bamar people have a better chance of prospering in civil service and ethnic nationalities are confined to other jobs which are more labour-oriented and it is assumed, are paid less. These issues shape the conflict over natural resources.

Inability to Value-Add and Capitalise on Existing Raw Materials

There was a perception that Myanmar has a shortage of factories and industry to capitalise on the abundance of natural resources and raw materials it contains. Instead, business was confined to exporting these raw materials without the opportunity to reap benefits from value-adding. In order to be able to value-add to its raw materials, a significant investment in infrastructure and technology is required. Many interviewees were eager to see this occur, believing that at present, the rightful value of these materials was not being recognised.

If economic opportunities were established, we could produce things from rubber. This is a challenge. Now we have no machines, we just have the materials. All we do is export raw materials.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

A lack of adequate infrastructure meant natural resources could not be accessed and industry could not develop in some areas, such as Kayah State.

We live on the slash and burn system for crops in the mountainous areas. This is mostly just to provide enough food for survival. There are no government job opportunities and no factories in our area. We do have lead mines. We have some natural resources, but they are not well known. And because we have bad roads, it is difficult to extract and transport natural resources.

Older Kayah male farmer

Where infrastructure did exist it was prone to destruction as a result of over-use. The lack of sustainable infrastructure is an issue in need of examination.

The roads are in worse condition than two to three years ago because we have two companies cutting down trees. All the logging means the roads are destroyed, even in the capital town. The trucks drive fast and are weighed down with logs.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

Failure to Localise Economic Gains from Natural Resources

There was a concern that current natural resource extraction projects failed to localise their benefits, or redistribute the proceeds. This was not just a failure of government but also a failure on the part of corporations, and ceasefire groups.

We have a lot of teak, we have natural hydropower electricity, we have lead. But only the government and ceasefire groups have access to natural resources. The people provide labour but get no special benefits from these projects.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

We have a lot of timber and teak, but there are no benefits to the people who live nearby. The government uses the forest but there are no benefits to the people living in and around the forest. Ceasefire groups, armed groups, and the government benefit, but not the people. For example, the KNPP is the main armed group. Many groups came out of the KNPP after the government persuaded them to break away and join the government. So people from the same ethnic group are now fighting each other. The reason why people broke away from the KNPP was that they could get many benefits from the government, such as legal and illegal natural resource extraction. Even if it is illegal the government says they can do it; the government won't try to stop it. That is why non-ceasefire groups are angry with the

ceasefire groups. They fight each other, so the government doesn't have to fight anyone.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

There was strong feeling amongst the Rakhine people interviewed that the government extracted resources but did not return benefits to the community.

Rakhine people don't like this military government because in Rakhine State there are plenty of natural resources, such as natural gas. The government takes the resources but doesn't try to develop the state.

Young Rakhine male university student

In Rakhine State the economy is really bad because the government controls everything and gets a lot of money, but doesn't think about things like education and fixing the roads in the state.

Young Rakhine male NGO staff

It was perceived that the local community has an entitlement to some of the profits from the extraction of natural resources. Instead, the government were accused of taking the resources, making a benefit and failing to return anything to the community.

Many people identified natural resources as an area they would like to see developed into the future. For Chin State, in addition to factories and other industry opportunities, it was thought that natural resources could draw in tourists. It was felt that Chin State had natural resources that were as yet untapped, and this could form a healthy way of preserving rainforests and promoting economic opportunity at the same time.

Migration

A central theme for all ethnic nationality groups interviewed were the massive numbers of people leaving Myanmar to work, study or seek

refugee protection overseas. This issue was not raised by Bamar interviewees. Ethnic nationality members of civil society spoke of the reasons driving migration, the impact this had on their families, communities or ethnic nationality group, and of the difficult conditions facing workers overseas.

Push Factors

Leaving Myanmar was an option undertaken for a number of different reasons. These ranged from economic and educational considerations, to those recognised in an international refugee law context as fleeing persecution.

Many Karen go abroad. People try to send their children to foreign cities. They try to finish university here then go abroad to an American university and get an international qualification. People go overseas for work as well as study.

Middle-aged Karen female who works in women's education

Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the Delta area, was pushing migration to other parts of Myanmar and beyond.

People in the Delta faced Cyclone Nargis, but in other areas they do not find peace either. Karen are migrant people, they move around, from place to place. There is no peace. After Nargis, many people came to Yangon, then to Upper Myanmar, and they faced many problems. They have no higher education; they can't make a living; they have no money. They can't work there so they come to the city as housemaids or work in beauty parlours. Some go to other countries and face many problems there. Women will also go to the border. They go and live in the refugee camps.

Middle-aged Karen female who works on women's issues

These quotes also attest to the circular nature of some migration in that people move overseas or move to camps and return to Myanmar. This is more difficult for undocumented migrants who struggle to get

back into Myanmar. Others return to Myanmar through deportation. One young man said he had been deported and was saving money to again return overseas for work.

Some people who fled persecution are now stuck in limbo as a result of leaving without documentation, or illegally, and are therefore unable to return to Myanmar even if they wanted. The recent economic downturn was also perceived as bringing more people back to Myanmar who had lost their jobs overseas.

Working Conditions as a Migrant Worker

People expressed that conditions for those working overseas were sometimes challenging as a result of their visa status or because of their education and language skills.

They treat us like shit in Singapore. I sleep on the floor. 20 percent is taken from your pay, as compulsory savings. I realised I had to study in Singapore also, to get more experience. Then my salary went up to \$3,500 Singapore dollars. Burmese productivity is good. Companies abroad like Burmese workers but the government makes laws to protect their own people (in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand).

Middle-aged Karen businessman

Despite these conditions there were further obstacles, and these were perceived as greater obstacles, in returning to where they had come. Firstly, a lack of comparable job opportunities made return a less attractive option.

We suffer from marginalisation in the workplace because of a lack of education and knowledge. We are very frank so it is easy to betray and trick us. Most Chin cannot come back home. What would we eat? There are no jobs and limited opportunities. Chin State is a remote area controlled by the government. Even graduates cannot get a job. To get a job, we have to pay a lot of money. How can we earn this money? It takes time. So to get

money, people go to Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and India.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO staff

Secondly, a lack of documentation made return difficult, as detection by the authorities was a real threat.

Gender and Migration

Work in other countries is highly gendered. There is a perception that women are more vulnerable and these experiences can mean women do not want to return to Myanmar.

Boys are waiters, girls are maids. Women are not safe in foreign countries. I saw rape cases, and abuse. People are suffering from HIV and therefore don't want to come back to their homeland.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO Staff

This perception of vulnerability was driving gendered migration and education. People were not sending their female daughters overseas to work; instead they were staying in Myanmar for an education.

Throughout the whole of Burma, the children in all families, and mainly the boys, have to drop out of school. They drop out on their own account, not because of pressure from their parents. They go to Thailand as illegal migrant workers and send money home. The perception is that women who leave can get in more trouble than men, therefore girls are more likely to stay at school. It is very risky for women to go abroad, so the young men go. Women stay and attend university.

Middle-aged Mon woman from Moulmein, Mon State

Impact of Migration on Village Communities

The impact of migration on village communities is mixed but significant. Whilst it brought in essential financial support through remittances, it also has an impact in terms of lack of human resources, particularly young people.

Generally it is now only old people and young people who are left in villages as the working population is in Thailand. We have to rely on Thailand for economic opportunities.

Middle-aged Mon man from Moulmein, Mon State

In our community many young people have left the town to work abroad, so the town has few young people left! They cannot speak Burmese; they have gone to Malaysia and now speak the Malaysian language very well. They never come back, they work so hard there.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

Remittances were financing a great number of village and communities. These funds were providing opportunities for people in Myanmar that they could otherwise not afford.

There are 1,000 houses in my village, about 300 receive support from overseas. The people go to Delhi, some are refugees in Malaysia, Norway, US, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Singapore.

Middle-aged Chin female pastor

I can afford to study at university because my brother is sending me money. He works in Thailand.

Young Mon female university student

The migration phenomenon was keenly felt by all ethnic nationalities. Many people of all ages, but particularly young people above school age, were migrating legally and illegally to other countries for work. Remittances were said to be a primary source of income for many households. Their experience in these countries was sometimes precarious. Some interviewees had worked overseas and returned to Myanmar to work for civil society. They said that some people want to return to Myanmar but the conditions are such that they cannot, as the opportunities do not exist in Myanmar to sustain them.

Refugee Protection

People leave Myanmar for refugee camps and to seek refugee protection under international law. Whilst some civil society members empathised with their decision to flee, a lot disagreed with this approach.

Some people want to go to refugee camps unofficially, the informal way. They go because they want to go to Europe. My sister-in-law's friends, a couple, are staying at a camp because they think they will get to Europe from there. But after a year, they are still in the camp. I don't like that. I don't support that. They went directly to the camp. They can't come back because they went in illegally. Some people do want to come back.

Middle-aged Karen woman originally from the Delta

Some were critical of what they perceived was refugee status becoming an end goal in life for young people. It was a status that had replaced other achievement such as the attainment of university qualifications.

At university, I try to develop my English and professional skills. Nowadays, people imagine they will become refugees. It's like a Christian who always dreams about heaven and forgets about the earth—their dream is very different from the reality... If you pray to get 'the card' (UN card), it's not good. This is not the right way. As a people we have to be morally strong. We need some serious research done about the long term implications of moving to, for example, Malaysia or the [United] States.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO Staff

Some interviewees suggested that the elderly population were particularly discouraging of those who wanted to seek refugee protection in other countries.

Elderly people say and Chin leaders say that we need to stop the UNHCR call to refugees. They need to accept no more, as this strategy will not help solve the problem. It's focusing on the effects,

but the focus should be on the causes. The lack of food and money is what needs to be addressed.

Middle-aged Chin male journalist

More research is required into the experiences of migrant workers, documented and undocumented, in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The issue of IDPs was only raised amongst the Kayah interviewees. Several of them said there were large numbers of IDPs as a result of the conflict. One had direct personal experience as an IDP.

We have many DPs [in Kayah State]. We had a big IDP problem in 1994-2000 because of the rebels. The government said they [the villagers, to become IDPs] fed the rebels so they victimised them by cutting communications. They forced us to move our village to the camps, and many fled to the border refugee camps. I was an IDP during this time. We left everything and ran for our lives. Some IDPs came back, but some are still in camps.

Middle-aged Kayah male NGO staff

Interviewees expressed their hope that IDPs could eventually return to where they had fled and that peace would unfold.

A greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing civil society members of different ethnic groups is achieved by this project. Education emerged as the issue that drew the most attention. People felt that working to improve education was a strategy that could improve conditions of the country and contribute to its future. Overall it was felt that the government failed to support the education system, the economy, and to provide adequate infrastructure. Sanctions were not seen as an effective remedy that could bring about a change in government. The current circumstances were fuelling migration internally and overseas.

INTER-GROUP INTERACTIONS

Introduction

Historically, the Myanmar government rarely enforced its rules throughout much of the territory it claimed. This was particularly true in the regions that the British colonial regime euphemistically dubbed the ‘Excluded Areas’ and now comprises the ethnically-demarcated states that flank most of the country’s international borders. Under colonial rule, the British administered and policed the territory that currently constitutes the Bamar-dominated divisions, while allowing the traditional local leaders to run the day-to-day affairs of the ‘Excluded Areas’. After independence in 1948, the new nationalist government, faced with serious antigovernment rebellions throughout the central region, haphazardly attempted to implement its parliamentary constitution and legal codes in the former Excluded Areas. But emerging opposition in some parts therein meant that the Tatmadaw was the only significant state presence.¹⁸ Since independence Myanmar has experienced a complex set of conflicts between the central government and the ethnic nationality groups seeking either separate states or autonomous states within the Union of Myanmar.

As the cultural and general context analyses point out, the non-Bamar ethnic groups consider themselves to be discriminated against and marginalised by the central government, not only politically and economically but also in terms of an inability to express their social, linguistic, cultural and religious rights. At the heart of the discontent is the lack of rights to teach and learn their own ethnic languages, which were described in the earlier section of the book.

The complexity of the ethnic situation in Myanmar has led to different dynamics in how groups relate to one another. One of the primary objectives of this research is to understand the relationships and interactions of different groups in the country. In this regard,

¹⁸ Callahan, Mary P., Policy Studies 31, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority State: Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence*, East-West Center Washington, 2007, p.6.

interviewees were asked for their perspective of group relationships, including: the relationship between their ethnic group and the government; the relationship amongst different ethnic groups; and, within the individual ethnic group.

Relationship of Ethnic Groups with the Government

It is very difficult but since we live within this military situation, we have to live the way they [the military government] want. We have to keep quiet and follow their instructions.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

Almost all civil society members from the ethnic nationality groups and the Bamar majority characterised their relationship with the government as negative and difficult. Many described that they don't like or trust the government. From the ethnic nationality's perspective, the loss of trust occurred when the 1947 Panglong Agreement was not implemented or practiced.¹⁹ As a result they perceive they have been cheated by both the post-independence Bamar dominated government and the subsequent military government. Mistrust has been exacerbated by the government's failure to honour ceasefire agreements signed between the central government and ethnic rebel groups. Instead there have been nonstop natural resource extraction activities in the states which have resulted in the loss of resources such as trees and minerals, gold and jade etc. There is also corruption and land issues.

In Kachin, we have no trust in the government. We have no trust because of their behaviour; we try our best but they don't change. If you compare the Kachin with other groups in Myanmar, the Kachin participate more than others in processes to do with development and building the country. But the government sees it differently, they see it destructively. We have lost our trust.

Older Kachin male NGO staff

¹⁹ For the text of the Panglong Agreement, see: Burma Library, "The Panglong Agreement, 1947," http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/panglong_agreement.htm (accessed on 22 January 2010).

The ethnic nationalities' relationship with the government is primarily based on how they have been treated under military rule and forcefully incorporated into the union after independence. Interviewees spoke of their fear of the government, based on experiences of armed conflict and continuing abuses of power, forced labour or portering, and military rape. Even from the Bamar ethnic group, many shared that they do not believe in the government; they have to do what the government tells them to do out of fear. Bamar interviewees frequently cited the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007 as a recent source of fear.

Look at 2007, they hit and shot at monks! They did that even to monks; what about us who are normal people? If we don't do what they want, it will be like this. So there is fear.

Middle-aged Bamar male NGO staff

The other difficulty that many people had faced is the absence of law, as well as the lack of procedure for protection. People do not understand and are easily confused over how to file and address grievances within the military system of governance. For example, some Kachin said that when they have a problem with land issues, they do not know where or which department of the government to present their cases; if they have a problem with soldiers or government servants they do not know where to file complaints. Some mentioned that although they filed a complaint, there was no action from the government.

A Dictatorship-Style of Governance

Many described the government as a dictatorship, one that only benefits those in top-level government and military positions. Interviewees expressed a lack of freedom, particularly regarding personal as well as group expression.

Interviewees said there is no recognition of human and ethnic nationality rights in Myanmar. Ethnic nationality groups felt that they are being colonised by the Burmese government. Moreover, ethnic

nationalities believe the government is attempting to eliminate their ethnic groups. Interviewees cited suppression of ethnic cultures and languages, the Border Guard Force issue, and inter-marriage between the majority and nationality ethnic groups as evidence of government attempts to eliminate ethnic nationality groups. Moreover, ethnic nationality members are limited in where they are able to travel.

With this government, we cannot travel where we want to go; we are watched by them.

Middle-aged Kayah male NGO staff

As Burmese are the majority group in Myanmar, they are very aggressive and look down on other ethnic groups. For example, passing the borders there are many checks and inquiries, but for Burmese there are much fewer checks than for other ethnic groups. They are favoured by the authorities.

Middle-aged Karen male pastor

Some Karen explained their experiences of being checked and inquired upon, even in their own homes, because the military would come to the villages to check for guest-lists.

There are many military groups. Some are very bad. They rotate platoons and check guest-lists and treat villagers very badly. Some villagers work in other villages but the military doesn't allow this, they fine them.

Middle-aged Karen male Village Chief

Relations between the government and ethnic groups are strained as a result of restrictions on mobility, harassment and abuses of power.

Discrimination within Military and Government Sector

Ethnic nationality groups strongly felt the government is systematically discriminating against them, particularly regarding government positions and promotions. For example, they shared that there will be no promotion if they are of an ethnic nationality or Christian. They

explained further that when it comes to religion, the government prioritises Buddhism over Christianity, and when it comes to ethnicity, the government prioritises Bamar over minority ethnicities.

Few people have positive experiences in the government. My brother works with the government. Most of his friends have been promoted, but he has not, because he is Christian. My father worked for thirty years as a township police officer but he was not promoted because he is Christian and also because he has a relative in a non-state armed group.

Middle-aged Kayah male NGO staff

On an individual level [discrimination] is not serious. But at an institutional level, there is discrimination. It would be extremely difficult to get a job as Director General or in Forestry Department, as a Chin.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO staff

There was also the issue of favouritism and corruption in the government.

It is too difficult to get a government position, the only chance is if your parents are in the government. Most Burmese are in government positions and they have a big influence. They give the opportunities to their friends and family. Some people get government positions because of money.

Older Mon businessman

However, two people said they do not experience any discrimination as an ethnic nationality group. This view was expressed by a Rakhine person living in Yangon. She felt that work in the government is really dependent on one's performance, rather than ethnicity. There was also another perspective from one Kachin participant that ethnic people cannot get higher positions because they may have challenges in communicating with their bosses, particularly in Burmese language and culture.

I never felt that I was an ethnic minority or that I was discriminated against or marginalised [when I worked for the government]. My experience there was based on my performance and my values, inherited from my ancestors and parents. I was born and brought up in Yangon. My views will be different from other Rakhine who are born and brought up in Rakhine State... In the early '90s the government changed from a socialist economy to an open market system. The civil society organisations began after that. In 1994, after serving the government for nineteen years, I changed my path to the civil society sector and I am still there.

Older Rakhine female INGO staff

Whilst some interviewees said they had not been affected by religious and racial discrimination in the government and military sector, others suggested this was regularly practiced.

Relationship for Survival

It was repeatedly said that people had to have, or pretend to have, a good relationship with the government for their survival. Ethnic nationalities felt that because they are a minority it is therefore their prerogative to become mainstreamed with the majority. Interviewees recognised the authoritarian nature of their government, and focused themselves on bettering the communities in which they reside.

The government uses a top-down approach, so we must play along with them. The government keeps changing the head of the township. I play with them and somehow I play tricks for the sake of the people, because the government's behaviour is not based on the people's needs. But we are always looking for ways to be on the safe side, to help our people and our communities.

Older Kayah male development worker

Being Neglected by the Government

The Rakhine, and other ethnic nationality groups, felt that the government extracted a lot of natural resources from their state, but does not try to develop the state. This frustration was further compounded by the perceived lack of economic development initiatives that benefit the locals at the grassroots. The Chin, on the other hand, felt the government neglected them because their state is small, with few resources. Some Kayah felt similarly.

For years we have been neglected by the central government, for years! Our people would like to make a plan for local development. In our area there are no good roads. They are junk roads and jungle roads! Even if people want to repair the road by themselves and ask permission from the government, they don't get the permission and the people have to keep asking every year.

Older Kayah man from Kayah State

However, there are some perspectives that people also neglect the government in response to government attitudes and practices. This perspective maintained that people do not know how to approach the government and this is in part due to the poor education system. People also said that they are so busy dealing with their daily survival that dealing with the government is not viable for their situation.

People don't know what human rights and citizen rights are, and they don't know how to claim their rights. That's why the government gets the chance to control our people, and do whatever they want.

Middle-aged Rakhine woman from Rakhine State

Education means you can earn money. If you are uneducated you spend all your time trying to fill your stomach and not doing politics. Education nowadays is aimed in a different direction.

Young Shan male INGO staff

Not Very Good, Or Very Bad

Although there are many negative views and experiences of a difficult relationship with the government, one interviewee from the Kayah ethnic group felt that there are good and bad things about the government, particularly regarding NGO operations in Myanmar.

There are good and bad things about the government. They allow a few NGOs to work here, but within a highly limited working space. I think this is good because if we open up, many bad NGOs that are not interested in helping the people would come. So by controlling these things, NGOs that work only for themselves cannot come in.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

Some interviewees told us that there are people from their group who can engage with the government. It was also perceived that within the government there are some who are agreeable to the general population. They said some government officials participate in village activities, and that such participation is desirable amongst the population.

The Shan and the government, they get on well with each other, but I don't know how they feel secretly. When our military officer from Taunggyi comes to our Water Festival, we dance to traditional music and he participates with the public.

Young Shan-Pa-O woman from southern Shan State

For southern Shan it is OK because the military government works closely with the Shan people especially on business. And the Wa now have a ceasefire with the government.

Young Shan man from southern Shan State

Some felt the relationship with the military is the same as the relationship with the government. However, several interviewees cited improvements as a result of ceasefire agreements in their areas. It was also said that the peoples' relationship with the government had

improved in the run-up to the election. Interviewees described this as a deliberate government strategy to trick the people into their continued silence and submission to military rule.

Possibilities for Engagement and Improvement

While recognising the difficulties and many negative experiences with the military government, some people said they do not hear people say they hate this government or love the opposition. While it is clear interviewees are not satisfied with the government or their level of development and living standards, they maintained the importance of engagement, dialogue, and cooperation with the government. They explained that in the government there are people who want to do good things, and if they want change in the country they need to cooperate and coordinate with those people to build the national capacity.

We need positive engagement. We may like them or not like them, but we cannot neglect them because they are very important people. In the regime—for example in the Forestry Department—there are good people who want to do good things for people. We need to look differently at the government and the regime. I have friends in there and they are good people. They want to do good things. The regime and the government system are separate things. They would like to do many things and cooperate with the international community and with the NGOs etc... A change in a law will not change everything. We need to build in-country capacity. We need to look to engage and build national capacity for development in the government sector.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO staff

A further perspective on the possibility for improvement in the relationship with the government and the situation in Myanmar is smart and strategic political action to create a safe space for ethnic engagement with the government. There is also possibility for engagement by strategically working within the government's so-called 'road map to democracy'.

The military government has a road map. We know this is non-democratic. Everyone knows it's undemocratic. There is zero chance to work for ourselves, but we have no choice. Yet in the future, there will be some civil society voice. We will have five or six percent Karen. It is an opportunity—we will have to be wise. We will have proactive relations with them. We have to create an atmosphere where we can survive and live together. Life must go on.

Older Karen male academic

Inter and Intra Relationships Across Different Ethnic Groups

Many said that there is some level of interaction with other ethnic groups. The interaction amongst different ethnic groups is particularly limited for those who live in the same state, due to geographical and communication limitations. Interaction between different ethnic groups who are not in the same state was rarely mentioned. Some interviewees did say, however, that interaction across ethnicities had increased after Cyclone Nargis. Religion is also playing a role in connecting ethnic groups. For example, Christians and Buddhists from one ethnic group have networks with their respective faith community in another ethnic group—particularly after relief and rehabilitation efforts sparked by Cyclone Nargis²⁰—though it is relatively rare for inter-religious networks to form across ethnic groups.

The initial responses to questioning on interactions between different ethnic groups was generally met with the same answer 'good', 'no problems'. However, there were no specific examples of how good the relationships are between each other, or how much they interact with one another. The exceptions to this were relationships based on business or livelihoods. When pressed on the question further, many interviewees said they do not have open conflict with other ethnic groups, though they observed that each ethnic group seemed to work for their own group rather than work for all of Myanmar. Moreover, ethnic nationalities tend to strongly hold on to their ethnic identities,

²⁰ CPCS, (2009), *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society Response to Cyclone Nargis*, Phnom Penh.

in part because of what they perceive as government encroachments designed to create divisions within ethnic communities.

Kayah people somehow are a bit isolated from others and shy. They don't want to relate to others much; they want to stay by themselves in their own spaces.

Middle-aged Kayah male NGO staff

We have this saying: Get the chickens, then rub the chickens with black paint. The chickens cannot recognise each other, so they fight. This is the government strategy.

Middle-aged Karen businessman

Different ethnic groups hardly come together on a regular basis to form an association or network to discuss and work strategically on a specific issue. According to the data, the exceptions to this are youth who are involved in the Ethnic Youth Network, relief work post-Cyclone Nargis, and a few ethnic leaders who discuss the country situation together.

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned they have a difficult relationship with the Bamar. The commonly cited reasons for this are historical, specifically the Panglong Agreement, along with past and current negative experiences with the military, such as abuse and violence. People had a hard time distinguishing between Bamar, soldiers and the government. This is because the majority of government soldiers and civil servants are Bamar, but peoples' synonymous use of 'Burmese,' 'military,' and 'government' is a critical finding of this research. Distrust, prejudice, and negative stereotypes are common among ethnic nationalities towards the Bamar majority and sometimes other ethnic nationalities.

Attitudes toward the typical Burmese are really difficult. When I was young, I hated them very much but now I am grown up, I understand that not all Burmese are soldiers. We always thought that Burmese were soldiers, and so this attitude still exists among villagers. They

cannot differentiate between soldiers and Burmese.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

Ethnic people see soldiers and Bamar as the same, so they hate us because they think we are soldiers. I was shocked by this because I did not do anything wrong! After a few years, I got to know some ethnic people and we have a good relationship. But still, many Karen and Shan don't like Bamar because we are Bamar; and Bamar don't like them because they are ethnic.

Middle-aged Bamar man from Yangon

Interestingly, almost all Kachin interviewees clearly expressed that they do not have any problem with the Bamar ethnic group. The only problem they have is with the Myanmar army and the military administration. They said that the military government is “a big problem” because of the lack of trust between the two, as well as the observation that the government ravages Kachin State resources without contributing to the development of the state or the people therein.

We don't have any problems among ethnic groups. There is no problem between the Bamar, or Shan or any other groups, with the Kachin community. We only have problems with the Burmese army.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

According to the data, some of the challenges hindering inter-ethnic interaction are as follows:

The lack of safe space for positive interaction and government limitations on group gathering

People said that the interaction of different ethnic groups really depends on the country situation. Public space is highly restricted in Myanmar. Some told us that gatherings of ten or more people are a crime, and as a result there are fewer interactions between ethnic groups.

Inter-ethnic relationships are also strained because of communication and transportation difficulties, which were perceived to be a form of

government control to prevent people from getting close to one another. For example, there used to be a National Sports Day in every state and a National Student Sports Festival, but these are not conducted anymore.

When I was in school, we had a sports festival. One year it was in Kachin State, the next year in Shan State, and so on. There were up to about seventy to one-hundred people from each group. At festivals we got to know each other and formed networks and relationships. But this programme stopped in 1988. I don't know why, it was government policy.

Middle-aged Bamar man from Yangon

All ethnics, if we can organise, we can demonstrate our desires. But now we cannot organise each other.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

People viewed this as a government policy to prevent inter-ethnic unity. Peoples' perspective is that the government does not want ethnic people to meet each other because if they come together and form a network and become organised, the government may be hurt. People shared that the government controls most communications. Although there is currently a chance for communication with the introduction of relaxed guidelines for the use of mobile phones, people still feel that communication infrastructure is lacking and is not provided by the government. Nevertheless, they appreciate that mobile phone service, and communication in general, has improved.

According to a Kayah interviewee, the situation in Kayah State is still very difficult and people do not trust each other because they do not know who is connected with whom. Fighting is also said to start easily between groups if a conflict arises between individuals.

We just want to live our lives. Even among friends, each of us wonders about their real background; we don't trust each other. In my father's case, his friends don't trust each other. Even when the ceasefire came, his friends in the ceasefire group could not

trust others because they didn't know their background. Since they are in a ceasefire maybe they are working for the government now, people think. It depends on the political situation; anything can happen so people hide their background because we don't really know who is a ceasefire and non-ceasefire member. It is complicated and hard to say who that person really is.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

Strong Belief in Their Group Results in Absence of Association and Leadership

From my point of view each ethnic group holds onto their own identity. Before I thought that the Kayah represent of all the nine sub-ethnic groups, but now I recognise that each sub-ethnic group works more for their own group and holds onto their own identity.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

We have our own ethnic 'spirit' and it's a bit high; we don't care about other ethnic groups because we think we are better.

Older Chin man from northern Chin state

The data suggests that ethnic nationalities tend to strongly hold onto their ethnic identity. For example, Shan ethnic people tend to live by themselves and do their own businesses. "Business is important to Shan, they don't care other things," said a middle-aged Shan-Rakhine female. They are more self, family and business oriented. It is not easy for them to work with other groups because they have their own beliefs which are very strong. They also have their own way of doing with business. In this regard, the Shan interviewees felt that they do not have a strong network or association that can represent their ethnic group because they are mostly concerned with their individual beliefs and ways of doing things. This has also led to the absence of leadership within and across the groups.

For the real Shan, it is not easy for them to work with other ethnic groups because they believe in their own ways and they are strong

in those beliefs [they have their own way and they don't easily trust other]. Southern Shan State people believe in their own way of doing business.

Young Shan man from southern Shan State

Shan people are usually quiet, and I feel they are very self-oriented people. For example, if I live in a village with my family, as long as my rice brings in a harvest, or I have my business, I will be happy... In Lashio, we have a Shan Culture and Literature organisation, and in the town of Muse 100 miles away there is a similar organisation, but they do things differently. They just do things on their own for their own area. There is a lack of organisation and cooperation in Shan State. We have city-based organisations, not organisations based on Shan unity.

Young Shan man from northern Shan State

This characterisation—of being isolated with little reason or interest to interact with others, even within their own ethnic group—is also described in the Kayah ethnic group. Participants observed that the leaders of each group work more for their own ethnic group rather than for others. The ethnic armed groups are also the same; they keep splitting among themselves because of power struggles and differences in ideology. This practice has led to the understanding that Kayah ethnic people and Kayah State lag behind other states regarding development because they lack an association or network that could present them.

I don't see much violent conflict among ethnic groups, but there are lots of prejudices and cases of people holding to their own ethnic identity. Even in church, if the bishop is from one group he is more concerned about those from his own ethnic group rather than others. They have perceptions about each other. And they will only have distant relationships with other minority groups who are not Kayah, like Shan and Bamar.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

Inter-Group Perceptions and Stereotypes

There are strong perceptions and stereotypes from the ethnic nationality groups toward the Bamar majority. These stereotypes still continue strongly in society and are very much related to the history of fighting between the groups, the Panglong Agreement, and the practices of the government, for example soldier oppression of villagers.

One thing we can say is that relationships among ethnics is good, but relationships between Bamar and ethnics are not good because we have been cheated in history many times: 1948, 1950, 1974... In 1948 Burma got independence and in 1947, with the Panglong Agreement, General Aung San promised ethnics they could have independence after ten years if they didn't like being in the union with Burma. But ten years later they couldn't get that. Aung San had died, but others had participated in that meeting and didn't keep their promise. They didn't care.

Young Rakhine man from Yangon

We have to dig into history [to understand ethnic relations]. First, [the Bamar] are the majority and the government is mostly Bamar. Second, Bogoke Aung San tried to get an agreement with ethnic groups in the mountain areas, but ten years after independence the ethnics did not get what they wanted. So they say we are liars. In the Shan region they had a king and were prosperous and had many facilities. But now they have to run away because the military government says we have to be unified. And they killed the Shan king. So people had to run from the regime. In the past this area was big, but now it is not. That is why they have hatred in their minds.

Young Bamar female journalist

Negative perceptions towards one another remained strong despite a lack of negative personal experience. Instead, bad experiences of a particular group or person are passed down to the next generation by parents and grandparents. So without trying to engage or to initiate discussion with one another, people already felt that the other group

does not want to work with them because of their perspectives on history.

In the Karen War in 1962, the Karen almost conquered Yangon. The Chin killed many Karen at the time. They feel now that some political Karen leaders are still thinking about that. Many Chin believe the Karen hate us and don't want to work with us—true or not, this is how many feel.

Older Chin man from northern Chin State

My grandfather said that if we were facing a Cobra and a Rakhine, we should kill the Rakhine. This is because he had bad experiences when his niece who married a Rakhine and really oppressed her. So my grandfather hates Rakhine and he teaches the family and me to feel the same way.

Young Bamar woman from Yangon

Rakhine interviews prominently figured the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict in Rakhine State. When asked for specific examples, interviewees were unable to directly point to an issue. Instead, they simply pointed out the cultural and religious differences between the two groups, such as Buddhism versus Islam, or the perceived threat of Muslim encroachment of Rakhine land as a result of an increasing population, as well as the differences in humanitarian and development assistance both groups receive. According to Rakhine interviewees, Rohingya receive far more international assistance than the Rakhine because there is a strong network which connects the Rohingya to the international community. Some of the Rakhine interviewees did not even accept that the Rohingya is one of the ethnic groups in Rakhine State. Instead, they were perceived as migrant workers left over from the British colonial era. Several others suggested that the international community assists Rohingya people more than Rakhine because of the so-called global war on terror and subsequent Western attempts to “win the hearts and minds” of Muslim people.

The problem in Rakhine State is the Rohingya, meaning Muslims. Actually they are not a race or ethnicity. They were brought here when the British monopolised the State in 1824. Those people had been living in Rakhine State and the British government allowed them to stay. In Bangladesh there are many people (the population is high). Now, more Muslims move to Rakhine State. The problem is that there is a gap between Muslims and Rakhine, but the government allows them to stay because they take bribes... They have a very strong back-up from Middle East. Many in the world know of Rohingya and human rights. We don't accept the name Rohingya, they are not an ethnicity, they are not from here, they migrated here. There are many Rohingya in northern Rakhine State, in some towns 80 percent of population is Rohingya. For example, out of 100 houses, eighty are Muslim and the other twenty don't want to live there anymore because they don't have a good relationship.

Young Rakhine man from Yangon

Geographical and Communication Limitations

During the interviews many said interaction amongst different ethnic groups is particularly limited for those who live in the same state. Several people said that interaction is limited due to geographical and communication limitations; for example, it may take more time to travel to another ethnic state than to Yangon.

Northern and southern Shan don't meet each other often because of transportation limitations. If want to go to from northern to southern Shan State it will take two to three nights.

Young Shan-Pa-O woman from southern Shan State

People cannot travel in Rakhine State because of money and the transportation system. In most places, it is very difficult to travel from one place to another. We must use small boats or ships. For

village to village, travel is by small boats. In a very few places we can use cars.

Middle-aged Rakhine woman originally from Rakhine State

Even in a city like Yangon ethnic nationalities tend to stick together, creating ethnic quarters, in which several blocks are occupied by a specific ethnic group. This may be in order to feel connected with their group, and to provide a geographical “safe zone” for their ethnic group. According to John Paul Lederach, the characteristic of a divided society is that people seek security in smaller and narrower identity groups such as clan, ethnicity, religion, or geography/regional affiliation, or a mix of these.²¹

Government Divides Us

The issue of division across different ethnic groups was perceived as a deliberate government strategy to prevent a unified opposition movement. People said that the government divides them according to differences in religion and ethnicity, both within and between the various ethnic groups. Armed groups are also divided by the government through the use of ceasefire agreements, whereby non-ceasefire groups often fight ceasefire groups who receive government privileges such as business and natural resource extraction ventures.

Recently, the government work secretly to divide ethnic groups. They promise jobs and decent salaries to people if they work as an informer. One out of every 100 to 200 is a spy for the government... How can we be secure when there are informers in the community and in the family?

Older Kayah man from Kayah State

For example, the Karenni National Progressive Party is the main armed group. Many other groups came from the KNPP after the government persuaded them to break away and join the

²¹ Lederach, JP., *Building Peace, Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Society*, United States Institute of Peace, 1997, p.13.

government. So even though they are the same ethnic group they fight each other. The reason why people broke away from the KNPP is they got many benefits from the government, such as legal and illegal natural resource extraction; if it is illegal the government says they can do it and won't try to stop it. That is why non-ceasefire groups are angry with ceasefire groups. They fight each other so the government doesn't have to fight anyone.

Middle-aged Kayah man from a village in Kayah State

Government attempts to divide people are not limited to ethnic nationality groups, as the Bamar also cited significant government-manufactured divisions amongst themselves. One participant shared that the government uses material differences, such as class and occupation, to divide the Bamar population; another source of division was the education system because students were taught to look out for themselves rather than to help others; and there were the divisions across the political groups or government associations. People observed that Bamar had many political groups and government-sponsored associations but they work separately and not together.

Within Bamar there are many groups: NLD, Women's Affairs [Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWWAF)], USDA, etc. We should be organised so that we could be united. We are all Bamar. The divisions are political; they use political strategies to divide the people. Some are on the government side and others on the opposition side.

Young Bamar male NGO staff

Another Bamar went further by stating that the government created another 'tribe' in Myanmar called the 'soldier tribe.' He said that once an individual joins the army he is inducted into the 'soldier tribe', where their only identity is soldier. He perceived that the government reserved all authority and opportunities for this one tribe. They are trained and brainwashed to go against and chase anyone and everyone. This is said to have created divisions within families, where soldier and non-soldier family members do not trust each other.

Many ethnics are in the soldier tribe. When they join they lose their identity and become soldier tribe only... the Bamar and soldier tribe have a difficult relationship. I have nephews in the soldier tribe, and we cannot easily make conversation. We are on different levels. My younger brother is in the army, he is a colonel, but we cannot communicate. We meet each other, but there is no trust.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

Some people felt that the government divided people over religion. One Bamar interviewee said that in the late 1990s the government attempted to divert public attention away from itself, which at the time was suffering from embarrassing internal divisions, by manufacturing a religious conflict. Karen and Kayah told us that there are many diverse faiths amongst the Karen but they get separated because of the religious differences between Christianity and Buddhism.

There are many diverse faiths amongst the Karen. We speak the same language. We have good relations. But the Burmese want to disintegrate us. They want to drive a wedge between us and they use religious differences to do it. Buddhist and Christian groups get separated. They kill each other. It's a very sad thing.

Older Karen monk from Yangon

Another perspective was that religious conflict does exist in some of the ethnic groups like Kayah, Chin and Karen, but that this conflict is based on their mutual history rather than government-manufactured divisions.

According to history, we have no conflicts based on ethnicity. When it comes to religion, yes we have had some problems, both in the past and now. For example, Kayah are Baptist and Catholic and they have problems. Religion is sensitive. It goes back to Independence, when we had fighting between Catholics and Baptists. Even though they were basically the same tribe, they fought over religion. If a Baptist group conquers a Catholic group

and takes their land, then the people will become Baptist. Proselytisation contributes to religious conflict as well.

Middle-aged Kayah male Catholic priest

Within the ethnic group are Protestants and Catholics. They are still seen as competitors in a competitive environment. Protestants' perception of Catholics is bad, pessimistic; they are seen as trying to persuade people to convert.

Middle-aged Chin male NGO staff

Mixed Marriage and Blood Issues

Two multi-ethnic people were interviewed for this project, and it is clear from these interviews that inter-ethnic marriage remains a contentious issue in Myanmar society. This was particularly so for the two multi-ethnic civil society members interviewed, who keenly feel the effects of their mixed ethnicity. They felt that they have been treated differently and they do not quite fit in with either of their communities. These individuals reported discrimination from both ethnic groups they belong to.

When I was young I lived in a military compound because my parents are government servants, they worked at a government hospital. When I was aged twelve I moved to a real Shan community. I didn't like the Shan community very much because of my background. I am Shan-Rakhine. Shan don't like other people and they didn't like us because my father is Rakhine. They also don't like the military and my father is a soldier. My family, like my uncles, think we are Bamar... I am not [real Shan].

Middle-aged Shan-Rakhine female NGO staff

When I relate to Shan people they say 'you are not real Shan'. When I relate to Myanmar people they say 'you are not real Myanmar'. So I suffer over this. Some accept me as Myanmar, some as Shan. But I always felt I was a not real Myanmar because I think I am not like Middle Myanmar.

Middle-aged Bamar-Shan female NGO staff

Many expressed fears over inter-ethnic marriage. Particularly, interviewees viewed inter-ethnic marriage with the Bamar as an attempt to eliminate ethnic nationality groups as well as a form of “Burmanisation”.

Nowadays many Rakhine marry other ethnics, yet the essence of Rakhine means keeping your nationality and keeping the precepts of your nationality. Being Rakhine means we must do these two things.

Middle-aged Rakhine man from a village in Rakhine State

Now there is a lot of intermarriage. The mixed population increases and increases. Because of this, after marriage, many people don't speak Mon, and they don't preserve the culture.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

My father says 'don't marry other ethnic groups, especially Myanmar'. I am friends with them, but I don't plan to marry another ethnic group. This is how we protect our ethnic group.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Yangon

Lack of critical thinking in education and the link between leaders and grassroots correspond with negative views towards the other

It was said ethnic conflict, such as ethnic prejudices, was more common amongst the less-educated population. Most agreed there is very little top-level interaction amongst ethnic groups, but it was perceived that prejudicial practices were more rooted within the lives of those at the grassroots level. There was also an acknowledgement that there is not enough inter-ethnic understanding, particularly regarding cultural practises and norms, and that the government does not try to create space to facilitate inter-ethnic understanding. Inter-ethnic misunderstandings were viewed as a successful government strategy of division.

We don't have proper understanding, because Bamar people are also facing oppression by the military regime. We don't know the situation in other areas. It is difficult to interact properly because we don't have understanding. We need understanding to have proper interactions. It doesn't matter if you are a Bamar or from an ethnic [nationality] group, if you are knowledgeable and open-minded you will understand other ethnic groups. It is difficult for all ethnic groups not to have prejudices against others because successive governments haven't tried to help ethnic groups understand each other.

Middle-aged Bamar male journalist

People acknowledged that some interaction occurs at the top level, but expressed doubt that this was being passed to the grassroots level.

Only high level leaders have relationships with other ethnic groups that do not live in Kayah State, like Chin, Kachin and Rakhine. Some of the lower level people, like villagers, don't even know the names of the other ethnic groups.

Middle-aged Kayah man from a village in Kayah State

We can see that during 1990, ethnic political parties and the NLD worked together. After 1990, even now, there was some interaction, but the level was quite low. But there is interaction: ethnic to ethnic interaction and ethnic to Bamar interaction. They cooperate on political resistance. In 1998 the Council Representing the People's Parliament (CRPP) was formed, composing of NLD and ethnic representatives, such as Rakhine, Shan, and Chin leaders. So there is cooperation and interaction with leaders, but I cannot say how much interaction and cooperation there is at the grassroots level. The grassroots level is not aware of the top level interaction in the CRPP.

Middle-aged Rakhine male INGO staff

While many challenges to inter-ethnic interaction are described above, the interviewees said there are also many opportunities for different

ethnic groups to interact with each other. It was said these opportunities need to be strengthened or reinforced to enable networking and close interaction between different groups in the country.

Traditional Celebrations and Festivals

Each ethnic group has its own festivals and traditional celebrations. Some of these are restricted by the government, but most can be celebrated. During celebrations there is dance, the Manau dance for the Kachin, and some traditional food, for example a banana leaf shaped like a triangle and filled with sticky rice for the Kayah that represents unity within their ethnic group. Some interviewees felt that these traditional celebrations and festivals can bring people together.

One thing we can say is that we see no differentiation among the tribes. We can come together in marriage and in celebration like with the Manau dance. We have inter-marriage across the tribe, but in terms of dialect we have different ones, so sometimes it is hard to understand each other. But almost all of us communicate with Jingpo.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Kachin State

For the sub-groups to come together we have a ceremony, the sticky rice ceremony, and other kinds of ceremony which bring the sub-group together.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

Existing Networks and Organisations

Members from each ethnic group expressed that networks and community based organisations (CBOs) are really important for bringing the different ethnic groups together. People shared that CBOs provide space for people to come together to join in development activities. The ecumenical movement and dialogue across faiths and ethnicity also helps build mutual understanding.

If one ethnic group does something the other will join. For example, development work. We do it regardless of gender or race, so we don't have any discrimination against any people. Like in the organisation I am working with, we work for everyone. So in Kachin State, we have different ethnic groups and we work for them all.

Middle-aged Kachin male NGO staff

We work together in societies and associations of Buddhists and Christians. We have Buddhists and Christians together.

Older Karen woman from Yangon

Organisations and networks have also provided space for capacity development, while at the same time decreasing prejudice and tension across different ethnic groups. People felt training workshops are a way for them to come together because they provide a safe space for positive interaction.

In the past we hated Bamar but now things are better. But in some places it is still difficult. When they see Bamar travelling there, the villagers are not secure and they still hate Bamar. Things are better because we are aware of development and we now see that we are all the same. One challenge is that parents always tell us to follow what they teach, but now children are more educated and aware of development and are more open to Bamar and to other opinions. When I visit Yangon I have Bamar friends and I have learned that there are many with good hearts. Even in Kayah there are bad people, so not everyone from any group is bad.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Special Region 2 in Kayah State

Likewise, the Ethnic Youth Network, which has representatives from different ethnic nationalities, creates a safe space for young people to come together and discuss issues concerning them.

Ethnic Youth Network is led by Rakhine, Karen, Shan and Chin members. We are a bit weak because we are busy and can't give time. I want the network to do something, to have a strategic plan

for the future... According to my experience, we have never, not once, invited a Bamar to a meeting.

Young Rakhine man in Yangon

For the ethnic groups whose majority religion is Christianity, exchange visits are said to be relatively common. This kind of exchange helps people from different groups to get to know each other's culture and situation. Interviewees also said that group exposure visits and learning outside of Myanmar provides a safe space in which to discuss issues which would not normally be discussed inside the country.

Through the fellowship programme, connections will improve through cross-building. We were invited on an exchange to Kachin State and it was very good for relations.

Middle-aged Karen man from the Delta

We need space to have friendly discussions. We need a place where we can see each other and stay friendly... Take us to different countries like Thailand and Cambodia so that we can talk freely, without fear of repression by the authorities.

Young Karen male NGO staff

Culture and Literature Associations

Almost all ethnic nationality groups have a culture and literature organisation within their individual ethnic group. A limitation of these organisations is that they often do not network even within their own ethnic group, nor do they make it a priority to include sub-ethnic group communities in their activities. However, some groups have shown great progress in intra-group relations and are a potential venue for inter-ethnic interaction and collaboration.

In the past, we did not have much communication with other Kayan groups because we have bad communication. We want to talk to others about our local situation, and we are trying to. Every three months since 2000 we organise for local leaders to meet and discuss our situations. We have not had much success, but one of

our successes is that we, of the same ethnic group, can meet each other in a single place and can actually organise. Membership is also growing in among other sub-Kayan groups and even Kayan Buddhists now accept the literature.

Older Kayah man from Kayah State

Collaboration and Action to Prevent and Restore the Environment

One interviewee had a very strong view that there is a possibility for ethnic groups to come together to work on common issues they are facing. It would be an issues-based network or collaboration and it could be also practical, for example, it could focus on the common issue of the environment.

I work with Bamar, Shan, Chin, Kayin, and Kachin people on environment issues. We want to meet and do something together, but we need a good strategy to work together. The environmental issue is easier than other issues to bring people from different groups together. This is a good time for us. If we talk about development or ethnic empowerment we also need to talk about environment, because it is a real, practical, issue.

Middle-aged Rakhine female INGO staff

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration among Civil Society Organisations

Some felt that there is a gap in the way civil society organises and networks amongst itself. For example, there are CSOs who work strongly and effectively in the community, but people felt that they principally work in their own area and sector. For example, peace organisations work only with other peace organisations. People strongly felt that CSOs should have a political motivation with a broader scope, be more inclusive and should seek out close relationships with others regardless of their areas of work. Such a network has the potential to become a strong force in Myanmar as it allows for greater cooperation between individuals and

organisations seeking to bring about positive changes in the country. Such interaction could also provide an example to people at the grassroots level.

The level of interaction is very little, but people are trying. INGOs and NGOs just work in their target areas and don't interact much with each other. It's even more difficult for the grassroots. Without interaction between INGOs it is impossible for the grassroots level to interact! INGOs should facilitate this process because it is difficult for the people to do by themselves. It is not happening yet, but I would like to see it happen.

Middle-aged Rakhine male INGO staff

Inter-Religious Links

The government strategically divides people over religious differences. However, there are also religious leaders and youth networks currently working together to build inter-religious understanding and networking. Inter-religious dialogue and the engagement between leaders and youths on religious issue is a significant development that has potential to promote inter-group interaction in Myanmar. It was said by several interviewees that religious conflict has lessened of late because the people understand government intentions, as well as the importance of building positive relationships amongst themselves. One perspective from a Bamar interviewee was that after the 2007 monk-led protests, religious leaders came to understand each other and recognised the importance of working together.

After 2007 main religious leaders tried to negotiate and do something together. After the killings of monks, people realised that the government had internal problems. They also saw that the the government had tried to focus on religious differences in order to manipulate people. So the religious leaders started thinking of coming together, and thinking of how to solve mutual problems. They thought about not only working within their own group, but with other groups as well. That way, it would be harder

for the government to use religion to distract people.

Middle-aged Bamar woman from Yangon

Ethnic nationality groups and the Bamar ethnic majority have all faced great challenges and difficulties in relating with the government. All groups described the government as a military dictatorship which placed many restrictions and oppressions on the people, with only a few benefiting from the system. Despite the difficult relationship all ethnic groups have with the government, the research also showed many challenges in the interactions between and among them. One of the significant challenges is that the government uses different strategies to divide people and prevent inter-group unity. While recognising that the government is the main reason behind all the challenges and division of different ethnic group interaction, the research also revealed that groups' strong beliefs in their own cultures and practices, together with people's historical experiences, prejudices and attitudes, are also a challenge to the goals of achieving solidarity and working together. Nevertheless, there are many possibilities to build relationships and interactions through existing structures and networks.

There are networks of monks from the Rakhine and Mon, and also between Karen people from different faith backgrounds. However, not much is known about how much these networks actually function, how regularly they connect with one another or how often they work together. According to Ashutosh Varshney, there are links between ethnic conflict and civic engagement, both everyday and associational. First is the prior and sustained contact between members of different communities that allows communication between them to moderate tension and pre-empt violence because they have mutual consent and involvement. Second is when the cities have both associational and everyday engagement between different communities, the foundations of peace become stronger in preventing ethnic violence.²² He suggested that civic engagement

²² Varshney Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict Civic Life – Hindus and Muslims in India*. Yale University, United States of America, 2002. p. 46-49

across ethnic groups is critical in preventing polarisation because it creates a space where the benefits of togetherness and a change in behaviour can prevail; it also makes them larger in numbers and stronger in countering the potential space of destructive and violent action. Therefore, a finding of this research is that the networks need to be strengthened and institutionalised because they are a strategic safe space for different ethnic groups to interact, build trusting relationships and help prevent violence.

ETHNIC VISION AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Recognising the complexity of ethnic issues in Myanmar, such as culture, the general socio-political situation, and different group and relationship dynamics, this research also seeks to explore and understand different civil society perspectives on the future of Myanmar and the role of the international community in Myanmar. To fulfill these objectives, the research team examined individual perspectives of the situation in Myanmar and the current issues they face. Some interviewees shared what they perceived to be the “mood” of the general public from their own ethnic group.

Of the eighty-seven interviewees, forty-one individuals from seven different ethnic groups spoke of the upcoming election. A variety of diverse perspectives were expressed. Some were still caught in the dilemma of whether or not to accept, and participate, in the elections.

Specifically, this section will address participants’ vision for the future, both of their ethnic group and Myanmar as a whole, and how the international community can support their vision and bring about positive change in Myanmar.

Perspectives of Different Ethnic Groups on 2010 election

An election sounds great. Whoa! It sounds like pure democracy, but in reality it is not. It is a kind of show. The government is cheating, and frankly speaking they cheat a lot, but they try to make the election look official. They say we will have an election, but they will cheat. It is like they are performing in a theatre... If they give people freedom and the freedom to have political parties that can go their own way, there would be no problem, but they will not do this. I don't think things will change. Some people say that it is just a matter of their changing their clothes. They will take off their uniforms and wear normal clothes.

Young Shan male INGO staff

The following are the six primary perspectives expressed by participants on the 2010 national election.

Do Not Believe the Election will be Fair—Government Will Win Like the 2008 Referendum

Many interviewees expressed that the elections will be just like the 2008 referendum, where there were reports of large-scale government misconduct and ballot rigging. Indeed, several interviewees spoke of their personal experiences of being cheated out of their vote in the 2008 referendum. For example, they said that though many people voted ‘NO’ for the referendum, the result presented was an overwhelming ‘YES’. People felt the government had changed the result and would do the same with the 2010 election. Some shared that the government was only doing the election for themselves, to maintain power; they would just change their uniform from military to civilian clothes. Many people, therefore, were not confident about the 2010 election, nor were they necessarily optimistic about the potential for transformative change as a result of the election. Pessimism towards the potential for transformative change was rooted in peoples’ negative perceptions and experiences of the 2008 constitution. It was also commonly expressed that the election will go forward only in accordance with the government’s plan to hold onto power—its so-called “Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy”²³—and as a result these people expected the election to be anything but free and fair.

I don’t think much of the election because it is not free; everything is well planned so they will get the result they want. I am not very enthusiastic about it.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Yangon

I have no opinion on the election because I am not interested. This election is not real. We had the Nargis referendum. My younger

²³ For more information see: David Arnott (2004), “Burma/Myanmar: How to read the generals’ ‘roadmap’ – a brief guide with links to the literature,” Burma Library, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/how10.htm> (accessed February 11, 2010).

sister worked for this because she is teacher. My sister told me they changed the results, the result given is not from the people. The coming election will be the same. In my home, we are not interested in the election. Most people in our country don't know about elections and election processes.

Middle-aged Bamar female NGO staff

Some based their views on the constitution, which was said to be biased. Interviewees also reported that the general population was confused about the constitution. Of particular concern for people was the clause which stipulates that 25 percent of parliamentary seats shall be reserved for the military, thus further cementing the military into the “democratic governance structures” of the country.

I think after reading the constitution, I don't feel happy. I didn't vote for the constitution. Many people voted 'No' but I didn't vote at all, because I don't believe in it or feel it is fair. For example, 25 percent of seats in the legislature are reserved for the military. I think everything will be controlled by the military. It will be very difficult for us to make changes we want because the military will control everything, just like they do now.

Middle-aged Bamar male journalist

Moreover, some said the military will still be able to use their power to force the people to do as they wish. Some expressed optimism that the military will only be 25 percent of the parliament, as opposed to 100 percent. Concern was expressed that the post-election climate may be similar to that in 1988 and 1990, when the government suppressed protests and refused to honour electoral results. Many people also strongly held the view that the election will not bring any changes; the government has already prepared their own people and developed their own structure, and they will tell the people to vote for government selected, sponsored, or supported candidates. It was a commonly held view that the government had already selected their candidates and was currently in the process of strengthening government-sponsored organisations, such as the Union Solidarity

Development Association and the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation to garner further public support for military-backed candidates. As such it was widely perceived that it will be a “selection” not an election. Interviewees said if the government was serious about elections they would have promoted electoral and constitutional knowledge amongst the people, provided space for citizen-led organisations to organise themselves, such as political parties, and invited the international community to observe the elections—none of which has occurred.

Do Not Participate

There were several interviewees, primarily from the Rakhine, Mon, and Shan ethnic groups, who said many people from their group will not participate in the election. Their reasoning was mixed. One Shan interviewee said the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) will refuse to participate in the election because they do not accept the constitution, and indeed the SNLD withdrew from the constitutional drafting process because they had been excluded by the military-dominated National Convention. A Rakhine participant said his group is seeking independence from Myanmar because they failed to attain their rights by constitutional and electoral means and therefore believes this will be repeated again in 2010 should the Rakhine chose to participate.

People do not accept the government’s Seven Point Road Map [to Democracy]. The majority of people don’t accept the constitution and the referendum. People don’t want to participate.

Older Mon male retired teacher

Of all the interviewees who talked of the election, approximately three persons said that their group [Rakhine, Mon and Shan] will not participate in the election. Among the three, only one Rakhine civil society member had a very strong view and advocated for non-participation through armed resistance in order to gain an independent Rakhine State. His view however, reflected the current situation and discussion among different Rakhine key leaders and politicians. Many

had expressed their concerns that the situation may be similar to 1988 if they decided to go for revolution.

All of Rakhine is ready for revolution if Rakhine politicians decide for it, and to not engage with the election. People are very afraid of a revolution; they don't want to die. They want to participate in the election because they are afraid of the consequences of revolution. But they are waiting to hear politicians' decision.

Young Rakhine male university student

According to the statement above, this individual called for Rakhine people to speak with one voice. He said that politicians needed to listen to people's voices and concerns before making decisions. *"Politicians need to listen to the people's voice and discuss with the people, not just only among themselves. We need to speak with one voice."* He explained further that if Rakhine people decided to accept and participate in the election, awareness training for people on how to engage in politics and the election process was needed.

Whilst talking about awareness, two interviewees [Shan and Bamar] shared that their perceptions on the election had changed after attending an exposure visit and learning from Cambodia's experience in relation to elections, "Before I thought I would not vote, but after [visiting] Cambodia I think I should." Although these individuals had decided to participate, they do not expect much change out of the 2010 election, "I don't expect too much positive change in 2010. It will be the same people after the election, and the next government will not consider the grassroots level."

Election Will happen...But It Won't Bring Any Changes

A number of interviewees from different ethnic groups felt there was nothing special about the 2010 election because the government would simply use it to suit their needs, that is, the preservation of its power. Accordingly, these people did not expect any significant change in their daily lives as a result of the election.

Our lives will not be any better. We have a very negative view of the election. Personally I also feel that way, because if the government had good intentions and really meant change for the country, there are many things they should be doing, and they aren't. They will continue to monopolise power.

Middle-aged Kayah male Catholic priest

I have to participate because I am over eighteen and an adult. I feel that we have to vote if we are asked to. I don't think positive things will happen from the election, but I have a desire for change. It will take time.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

Another perspective held that the situation in Myanmar was very complicated and therefore there was no clear path forward; people do not clearly understand the election or its process, and the lack of space for political parties, particularly ethnic opposition parties, to organise and participate in the process further complicates the way forward. Moreover, some ethnic opposition leaders are in exile abroad, which severely limits their ability to engage and mobilise their constituents for change.

For Rakhine people, the 2010 election will not matter. It won't bring any change for the Rakhine. In Rakhine State there is no place or party that is powerful enough to take part in 2010. We don't have any opportunity to gather to talk about political affairs.

Middle-aged Rakhine man from a village in Rakhine State

No one can predict the political situation because of the many strategies the government uses to make things more complicated. For example people are still confused about the election and how to participate or even respond to it. We don't know how to vote! Most people, even Bamar, are afraid of the government. Some will not even utter the word politics here in Myanmar. It is beyond me to think that good will come out of the election... Nothing much can change without some big struggle. It will take a long time to

change the situation.

Young Shan male university student

Some people felt the election would not bring about instant change, but they would reluctantly participate in the elections, in the hope that gradual change will eventually occur. Some suggested that the process of change could take upwards of next ten or twenty years; these points are elaborated on in the following.

It is an Opportunity—Change Can Happen—It Will Take Time

It is a long process. This is one opportunity. Don't look back at the past. Young people, prepare for it and try your best! From now on I am prepared to have a national mindset, to think about all Myanmar people. But not many people do this.

Young Bamar male NGO staff

The first four years [after the election] may be chaos, but let's hope for the best after that.

Older Rakhine female INGO staff

A number of interviewees who spoke about the election held the view that it may provide an opportunity for future change in Myanmar. These individuals said they looked forward to the election and would prepare and hope for the best, although they acknowledge the government is likely to win a majority in parliament and thus control the first few years of Myanmar's experiment with democracy. Nevertheless, they believed the election is still an opportunity to advance their respective ethnic nationality agendas and to promote ethnic nationality leaders capable of speaking for the good of their ethnic group and Myanmar as a whole. Some also perceived the potential for more grassroots participatory opportunities and the promotion of good governance, rather than just the government-backed promotion of so-called disciplined democracy.

To change the country we need power. Even in this situation, in which the government is giving an opportunity to compete for power, they [the government] are still fighting for power.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

I think change can happen in the election. The role of ethnicities could be higher though. Even if they [the government] give us a chance, the constitution still lets them control everything. But we do have a chance because the constitution says that every state and division will have its own minister. So ethnic states will have an ethnic minister. The ministers are controlled by the government, but at least we will have our own minister.

Middle-aged Kayah man from a village in Kayah State

After the election at least something will change. If the situation stays as it is now, we will have no change. There will be many military in the government.

Middle-aged Shan-Rakhine female NGO staff

Some people felt that changes in the country are their responsibility and not just the government's alone. One Shan interviewee shared that "Maybe we can make little changes in politics... We are responsible to do for advocacy changes". Others see the bright side of the election particularly as an opportunity for awareness and education for the people so that they will have an understanding about the process, how to engage in politics, and how to vote. These interviewees viewed the aforementioned opportunities as central roles and responsibilities expected of responsible democratic citizens. Similarly, a Bamar shared that as a result of the election there will at least be legally binding rules and systems that the government must obey.

If we look at the bright side; right now everything is controlled by them, there is no system. The rules just come from their mouths. The bright side is the constitution will come into effect and it will bring rules and systems. They will not be able to operate outside the system; somehow they will be caught and it will be harder for

them to do whatever they want. They will have to take the rules into account.

Middle-aged Bamar woman from Yangon

Some interviewees thought the elections were an opportunity to create and expand organisations and networks between various groups—ethnic, political, or otherwise. They observed that despite the presence of groups working to change Myanmar, such as NGOs (both international and local) and ethnic organisations, these groups rarely talk to each other and in many cases do not even share the same goal. Some called for regular meetings between networks and groups so that they can be a mechanism to present, pool, and coordinate ideas. Others called for groups and networks to work together towards the same goal while respecting differences in approach, including the content and level of society the approach is targeting.

In the constitution the military already has 25 percent. The rest belongs to the people, but the leaders of the people are silent, they have no voice. Offenders and others all have different approaches. If they had one voice and the same goals, we might win the 75 percent in the election! Those who have a chance to get elected, have to fight for it. The government might have opened the door, but the people must walk through it. They have to get in and fight for it. The grassroots also have to fight for it. They need to have the same goal even if they have different strategies... We need a multi-level approach. People need to continue to do their own work but they need to share the same goal. The system has already existed for 60 years, so without a multi-level approach things will not be change.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

Many maintained that animosity towards the government is not enough to induce positive, transformational changes. Moreover, many also saw the lack of a unifying leader who is capable of gaining and maintaining the trust of the people as a primary obstacle to positive and transformational societal changes. Only four people mentioned

Aung San Suu Kyi (three ethnic nationality members and one Bamar), all of whom viewed her in a positive light, though it was acknowledged that her role in the elections and the first few years of democracy is likely to be restricted.

Civil Society has No Time or Opportunity to Prepare

A Rakhine interviewee felt that civil society was unlikely to have enough time and space to prepare for the, as of writing, unannounced election date. Concern was also expressed that civil society lacked the capacity to prepare for and actively participate in the election. At the time of interviews, the government had yet to announce an election date or electoral procedures. Nevertheless, it was commonly expressed that there was a great and urgent need to build a strong, and according to one Rakhine interviewee, politically motivated civil society.

I think that in 2010, even though they [the government] will win without competition, we need to build a very strong civil society. If civil society is strong enough we can do many things, like training, education and human rights.

Young Rakhine male university student

We really want civil society as a movement for change, but we have doubts because civil society needs to have much more interaction, stronger networks, and broader target areas. So far we have not seen media, journalists, as part of civil society. They never work together, but they are very important for change in this country. Even NGOs like peace organisations work only with other peace organisations. We need to cover all the sectors.... Whenever we talk of civil society people try to define it narrowly, but for us it is broad and inclusive and can be a strong force. Civil society needs to be politically motivated; they must have a political will.

Middle-aged Rakhine male INGO staff

Election May Not Happen

There were only four interviewees who contended the election will not happen. One of the cited reasons for this is that the election will be disrupted by non-participating opposition political parties. Another perspective held the government will repeat their refusal to honour election results, as they did in 1990. The interviewee who held this view said, “I don’t believe the election will happen, but I pray it will. In 1990 the winner was the NLD and even though they won, they did not get power. The government still keeps control and continues to take power and authority despite international pressure.” Finally, another interviewee shared that he does not believe the election will happen because the government, specifically the ruling generals, cannot guarantee an agreeable outcome—that is, the continuation of military dominance in government structures.

I see one scenario that could happen. I am not sure the election will happen or not and no one can tell. But if we see the situation from the generals’ viewpoint as well, they are not secure in themselves because they don’t believe each other and don’t trust each other. In this country, if you move from [loyalty] to one person to another you can be arrested. If the situation is not safe, the election could be continuously postponed for many years, like they postponed them since the 1990 election. The election may happen but on the other hand it may not because of their insecurity.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

The majority of people felt they signified gradual change and did not expect much from the elections. Other civil society members would choose not to participate, or do so reluctantly. Others still believed they would not go ahead or there would not be enough time given to people to prepare and participate.

Ethnic Groups’ Vision for the Future

Despite the difficult situation of each ethnic group in Myanmar, people still have strong hopes that positive change is possible, though

many felt it will be a long and slow process. Only three people were so overwhelmed by the situation that they were unable to find their vision for the future, because the government had been in power for so long. They explained that “the government are sitting on one seat for many years, and so it would be so difficult for them to get out of their seat. They will continue to sit on the same chair and just turn the direction of the seat, so it is very difficult to see the future.” Another person said that he can “*see bad signs in Myanmar*” because of the attitudes and practices of both the people and government, who do not care about and discriminate against each other.²⁴ Citing government abuse of Buddhist monks in 2007, this participant said government treatment of the holiest men in the country is a bad sign for the future of Myanmar’s people.

At the time (2007) I watched TV and saw monks giving blessings to the people. They didn’t hurt anyone; they just sat there. I saw the army come and separate them and hit them with sticks... After 2007, in Pokokku, we heard monks were touched and killed. In Yangon also it happened and we could see it directly and experience it directly.

Middle-aged Bamar woman from Yangon

Look at 2007, they don’t care! The government is Buddhist, but they beat monks! This government is like a fascist dictatorship, they don’t care about anything.

Young Rakhine man from Yangon

I can foresee only a negative outlook. I see the conditions for the Kachin will be worse and more and more Kachin rights will be taken away. Now in the school curriculum, they teach about the Bamar culture and tradition, and don’t allow teaching about the Kachin... There will be very few people that carry on with their identity. So their identity will be slowly lost over time.

Middle-aged Kachin man from a village in Kachin State

²⁴ For more information see (relationship analysis section), pages 128-156

The following are visions or dreams for the future of different ethnic groups, including the Bamar, for their people and the country.

Treat Everyone Fairly; Give All Full Rights and Equal Opportunity

Interviewees shared a dream of Myanmar in which all people from different backgrounds will be given equal opportunity and treatment with full rights and dignity. Regarding federalism, a clear majority of ethnic nationality interviewees said they do not necessarily want autonomy for their state, but rather full equality.

In future, I want the government to treat everyone fairly and give us all rights—all ethnic groups. There should be equality, dignity, equity of resources, and education for all. If we are given our place and respect and are well treated, we can plan for the development of our people. We don't necessarily want autonomy; we want to be recognised as equals in Burma!

Older Kayah man from a village in Kayah State

We dream that no particular race will have favour and that the rules will be for everyone. It is a fact that I am Shan, but I have no intention to say, give all power to Shan. Instead I would give the power to all those who have the capacity. We just want equality. This is what we expect.

Young Shan male university student

I dream of human rights and opportunity.

Young Bamar male NGO staff

Some interviewees shared that they want to have freedom of expression, freedom to travel throughout the country, the ability to protect their culture and literature, and be able to celebrate their culture and traditions without oppression or restriction. They also desire to use their state resources for their development, whereas now only the central government benefits from natural resources in the ethnic states.

I want to protect Shan culture and literature. I don't want to go against the government because I am afraid. When we celebrate Shan New Year we have to be careful because youth want to speak their mind freely, but this would cause conflict with the government.

Older Shan man from Taunggyi, Shan State

We want our country to be peaceful, with people loving each other. No more torture; freedom to travel; freedom to talk. Freedom to enjoy your own culture without oppression.

Older Karen monk

One interviewee, a Shan female, went further by saying she wants a situation like Thailand for Myanmar, where the people can select and remove their government through nonviolent action, and where people can freely and openly talk about pressing societal issues such as corruption.

Many interviewees expressed a desire to see gender equality in Myanmar. Specifically, they spoke of their desire for women to be able to become leaders in the country, and to have more space and opportunity to develop themselves as leaders, such as elected government officials or in civil society. Within the current military government there are very few, if any, women in high-ranking positions.

Women should have the right to vote and to become prime minister or president. They should have an equal role with men—in the parliament, senate and the White House. We need to support and provide skills and encouragement to women to have a chance in politics.

Middle-aged Mon woman from Moulmein, Mon State

Interviewees also called for women to have greater access to equal job and education opportunities. It is important to note that both women and men called for greater levels of gender equality in Myanmar.

Democracy; Federal Democracy

*We want a democratic, federal state. Liberation! Freedom!
Equality!*

Older Karen male academic

A common desire amongst all ethnic groups was genuine federal democracy. Federal democracy was particularly emphasised, where all ethnic groups can practice their religions, languages, and traditions; where people have rights and freedom to express themselves. Moreover, interviewees want to experience democracy like they perceived other countries enjoyed—India, Malaysia, the US and EU were commonly cited—where different languages are recognised yet a common language of communication exists. They also want to see state levels of government led by their own ethnic people or people born and raised in their state. In addition to this, interviewees mentioned that they want to have more political parties, specifically opposition parties, so that they can support democracy in Myanmar from different perspectives and experiences.

This is our homeland; we want to build a federal union where all ethnic groups can practice their religion, language and traditions, where people have their own rights and freedoms. We want a life as a human being, not as a second-class citizen. We want a federal state based on race and geographical location. We don't want discrimination, we want a happy life like the Europeans enjoy.

Older Karen monk in Yangon

My vision is to have Kachin State with genuine federal, genuine autonomy, like the United States. In my lifetime I will not see it, but I hope for it.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

I have a dream for my country: democracy, real democracy, not so-called democracy. I hope for Western democracy for our country, like America.

Middle-aged Bamar man from Yangon

A Bamar from Kachin State being a leader there is no problem because he was born here, knows our culture, and our situation. That is no problem.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Interviewees demonstrated a clear understanding of democracy, calling for good governance practices. In particular, some participants wanted to see the exclusion of the military from future governments. A majority of participants also called for greater levels of awareness amongst the population, particularly regarding democratic citizenship and international systems and relations.

We want real democracy; a real federation/democratic Union of Burma. Also cultural, historical, and ethnic heritages need to be preserved... We need awareness and to persuade them [the people] to do this. It will take time but it is necessary.

Older Chin man from northern Chin State

Many reported their NGOs currently conduct awareness-raising activities through development initiatives, but explained they would like to see a deepening and expanding of such activities. They specifically viewed education as a means of understanding their current situation while promoting greater understanding of democracy, freedom and rights. It was commonly felt that to accomplish such objectives, greater cooperation amongst groups is required. Interviewees also called for frequent meetings between “insiders” and “outsiders”—foreigners and expatriate exiles alike—to share their experiences and knowledge, their understanding of the situation, and their concerns in order to foster greater cooperation and coordination in addressing deep seated issues in Myanmar society. Without joint efforts, it was said, it will be difficult to achieve a meaningful federal democracy in the country.

We need frequent meetings between outsiders and insiders. They [outsiders] need to share information about their situation, like about what is democracy. We need to share experiences and

concerns... We need to learn from each other, the situations and the different ideas and solutions.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

Several voiced their perspective on how to affect greater societal change and to achieve democracy in Myanmar. For example an older male academic stated that “If you look carefully at [the government’s] anatomy, there is hope. The top brass are getting old and will die after a decade. They are fading out.” He suggested that in order to bring about widespread desired societal changes, the middle level of society must be targeted through a variety of initiatives. Many of the mid-level actors are educated students from the ’88 students’ generation and are too afraid to speak out against the government. “They have to be patient. They have to wait for these old devils to die. Patiently and cleverly they start to substitute. A creeping substitution; readily and wisely. We know who is who. We understand each other. One day, we are quite optimistic we can join hands in pro-democracy.”

Peaceful Society and Development...

My opinion for the future is that I want my area to be a peaceful society. We don’t want too much material development at the moment. We’d rather have a peaceful situation. We love our area and we want peace. My dream is for Kayah to be peaceful and for people to have enough daily food.

Middle-aged Kayah male NGO staff

Many villagers are afraid of the military government. So what we want for the future is for people to feel more secure and calm about the military, to have peace, the ability to work peacefully in their villages and do business peacefully.

Middle-aged Karen woman from Hpa-An, Kayin State

I want Myanmar to be developed, like other countries; economic, social and educational development.

Young Shan-Pa-O woman from southern Shan State

Many people said that they want to have a peaceful society; currently, many regions of Myanmar are high in tensions and in some cases there is ongoing fighting between groups. People also want to see development in the country because the living standard is very low, and there are large differences between the rich and poor. For example, a participant shared that some spend US\$100 for dinner and at the same time there are people starving. People do not expect total economic equality, but expressed that ideally at least the needy people will have a better living standard and have enough for their daily lives.

Many expressed a keen interest in development and development programmes. The interviewees were very clear that they do not mean dependency development that gives money to the needy people or community. Rather, they want to see more opportunities for people, especially grassroots people, to have greater access to the economy and education so they can find jobs that can provide for their daily sustenance.

Many of us want to ask for help, but we also need to do things for ourselves. We need to change our attitudes towards development, and to do that we need resource persons. Many organisations cannot meet the people... The top-down approach spoils the minds of people. Development begins with individual attitudes.

Older Chin male NGO staff

Talking about development and trade, a Mon participant said he wants to see more trade and the removal of international sanctions. Several other interviewees also called for the removal of international sanctions; only three people called for them to be maintained or strengthened. Big companies were seen to monopolise industries at the expense of smaller businesses that could generate significant employment opportunities. Another observed that there have been some positive and significant changes in relation to development because of the involvement of NGOs.

There are CBOs in many villages throughout Mon State. Many of these CBOs participate in the Mon Social Development Network, which helps facilitate greater connections, communication, and sharing of resources and capacity building amongst Mon CBOs.

Middle-aged Mon male NGO staff

In the past we hated Bamar though now things are better. But in some places it is still difficult because when villages see Bamar travelling there, they are not secure. They still hate Bamar. Things are better though because we are aware of development. We now see that we are all the same, because many INGOs and many groups came in. We understand we are all human beings and need to respect each other.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Special Region 2, Kayah State

Another interviewee said the formation of local NGOs to help deal with development, particularly sustainable development, is essential because they will aid in long-term and locally-led development. Vocational training programmes, such as sewing and tailoring, were cited as a means of stimulating the economy while at the same time providing a sustainable livelihood to underprivileged people. Others suggested that development programmes should also encompass new agricultural techniques and products, as both would aid the sustainability of community initiatives and contribute to a growing local and national economy.

It is important to get new techniques and technology for farmers. Now Myanmar farmers have no techniques, fertiliser, science, chemicals, what to do? The farmers don't know. The paddy seeds are not good because of techniques [used to generate the seed].

Older Karen businessmen

While there are many NGOs working on development in Myanmar, interviewees felt some donors' criteria for eligible organisations is unfair, such as a mandate to work only with registered NGOs. Many local NGOs in Myanmar are not registered with the government so as

to provide greater freedom in NGO initiatives and activities, particularly regarding peace work. Therefore most local NGOs will not be entitled to register and so work without the cover of registration. It was felt that some donors do not appreciate this context, whilst others were prepared to work with unregistered organisations. People expressed hope that funding opportunities for local NGOs would increase in order to enhance community development.

Cooperation with Government and Others; Unity Among Different Ethnic Groups

We want to stay harmoniously, peacefully, in prosperity and in contact with foreign countries. However, the difficulty is that we are not united.

Older Chin male lawyer and politician

We on the inside have to work with them [international community] and join hands together with the military and the mainstream to create space and room to work proactively with the government.

Older Karen male academic

Several interviewees felt it is very important for NGOs and ethnic nationality groups to cooperate with the government and have a genuine relationship with them. As the last publication in this series demonstrates, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis*, relationships amongst and between civil society and government organisations shifted as a result of Cyclone Nargis. Similarly, interviewees thought there should be greater cooperation between ethnic groups and the government to develop and preserve culture and language, and to improve the local situation in the ethnic nationality states—even if the government attempts to limit the activities of ethnic groups, as it currently does—because it will provide greater space and opportunities to improve the situation. It was suggested that additional space for civil society activities will be created as a result of cooperating with the government.

For me, I have brotherly relations with ethnic groups, including Bamar, and I want to keep it like this. I want us to live all together like brothers and sister in the future. I think it is important to cooperate with government, even though they put restrictions on us. We will not have any opportunities if we don't cooperate.

Older Shan man from Taunggyi, Shan State

Aside from cooperating with the government, many ethnic nationalities felt a strong need for cooperation and unity amongst their own ethnic nationality groups so they can protect themselves from being discriminated against by the central government. Doing so would also help prevent the loss of culture and literature, as well as provide greater connections and space to work for changes in the country situation.

We are the same. We are all discriminated against. We need to cooperate to change. We must organise and cooperate with each other. There is no transparency and no trust between ethnic groups. We are in the same situations, we need to cooperate with each other.

Young Rakhine female NGO staff

One way to restore things is to have unity, solidarity and collaboration among all the tribes. Now there are many associations working on the literature and culture of their tribes. If they could collaborate more they might be able to prevent the loss of their identities.

Middle-aged Kachin man from the Kachin-China border area

To have unity amongst the different ethnic groups, a Bamar interviewee said, there must first be respect amongst the groups. This individual characterised current ethnic relationships as tense and divisive. He said “we need to show [ethnic nationalities] that not all Bamar are military. We need to make it clear.” He also said that the national school curriculum and textbooks should include information about ethnic nationality cultures. For example, it was

said the Kachin need to learn about their own culture and others. It was the view of interviewees that without mutual understanding there will be great challenges for cooperation and unity across ethnic groups in Myanmar. Interviewees suggested it is possible to add ethnic cultures to the national curriculum through cooperation across sectors, particularly with those who have influence with the government such as business people. One person explained that it is of no importance “who the government is, but how they rule the people.” As such, interviewees expressed desire for greater societal capacity to achieve inter- and intra-ethnic understanding through education and awareness raising initiatives.

Until Ne Win we had culture every Union Day; all ethnic leaders were invited to Yangon to discuss social issues. That was very good, but it no longer exists. To put ethnic education in the school curriculum is impossible in this situation. But NGOs and individuals can do it. After Nargis some donors inside and outside supported students. After Nargis the people are trying to force the government to include information on emergencies in the curriculum and from the government. People who are respected by government, like businessmen, media, and journalists, need to pressure the government to include ethnic groups.

Young Bamar male journalist

Interviewees articulated their desire to see leaders who actually care about, lead, and fight for, the people. Currently, leaders are seen enjoying themselves rather than fighting for the “greater good”; they do not want to take the challenge to stand for the people and by the people, which is perceived by the people as non-leadership. It was commonly said that there is a lack of individuals capable of becoming leaders, both within their respective ethnic groups and for Myanmar as a whole. Discussing leadership, one Chin participant said, “I pray that Aung San Suu Kyi one day has a chance to lead this country. I’m afraid she will die without leading. A lot of Chin people support her. We support democracy, not her personally, but her values on democracy.”

Change Government...Government that Represents Us

A number of interviewees said there is a need to change the government and they see this possibility in the upcoming 2010 elections. People told us that a change in government alone is not enough; government policies also need to be changed, particularly regarding the preservation of ethnic nationality cultures and literatures. Some believed that a tripartite dialogue between the government, NLD, and ethnic nationality groups would provide an opportunity to initiate change in the government.

Change the government. Get a tripartite discussion between the government, NLD and ethnic groups. Have them meet and negotiate with each other.

Older Mon retired businessman

People want to have the government represent them; they felt that the current government is not representative.

I believe that there must be a government that represents the people. If a potential government candidate is good for the people, we will work for that candidate.

Older Kachin man from Kachin State

Similarly, interviewees said they want people from their own states to represent them.

We want a Kachin State government and representatives. I want at least 50 percent of representatives to be Kachin people. I would like the Kachin State prime minister to be a Kachin person, not a Bamar from Yangon or Mandalay.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

On the other hand, some expressed a sense of hopelessness over a representative government because they believe the 2008 constitution will create new and more problems, rather than solve them. One Bamar

interviewee said that “I think there will be more dissatisfaction, chaos. I don’t think we are going to see good governance very soon.”

Many discussed the possibility of inter-ethnic collaboration and engagement with the government and government processes, such as the electoral process. One person from the Rakhine said, “We want to live in our own kingdom.” When pressed on how that could be possible, she said it will be very difficult and that they will get there step by step. First, she said, Myanmar people need to be brave enough to fight for their rights and to do so they need resources, experience, and knowledge from the international community.

Awareness and Education

Raise awareness among people, because people in the villages are not educated. I want them to think wisely and widely. I also want to educate children, so they can become good leaders, and will not suffer like the old people. It is important to educate people so they can think widely, wisely, and critically and be more developed.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

Two commonly cited issues required to achieve a just and peaceful future for Myanmar, as cited by both majority and ethnic nationality members, were awareness and education. Many said that if change is to be actualised in Myanmar, awareness and education are required first. Interviewees said the government is able to politicise, control, divide, and force the people to their will because the general population is ill-educated and unaware of pertinent issues facing the country. Related to this is the ability to communicate across ethnic divides and with the international community to exchange ideas and perspectives on the various issues plaguing Myanmar.

I want to go back to my land and be independent and participate in promoting the capacity of local people, especially women because they are oppressed in every way.

Young Kachin woman from the Kachin-China border area

We need formal education for children. If parents understand and value education, the children will get a good education and reach decision-making level and will not be oppressed by others. Otherwise, things will not change. There are not many educated people to present the issues and report to others, so nobody knows what is happening in our state. There are many kinds of oppression. There are many, many, interesting things, but nobody knows about them. We need education to help produce these kinds of people, so they can express the real situation.

Middle-aged Kayah female NGO staff

It was said that without critical thinking skills, which arise from awareness and education, it will be very difficult to transform the future of the country. Some explained further that they want to introduce social science, gender and environmental concerns into the curriculum. Presently, they have these studies in Yangon but they are very limited to access and therefore only a small amount of people can study and apply these concepts. Another interviewee expressed that it is very difficult to study history and politics because of limitations in finding historical facts—furthermore this was perceived to be a deliberate government strategy. Therefore, the next generation would not know of the past and they will have no ideas of what to do for their state or country. A Shan interviewee stressed that “without such knowledge, the spirit of nationalism or attitude of love Shan State and commitment to work for their state and country will not happen.”

If I want to find Shan history, how things were in the past, the information is lacking and hidden. If I want to find books on Shan I have to go out of the country (like Thailand etc), there are lots of books there! But inside, no, you have to go to a person with knowledge of such things.

Young Shan man from Lashio, Shan State

According to Rakhine and Chin interviewees, some people in their state are very isolated and they do not know what has happening regionally and globally because of a lack of awareness, as well as information

technology, such as the internet. They believed the government intentionally limits access to such tools because it allows them to control the people and monopolise their resources. Interviewees believed that awareness would prevent such a scenario from occurring because with knowledge comes an understanding of one's personal value, as well as rights and freedoms in a democratic society.

I want Rakhine State to be like Yangon. Many Rakhine don't know what globalisation is. So we don't have information, technology or human rights.

Young Rakhine male university student

Moreover, it was perceived that education and awareness of oppression and exploitation is critical at this moment in time because the people desire change. Therefore awareness of critical issues may push the population into some form of redress.

Change will come from the people if they have enough awareness of being exploited and oppressed, and become united. Change will start from there.

Middle-aged Kayah female INGO staff

My vision is to encourage young people to mobilise. They need capacity in education and communication.

Middle-aged Chin male INGO staff

We have to change. We need to move the mountain. Even if it doesn't move, we have to keep pushing. We need to get people to join us and we'll keep pushing and one day it will move... I will focus on the young generation. We have to make the younger generation cleverer—it will take time to move the mountain.

Older Karen businessman

The data suggests young people should be the primary target for awareness and education initiatives. Many people observed that young people migrate to other countries to look for jobs, such as Malaysia and Thailand. People shared that many of them could not even speak

Burmese properly but they are instead learning other languages, such as Malay, for jobs. Meanwhile, those left in the community are often desolate and without work opportunities. Alcohol dependence was said to be an issue. Education, awareness, and encouragement of young people to mobilise themselves to directly engage in the political process, either as individuals or as associations, and the development of the country was seen as highly desirable and greatly needed.

Be the Agents of Change...Change in Attitudes and systems

One bright thing I see is that the majority of people have come to know that change will not just come from the government but has to come from the people; we must be the agents of change.

Middle-aged Kayah Catholic priest

Many expressed that exile groups and the international community have very little influence on the actual situation inside Myanmar. The potential and responsibility for change was seen to reside primarily within the domestic population in Myanmar. It was commonly said, however, that the international community should provide support to change agents within Myanmar. For example, interviewees were eager to hear about other countries' experiences with democracy, and to learn relevant democratic skills and knowledge so that the people themselves can initiate the process of change.

Interviewees commonly said they do not expect large or immediate changes; rather, they held on to the possibility of and potential for small changes to make way for larger changes in the future. To materialise change, many strongly felt there is a need for a change in personal attitudes. Without a change in attitude, interviewees said, true democracy will not materialise. Moreover, they said what really matters is the system of governance. The system failed to meet the needs of the people, and therefore for the country to change, policies, structures, and the overall system need to be transformed. Most people who held this view also said that such a process will take a tremendous amount of time.

However much the leading person is working to get democracy, and does their best, if that person stays in power then it is not true democracy. If we want true democracy we should change our attitudes.

Middle-aged Bamar son of a high-level retired government official

I don't believe in any particular person or party. I don't believe if tomorrow Aung San Suu Kyi is in power, things would be automatically better. It is not about the person, it is about the system. Whoever is in position, that person needs to have a better policy and system for the country.

Young Shan male INGO staff

It is remarkable that despite the current country situation, an extraordinary amount of people continue to try their best and refuse to give up on actualising democratic change for Myanmar. Another interviewee suggested all Myanmar people continue to work hard and to be positive because change is a painfully slow process. She said that small individual actions, when viewed collectively, can make an extraordinary difference in the situation. Collectively, then, change is possible.

Poor people try their best. Rich people who can afford education also try their best, even though they don't know what will happen next. We still have hope and try our best for a change in the situation.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

Work hard wherever you are and be positive; rather than be criticising and blaming or complaining, work hard. Every little thing will count; work hard wherever you are. Even if you are working in the field of Waste Management, you are helping the environment and helping things change.

Older Rakhine female INGO staff

International Community Role in Supporting the Ethnic Groups and Positive Change in Myanmar

In line with the overarching objective of this project, to document ethnic voices from inside Myanmar on their perspectives regarding their situation, each interviewee was asked to comment on the role of the international community in Myanmar, and more specifically the role of the international community in supporting their vision for Myanmar. A range of diverse views were expressed. Some people said they don't see much room for the international community in Myanmar, primarily stemming from the perceived lack of progress made by UN representatives, including the General Secretary.

[The international community] can offer some support, but I don't think they can really support us. There is no role for them. They have no direct experience. It has to happen from inside Myanmar only.

Middle-aged Karen female journalist

The UN can't do anything... Ban Ki Moon didn't even meet our general. He [Ban Ki Moon] is in the most powerful position in the world! Gambari came many times but nothing happened; it is useless!"

Young Rakhine man from Yangon

Conversely, others indicated that there is indeed space for the international community to operate in Myanmar and that there are many ways they can influence the Myanmar context. It was said, however, that there needs to be greater levels of cooperation and coordination between international actors when attempting an intervention in Myanmar. Particularly, interviewees called for the international community to create more connections with domestic actors, and to more fully understand the situation and its complexity, particularly regarding ethnic issues. It was commonly perceived that the international community oversimplifies the context and conflict in Myanmar and regularly ignores issues of ethnic conflict to focus on

single issues, such as democracy, or more specifically, the military junta versus the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. This has an adverse effect on the success and degree of success interventions or approaches may have. Interviewees also suggested the international community use constructive criticism with the government so as not to inadvertently restrict the space of civil society.

The researchers chose not to specifically define the so-called “international community” so that interviewees would be able to articulate broad ideas about their role. Interviewees used the term “international community” to encompass individual state governments, regional intra- and inter-governmental bodies such as the United Nations and Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and international organisations and agencies, including both governmental and nongovernmental organisations. The following are some of the ideas and suggestions to the international community provided from the eight major ethnic groups.

Raise Awareness and Support Capacity Development

I want awareness for the people; provide awareness training. The international community can do this.

Young Rakhine male university student

Interviewees across ethnic groups said the international community can provide and support in awareness and capacity development. There were a variety of key areas suggested. Firstly, education for children and young people was commonly stressed throughout the interviews, as well as for the general population. In particular, they hoped for an increased capacity for critical thinking which could translate into wider and more open perspectives towards one another and their situation. There are international organisations and church-based organisations currently addressing these issues, however people felt that more needs to be done, specifically regarding an increased target population for such initiatives.

We badly need education. Some NGOs (local/international) do education work, but not all, and there are still many children in need. They [NGOs] have limited budgets and target areas, so they cannot do it widely...I would like to see more education support. If people have more education, they will be more understanding.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

Secondly, and related to the aforementioned suggestions, interviewees requested increased training and capacity building to support democratic spaces and practices in Myanmar. Specifically they suggested training and knowledge in democratic and human rights concepts, the roles and responsibilities of democratic citizens, political and developmental concepts such as project and programme management, and in elections and electoral processes such as how to involve the population in elections. Interviewees said that such training and knowledge would enable the population to be aware and be able to actively participate in the political process. Moreover, such training and knowledge would equip the population with the necessary skills to actively bring about change in their society. To pinpoint the significance of an educated public, one participant said: “If all nations have awareness and good education, they can manage themselves.”

People do not know about goals and values. NGOs should raise awareness of goals and values and situations... We lose out in seeking our rights because of fear; they [the government] drain our minds with fear.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

Right now people know only the word; but they do not know what it means. They need to know about responsibilities, rights, and consequences, in relation to democracy. The international community can help do this.

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

People suggested that awareness could be done by NGOs, both local and international, with the support of the international community.

Interviewees said that doing such trainings in Myanmar at the moment can be quite problematic, particularly regarding sensitive subjects such as political involvement and activism. As such they suggested that NGOs conceal the true nature of the trainings by replacing politically charged words with neutral ones, such as “development.” They also suggested the international community support and utilise locally-led training workshops as much as possible because the presence of foreigners may draw additional government scrutiny.

We need education. We do politics training but we change the title, and we need to be careful of our audience. We have to give as much knowledge as we can.

Middle-aged Karen woman who works in women’s education

The international community can help [with peace training], to provide support and build the capacity of local people so [that] then Myanmar can train Myanmar in inter-ethnic and religious issues. When foreigners do training in Myanmar it is very difficult because of the government. The government is xenophobic; if they see white people they ask many questions and it makes work difficult.

Middle-aged Bamar male NGO staff

Some suggested utilising media, such as radio, to raise awareness levels. Others suggested that the exile media be more strategic in its reporting. Specifically, suggested that rather than criticising the government or only reporting disasters and violent situations, the exile media should focus on constructive feedback and criticism to promote positive changes in Myanmar. Similarly, they said international media should show the good things and positive developments in Myanmar to help dispel the myth that Myanmar is a dangerous place. Some also said the media could be used to promote greater communication between Myanmar and the international community.

If the BBC and Voice of America (VoA) and other media could focus and do awareness-raising it would be more helpful because the

people could be educated, they could be evaluating things, and they could start to change the country themselves. We know the bad things about the government already, because we suffer from them.

Middle-aged Bamar female NGO staff

The media outside is emotional. They have a disrespectful attitude. They are good, but they base things on emotion which exaggerates the situation. Things are not that terrible, though of course they are not good. The media paints the country in a bad light and people fear for our country. The impression given internationally is that it is very risky and dangerous to live and work here; but that is not the case.

Young Shan male INGO staff

We have no media freedom, so outside media should help enlighten the international community that Myanmar is safe and beautiful and not like they think.

Young Bamar female journalist

Interviewees suggested education and awareness initiatives focus primarily on children and youth because they are the future of the country. It was said that such initiatives ought to also cover adults as well, so as not to accidentally create a division between young and old. Moreover, initiatives which target a wide range of participants would more evenly increase the capacity of society as a whole, avoiding any potential future conflicts which may arise as a result of narrow target audiences. In the words of a Bamar participant, “We need education and awareness to develop ourselves and Myanmar, especially youth.”

We need a lot of leadership skills, so if you want to help Burmese people you should give capacity building to young people. If they get good leadership skills they can lead our people and fight the generals... NGOs should give training and awareness to minority groups... We need skills in how to organise our communities, ethnic nationality groups and the nation.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Interviewees also spoke of bridging the divide between those living inside the country and outside, such as on the border or as expatriates. Border regions, in particular the Thai border, receive a lot of assistance. However much of this assistance is focused on humanitarian ends rather than preparing the displaced persons to return to Myanmar as productive and proactive members of a democratic society.

For those who are now outside of the country, the international community needs to educate them and pressure them not to fight. And they need to find ways to support the development of the own people in Kayah State.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

Last but not least, the interviewees shared that women are also key people who need capacity development because they have been discriminated against and oppressed by the country situation and by the male-dominated culture common in all ethnic groups. Interviewees, both men and women, said they would like to see greater levels of gender equality, particularly regarding education and employment opportunities.

I wish that women can become more educated and better at doing business, like women from the rich countries.

Middle-aged Karen female trauma worker

Women need to be aware of the environment and the situation in the country. We have lived in the situation so long, we believe whatever we hear. Before 2000 women were mostly in the kitchen, but now more are in offices. Women need to be aware of the situation here and outside. We need education.

Middle-aged Bamar woman from Yangon

While discussing the current role of the international community and its actors, interviewees said some NGOs currently operating in Myanmar simply provide materials rather than awareness. They described this as generating dependency on foreign assistance, which was widely seen as undesirable. Instead, they suggested the international community

provide the necessary training prior to giving the related materials so that the community is able to use their resources more effectively. It was suggested that trainings be open to everyone, especially at the grassroots level, and not just to government and NGO staff.

If NGOs just give whatever we need they will create dependency and I don't want that.

Middle-aged Kayah male development worker

NGOs need to revive and re-strengthen thinking skills and open our eyes. Help us set goals. Don't just distribute things and give charity, but also give knowledge and training.

Older Bamar male INGO staff

Create Stronger Linkages and Foster Cooperation Across Civil Society Organisations and Government

A number of interviewees said the international community needs to seek out new and stronger links with local Myanmar organisations and people. Interviewees reported difficulty in initiating dialogue with international actors because of domestic restrictions and limitations, particularly regarding communications technology. A Karen interviewee called for the international community to move slowly in initiating new programmes in Myanmar because of the challenging, and constantly changing, domestic situation.

Even if they are full of heart, they do not get permission; they have restrictions... When thinking of working for Myanmar, you need to get good connection—I mean a person—a trusted link. Even if you cannot conduct things by yourself, can you please give 100 percent trust to the person who will represent you? Then will you please go slowly? In other countries, things can happen day and night, but here, things are much slower. Because of limitations of working in this context, some things may not happen within days or even a year. That is the challenge.

Young Karen male NGO staff

It was also suggested that the international community adopt a humbler attitude and approach when working in Myanmar. A Rakhine woman said,

‘International experts’ should not belittle us. Don’t come with the attitude that Myanmar people are stupid or don’t know anything... When you come don’t think we don’t know anything. There are some things we don’t know, but there are things they don’t know.”

Older Rakhine female INGO staff

She called for joint efforts between local and international actors.

Several suggested that alternative engagement with the Myanmar government is required in order to make a real and honest approach in promoting democracy in the country. A Kachin interviewee said, “We can’t complain too much to the government. We have to say constructive things. In local areas we need the local government. If we can build trust then we can do a lot of things.”

A good relationship with government means you are successful and it is important.

Older Karen businessman

Interviewees from the Shan, Mon, Karen, Rakhine, Kayah, and Bamar groups went on to say that isolationist policies and sanctions do not have any effect on promoting democracy or social change in Myanmar. Instead, they said it is the grassroots level that suffers from dramatically decreased economic and social opportunities. A Shan man from Lashio suggested that if sanctions were lifted there would be noticeable and measureable benefits going directly to the local people. He pleaded, “Remove sanctions and find a chance to work here and inspire change.”

When the international community encourages civil society and ethnic groups; that is good. But economic sanctions are bad.

Middle-aged Rakhine female INGO staff

Sanctions, I think, are wrong. Because of them, tourists don’t come

and because of this the people are struggling and have lost opportunities for jobs. So the result of sanctions is we still cannot change our government because they are stubborn. At one time they opened up a little opportunity for the people. If we can use these opportunities, there will be many opportunities for people at grassroots level. Foreigners always think it is oppressed, not safe, and dark in Myanmar; they are afraid. But when they come here they realise the situation is different; communities are OK and survive. The outside world fears coming to Myanmar because of the tension and competition between the NLD and government. So outsiders think Myanmar is a dark place that they should not visit, that it is not safe.

Young Bamar female journalist

While a majority of interviewees said sanctions have a negative impact, there were three of them, Shan and Rakhine, who strongly agreed with international sanctions. According to these individuals, the role of the international community is highly limited in Myanmar and therefore sanctions are the only way for the international community to show concern and disapproval, and to pressure the government for change. A Shan interviewee said, “All the international community does is sanctions. The government does not listen to international advice, so sanctions show that people around the world are concerned about our political situation”. A young male Rakhine said, “Sanctions should be stronger, like with North Korea. They cut off everything! We must be starved so we will be motivated to change the government.” This individual was so overwhelmed and frustrated with the past and current situation of his country that he felt people would do something—that is, revolution—only if they suffer further.

Other interviewees agreed, though to a much lesser extreme than the previously mentioned Rakhine interviewee, that international pressure on the government is important. Particularly, they suggested international pressure on the issue of a tripartite dialogue between the government, National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic nationality groups.

If all of them [the international community] can give pressure together that might bring some change.

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

The government doesn't have the political will to dialogue with opposition or ethnic groups. Historically, the present situation shows that unless we can bring everyone (tri parties: government, Aung San suu Kyi and ethnic groups) for discussion and negotiation, this problem will go on and on.

Middle-aged Kayah male Catholic priest

Several interviewees said the international community should facilitate cooperation amongst ethnic groups by bringing them together for dialogue and mutual understanding. It was commonly perceived that the various ethnic groups do not currently coordinate and organise amongst themselves. For example a Kachin said, "There is not enough coordination between and among each ethnic group. They need to be more strategic even within their own ethnic group... There is division in the country and division in each group too." The division between groups was further expressed by a Karen participant who is keen to see ethnic unity, but believes unity must first be accomplished within ethnic groups before attempting inter-ethnic unity: "We need interfaith unity. We need internal unity first before we interface with other groups." Several participants called for greater networking, cooperation, and coordination between insiders and outsiders, particularly with exile groups. Another Kachin said "Outside information needs to be passed inside and inside information needs to make it to international community." This idea is further explained by a Rakhine female working with an NGO:

Exiles should not work alone, they need to contact insiders. Of course it is difficult, but it needs to be done. An exile group alone at the UN is not good; it needs insiders and outsiders [working together]. They need to keep in touch with people in the country, and then you can raise more issues from the inside to the UN. We need behaviour change for insiders and outsiders.

Middle-aged Rakhine female INGO staff

Humanitarian Support

Interviewees, particularly those from the Delta region, expressed their utmost appreciation of the massive humanitarian aid effort undertaken by the international community after Cyclone Nargis. At the same time however, interviewees from the Rakhine ethnic group complained that they do not receive such support even though they are hit yearly with cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. Interviewees from other ethnic groups also complained of the lack of assistance reaching their areas, particularly rural regions such as the Shan-Thai border.

There are many NGOs in Myanmar but very few in Shan State compared to Yangon. It would be good to have more, especially in terms of giving knowledge, such as on HIV/AIDS.

Young Shan male university student

In Rakhine State there is very little support from the international community and national government. INGOs and NGOs work only in north Rakhine State for Rohingya people, not for the Rakhine people. Our Rakhine people also need support.

Middle-aged Rakhine woman from Rakhine State

Listen to Local People and Understand the Context

Several suggested the international community first gain a holistic understanding of the Myanmar context—specifically ethnic conflict—prior to attempting an intervention. One Bamar said “Now the situation is that international people are feeding people who don’t want to or don’t need to eat. Instead they should know the situation very well and reach those who are in need so that the programme will be effective and satisfy the [needs of the] people.” This idea was furthered by another Bamar participant who said, “I talk to ordinary people and they all feel the same: abandoned by international organisations, groups and other governments.”

This feeling is common and results from a lack of understanding of the international community’s agenda because of government

misinformation campaigns as well as communication censorship. For example, when the United States announced it was “reviewing” its Myanmar policy—without explicitly outlining the new policy of engagement, to be announced several months later—government broadcasts said that the US was bowing to the regime’s demands. Another example is confusion over the role of former UN Special Envoy to Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari; as one civil society member commented, “Gambari’s role needs to be clearer. What is he doing and why is he here in Myanmar?”

The international community should know more about the complexities and history of the people, especially tribal people. Unless they understand the background of Myanmar, Burma and ethnic groups, they won’t be much help to Burma. If they have knowledge about ethnic groups and their backgrounds, they can plan more effectively on their role in promoting peace and democracy in this country.

Middle-aged Kayah male Catholic priest

Cooperate with other International Governments... More Engagement from ASEAN, China and India

Many interviewees from different ethnic groups expressed frustration with the international community’s approach to Myanmar, specifically the US, China UN, and ASEAN. One Kachin civil society member said “The international community, especially the UN, just talks about Burma and ethnic nationality groups, but they don’t do anything.” Two others elaborated, saying “The ASEAN approach is constructive engagement while the US approach is isolation. Those approaches are not working in Myanmar.” On the other hand, a Bamar participant felt “The UN is very important, but very weak on Burma.” He suggested the UN clearly outline what types of changes are expected of Myanmar and potential avenues to implement those changes. Others, meanwhile, suggested the UN has zero influence in Myanmar and therefore any approach is an exercise in futility.

Others however suggested international efforts are stifled by Russian, Chinese, and Indian involvement with the government and their use of vetoes in the UN Security Council. In this regard, Mon civil society members expressed a desire for greater lobbying and dialogue of the international community, in particular with Russia and China. “[There should be] more lobbying to China and Russia government. They have veto power in the world... We need to lobby to make them understand the real situation in our country, how it works. We need to know how different those two governments look at the situation in Burma.” However, interviewees from Kachin ethnic group said “China and India, they support this military government. That’s why the general is not afraid of anyone, and China is like the big brother.” But these individuals also suggested that the Chinese relationship with Myanmar is primarily based on business, and therefore the international community should pressure China to change their *business* policies towards Myanmar. On the other hand, a Shan male said “The government will definitely be careful about having a good relationship with China and won’t care about any other organisation or state.” It is important to note, however, that the government is careful with their relationship with China primarily because of their business relationship. Another Shan interviewee suggested that “If INGOs really want to help us, they should educate [the] Chinese government first. Chinese government role is very big in our country.”

Although there was a lot of frustration that the international community cannot really affect change in Myanmar, many interviewees continued to have hope for the future. They suggested the international community work collaboratively amongst themselves, particularly with ASEAN, China, and India, as well as with Myanmar civil society. It was suggested that there is a potentially significant role for Myanmar’s neighbours to play, particularly advocating the government to begin a genuine tripartite dialogue between the government, NLD, and ethnic nationality leaders. Additionally, several Mon interviewees confirmed the importance and the need to lobby ASEAN on the Myanmar issue: “We need to lobby ASEAN to start dialogue with ethnic groups, the Myanmar government, and NLD.” They also suggested UN to take a

more mediator role as well to give pressure or the government to get tripartite agreement.

I want shared leadership working towards democracy and freedom. ASEAN, I must say, is totally weak. I would appreciate if they [ASEAN] would raise the issue of freedom in Burma. China is another issue in the Burma and Mekong region. The international community should advise it to work with ASEAN and the neighbouring countries. I don't know what the UN can do and I do not know what ASEAN is thinking. Maybe the US and UN can help us with China and ASEAN.

Middle-aged Rakhine female INGO staff

The neighbouring countries are very important. Especially they should be putting pressure on this government. Like China, India, Thailand etc.. We want to see ASEAN playing a greater role and pressuring the government to come to the negotiation table.

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

Messages to the International Community

While discussing the international community, interviewees were also asked if they had any messages that they would like to tell the international community. The following are their messages.

- *You already know our government's strategy on ethnic armed groups. I don't know whether the government will fight with any ethnic armed groups or not. If there is more fighting, the situation will be worse and there will be more conflict. The role of international community is how to influence the government. They need to have effective intervention.*

Middle-aged Shan-Rakhine female NGO staff

- *We want to tell the international organisations and INGOs, please try and find all the ways and means possible to help and advance the position of the Karen people.*

Older Karen monk

- *The international approach is very based on criticising the regime, but instead the international approach should criticise the government's management of the people. Instead of criticising who they are, emphasise the facts about the people suffering here.*

Young Shan male INGO staff from northern Shan State

- *Living in Myanmar is good. I love Myanmar because we have a lot of resources. We have kind people, and lots of interesting places to visit. We have a beautiful land. So if the government opens and changes, there would be a lot of joy living here.*

Young Shan male INGO staff from eastern Shan State

- *I want to say, continue to help the Burmese people, to help us get the changes we want. For me it is very difficult to say how to do this or that. All people want is help to get the changes they desire: economic and political. Democracy. This is what they want.*

Middle-aged Bamar male journalist

- *There are people that come from the Thai border to fight; they have had lots of training from outside people there. But their perceptions have not changed. I think that their ideas and hatreds continue. They [the international community] should make programmes more effective to prepare people from that side. I know it is difficult for people with experience of torture and killing to change their perceptions, but with those kinds of perception we cannot get a solution. So work on changing their perceptions and attitudes, and find other ways to help them and the inside people.*

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

- *It would be more effective and useful for us if the international community could help as much as they can to help us become peaceful and developed; so there would be no more oppression or discrimination. Charity or development provided by the international community should be based on empathy for all ethnicities. Come and be in our place. Feel it and help us.*

Middle-aged Kayah man from Kayah State

- *Our recent situation is very dangerous. Many nights I cannot sleep. If the government and minority groups are fighting, my family and my community will be at risk. We can't move to another place; I love my country and I love my native place. Help the minorities. The military is very big and we are small, we cannot fight them. We cannot win without the international community. We will try; we must try, to get peace!*

Middle-aged Kachin man from Myitkyina, Kachin State

- *Compared to other countries we are very low; we have many needs. But try to do what you can. If you see a need, try to help. Try to help us as much as you can. If dictatorship spread all over the world, the world would be destroyed. Dictators need to be controlled, not just in our country. It is in everyone's interest to control dictatorship. So do not think it is only for us, but also think about yourself, and to not let this kind of system occur in your country.*

Older Bamar male INGO staff

- *It would be useful if the internationals could do something to let the government know that villagers are trying to find a way to survive both state and non-state armed groups. The state armed groups, they blame, accuse and torture us, but the government and people need to understand that we are villagers caught between these two groups, just trying to survive.*

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Kayah State

- *See the complexities in the situation. The people are not the government. The international community just sees the wider situation, so they block humanitarian aid. People need humanitarian assistance, so please see the separate views and needs of the people and help us as much as possible, and see as us human beings. See the real situation of the people in the country and support us! The international community and other countries' role is very important for change in Myanmar. China and Russia block things, so the people lose out. We need support from other countries.*

Middle-aged Bamar female NGO staff

- *I want them to know the real situation of the country, because the media is really limited (does not report it all). It would be good if you can come and stay with us in the community to know the situation, but it is not very possible.*

Middle-aged Kayah woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

There were a variety of perspectives toward the 2010 election in Myanmar. Civil society members expressed that it will be a 'selection', not an 'election' because everything is well prepared by the government, including the non-participation of different ethnic groups and political parties. At the same time, civil society will have little time to prepare for their participation in the process because there was no announcement or awareness on the election process or electoral law. This is a particularly pressing need as Myanmar has not held an election in twenty years.

The civil society members interviewed had a great desire for equality and full rights as citizens of Myanmar which could be achieved through federal democracy where every group's rights, culture and literature will be protected and expressed freely. Greater awareness and better education were seen as critical in achieving a meaningful transformation of individual attitudes and societal systems writ large. Therefore, interviewees expressed a tremendous need for the international community to support awareness-raising initiatives and education in a variety of ways, such as building the capacity of local organisations, increasing humanitarian resources, using effective media to enhance capacity development, and within these spaces, facilitating increased linkages between different groups. Also expressed was a desire for members of the international community to build more and stronger links with other international organisations and governments, particularly ASEAN, China and India.

CONCLUSION

Myanmar's ethnic situation is extremely complex. Since the country claimed its independence from the British in 1948 and a military government took power in 1962, members of Myanmar ethnic groups have faced great challenges in their daily lives. In this research, people talked about many restrictions and constraints placed by the government on freedom of expression and movement in the country. Most commonly stressed were constraints on cultural expression in ethnic nationality areas, which manifested through restrictions on languages, education, employment and religion. The ethnic nationality groups also experienced marginalisation and discrimination in opportunities for social, economic and community development.

Across all ethnic groups, education emerged as a critical issue which people felt was a key factor in any potential change and improvement in the country situation. However, education has been used by the government as a strategy to control and divide people. For example, it was said that the education system fosters a Bamar-centred bias. Teaching is conducted in the Burmese language, and official histories exclude ethnic nationality perspectives, heroes and significant events. For ethnic nationality populations to preserve their own languages often means relying on religious institutions and families to shoulder the work. Education facilities were perceived as poor and under-resourced, especially school facilities and materials; the education system is teacher-centred, which fails to equip young people with critical skills.

The issue of poverty was also a major concern, as was the lack of investment in infrastructure and the economy, especially in the ethnic nationality areas.

Many interviewees from the ethnic nationality groups observed that the political and socio-economic situation in their areas faced great

challenges after ceasefire agreements were made between the government and some ethnic armed groups during the 1990s. People felt that many businesses deals were taking place in their states, both by the government and the ceasefire groups, with unregulated exploitation of natural resources such as minerals, forests, land, etc. The government's proposal that ceasefire armed groups transform themselves into Border Guard Forces with central military oversight was also a source of much concern; there were concerns over the ensuing spread and balance of mutual benefits and control between the military government and the ethnic ceasefire groups, and there was worry that if negotiations failed fighting might erupt again.

The research showed great challenges in the relationship between the people and the government. It was clearly described that the government was a military one that functioned through a dictatorship style that was oppressive and abusive in many ways. The research also showed many challenges in inter-group interactions; this was seen largely as the result of an intentional government strategy to more easily exert control and to manipulate people. There were strong feelings of enmity among those from ethnic nationality groups about the Bamar majority, resulting in great difficulties in building relationships and trust between them. People also recognised that there were difficulties in coming together due to their strong sense of identification with their own groups, and/or because of the difficulties in overcoming a sense of collective pain and suffering at the hands of others over time. Nevertheless, the research revealed many possibilities to build interaction, relationships and solidarity within and across different ethnic groups.

While the research showed many difficulties and challenges in the complex situation of ethnic groups in Myanmar, it also clearly pointed to people's hopes and desires for the future, and for change in the country. The most common desire was for better knowledge, awareness and education for all; it was felt that these provided a route through which individuals could work to transform attitudes and work towards a more peaceful and just society in which individual and group

rights were valued, respected and protected. It was said that the international community should provide support in awareness raising and education by every means possible, mainly by supporting local organisations and groups; also by building capacity, increasing humanitarian assistance especially in ethnic nationality areas, and by creating space for building links and relationships between different groups.

Interviewees said that sanctions imposed by the international community did not have a positive impact on change in Myanmar; it was suggested that the policy of sanctions be revisited in favour of more engagement with the Myanmar government in order to create bigger and better spaces for civil society to operate and to potentially provide more opportunities for people to access education and social economic development. In addition, people wished that different voices among the international community be more informed, more unified and more coordinated in order to generate better strategies and approaches towards positive change in Myanmar. More engagement and dialogue with ASEAN, China and India were commonly recommended as a potential way to push the Myanmar government towards coming to the negotiation table for tripartite dialogue with the National League for Democracy and ethnic nationality groups.

The research was carried out as the country was discussing and debating the planned upcoming 2010 election and revealed a wide variety of perspectives on the election from different ethnic groups.

The following section sets out eight Case Studies arising from interviews with members of the main ethnic groups. The Case Studies illuminate perspectives on difficulties, challenges and opportunities in relation to development matters and interaction between groups. They record people's visions for the future and their opinions on the roles that the international community could play in Myanmar society.