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Peacebuilding
Magazine



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Myanmar has been shaped by fifty years of military dictatorship. The country was isolated and economically marginalized for far too long. After several popular uprisings, the government launched a cautious opening in 2012 and three years later, the first free elections were held – expectations and hopes were high. However, the transformation from dictatorship to democracy is presenting the multi-ethnic state with huge challenges. Over 130 ethnic groups with different languages, religions and traditions live within one national border and since the first free elections, the intensity of the conflicts has risen again.

How will the country move forward? What support are NGOs offering? How is religion influencing the conflicts in Myanmar? What role do the different languages play?

I hope you enjoy reading this issue.

Amélie Lustenberger, editor of KOFF Magazine

focus

Myanmar – In Search of a National Identity



Main streets in downtown Yangon – Yangon is one of the most culturally and religiously diverse cities.

Picture: Creative Commons

The National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar's first democratically-elected civilian government in decades, has been facing enormous challenges in relation to the ongoing ethnic peace process and the crisis in Rakhine state. Addressing the social tensions that underlie both these processes will be crucial to maintaining stability in the country, especially in the lead up to the next general elections, taking place in late 2020.

Myanmar's population is incredibly diverse, with hundreds of ethnic nationalities with distinct religions, languages and histories residing in the country. Ethnicity and religion are central identity markers in Myanmar. However, these identity markers have been politicized throughout Myanmar's contemporary history, particularly during the British colonial period, the early independence period, and the decades under military rule.

The ongoing peace process aiming to end the decades-long conflict between numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Armed Forces) and efforts to repatriate Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar are beset by deeply rooted tensions among communities divided among ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. In regard to the peace process, ethnic nationalities' struggle for equal political and economic representation has underpinned the armed conflict for more than 70 years. These ethnic nationalities, accounting for about 30% of the country's population and living in resource rich border regions, have been campaigning politically and militarily for greater representation in the Bamar-Buddhist majority country since Myanmar's independence

from the British in 1948. In 2015, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between 8 EAOs and the Myanmar government, after around four years of negotiations. Today, Myanmar's ongoing peace process is fraught with fragmentation and uncertainty. Currently, only 10 out of 21 EAOs have signed the NCA. Major armed groups operating along the northeast border have not signed the NCA, but have launched their own set of negotiations amidst fragile existing bilateral ceasefires. Three large-scale post-NCA peace conferences aimed at negotiating a comprehensive peace accord have taken place, but future iterations of conference have proved elusive. While the complex peace process is ongoing, communities affected by ongoing conflict remain uncertain about the future of sustainable peace in the country.

In regard to the crisis in Rakhine state, social divisions between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas have been present in the area for decades, exacerbated by hate speech and anti-Rohingya rhetoric by hardliners that have influential members of the Buddhist monkhood. In 2016 and 2017, attacks on police outposts by the newly formed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army prompted large scale crackdowns by the *Tatmadaw* on Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine state. The disproportionate nature of the crackdowns led to the exodus of over 700 000 refugees that fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, creating a massive human rights and humanitarian crisis. Current efforts by the Myanmar government to repatriate Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar have been largely unsuccessful. Repatriation attempts are largely unpopular with hardliner Bamar and ethnic Rakhine, and rhetoric around their return are often politicized by hardliner actors within these communities.

These two phenomena have challenged the political reform process led by *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. Since their landslide victory in 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have been struggling to meet national and international actors' extremely high expectations of democratic change. The slow-moving pace of the peace process has Myanmar nationals concerned about the outlook of sustainable peace and the reality of receiving peace dividends from the NCA. The Rohingya crisis has exacerbated social tensions beyond Rakhine state towards other townships across the country. International criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi over her government's inaction in Rakhine coupled with criticism regarding civil society and political parties' shrinking space for political decision-making has complicated the situation in Myanmar further. In light of these developments, many analysts therefore believe that the 2020 elections will be held in a deeply divided Myanmar.

While many challenges exist in addressing these social tensions, there are a multitude of efforts at the national, state, township and village levels that are working to change the country's narrative from one of diversity over division. Both formal and informal processes and initiatives are taking place in Myanmar aiming to promote diversity and social cohesion across the country. These include inter-faith dialogues, working across language barriers, battling hate-speech on Facebook and other social media outlets, and fostering greater exchange between and among different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. Now more than ever, there is a need to spread awareness and support these initiatives countering divisive narratives and promoting moderate voices around national identity and what it means to be Myanmar, especially in the wake of the 2020 elections.

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reports

Creating Sustainable Peace Through Dialogue and Trust



‘Open History – Arts for Peace’ program. Photo by Peter Schmidt

Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Since independence, the country has experienced a complex set of conflicts that represent a significant challenge on the way towards peace, development and democracy. Political space is still very limited and mistrust is widespread. In their ‘Open History – Arts for Peace’ project, HELVETAS Myanmar and the local partner organization Pansodan are therefore creating space for dialogue to strengthen identities and promote peaceful coexistence.

“Trust,” the Burmese artist Aung Soe Min begins to explain “is something that we haven’t seen in Myanmar for a very long time. However, there is nothing more powerful than trust – nothing that contributes more to harmony, togetherness and peace.” Without trust, each family and friendship, each company and country, can fall apart.

According to the People’s Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE), trust is scientifically difficult to define, yet it is nevertheless woven into our entire social structure. It allows individuals to become stronger than they would be on their own; it brings people together and helps them to feel empathy. It is hard to reestablish something that has been missing for so many decades. According to a representative study conducted by PACE in 2018, 77%

of citizens in Myanmar do not trust each other. At times, this is determined significantly by ethnicity and religion; building trust takes time. The Open History – Arts for Peace project focuses specifically on (re)building this trust and on people getting to know the ‘other’ better. The project builds on an idea from the Yangon-based artist and founder of the Pansodan Gallery.

Discovering history together

The joint three-year project is creating room for dialogue to strengthen identities, exchange different views and therefore promote peaceful coexistence. At the heart of this project are so-called Open History exhibitions in eight different regions of the country in which women, men and young people from different ethnic and social backgrounds can share their stories with each other.

In order to listen to the stories and collect photos for the exhibitions, Aung Soe Min and two other artists travel to the project regions to get in touch with the people. Aung Soe Min explains: “Sometimes the people are surprised when we ask them about their history and for old photos. They ask us why we are interested in them as ordinary citizens and say that their lives were not spectacular at all. But this is exactly what we want: Before, only the history of kings and generals has been written down, but never those of the people. What interests us is the history of the ordinary people and how they perceived the past.”

Living in diversity – shaping solidarity

The stories and photos are collected for the upcoming exhibitions. In addition, photo and video competitions are launched to bring generations closer together. Young people get in contact with the elderly and encourage them to tell them stories from the past. The photos and videos collected are then presented to the wider public as part of the Open History exhibitions.

Around a month before each Open History exhibition, a cultural event is organized in the participating villages to explain the idea to the public and to establish trust. During these one-day events, residents are invited to contribute something to a specific topic: this could be a competition among fashion designers to promote traditional clothing for everyday use or a fashion show as part of a thanaka festival. Thanaka is a natural make-up and sunscreen taken from the bark of the thanaka tree; it is considered as a connecting element of all people of Myanmar. People from different backgrounds therefore come together and experience their diversity in a stimulating environment. What would be considered normal in Europe is unique in Myanmar: there have hardly been any events like this before.

Around a month after the introductory cultural event, a four-day Open History event takes place in which the collected photographs, stories and videos are exhibited. In order to avoid misunderstandings, particular care is taken to ensure that a caption is added to each photo. Furthermore, materials which Helvetas and Pansodan have received from the public are examined regarding the messages they contain: only peace-building messages shall be conveyed. Three Open History exhibitions have been carried out so far and the feedback from visitors was overwhelmingly positive. Aung Soe Min says with a smile: “It is so beautiful to see how committed people are to tell their stories from the past to other visitors in an artistic way. And it makes me especially happy that other communities, which

are not in the target region of our project, imitate our project activities and collect photos and stories themselves to show them to the neighborhood.”

Thoughts are free – art as a peacebuilding tool

Throughout the project, Arts for Peace is used as an approach to build trust and contribute to sustainable peace. In conflict contexts, art can help to promote peace in a variety of ways. It strengthens the resilience of people living in conflict areas and encourages them to persist even in difficult situations, for example, through finding new ways of employment, through nurturing important cultural identities which support them, or serving as an outlet for expressing their suffering and using this outlet instead of meeting violence with counter-violence. Likewise, art offers people platforms to express their opinion and share their views with one another. These platforms promote the dialogue between different identity and interest groups, contributing to a pluralistic culture and peaceful coexistence. Art also contributes to social change and conflict transformation by encouraging people to change their perspectives, gain a deeper understanding of a situation or reflect on things differently, for example when dealing with their past or with respect to an ongoing conflict. In collaboration with the media, art can also increase public awareness and therefore contribute to transformative processes. The way art achieves all of this is very particular: it can be obvious or subtle, often speaking to people on an emotional level rather than an intellectual one and is therefore more accessible to a wider audience. Therefore, art can contribute to reflection and understanding, as well as addressing issues, in situations where it is difficult to speak about a conflict.

In the context of Myanmar, the element of subtlety is particularly important. This is because in a situation where freedom of speech is restricted, it is necessary to find conflict-sensitive, easily accessible means of motivating the population to talk and reflect. Helvetas and Pansodan have a shared dream of Open History exhibitions taking place across the entire country and that one day, selections from the exhibitions can be displayed at a side event of the peace negotiations, which will hopefully be soon reactivated. Thus, the exhibitions could be used in a creative way to directly motivate the parties involved in the conflict to change their perspectives.

Sharing experiences with one another – the ‘virtual museum’

The Open History exhibitions are held every six months in different locations across Myanmar. The project plans to make the exhibited photos, videos and collected stories available to the public in a ‘virtual museum’ (a website), so that everyone can learn from each other. By listening to each other and telling each other stories, the participants contribute to a peaceful future for Myanmar.

During 2019, the project is financed by own funds and by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany’s Foreign Office.

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reports

Smart Peace to Champion Diversity over Division



Crossing a bridge in a rural community in Myanmar. Picture: The Asia Foundation

Violence has raged across parts of Myanmar for over 70 years. What started as armed struggle against a centralised government following independence from colonial rule evolved into a complex array of conflicts between ethnic minority groups and the Myanmar military. With a high number of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in the population, diversity is at the heart of the question surrounding peace in Myanmar: what would a governance model and political system look like that would be supported by and representative of the population?

Since 2011, successive governments have injected their hopes and energies into a negotiated peace process, culminating in October 2015 with the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement between ethnic armed groups and the government. After celebrating its fourth anniversary, many peacebuilders in Myanmar are reflecting on its impact so far and asking what happens next.

There is evidence of real benefits from the ceasefire on the ground: improved security and economic growth in certain areas and important political recognition for non-state bodies such as ethnic education and health services. But the non-inclusive nature of an agreement

that included less than half of Myanmar's 22 ethnic armed groups has entrenched divisions, and intensified clashes between armed groups and the military, failing to curb harmful and often illicit economic activities. These dynamics, underscored by the highest levels of fighting seen in decades, have not been addressed by an asymmetric peace agreement and are likely to continue.

In this context it can be challenging to see a productive way forward for inclusive peacebuilding work, navigating precarious relationships between myriad actors, volatile reactions to regional geopolitical forces, and the ever-changing landscape of donor politics. A new project called *Smart Peace* is seeking to rise to the challenge. Funded by the UK Government, *Smart Peace* is a global initiative uniting the expertise of consortium members The Asia Foundation, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, International Crisis Group, ETH Zurich, Behavioural Insights Team, Chatham House and led by Conciliation Resources, to address the challenges of building peace in Myanmar, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

The project combines peacebuilding techniques, conflict analysis, rigorous evaluation and behavioural insights for positive change in conflict-affected contexts. In Myanmar, it looks to build the background conditions and encourage reforms which will enable current and future peace processes to be more effective. The two-pronged approach will see peacebuilding, security transition and governance reform activities, informed by in-depth and ongoing analytical work on the context as well as the peace support landscape which seeks to address it. An ambitious set of dialogue events will be launched, aiming to generate debate and build common ground across conflict lines on concrete, technical issues. An iterative system of analysis, implementation, learning and adaptation will produce a significant body of literature and lessons learned for peacebuilding practitioners in Myanmar and globally.

Progress towards peace in Myanmar is hampered by a non-inclusive peace process, increasing and overlapping conflicts on the ground, and low faith among some leaders in a comprehensive negotiated process. In response, the international community should consider different ways of broadening dialogue, promote related reforms to existing civil and military systems, and harness the widespread desire for meaningful and inclusive peacebuilding. By doing so, and by showing the patience to stay the course, they can help to champion diversity over division.

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reports

Myanmar's Ethnic and Religious Minorities and Sense of Belonging



Civilians taking shelter from incoming air attack on Christmas day. Photo: Hkun Li

Myanmar has been struggling to build a collective sense of national identity amongst a population made up of over 100 ethnic groups. However, the biggest challenge is that ethnic and religious minorities in particular do not feel a sense of belonging to the nation. Instead, their ethnic or religious identities often trump their identity as citizens of Myanmar. Why is this?

First, the name “Myanmar” itself is a source of controversy. Many ethnic minorities believe that Myanmar is another term to call Burma, which is drawn from the name of the majority Burman (Bamar) ethnic group. Many Burmans in the government system do not regard themselves as one of many ethnic groups. Instead, they consider themselves the “owner” or “host” of the country, and the rest as “migrants or guests.” The previous military junta’s Burmanization policies divided majority and minority groups for many decades. Due to the junta’s divide and rule tactic and the lack of quality education, many civilian Burmans are disconnected and not aware of minorities’ struggles. Of Myanmar’s 14 regions, seven are named after ethnic groups, thus this adds more complications among smaller populations from different ethnic groups living in the same areas with the same “owner” and “migrants or guests” issues.

The nation’s constitution states that all citizens are to be treated equally and have freedom of religion or belief. In practice, ethnic and religious minorities struggle greatly to obtain government employment. Religious minorities’ freedom to practice their religion is also severely curtailed throughout the country. According to a political analyst, the systematic oppression of ethnic and religious minorities gave rise to armed conflict among the Shan, Kachin, Karen, and Kareni ethnic groups and the growth of Wa and Rohingya ethnic identities during the last few decades.

One of the major factors for why the civilian government-led peace process failed was the perception by ethnic minority representatives that they were not viewed as equals or treated with respect by the Burman leaders. The peace process brought back bitter memories of betrayal by Burmans breaking the 1947 Panglong Agreement.

In order to amend the broken trust, the civilian government still needs to improve the way they are engaging with different ethnic and religious groups. The government should make sure minorities are heard and respected during peace process meetings and negotiations. One way to do that is for government representatives to refrain from using “us’ vs. “them” sentiments when they interact with ethnic and religious minorities.

Unless the civilian government comes up with policies that would bring about lasting reconciliation between Burmans and ethnic/religious minorities and fulfill their democratic values in their government, the struggle Myanmar is facing today could divide the nation even more than ever in the future.

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[links](#)

- [Burma Chapter. \(2019\). United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#)
- [Aung, N. O. \(2019, July 31\). Time to Review the Peace Process in Myanmar](#)

reports

A podcast to give a voice to all communities in Myanmar



Doh Athan journalist reporting in Kayin State, Myanmar, in April 2019. Picture: Lâm Duc Hiên / Fondation Hironnelle

Fondation Hironnelle started working in Myanmar in 2016 to support a professional media sector, which was giving a voice to the population in a difficult, historic context of democratic transition. In 2017, Fondation Hironnelle launched a program on human rights with its local partner Frontier Myanmar, supported by the Dutch Embassy in Myanmar. Frontier Myanmar is an independent information magazine with a website in English and Burmese.

The project aims to make up for large gaps in content and access to information on human rights and related issues through practical training for journalists and ethnic media, and the production of a weekly podcast on human rights. This podcast, Doh Athan (Our Voice), has been broadcast since October 2017. It explores human rights-related issues through reports and in-depth interviews with the public, leading human rights activists, academics, campaigners and government authorities, with a diverse range of voices and sources throughout the country. Doh Athan gives a voice to moderate opinions and deals with information rarely covered in the national dialogue, especially the stories and perspectives of women and marginalized members of different communities, to combat negative

stereotypes. The audio produced for the podcast is complemented by videos distributed on social media.

To support the podcast's production and distribution, Fondation Hironnelle and Frontier Myanmar have developed a network of 6 ethnic and local media partners across the country. These media partners are given journalism training and production equipment, and they participate in the production and weekly broadcast of Doh Athan. The stories and voices of the whole country are therefore heard in this national audio magazine. The media partners help to distribute the podcast to their listeners and on their social media pages.

Testimonies of two journalists for the media partners who received training in Chin State:

Salai Holy (Chinland Post): *"I found the exchange of ideas between participants really useful. It enabled us to learn from one another about the main problems in other regions of Chin State, and the types of stories our audiences are interested in. I think the training helped me to develop new ideas about topics focusing on human rights."*

Van Lian Mang (Chinland Herald): *"I enjoyed learning to identify 'fake news'. 'Fake news' is a big problem in Myanmar and advice such as carefully examining sources and reflecting on which websites to trust, was really useful. I think it will help me with my reports."*

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- [Frontier Myanmar](#)
- [Der Podcast Doh Athan](#)

reports

HSD Commitment for Peace in Myanmar



Picture: HSD (FDFA)

The Human Security Division's (HSD) program in Myanmar is part of the 2019–2023 Swiss Cooperation Strategy and concentrates on the promotion of peace, human rights, and democracy. The aim of the HSD commitment is to strengthen trust among parties involved in the peace process (government, army, and ethnic groups) and to establish a culture of inclusive and structured dialogue as a means of overcoming conflicts.

In 2012, Switzerland became the first country to send a Human Security Advisor (HSA) who committed herself fully to the peace process. Today, Switzerland is in direct contact with the most important negotiating parties and, where desired, offers advice via the HSA as well as additional experts in areas such as federalism, ceasefire, or negotiation techniques. This consulting work concerns questions regarding the implementation of the national ceasefire agreement and helps the various parties to prepare for holding political negotiations as part of the Panglong process. The HSD focuses on improving the knowledge and techniques of the negotiating partners to enable constructive and structured negotiations. Mutual trust should also be strengthened.

The new distribution of power particularly affects the relationship between the central state and the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. Many parties believe that a federal state structure is the obvious solution to the country's problems. To date, however, hardly any substantial discussions have taken place regarding what federalism means in concrete

terms and which challenges it could resolve. Over the last few years, the HSD has therefore organized several study trips on federalism and dealing with diversity. For example, local and religious leaders from Rakhine have already visited Switzerland twice. This gave Buddhists and Muslims the opportunity to become familiar with diversity management tools. Scope was also created to exchange experiences and create cross-community contacts.

In early October 2019, the 15 chief negotiators in the Myanmar peace process – who are members of the Secretariat of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) – as well as 10 additional people from government, the peace commission, and other conflict parties, spent a week in Switzerland. The UPDJC is the most important committee for peace negotiations in Myanmar. Within this, the 10 rebel groups that have signed the national ceasefire agreement are negotiating with the government, military, and political parties. Admittedly, the UPDJC Secretariat hardly met at all in the past two years. One of the trip's aims was therefore to help unblock the process. The participants also received input on issues like decentralization, federalism, dealing with diversity, mediation and intercultural sensitivity. Ultimately, the HSD hopes to help bring about a further Union Peace Conference at the start of 2020.

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reports

Infrastructure for the Stabilization of the National Ceasefire Agreement



School in Mon State with children of the ethnic minority of the Kayan. Picture of the SDC

Since 2012, the SDC has been implementing direct campaigns in the south east and more recently in the south of the Shan State. This work focuses on social infrastructure planned and built in close cooperation with armed ethnic groups and Myanmar's government. With the support of experts from the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA), the aim is to improve planning, construction, operation, and maintenance using suitable compromising solutions and to improve collaboration processes between the parties. The population not only remains in significant danger following conflicts in non-government controlled areas, but also in areas with internally displaced persons and ethnic minorities in marginal zones. On top of this, it is often unclear where responsibility lies for basic care from healthcare and educational services because both the Myanmar government as well as the service offices of ethnic groups have taken up this task. The national ceasefire agreement entered into force in 2015 but there have been hardly any peace dividends for the population. As a result of the population's precarious situation following decades of conflicts, migrating to neighboring Thailand often remains the only option.

During the implementation of this project, Switzerland places immense value on co-participation and even on the management of proceedings by village communities that understand the local context the most and can incorporate this in the best possible way. This enables adjusted and fundable infrastructure to be put forward that improves and promotes trust between the population, the government, and the participating ethnic organizations in terms of operation and maintenance. Drawing on the example of a newly built school, it could be repeatedly shown how the building can be used as a shelter during the annual floods and how it has been made possible for the school to operate with greater diversity. At the new school, teachers from both the Myanmar Ministry of Education and the ethnic educational authorities teach together and offer pupils a varied and inclusive curriculum that promotes understanding and acceptance of cultural and ethnic diversity. Thanks to the cooperation between the SHA, the various participating Myanmar authorities, and ethnic groups, it can be ensured that the infrastructure lays the foundations for social facilities on which different development projects can later be built, for example in the area of vocational training or health.

Overall, Switzerland's direct campaigns not only bring increased versatility, but also enable effective and practical project implementation that can be used as practice-based examples on a political level for the peace process as well as in humanitarian dialogue.

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reports

The refugee camp in Bangladesh – two years after displacement



In the camps in Cox's Bazar district. Photo: SRK, Remo Nægeli

A large number of displaced persons sought refuge in Bangladesh in 2017 from the violence in Myanmar. The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) has been active in Bangladesh for almost 50 years and has also been in Cox's Bazar since 2017. In this interview, Benedikt Kaelin, Program Officer for Bangladesh at the SRC, talks about the lives of people in the camps and assesses how they can move forward.

It has been two years now since the Rohingya people fled from Myanmar. What is the situation in the camps today?

Almost a million people currently live in the camps, of whom over 700,000 have been living there since the events in August 2017. Some of them were already in Bangladesh before the exodus in 2017, but most of them arrived at the camps later. The camps are huge, and parts almost feel like a normal city. However, the government is taking care to ensure that no permanent infrastructure is built. The refugees in the camps live very closely to one another – in parts of the camp, this amounts to as little as 10m² per person (while humanitarian standards envisage 30 – 45 m²) – and the lack of hygiene is also a problem.

Compared with two years ago, the situation has generally improved in many areas, for example, in terms of basic supplies and health care. The government, together with the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, has given half a million people refugee papers, and many children have been able to go to school for the first time in their lives. The structures and coordination between different humanitarian organizations have also significantly improved.

The lack of future prospects, however, is becoming an ever-greater problem. The refugees have no access to the formal labor market and are dependent on humanitarian aid. Alongside the traumatic experiences that many people have lived through, this leads to ever-increasing desperation and destructive coping mechanisms.

Tension within the camps as well as between those in the camps and the local population is also increasing. Lots of land and resources, which had previously belonged to the local population, were required for the camps, and the sheer number of people is driving prices up. When a local politician in the region was murdered at the end of August 2019, young men from the camps were suspected of the crime, leading to angry protests by the local population.

Why are tension and violence increasing now even though the conditions in the camps have improved in many areas?

In relation to violence, this still only involves a number of individual instances, and I cannot see any pattern so far of rising violence in the camps themselves. When so many people live together in such precarious conditions, then, in my opinion, a certain amount of criminality and violence is almost unavoidable. But what is definitely increasing is tension between the local population and the camps' inhabitants.

Reasons for this include the many expectations that are not being fulfilled as well as the lack of resources I mentioned earlier. Another reason is that these huge camps distort the local economy, and there are of course also people who are profiting from this: I'm thinking, for example, of hotels and transport companies or also people who have found a job with the international organizations. This distorted market, combined with the increasing realization that people are going to have to get used to the fact that the crisis will not be over soon, is causing a lot of frustration in some cases.

How close do the camps' inhabitants and the local population live to each other? Do they see each other every day?

Yes, it is actually the case that people meet each other every day and live very close to one another. There are of course checkpoints at the entrance to the individual camps, however, the camp as a whole covers a very large area, with various local communities dotted about across the territory concerned. These encounters are often wholly positive. People meet each other at the market, and there is lively interaction. The markets in the camps are also functioning better and better because this interaction is actually helping viable supply chains to emerge.

You have said that camp inhabitants are not allowed to take on formal work. What do they do all day?

They are not allowed to work formally but smaller jobs that don't require any proper qualifications are possible. Certain people are also compensated for this work. Some earn money through their work with the aid organizations. The refugees are on the look out for such opportunities, particularly the men, and they struggle when they don't have anything to do. The men are often at the market all day long searching for a source of income. The women stay more often in their accommodation and look after their families.

Which services does the SRC offer on the ground?

The Swiss Red Cross is concerned with meeting current needs and mainly works in a health care capacity, where it can bring its expertise to bear. With this kind of work, you have to differentiate between the role at the beginning, which mainly involved emergency aid, and the situation now, which requires a more long-term view. Initially, the construction of toilets and standpipes was the focus, and hygiene training was carried out. In 2018, three multifunctional health centers were built in which the SRC has since been offering health and nutrition-related services in cooperation with partner organizations, helping bring families together and offering protection: the focus here is on family planning, vaccinations and hygiene measures. There are also offers of psychosocial support. Over 200,000 people have made use of these services so far.

The SRC is currently supporting the construction of two further health centers and is working closely on this with different actors and the Ministry of Health. The coordination at Red Cross health centers is unique because all these actors work under the same roof – NGOs, UN organizations and doctors from the government. Another special feature is how health centers are made from a special construction material: they are semi-permanent. Indeed, these are not built for the long term because the government would not allow this, but they are more stable than other buildings you might find in a camp.

In one of the camps, the SRC is also working on establishing a waste disposal system.

What then are the biggest challenges in terms of the work on site?

As a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the SRC works in its program countries, wherever possible, with local Red Cross societies. In Cox's Bazar, this involves the Red Crescent of Bangladesh. This organization, like many other organizations, was ill prepared for the unusual situation in Cox's Bazar. The SRC always therefore supports the structures of partner organizations through its projects, which can sometimes be a challenge. For example, our partner organizations can hardly match the high wages that other organizations pay their local employees – which makes it difficult in turn to find good people for the demanding work involved.

Another difficulty is the availability of government doctors. In particular, the journey to the camps can be very difficult, particularly during the rainy season, and this often leads to a lack of capacity.

How is work with the government in Bangladesh going?

The government has demonstrated great generosity in accepting the refugees. It continues to show the same spirit of generosity, and the SRC's cooperation with the authorities is generally running very smoothly. For example, an agreement with the Ministry of Health was signed recently, which defines the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved and obliges them to show constructive cooperation.

The challenges for Bangladesh as a host country, however, are enormous. Bangladesh is densely populated and, with 160 million inhabitants, has considerable needs of its own to meet. The situation in the refugee camps is therefore an additional burden.

A permanent settlement for refugees in Cox's Bazar is not an option for the government – it is therefore planning to resettle the refugees onto an outlying island. This project is slowly taking shape. However, only some of the refugees could be resettled – approximately 150,000 people. According to the government, anyone who is at particular risk of natural disasters should be resettled in the first instance.

Can you tell us any more about these natural disasters? How real is this threat?

Bangladesh is a country that is repeatedly affected by natural disasters. First and foremost is the threat of monsoon, which has also caused great damage this year. From April until September, there were floods in the camps, which made it difficult to access services. Around 15,000 people were evacuated, and accommodation was damaged or destroyed. The settlements are built on slopes and can easily slip down. Thankfully, nobody died this year in the camps. This is partly down to the excellent safety measures put in place.

The camps are well prepared for smaller incidents. If a cyclone (for example) were to hit the area, however, this would have unforeseeable consequences.

What will the future bring?

In principle, there are three scenarios: repatriation of the refugees to Myanmar, some kind of resettlement or long-term settlement and integration at Cox's Bazar. As already mentioned, the last scenario appears not to be an option for the government.

Talks are underway regarding repatriation. However, the positions of the countries involved and that of the United Nations regarding this matter are some way apart, and up to now, no refugees have volunteered to return. Also, both security and living conditions in Myanmar need to be guaranteed to a certain level.

So that leaves resettlement within Bangladesh: this could mean that 150,000 people are actually resettled, but this would still only account for a small proportion of the people concerned. What happens with the rest would remain to be seen.

Interview with

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reports

What space for civil society organizations in Myanmar?



Using a trainer of trainers approach. The Local Resource Center - an umbrella organization of around 1'000 Civil Society Organizations (CSO) - in collaboration with Helvetas Myanmar builds capacities of more than 300 local CSOs on civic engagement. Picture: Helvetas, Peter Schmidt

Helvetas Myanmar and the Local Resource Centre (LRC) are two organizations supporting the empowerment and capacity building of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar. LRC is committed to strengthening the collective voice of the civil society through skills development, dialogues and advocacy activities. Helvetas engages in three working areas in Myanmar, namely skills development, sustainable & inclusive economies and governance & peace, whereas the latter includes the support to civil society organizations.

To approach the question of the civil society's space in this young democratic nation, we asked Pansy Tun Thein, Executive Director of the Local Resource Centre and Technical Advisor to the Gender Equality Network and Peter Schmidt, Helvetas Country Director, to share their perception of the situation.

SJ: What is the landscape of civil society organizations in Myanmar?

PS: Myanmar has gone through a long history of a military dictatorship, then slowly opened

itself towards a partial democracy, which has been in place for four years now. Even under the dictatorship, there was an astonishingly active civil society in this country and it is still the case today. There is an estimated number of 10,000 local CSOs, whose activities are very broad: from the provision of oxygen to patients who can't leave their homes to human rights advocacy work and environmental engagement. When you look at Myanmar with a European perspective, knowing the past of the country, you would not expect such a lively civil society.

SJ: What kind of challenges have they gone through?

PTT: For many years, the CSOs in Myanmar have been very active in the provision of services, filling gaps left by the government. However, the law of 1988 relating to the registration of organizations seriously injured this movement. Under this highly punitive law, all CSOs operating without registration were threatened with legal action.

In 2013, LRC did an assessment of the operational space for the CSO and it was found that all were aspiring to a more progressive law. LRC, together with leading CSOs and INGOs then led the process of revising this law in 2014 and successfully managed to work with the government to develop a more progressive law. Today, there are over 10,000 local CSOs in the country including 3,500, which are officially registered. The rest are operating without registration but the government cannot punish them for operating without registration, as the current law allows voluntary registration.

SJ: Are they still active in filling the gaps left by the government?

PTT: Yes they are, all over the country, because we have serious gaps in the public sector. In terms of health and education, both national and international NGOs are providing health and educational services, especially in remote or out of reach areas where the population is the most affected.

PS: To give an example: Many of the ambulances in Myanmar are operated by CSOs. This is an example of a typically public service, which has been taken over by the civil society in Myanmar.

SJ: How is the involvement of civil society organizations in the provision of public services received by the government? Is there any form of collaboration?

PTT: the government is generally in favour of this type of activity because it claims to be working on filling these gaps. This is a common objective that the government shares with CSOs, they are therefore complementary in trying to fulfil it. For example, several NGOs work collaboratively with the government in implementing the national AIDS program. In this program, the provision of antiretroviral treatment for the affected population is divided by geographical areas for the government as well as for the NGO/CSO sector. The government approves and supports this joint action.

PS: You have to see this in the context of culture and religion. The majority of Myanmar's population is Buddhist. 'Doing good' is very important for their reincarnation. There is a generous mentality deeply rooted in the society. The functioning of CSOs as service providers of "doing good" reflects this country's cultural identity. Look at the World Giving

Index. Myanmar has ranked first over the last 4 years.

This all sounds beautiful, but it is only one part of the story. A piece of research conducted jointly by LRC and Helvetas in 2017 shows that the government welcomes the CSOs that are service oriented or strictly humanitarian but is far more critical towards politically active NGOs such as those promoting human rights.

SJ: What are the consequences for the organizations having a political engagement?

PTT: Freedom of expression is still very much affected in our country. You would expect more freedom granted to the civil society from a democratically elected government, but this is a challenge in Myanmar. For example, the Telecommunications Law of 2013 (Article 66D) states that you can be jailed for making any kind of critical statement towards a third party, especially towards the government or the members of parliament (MPs). Many people have also been jailed under the Unlawful Associations Act (1908) which punishes “any person or group who associates with an unlawful association, contributes, receives or solicits any contribution for the purpose of any such association.”

The government selects and only works with the CSOs that it trusts. Advocacy is a continuous work for the civil society, which has to find innovative ways to access government ministries, the parliament, to advocate for issues that need to be addressed, but challenges remain.

PS: What is surprising is that the article 66 (D) has been more frequently applied by the current democratic elected government than by the former quasi-military government. An explanation that I have heard several times is that the current government has been democratically elected and that there is therefore no need for a politically engaged civil society.

SJ: Would you say that you have enough space to exercise influence?

PS: As Helvetas' focus is on agriculture, ecology, education, we are not affected by restrictions and can implement our projects in freedom. We do engage in advocacy work for example related to the space for civil society. Usually we express ourselves through our local partners, typically CSOs such as LRC but also through private sector partners and we maintain a dialogue with government partners from local to the national level.

PTT: The CSOs often work through various platform groups, which are mostly thematic (HIV/AIDS, land security and civic engagement, etc). These groups gather, address and advocate their issues to the government as well as to the parliament. This is a way of collectively engaging with the government while protecting the individuals. LRC works as an umbrella network comprising over 1,000 CSOs, and operates through several regional offices located mostly in conflict or post-conflict areas. LRC is a representative of the platform group known as “Myanmar Civil Society Partnership for Aid and Development Effectiveness- MCPAD” providing a good opportunity for these organizations to exercise influence and use their collective voice to report some of the CSO's concerns to the government and the parliaments, as LRC promotes neutrality and non-confrontational approaches.

SJ: The project “Open history- Art for Peace” developed by Helvetas in cooperation with the Pansodan Gallery promotes the use of art as a unifying tool for several types of groups

in the society. How is the project received by the public and by the government?

PS: This is a relatively young project, initiated by a local Burmese artist. His reflexion is that people who don't know their history well will encounter difficulties in conceiving their own identity, which can be a factor of intolerance towards others. His work consists of collecting in a given area ancient photographs that people have at home, to then scan, frame them and organise a public exhibition. This for Myanmar unique approach is used as a space for different groups from the society (women and men, different religions and ethnicities) to come together. It generates a lot of enthusiasm among the visitors but also among the local government bodies, interestingly, which fully support this approach. When we recently organised the latest of these exhibitions the Chief Minister of this State (province) immediately requested us to present a selection of the exhibits in the provincial museum where the pictures can be displayed for a long period. It's great!

SJ: Do you actually succeed in bringing people from various social, religious or ethnic backgrounds together?

PS: We had a pilot exhibition last year and the two exhibitions are ongoing (in October and November). So far, we have been very successful in bringing men and women, as well as different generations together. This was relatively easy. How well we will achieve a positive interaction between different ethnic and religious groups is still an experiment. We are very much positive and optimistic about this approach and designing – together with LRC – a larger project funded by the European Union, 'Culture For Peace' using this mechanism, to bring different groups together at a much larger scale.

[Interview with](#)

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[links](#)

- [Helvetas Myanmar | Independent Swiss development organization](#)
- [Local Resource Center](#)
- [Open History - Arts for Peace | Myanmar | Helvetas](#)

reports

How do Language Barriers Affect Access to Humanitarian Services ?



A doctor visits a Rohingya woman at a humanitarian clinic in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Picture: TWB/Fahim Hasan Ahad

It's a question we don't often ask. Yet most humanitarian contexts are multilingual, and marginalized sections of society are less likely to speak a national or international language. A recent study highlights language exclusion for the Rohingya community.

Translators without Borders (TWB) has been providing language support to the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh since 2017. Research and consultation with refugees and humanitarians identify language and communication pitfalls. This informs terminology resources, translations, pictorial and audiovisual tools, guidance and training for staff and volunteers to improve the communication capacity of the response.

In a new study, TWB assesses the implications of communication challenges for Rohingya communities on both sides of the Bangladesh/Myanmar border. This examines how language barriers affect their access to quality services in Cox's Bazar and Sittwe.

It finds that monolingual Rohingya in both countries are disadvantaged in their access to quality humanitarian services. Most of the population speak only Rohingya. Women, people

from rural areas, recently arrived refugees, and less educated individuals are most likely to be monolingual.

Unable to speak the languages of humanitarian responders, monolingual Rohingya depend crucially on bilingual intermediaries. Without them, they cannot make their needs and concerns known, access information, or engage with decision-makers.

But the intermediaries – chiefly Chittagonian speakers in Bangladesh, and Rakhine speakers in Myanmar – are largely unprepared for this role. Many lack training, guidance and resources to develop their understanding of the Rohingya language and culture. Nor do they generally receive training in interpreting and cultural mediation.

As a result, intermediaries miss verbal and non-verbal cues that could help them better understand what service users mean. They hold separate bilateral conversations with service providers and users, rather than facilitating direct engagement between the two. And the control this gives the intermediary over what information is relayed, prompts distrust on both sides. Trust and communication break down, and too often people in need of support are left ill served and frustrated.

This reduces access to quality services and compounds existing tensions with neighboring communities. Social cohesion programming geared to Myanmar and Rakhine speakers cements exclusion and misses opportunities to build bridges.

Humanitarian organizations are largely unaware of these dynamics and their impact on the reach, effectiveness, and accountability of their programs. A survey of humanitarian staff in both contexts found that they generally overestimate the language skills of the Rohingya community and the similarities between Rohingya and other languages. Service providers interviewed also saw language barriers as less serious than did Rohingya respondents.

These should be serious concerns for the humanitarian response in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. But solutions exist. They include:

- Communicating clearly, avoiding jargon and applying plain language principles
- Building the language skills and cultural awareness of staff
- Planning services to allow time for interpreting and crosscultural communication.

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[links](#)

- [TWB's reports, glossary and language guidance](#)

reports

Swiss Democracy Promotion: the Example of Myanmar



Wundwin Township, Myanmar 2015. Picture: Human Security Division

In 2013, the military leadership government in Myanmar initiated a democratic transition. The historical elections were held two years later. This left little time to prepare given that decades of dictatorship had left deep mistrust in political parties and government.

The electoral commission therefore resorted to outside help with the preparation and asked Switzerland to facilitate the negotiations for a code of conduct between the parties. Six months later, the code of conduct was successfully negotiated and all the basic rules of conduct for peaceful elections and free competition had been signed by the 90 parties. The code contains principles to ensure protection against attacks and reputational damage, threats to the private life of candidates, and against hate speech. Other provisions cover rules against the abuse of state resources and a renunciation of the use of religion for electoral purposes. Switzerland continued to help implement the code of conduct during the election campaign. The initiative made a contribution to the prevention of violent conflicts in the run-up to the elections, and to the building of trust between the parties.

Immediately after the elections, the EU election observation mission on the ground – again with Swiss participation – praised the electoral process. It concluded that there had been

no unrest and that electoral freedom had been re-spected. In its recommendations, however, the head of the mission criticized the rigid law on citizenship, which disqualified various cultural and ethnic population groups from the right to vote, the unbalanced media reporting and the lack of transparency in the composition of the electoral commission – and suggested a list of commitments for the further democratisation of Myanmar.

In spring 2019, the EU follow-up mission (EFM) travelled to Yangon to review the implementation of the recommendations. One example of partial implementation of the recommendations was that the Myanmar government set up a constitutional review committee to make the right to vote more inclusive. Other recommendations, particularly the transparency of electoral authorities, have still yet to be implemented. Time will tell whether progress has been made in this area when the next general election takes place in Myanmar in 2020. The EU will be involved as an observer. The EFM also confirmed that there is an interest in negotiating a new code of conduct.

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links

- [30 years of Swiss participation in election observations: Review and outlook](#)
- [Thematic approach «Peace, elections and democracy» of the Human Security Division, FDFA](#)
- [Swiss Expert Pool for Civilian Peacebuilding, FDFA](#)

reports

Prevention of genocide, Myanmar and Assam



The Rohingya crisis was triggered, among other things, by the lack of implementation of three fundamental rights: the right to registration at birth, the right to an identity and the right to a nationality.

Birth registration is an integral part of the rights to life, of equality before the law and to a personal identity; a legal and cultural identity. These rights, as well as the right to a nationality are necessary for the recognition, by the community, of the human person.

The whole region of the Bay of Bengal, from India to Myanmar, through Bangladesh and the foothills of the Himalayas, was the scene during the partition of India (1948) and the independence of Bangladesh (1971) of wide population movements. The region is multiethnic, highly populated and often poor, resulting in a high migration of people whose identity origins are not always demonstrable. Add strong religious tensions to the situation and the risks of genocide, mass atrocity crimes or ethnic cleansing become serious.

This is what happened in the Rakine State in Myanmar and unfortunately in Assam, a few hundred kilometers away, a local government with a strong Hindu tendency has decided the systematic registration of the entire population, including of a minority of about 4 million Muslims whose national identity or status of residence are unclear. Their future is very uncertain.

In either case, it is high time to see these populations recognized by law and treated with

the greatest humanity.

In collaboration with the Center for Global Nonkilling and the Global Alliance Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (Gaamac, created and supported by Switzerland) and using the Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights of all countries, APRED supports, in the framework of our work on the right to life, strengthening birth registration processes and the reduction of statelessness.

APRED

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links

- [Genocide watch](#)
- [UNICEF, birth registration](#)
- [High Commissioner for Refugees, statelessness](#)
- [Universal Periodic Review](#)
- [GAAMAC](#)
- [Center for Global Nonkilling](#)

news

The 2020 peace calendar on Myanmar



Cover picture of the 2020 peace calendar.

The Swiss Peace Council, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary next year, publishes a peace calendar annually with tear-off postcards and international peace dates. The 2020 peace calendar, which was published at the end of October and marks the 24th edition of the calendar, includes 12 postcards featuring topics relating to Myanmar. Board Member Francine Perret visited the country back in 1993 shortly after it opened its borders: “We discovered an Asia that had otherwise been long lost – ox carts on the street where only the sounds of cyclists ringing their bells could be heard, colorfully dressed women and men in their lungis, and only very few tourists. It was a secret world and a land for travelers with the spirit of discovery – a country in which time had stopped still.” In spring 2019, she traveled to the country for a second time. In 2011, the government had initiated democratic reforms, which was reason enough for Perret to travel to the country once again and take lots of photos.

To mark the release of the 2020 peace calendar on Myanmar, the September 2019 edition of the Peace Council’s PEACE MAGAZINE (edition no. 30) focused on this topic. In this edition, you can find critical background reports on the current situation in Myanmar, including in the article ‘Ein Land, drei Namen und zwei konträre Sichtweisen: Myanmar – Unrechtsstaat oder Shangri La?’ (‘One country, three names and two opposing points of view: Myanmar – an illegitimate state or Shangri La?’), or in ‘Krieg in den Köpfen und auf dem Schlachtfeld: Der andauernde Unfrieden in Myanmar hat sehr tiefe Wurzeln’ (‘War of the minds and out in

the field: the ongoing tension in Myanmar has very deep roots.')

The articles are completed with a report by Georg Winterberger, Executive Director of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Zurich, on a research project to secure livelihoods in Myanmar.

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links

- [More information and how to order the peace calendar \(in German\)](#)
- [The peace magazine \(in German\)](#)

news

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calendar

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