CIVIL SOCIETY GAINING GROUND

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN BURMA

Contents

Introduction

Burma/Myanmar[1] has been at civil war virtually since independence in 1948, and has been under military-dominated rule since 1962. Decades of war, and the militarisation of society and government repression, have severely constrained the ability for people in Burma to freely organise themselves. This has been especially true for anything deemed politically orientated by the military regime.

In 1997, TNI and BCN organised a conference in Amsterdam on civil society in Burma, bringing together international specialists and representatives of international organisations working in Burma. The aim of the meeting was to analyse what role civil society played in Burma, whether civil society was emerging and how the international community could develop strategies to strengthen the existing local organisations. The conference papers were published in 1999 in the book Strengthening Civil Society in Burma, Possibilities and Dilemmas for International NGOs, which, as one of the authors noted, was among the first studies on civil society in Burma.[2]

The conference was controversial at the time, as most Burmese political groups in exile as well as some international organisations believed an independent civil society did not exist in Burma, and that all actors in the country were under strict control of the government. For international Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to work inside Burma in cooperation with local organisations was considered to legitimise the regime. Furthermore, organisations that claimed to be independent local organisations in the country were seen as pro-government.

The book concluded that despite some changes in Burma's political landscape since 1988, notably the 1990 elections and the cease-fire agreements in ethnic regions since 1989, the initiatives of civil society remain repressed. As one of the speakers concluded: "Civil society died under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP); perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered." However, several speakers at the conference also gave examples of how people were able to organise themselves. As one of them stressed: "If international NGOs are realistic and sensitive, they can work at the local level, but it is vital that they never lose sight of the bigger picture."[3]

Now, more than a decade later, TNI and BCN are taking stock of civil society in Burma again. This report will revisit some of the assumptions and conclusions made in 1997. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, several important changes have taken place in Burma. In November 2010 the first general elections took place in two decades, and in early 2011 a new government was formed. It is unclear at this stage whether this will move the country towards a more democratic political

system, address ethnic conflict, and end the more than 60-year old civil war. However, it is clear that this is a defining period and that these developments will determine Burma's political and ethnic landscape for another generation, for better or worse.

Changes in Burma, however, are not confined to the political field. Social dynamics are as equally important as the political dynamics in countries in transition. Social processes and social changes in many ways shape and determine the political culture. It is also too early to say whether the recent political developments will provide opportunities for civil society to further develop and to engage with the government on policy issues.

Certainly, in the last decade significant social changes have taken place in Burma. There has been a marked increase in the number of local organisations that have been formed. In ethnic regions, the main impetus for this development was a series of cease-fire agreements concluded two decades ago between the military government and armed ethnic opposition groups. Pre-existing civil society actors such as faith community leaders played a key role as mediators, and used the truces as an opportunity to set up new local organisations and initiate community-based programmes in former war areas. Civil society organisations thus created new spaces for themselves. Civil society in Burma further developed and expanded to fill the gap created by declining government services, and in other areas where there they saw opportunities. New threats to natural resources and the environment in Burma's borderlands, mainly by regional trade and investment, have also raised great concern among community groups in ethnic areas and provided further impetus for the development of local organisations there.

Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, which left over 130,000 dead, civil society developed further. A wide range of local initiatives, including ethnic faith-based organisations, played a key role in the emergency response and were among the first to enter the disaster zone, providing urgently-needed water, food, clothes and other relief items. It was a citizens' response to one of the largest natural disasters in Burmese history. These citizens did not wait for permission from the government but responded with emergency aid, creating new formal and informal organisations. Civil society further expanded after this.

The second reason for this report is the increased interest from the international community to work with and support local organisations in Burma. This includes donors based inside and outside the country, as well as various international NGOs and UN agencies with a presence on the ground in Burma. They support a wide range of local organisations for different reasons. The interest in working with civil society has grown further since Cyclone Nargis, when the military government initially limited access by international NGOs and UN agencies to the main disaster areas in the Irrawaddy Delta. Therefore many international agencies relied on local NGOs to reach the worst affected areas.

The increased interest of the international community in working with civil society in Burma raises further important issues. Until recently, few international actors developed a strategy or had a mandate to support civil society in Burma in its own right. While the new interest is a positive development, it raises a number of concerns and questions about how these relationships can be developed to ensure these are mutually beneficial, and do not only serve donor or programme needs of international organisations. Throwing too much money at small organisations with weak structures without further appropriate support may also cause problems for local organisations. Furthermore, there are concerns about potential risks posed by international support to local organisations, including security risks for local organisations vis-a-vis the government, as well as risks in enforcing one-size-fits-all models on Burmese civil society, thereby ignoring existing or alternative models.

There are several arguments why it is important to support civil society in Burma. It can help provide humanitarian and development aid directly to marginalised local communities – especially in isolated and war affected areas - in an accountable and sustainable manner. It is also a long term strategy for empowering particular groups and building a more plural, democratic and just society with respect for ethnic rights.

However, clearly a stronger civil society is not an answer to all of Burma's problems. The structure and management of these organisations is often a mirror of society, and they are often top-down and undemocratic. Furthermore, while 'civil society' has become the new buzz-word in Burma, there is a danger of placing too much hope and unrealistic expectations on what civil society can deliver. There is also a tension between what western donors provide and what local organisations need.

The report will first analyse civil society in Burma in historical perspective. It will discuss how people traditionally organised themselves in the period of Burmese kingdoms, during colonial time and since independence. It will argue that social formations are not new in Burma, and that throughout history people have come together and carried out social and religious activities, mostly through informal religious Buddhist networks. Many such traditional organisations exist today. They are quite different from the formally-organised Western NGOs. In contrast to the conclusions of the 1997 TNI-BCN conference, it will then argue that civil society continued to exist during military rule, and further developed in the last two decades. This chapter will also show that civil society in Burma today is diverse and dynamic, and has been creating its own space. The second chapter will analyse the role of civil society in

Rice harvest in Irrawaddy Delta

Burma under an authoritarian government since the coup d'état in 1962 by General Ne Win. It will examine state-society relations, in particular how civil society engages with the government, and what strategies they are adopting. It will argue that the government has tried to create its own civil society by setting up various mass organisations, usually referred to as 'Government Organised NGOs' (GONGOs). It will then discuss the various legal challenges local organisations face. After a discussion about relations with the authorities, the chapter will provide an analysis of opportunities for policy engagement by local organisations with the government.

Burma is a diverse and divided country with many different ethnic groups, which have distinctive cultures and traditions. There is a wide range of different languages and dialects. Ethnic minority groups make up some 30 to 40 percent of the population. The third chapter therefore will focus on ethnic nationality regions, where civil society actors are playing key roles in building up communities shattered by over half a century of civil war, and promoting ethnic rights and peace and reconciliation to end the conflict. This chapter will discuss what forms and activities local ethnic nationality organisations have taken on It will also pay attention to civil society organisations set up by people from Burma living in exile.

The next chapter will examine the profile of local organisations in Burma. It will argue that there is great diversity in organisations, and discuss their different strategies and activities. The final chapter will analyse relations with international organisations. While arguing in favour of international community support for the development of local organisations, it also discusses some of the difficulties in navigating partnerships between international NGOs and local partners.. After an explanation of the needs of local organisations, the chapter makes some recommendations on partnerships, accountability and good governance, and notes some limitations and risks of international support to civil society.

Civil society is often defined as the space between the state and family, which is autonomous and separated from the state. This study excludes political parties and armed groups from the definition of civil society. The business sector is also not included, apart from those actors that engage in socio-economic activities for the common good. The relationship between civil society and the state is complicated and diverse. Narrow definitions of civil society are not useful in the Burmese context, as they exclude important local actors and prevent a better understanding of social organising and social change in the country. Even in democratic countries, civil society has some kind of relationship and interaction with the state.

This report defines civil society not simply as initiatives that are opposed to the state or the military regime, or those only that exist and function despite the state or military regime. Instead, it argues that it is important to analyse civil society in Burma in its own right and try to place it in a broader historical and cultural context. The main criteria is whether organisations have a significant amount of autonomy from the government and state in determining how to run their organisations, decide their policies and strategies, and implement their projects.

This report is based on 15 years of research on and working with civil society organisations in Burma and its borderlands. This includes many meetings with local organisations in the former capital Yangon, but also in other parts of the country, including various ethnic states. Apart from independent research, the author also carried out several studies for international organisations that want to establish relationships with civil society in Burma.

History of Social Organising in Burma

Traditional Organisations and Networks

There is no equivalent of the Western term 'civil society' in Burmese language, and the concept itself is also rather new, making any historical overview of its existence in Burma difficult.[4] Usage of the term civil society in the country really started with the entrance of international agencies and donors in Burma in the mid-1990s, who were looking for local partners to implement projects.

This is not to say that social formations did not exist. On the contrary, in the traditional kingdoms located in the plains and river valleys of present day Burma, religious organisations, especially at the village level, were the most obvious manifestation of people organising themselves for a common purpose beyond the family life and outside of the state structure. These were informal arrangements, without any official registration or formal membership, with people joining together to organise various religious and social activities in their villages.

According to one study on civil society in Burma: "Most villages organised social events and initiatives around the Buddhist temple. Monks led these events and initiatives and a local organisation in most villages was formed to support the temple and related activities. The strong patronage system and hierarchy in society probably limited the number of type of organisations to very basic community-based social and religious groups. Yet there are records of many social and religious organisations within communities that were outside of direct state control."[5]

Christian organisations also have a long history in Burma, and early on developed more formal structures. Christian missionaries failed to convince many Burmans to become Christian, but were quite successful in making converts among the ethnic nationality populations, especially among Karen, Chin and Kachin communities. The first Christian missionaries to arrive in the country were two Barnabite Fathers, who came to Pegu in 1721 as part of the Catholic mission.[6] They were followed by Baptists who came to Burma in 1807, but the Baptist mission only really took off in 1813 with the arrival of Reverend Adoniram Judson, who later also translated the Bible into Burmese.[7] In 1865 the Baptist churches in Burma organised themselves in the Burma Baptist Missionary Convention, probably the first formal Non-Government Organisation (NGO) to be set up in Burma.[8]

During the colonial period the first local community organisations were created. The British colonial authorities did not ban such initiatives, and, as Burmese academic Kyaw Yin Hlaing has argued, "there was a mushroom growth of modern, formal associations representing indigenous peo-

ple in the first half of the twentieth century".[9] Since then, religious organisations in particular, not only Buddhist but also Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, have been able to set up social welfare and development programs, targeting local people, often beyond their own communities.

Among the first such formal organisations to be created was the Malunze Rice Offering Society in Mandalay. The aim of the organisation is to donate food and other basic needs to religious people (monks, nuns and pothudaw – lay people who support them) living in the Sagaing area, which has the highest density of monasteries in the country. It was set up by local businessmen in 1896, a decade after the British occupation of Mandalay and the removal of the royal family. These religious people were facing hardships and food shortages as they were no longer supported by the king. The organisation has functioned ever since, and currently has 306 branches in the country collecting donations in cash and kind (rice). "We never stopped functioning, not even during the Japanese occupation," says a member.[10] The organisation was asked to officially register by the authorities in 1988. After submitting an application, it was registered under the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2002.

In the last decade of the 19th century several cultural associations sprung up, including various Buddhist societies in Mandalay and in Lower Burma.[11] These organisations started as religious and cultural associations, but were the forerunners of Burman and ethnic nationality (especially Karen) nationalist movements, and themselves soon became more political. The Karen National Association, formed by Christian Karen in 1881, was the first formal ethnic nationality organisation in Burma. The aim of the organisation was "to promote Karen identity, leadership, education and writing, and to bring about the social and economic advancement of the Karen peoples."[12]

According to US academic David Steinberg, the ban by the British colonial authorities on political activity "in fact encouraged the growth of civil society through ostensibly religious organisations that had a nationalist agenda – e.g., the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA)."[13] The YMBA was formed in 1906, initially focussing on religious, social and cultural issues. Its official goals were: "adherence to the Five Precepts, education (religious and secular), social reform, the encouragement of art and literature."[14] The YMBA was set up by Western educated middle class Burmans to counterbalance the challenge posed to Burmese culture and Buddhism by the West and Christianity. They used a similar structure to Western Christian organisations and modelled it after the YMCA.[15] According to one author: "The institutions of the modern state and of modern Christianity, including elected leaders, committees, formal resolutions and voluntary membership, came to be seen as necessary instruments to be used to resist colonial rule."[16] The YMBA was the first large scale formal organisation in Burma and quickly gained popularity among the popula-

tion, through its campaign to press Europeans to take off their shoes at pagodas and religious buildings. Since then, the activities of the organisation became more politically oriented.

The YMBA was later overshadowed by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), formed in 1920. From the beginning the GCBA's focus was on politics and promoting Burmese nationalism. The GCBA aligned itself closely with village national associations (wunthanu athin), which had sprung up in many villages of central Burma, challenging the British colonial system. U Wizara, a monk who fasted to death in prison and is now considered a national hero, was part of the movement.[17] The General Council of Sangha Sammeggi (GCSS), established in 1920, was initially also set up to promote Buddhism and religious discipline in the sangha (the Buddhist order). Soon however the GCSS also became involved in politics under the leadership of another famous monk, U Ottamma, and worked closely with the GCBA.

At the time of independence in 1948, voluntary and professional organisations continued to exist, and were especially active in cities and towns. According to Steinberg: "Professional and non-political organisations flourished, but since most employment of the educated population was directly or indirectly linked to government, these organisations, although independent, were in the mainstream of Burmese life."[18]

Soon after independence, civil war broke out, with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) going underground to launch an armed struggle against the central government. It was soon followed by several ethnic nationalist movements who demanded more autonomy and ethnic rights, and who also acted in self-defence. Fighting soon spread to many ethnic regions in the country. At the same time central Burma became increasingly militarised, with politicians and other power holders arming themselves and forming militias for protection and influence. These developments limited the functioning and formation of local independent organisations. According to one report: "When Burma was under democratic government from 1948 to 1962, a vibrant civil society existed in urban areas although paramilitary organisations and local politicians tended to repress dissenting views and independent organisations in rural areas."[19]

The years after independence saw the formation of many myoneh athin ('township associations'). These are local organisations created to provide welfare for members in their respective townships. They include financial support for students to study and for people of old age, donations for funeral services for those who cannot afford it, and various religious activities, including facilitation of meditation courses and donation to monks and monasteries. All activities are financed by donations from members. There are currently an estimated 300 township associations in

Founding members of the Malunze Rice Offering Society

the country.[20] The Shwe Gyin Myoneh Athin, for instance, formed by residents of Shwe Gyin Township in Bago Division, was established in 1925. The organisation has some 700 members in Yangon (who migrated there following the outbreak of the civil war), and another 100 in Shwe Gyin township itself. The size and strength of these township organisations varies greatly, depending on the size, location and wealth of the township.

Civil Society under Military Rule

In 1962 the army led by General Ne Win took power in a military coup. The new regime abrogated the constitution, and turned the country into a one-party state led by the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Ne Win put forward his political ideas in the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', a mixture of Buddhist and socialist ideology. By the mid-1960s Burma had been closed off from the outside world, and all large companies, media, and institutes were nationalised.

Under BSSP rule, mass peasant and worker associations were created, as well as the Lanzin (BSPP) Youth League and the War Veterans Associations. These organisations, often referred to as Government Organised NGOs (GON-GOs), were all tightly controlled by the state, and served to mobilise people and prevent them from organising independently.[21] The BSPP also tried to control the Buddhist clergy at the national level by reforming and centralising the sangha (the Buddhist order) and ordering all monasteries and monks to register. The government also tried

to place stricter control over other religions, but its main focus was on attempting to restrain Buddhist religious groups. According to one scholar: "Religious freedom was maintained but restricted. Buddhism was treated the same as other religions, and the clergymen of all religious organisations were barred from political participation."[22]

At the same time, civil society organisations were banned or placed under strict government control, and members of the political opposition were put behind bars. According to Steinberg: "Civil society died under the BSPP, perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered."[23] However, as Steinberg later wrote, it was only those civil society organisations that were engaged in advocacy that were shut down by the BSPP, although a number of them continued to exist underground.[24] Many others continued to function, especially religious organisations and some cultural associations, although they certainly were under much greater pressure than before. Research by Kyaw Yin Hlaing confirms this picture: "[The] military was never able to wipe out civil society organisations. Most of the social movement organisations (SMOs) that led the 'Four Eights' democratic movement were not the organisations that emerged after the breakdown of the socialist government but the groups, formal and informal, that survived the military's cleansing campaign."[25]

In 1964 a law was passed requiring all social and political organisations to officially register with the government. This law is still in place today. As the military government restricted formation of social movements, this period saw an increase in religious organisations. According to

one coordinator of a local NGO: "At that time so many faith-based organisations were formed in the country, because all other organisations needed to register with the government. In cities like Rangoon and Mandalay many such informal organisations were formed, called sunlaung athin ('donation groups')." Several of these groups already existed before 1962. They not only performed religious activities but also carried out some social activities on health, education and the environment. Testimonies to their existence are the large number of donation plates at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda from such organisations from all over the country. These plates record the size of the donation and the names of the donors. M any of the contemporary local NGOs in the country emerged from these social-religious groups, referred to as Community Based Organisations (CBOs) by humanitarian and development agencies.[26]

The myoneh athin also continued to exist after the military take-over. Registration from the government was relatively easy to obtain, as these organisations were essentially non-political and focused on social and religious issues only. The main exception to this was those myoneh athin led by some of the former politicians, especially from the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League.[27]

Several civil society organisations in ethnic regions also continued to exist. The Arakan Social Club, for instance, was formed in 1939, and has been officially registered with the government since 1961, when it was reformed and renamed Rakhine Thahaya Association. It is a voluntary organisation, and its main focus has been on social activities and education. In 1981 the organisation started a programme to provide stipends to students with at least one Rakhine parent, to lower drop out rates in primary education. By 2011 the organisation had 1,900 members, and had offices in Yangon and in 14 townships in Rakhine State. It has regular contact with the Rakhine Literature and Culture Association, and with various other Rakhine religious and cultural associations, including the Rakhine Women Association, which was established in 1950. [28]

The Role of Religion

Burma is a deeply religious country, and religion has played an important role in socio-economic as well as political lives of the people in the country. Religion has been a cornerstone for people to organise themselves or join networks of like-minded people for religious as well as social purposes. Faith-based organisations are thus the bedrock of social formation in the country. According to a Buddhist abbot in Yangon: "Before 1988, we did not have [formal] local NGOs, but we had local organisations doing social work and doing local activities. Especially the Buddhist monasteries in our country are very famous for orphanages and monastic schools, so that poor people can have education."[29]

Christian churches have long been involved in community development activities, in many cases beyond their own direct communities, which have, as in other countries, become an essential part of their work. Some religious organisations, such as the umbrella organisation Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC), the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), have nationwide networks, especially among ethnic nationality communities. Christian churches in Burma have also had longstanding relations with international organisations through church networks, including with – often Christian - development organisations. These continued to function during the BSPP period (1962-1988), and provided Church members with opportunities to maintain international contacts and in some cases travel abroad. Therefore they have had more exposure to international concepts of development models and the role and functioning of NGOs.

The sangha, the official central Buddhist monastic order in the country, is not considered part of civil society, as it is under state control, especially since it was centralised and reformed by the BSPP.[30] However, activities by individual monasteries and other Buddhist institutes that benefit local communities are mostly included in definitions of civil society, as these are carried out independently from the government. In central Burma, but also among ethnic Shan, Mon and Rakhine Buddhist communities, the only opportunity for the rural poor to send their children to school was monastic education, run by village monks. Several monasteries have initiated other social activities, including on health.

These Buddhist organisations have developed less international contacts, although this has changed in recent years with the influx of more international NGOs to Burma, including some from other Asian countries. There is also less space for Buddhist organisations in the country than Christian organisations to carry out socio-economic and welfare activities that are not directly religious. Said a Buddhist abbot: "The local organisations which are well experienced and well developed in our country are Christian organisations... The donor agencies also see that Buddhist organisations are very important in this country, because the majority of the population is Buddhist. But due to lack of experience and lack of good contacts and communication, the Buddhist organisations are very weak." [31]

According to a senior church leader: "We explain to the government that our mission is spiritual, but also for the welfare of the people. But for the Buddhist groups to work on social issues is very difficult, although some groups are trying… All the Buddhist monks are under the central Buddhist order, which is controlled by the government. This makes it difficult for the groups at the local level to do anything. They are restricted to only work on religious issues."[32]

These restrictions on Buddhist organisations by the government are also related to the fact that the Buddhist order in Burma has historically played an important role in protest against the authorities. During colonial times, monks played a catalyst role in organising protests against the British rulers. More recently, hundreds of monks joined the anti-government protests of September 2007, which became known as the 'saffron revolution', a reference to the colour of the monks' robes.[33]

Although Buddhism is not the state religion, some Christian organisations complain that they face several restrictions on their religious activities. For example in Chin State, villagers have reportedly been pressured to adopt Buddhism, and there have been reports of restrictions on building new churches.[34] Burma's Muslim population has probably suffered the most from religious and ethnic discrimination. Anti-Muslim riots have taken place on numerous occasions in several towns in central Burma. Tensions are particularly strong in Rakhine State, where the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority, face ethnic and religious discrimination.[35]

Burma also has a mass meditation movement that exists in social spaces between civil society and the state. According to one scholar: "the mass lay meditation movement is a key dynamic in the dialectics between what political scientists have conventionally described as the state and civil society… [The] movement has functioned, vis-à-vis the regime, in a continuous manner, to build a particular vision of culture that is meant to encompass individualism, the state, and society."[36] The author argues that the consensus that is achieved by a large number of people practising meditation "is best investigated in the context of moral communities, donation cliques, and other lay institutions whose explicit purposes have little apparent connection to anything outside the organisation of religious life and learning in Burma."[37]

Mediating Cease-fires

Civil society in Burma slowly regained ground after the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, following a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. The new regime introduced some economic reforms, including a new open door and market oriented policy. More changes followed in 1993, after General Than Shwe took over power. These included among others the release of political prisoners, accepting back Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh,[38] and an announcement of cease-fire talks with all armed opposition groups.

The main architect and contact point of the cease-fire initiative was head of the Military Intelligence (MI) Lt.Gen. Khin Nyunt. Khin Nyunt and his men also invited international NGOs to come to Burma and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). They wanted to end the international isolation of the country, and improve contacts with the outside world. This allowed international NGOs to start implementing community-based development projects, often in cooperation with local organisations, including in sensitive border regions, many of which were former war areas. During this period, government tolerance towards and the space for community-based initiatives grew.

For ethnic regions, the series of cease-fire agreements in the 1990s between the government and ethnic armed opposition groups were a key development that prompted a growing role by local organisations. Civil society actors – especially from faith-based groups – took the initiative to act as mediators in the negotiations between the military government and armed opposition groups. They served as important communication channels, built trust between the warring parties, and kept the talks going.

The cease-fire agreements also allowed organisations, with existing community development programmes, to cover areas previously inaccessible due to fighting and insecurity. Furthermore, the truces facilitated the emergence of a number of new local NGOs, such as the Shalom Foundation, who took the initiative to create new spaces for themselves. Some of these organisations focus not only on much-needed social and economic development, but also on promoting peace and reconciliation in war-torn ethnic regions.

Growth of Civil Society

Sensing the new opportunities, by the year 2000 a wide range of local initiatives had started, not only in ethnic regions but also in central Burma. Several of these organisations are faith-based and focus on religious, welfare, and education activities. These include, for instance, several funeral associations and various monastic education projects and orphanages. However, there are also many secular initiatives. These include a number of organisations working on environmental issues and community development.

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the country, coupled with the lack of basic services provided by the state, also contributed to the growth of civil society in Burma. There is an increasing number of local charity and social welfare initiatives that aim to assist the poorest of the poor, who often cannot afford to pay for basic social services. Furthermore, people sharing common challenges have also started to organise themselves in various kinds of self-help groups. These include groups of people living with HIV/AIDS, sex workers, people who inject drugs, and men having sex with men. For ethnic communities, promoting culture and education in local languages also became an important theme for people to organise themselves around.[39]

The first detailed survey on civil society in Burma was carried out in 2003. It concluded that civil society in Burma was expanding rapidly: "Civil society is alive in Myanmar today. In fact, it never died... NGOs and CBOs that formed decades or a century past, still exist and function today. New NGOs and CBOs were continuously forming every decade. In fact, the country may be on the verge of an explosion of new organisations. More NGOs and CBOs were forming since 1990 than at any other time in history."[40]

The study estimated the number of local NGOs in the country at about 270, using seven criteria: non-profit; voluntary initiative; relative independence from political parties and organisations, and from government; self-governing; self-perception as accountable in some way to society; disinterest, in the sense of working on behalf of others and not their own staff, members of committees; socially progressive, that is, having at least one human development or social welfare aim.[41]

The same study estimated the number of CBOs at some 214,000.[42] The study distinguishes these from local NGOs by defining CBOs 'as working in a limited geographical area (one community and, possibly, adjacent communities)'. Although these numbers may be overestimates, as the study argues, nevertheless this is a clear indication of the large number of civil society organisations in Burma. The survey further shows that NGOs and CBOs were relatively equally active in all seven states and seven divisions of the country, with Thanintharyi and Magwe Divisions (now Regions), and Rakhine and Kayah States being at the bottom of places covered by programmes of Yangon-based organisations.

The first Myanmar Local NGO Directory, published in March 2004 and a direct outcome of the 2003 survey, listed 60 local NGOs. In the second edition of November 2005 this number had increased to 86.[43] Criteria for this list include that the organisations must have an office in Rangoon, and must cover two or more distinct working areas or 'coverage' areas. By 2011, the number of local NGOs listed in the new online directory had further increased to 119.[44] For several reasons, not all local organisations want to be included in this directory. These include security concerns but also because they do not see any direct urgency or benefit from it.

Clearly, civil society has expanded in the last two decades. However, it is important to realise that a large number of these informal as well as formal local initiatives were not new and had already existed for decades, or in some cases even longer. In a sense, the existence of civil society in Burma was 'rediscovered' by international NGOs and Westerners studying the topic. These local initiatives were not noticed earlier, partly because they did not fit standard Western criteria or definitions of what civil society looks like, and partly because these local organisations were self-sufficient and not looking for international financial and other support.

Monastic Education

Water and sanitation project of local NGO in Shan State

Citizen Responses to Natural Disasters

On the night of 2 May 2008 a powerful cyclone caused great havoc in the Irrawaddy Delta and the former capital Yangon, leading to a huge loss of life and property. An estimated 130,000 people were killed, and many people were wounded. An estimated 2.4 million people were affected by Cyclone Nargis.[45] In response, a wide range of initiatives by private citizens, local NGOs, faith-based organisations (including many monasteries and churches), businesses and other local groups emerged to provide emergency aid, mainly food, medicines and other relief items. Many individuals from all over the country, especially from nearby Yangon, simply started to collect money and relief items and brought these to the disaster areas with their own transport. Support came in the form of cash and in kind from all parts of the country, and it was, clearly, a citizens' response. They did not wait for permission from the government, but took their own initiative to help their fellow citizens.

According to a report by the Tri-Partite Core Group, set up to coordinate the disaster response and comprising the military government, ASEAN and the UN: "In the days following the storm, the roads leading out of Yangon and other big towns to the affected townships were filled with motorcades of people carrying with them cash, food and household supplies. Many of them ventured further afield by boats to difficult-to-access villages, spurred on by a humanitarian urge to help. Similarly, many Buddhist monks from all over the country also went to the affected difficult-to-access areas and disbursed substantial quantities of cash and relief materials to the villagers using the local monastery as base. Likewise, religious leaders and members of all other faiths in the country contributed substantially to the relief efforts."[46]

As the government initially restricted access of international NGOs and UN agencies – especially of their international staff, it was extremely difficult and frustrating for them to reach those in need. Although there were some restrictions, generally speaking local initiatives did not have great problems in getting access to the Delta, other than the difficulty in getting to isolated villages.

Faith-based organisations were very active in providing relief and recovery. A number of well-known Buddhist monasteries and 'Sayadaws' (literally 'venerable teacher', the Burmese form to address senior monks) from all over the country became actively involved in distributing relief items through monastic networks in the Irrawaddy Delta. These included the Sitagu Sayadaw as well as the Thidigu Buddhist Association (TBA) led by Ashin Nyarnissira (Tha-beik-aing Sayadaw).[47] They also started close coordination and cooperation with a number of local NGOs, such as ECODEV.

Christian churches played a significant role through local Church networks, as the Irrawaddy Delta has a large Christian Karen population. According to one author: "Christian churches have also been deeply involved in community-based development activities. These include branches of the main Baptist, Anglican and Catholic churches, as well as a number of local congregations… Some of these

church-based NGOs and CBOs were involved in the fore-front of impressive efforts undertaken by Burmese civil society networks in responding to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 which afflicted both Burma and Karen communities across the Irrawaddy Delta."[48]

Among existing local NGOs, the Metta Development Foundation, for instance, was able to respond quickly, as it already had programme activities in the Irrawaddy Delta in response to the damage caused by the Indian Tsunami of December 2004. In the first 3 months following the Cyclone Nargis, Metta was able to provide relief and recovery in 380 villages in eight townships, reaching 249,500 beneficiaries.[49] The Myanmar Ceramic Society (MCS) provided plastic sheets, medicines, and drinking water to communities engaged in traditional pottery production. The MCS was already working in these communities before the disaster; trying to preserve the cultural tradition of the communities while at the same time raising their living standards through community development.[50] The Swanyee Development Foundation (SDF) was formed in 2006 by a group of students from the Yangon Institute of Economics. The organisation's main focus is on building infrastructure. During Cyclone Nargis, several people in Laputa Township in the Irrawaddy Delta survived by holding on to a bridge built by SDF. After the cyclone, SDF repaired infrastructure and built storm shelters.[51]

Myanmar Egress, a local NGO set up by a group of businessmen with a focus on training and short term courses on a wide range of issues, provided emergency aid in coordination with local businessmen involved in the fishery industry in the Delta. It set up the Nargis Action Group (NAG) and, within days of the cyclone, had sent truckloads of supplies (including food, drinking water, medicines and shelter materials) into the disaster zone. NAG also took a long term view and commitment to work in the disaster area, and later implemented rehabilitation activities in four different townships in the Irrawaddy Delta.[52]

Following the cyclone, several new local organisations were created. These include Link Emergency Aid & Development (LEAD), which started as a volunteer organisation distributing emergency aid to the Irrawaddy Delta, using their own funds. Later on the organisation started to implement livelihood projects with support from international donors. The organisation was formed by members of a mountaineer and cycling club.[53] Ar Yone Oo ('Morning Dawn') was also set up in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Using church connections, this local organisation provided emergency aid in Yangon and the Irrawaddy Delta. Like LEAD, the organisation has expanded since, and plans to implement projects in other parts of the country as well.[54]

There were also many local initiatives by people in the disaster area itself, often on a voluntary basis, sometimes in cooperation with other actors including local NGOs, in-ternational NGOs and UN agencies. While private initiatives were often uncoordinated and focussed on the initial emergency phase responses, the activities by local NGOs were much better coordinated and structured, and many continue until today, focussing on recovery.

Following the flooding in Mandalay in October 2010, several local NGOs responded to the immediate needs of the affected population. A number of local Buddhist and Christian organisations came together and formed a temporary interfaith committee, including the Malunze Rice Offering Foundation, the Mandalay branches of the Methodist Church and YMCA, and the Byamaso Funeral Association.

Local organisations also quickly responded to the havoc caused by Cyclone Giri, which hit Rakhine State on 22 October 2010, leading to considerable devastation and loss of life. A day later, on 23 October, 22 Rakhine organisations met at the Rakhine Thahaya Association Yangon office and set up the Giri Cyclone Relief Committee. According to a committee member this was not the first time: "We have experiences with providing cyclone relief since the 1960s, as Rakhine State suffers regularly from cyclones." The committee raised $240,000 US dollars from private donations and provided emergency aid in the form of food and temporary shelter to the most affected areas in four townships in Rakhine State.[55] In Mandalay, Christian, Buddhist and Muslim local organisations worked together to raise funds and brought supplies and cash to Giri affected areas. "The Christians led the fundraising, and the implementation was done by Buddhist and Muslim groups," says a Christian church leader in Mandalay.[56]

The responses to these disasters also gave local organisations experience and opportunities to improve and better coordinate their activities. A representative of an NGO involved in the relief effort notes: "The Mandalay floods and Cyclone Giri occurred within a short time span after each other. During the Mandalay flooding we worked in our own way. We saw the gaps, with some people receiving many food packages, while some others got nothing. This was our learning point, and when Giri hit we formed the Mandalay Mercy Group."[57]

Civil Society under Authoritarian Government

The 'Burmese Way to Civil Society'

Discussion of the term 'civil society' is often based on studies in western democratic countries, concentrating on how its existence in a country will promote democracy. The term is contested in Western discourse, but civil society is mostly defined as the space between the state and family, which is autonomous and separated from the state. Excluded are for-profit organisations, political parties and other political organisations, and other non-state actors such as armed opposition groups. According to a study on civil society building in Central America, for instance, "civil society can be defined as the totality of social institutions and associations, both formal and informal, that are not strictly production related, governmental or familial in character."[58]

The relationship between civil society and the state is complicated and diverse. Even in democratic countries, civil society has some kind of relationship and interaction with the state. This report therefore defines civil society not simply as equivalent to initiatives that are opposed to the state or the military regime, or those only that exist and function despite the state or military regime. Instead, it aims to analyse civil society in Burma in its own right, and tries to place it in a broader historical and cultural context. The main criteria is whether organisations have a significant amount of autonomy from the government and state in determining how to run their organisations, decide their policies and strategies, and implement their projects.

As Burma specialist David Steinberg, who has written extensively on the subject, has argued: "civil society obviously means those institutions and groupings that are outside of government. There are nuances in different definitions, but the essential characteristics of what we call civil society lies in its autonomy from the government. It is also obvious that such independence is relative, as no individual can be isolated, so no institution within a societal framework stands completely alone."[59] A study on civil society in authoritarian countries, which analyses the cases of China, Burma and Vietnam, concludes: "in any kind of regime, the relationship between the state and civil society is based on 'interrelatedness rather then separateness' and is thus more complex and reciprocal than the state-society dichotomy depicts."[60]

Some civil society actors in Burma have sought interaction with the state or military government because they aspire to this, and not because of coercion, as a collective action by citizens to advocate their interest vis-à-vis the state, both at the local and national level. In order to formulate effective policies on HIV/AIDS, for instance, it is a prerequisite to involve people living with HIV/AIDS in the planning,

executing and monitoring of programmes that address the causes and consequences of HIV/AIDS. This is the case in all countries, whether they are ruled by a democratic or authoritarian government. Several local NGOs including self-help groups in Burma have with some success carried out advocacy towards the government on its HIV/AIDS policies. This has in some cases meant that civil society actors have sought cooperation and coordination with actors in the government administration.

As Steinberg has argued: "[In many] societies, such as China, the term civil society implies anti-government activity, and thus its use is deemed inappropriate. This, I would argue, misconstrues the importance to our analysis of Burmese issues."[61] The study on civil society in authoritarian regimes arrives at a similar conclusion: "Recent research, however, revealed that close cooperation between some associations and the state does not necessarily have to be a result of the pressure imposed by the regime, but can be based on the decision by the association itself."[62]

Civil society actors in authoritarian countries like Burma are not just using the available space, as some authors have correctly argued[63], but they are also actively enlarging the available space and creating new space as they define their own issues and goals. This is being carried out in many different and creative formal and informal ways. In many instances, local organisations have actively pursued strategies to engage with government representatives at local and national level to promote understanding and acceptance of their organisations and their activities. They have tried to show that civil society is not a 'threat' to the government nor is acting ´against' the government, but instead is able to play a complementary role in addressing the challenges the country is facing. Representatives of local NGOs in Burma say that there is more space available for civil society in Burma than is currently being used. There are opportunities to expand various existing activities but also to develop new initiatives and thus create more and/or new space. According to one local NGO coordinator: "The space and possibilities for civil society is up to us. We can widen this space. It is not ideal, but it depends on our creativity."[64]

Furthermore, not all initiatives by local organisations are targeted to represent their interest vis-à-vis the state. In fact, in many cases civil society in Burma has tried to promote change in the society at large. These local organisations thus also perform roles similar to civil society organisations in western democratic societies. Clear examples of this are raising environmental awareness, and preventing stigmatisation and discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS among local communities and the general population. These organisations are doing this not to replace activities that are the responsibility of the state – in both democratic and authoritarian states – but because they are better placed to carry out such activities.

Other examples of this are local NGOs introducing community participation and democratic principles at the community level. According to a representative of a local NGO in Kachin State, the biggest obstacle to involve local communities and introduce Participatory Action Research (PAR) method was not restrictions put into place by the military government, but instead the traditional culture and hierarchy. People were hesitant to express their opinions and speak out openly in front of seniors or villages leaders.[65] In the long run, initiatives by local organisations can contribute to making the society more pluralistic and democratic, even though this is not their direct goal.

Civil society organisations in Burma have also adopted different strategies in dealing with the authorities. Some local organisations are deliberately in close contact with local or national authorities, not just in order to influence their policies, but because they believe this is the best way to accomplish their goals and implement their projects. Others prefer to keep a low profile, and want to keep activities under the radar. All strategies have their own specific limitations and opportunities. There are thus a wide range of relationships between civil society and the state, ranging from no contact at all with state actors to frequent interaction, for a wide variety of reasons and with different results. Personal relationships often play a key role in whether these strategies are successful.

Clearly, as a country with an authoritarian regime failing to address socio-economic problems, civil society has been carrying out initiatives that are the responsibility of the state. Various programmes on education and health are good examples, as government spending on these sectors is very low. These local organisations are addressing some of the key challenges that the population in Burma is facing today.

The debate about civil society in Burma has mainly been held in the context of Western humanitarian assistance and international development aid, and by, at least initially, predominantly international actors. Consequently, civil society has not been analysed in the Burmese context or in its own right. Many sectors of civil society have also been excluded in the discussions by INGOs based in the country about how to engage with and support civil society, because they were not deemed 'socially progressive' by international actors.[66] This includes various traditional religious-based initiatives, as well as the private media, various arts and cultural associations, and some initiatives by the private-sector.

As stated earlier, strict Western definitions of civil society are also not applicable to the Burmese context, as they exclude several important local actors, who throughout history have come together and carried out social and religious activities, mostly through informal religious Buddhist networks. For these traditional local organisations in the country the discussion about space opening up for civil

Local NGO building cyclone shelters in Irrawaddy Delta

society seems less relevant. "Those who define civil society in a purely Western sense will say that space is opening up," says a local representative from an international organisation. "But for those who interpret civil society more in terms of charity and welfare, will likely say the space has been there all along. There are some organisations who have no burning urge to push or expand the space as the existing space serves their purpose nicely."[67]

Lastly, it is important to realise that Burma is a militarised state, and apart from the military-backed government there are many other armed groups in the country that present challenges for people to freely organise themselves and carry out projects in their areas. These include a wide range of armed opposition groups, mostly formed along ethnic lines. The majority have signed cease-fire agreements with the military government, while others are still fighting. The space for people to organise themselves in such areas differs from region to region. However, in such a climate of ongoing armed conflict and militarisation, setting up and creating space for civil society is no easy task.

Government Organised NGOs

Following the creation of the State Law and Order restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, the military set up new mass organisations. As David Steinberg has argued the military "created its own 'civil society' in the guise of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)."[68] The USDA was created in September 1993, officially as a

'social welfare organisation'. The USDA's explicit mandate was to support the policies of the military. Senior-General Than Shwe was the USDA patron. The regime claimed membership of the USDA at some 24 million people, but most of them were forced to join, or face loss of job or position. Membership sometimes also gives access to computer and English language courses and other benefits. In April 2010 the USDA was transformed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to take part in the 7 November 2010 elections.[69]

The electoral process lacked democratic and ethnic inclusion, and opposition parties complained there was no level playing field due to the strict regulations on registration and registration costs and the limited time frame for parties to organise themselves. This all favoured the USDP. The elections themselves were also not free and fair, as the vote count was manipulated by advance voting. As a result, the military-backed USDP, headed by SPDC Prime Minister Thein Sein, won a landslide victory.[70] Thein Sein subsequently became President in the new government, which was inaugurated in March 2011.

Other government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) include the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association and the Myanmar Red Cross Society. GONGOs are not considered part of civil society, as they are not independent from the government. They are usually led by people appointed by the government, and the policies and activities of GONGOs reflect and promote those of the government. GONGOs are mostly top-down organised and hierarchical. Ac-

cording to the government: "[NGOs] that are sponsored by the government could have a structure and membership pattern that is imposed from above and government appointers could sit on their management board."[71]

GONGOs have also been used to actively support government policies in public demonstrations orchestrated by the regime. Some GONGOs have also been accused of involvement in physical attacks on the opposition. In May 2003, for instance, a government organised mob, widely believed to include USDA members, attacked an NLD convoy at Depayin, killing and wounding several people. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, "I can say that there is a prima facie evidence that the Depayin incident could not have happened without the connivance of State agents…According to testimonies, there were between 50 and 70 people lying on the road, either injured or dead."[72]

However, not all GONGOs can be categorised in the same way. Some GONGOs are 'professional organisations', focussing on a single issue and consisting mostly of government (or ex-government) staff. These organisations are different from the USDA because they have not been used to publicly back the military government, other than on policies that are relevant to the subject these organisations work on. The leaders of these professional organisations are mostly middle to high ranking government officials, but staff are practitioners from government services.

The Myanmar Health Assistant Association (MHAA) was formed in 1994 and consists of health assistants from the government's Department of Health. The MHAA also responded to Cyclone Nargis, by providing basic health services to communities in the disaster area in cooperation with UNICEF. The Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association (MANA) consists mostly of retired government staff from the Health and Police Department. Despite its name, MANA has officially endorsed the principle of harm reduction, an important step in addressing the urgent HIV/AIDS epidemic and the needs of drug users. The organisation is running various services for drugs users, including a needle exchange project.

The Myanmar Nurses and Midwives Association (MNMA) is another professional organisation. It works on HIV/AIDS and other health issues. It was set up in 1922 and, like other local organisations, was forced to shut down in 1967 after the General Ne Win military coup. In 1971 the government allowed the MNMA to re-form and start its activities again, yet now under closer government control. "In professional organisations there are two kinds of people: those appointed by the government and ordinary members," says a representative of MNMA.[73] Since 2010, the executive committee members of these professional organisations are no longer appointed by the government but elected by its members. "We are not a GONGO," says

a MNMA member. "The government control is only at the central level of our organisation. We are similar to MHAA and MANA."[74]

These professional associations tend to be more top-down in structure and more conservative in their policies than the independently created local NGOs. They also have less space to operate independently from the government than local NGOs, especially at national head office level on important policy decisions. However, these professional organisations have been able to establish working relationships with international agencies, and have experienced and committed staff especially at the local level, who have been able to implement meaningful projects that deserve to be supported. They often have well-structured systems, are relatively better resourced and have good technical expertise in their areas. They also have members and branches all over the country. "All these professional associations are untapped sources for large scale mobilisation and societal change," said a local source with long experience in working with local NGOs. "They are not even given chances to prove themselves. They have been judged without trial. In that regard, we are no better than military government with our assumptions and narrow mindedness."[75]

Legal Challenges

There are many legal restrictions affecting the ability of people to organise themselves in Burma. As one author has argued: "The development and maintenance of civil society – that is, free associations of citizens joined together to work for common concerns, or implement social, cultural, or political initiatives which compliments, as well as compete, with the state, depends upon the citizens of any state being able to enjoy fundamental freedoms: freedom of thought, opinion, expression, association, and movement. Underscoring and defending these freedoms must be an independent judiciary and the guarantee of the rule of law. In Burma today, none of these conditions exist."[76]

However, this does not mean that there is no space at all for local organisations to exist legally. In the 'Law Relating to Forming of Organisations' of 1988, the government defines 'an organisation' as "an association, society, union, party, committee, federation, groups of associations front, club and similar organisation that is formed with a group of people for an objective or a programme either with or without a particular name." The law further stipulates that "organisations shall apply for permission to form to the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs according to the prescribed procedure." The law makes two exemptions of organisations that are not required to apply for permission to form: organisations that are registered at the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs already under the Protection of National Unity Law of 1964; and organisations that pursue religious activities only.[77]

Organisations can also choose to register under the Partnership Act of 1932, the Cooperative Society Law of 1992 (amended from 1970), and the Code of Civil Procedure of 1908. Most local NGOs are registered as an 'association', under the 1988 Organisation of Association Law. According to research in 2003, of the surveyed registered local NGOs 76% had done so.[78]

In a paper on the NGO sector in the country prepared for an ASEAN workshop in 2006, the government listed 393 local NGOs by name from all seven states and seven divisions[79]. All of them are registered under the 1988 law with the Ministry of Home Affairs. The same source lists 66 religious organisations, 61 social service providers, 34 government supported organisations, and a number of business associations, clubs and literature and culture associations. The large majority of them are based in Yangon Region.[80] These also include GONGOs and various associations which were left out of the 2003 civil society survey, such as a pensioners group from the police force, a swimming club, a golf club, business clubs formed by Chinese Merchants, and various others.

Some local NGOs have decided to register as private companies under the Cooperative Law and the Private Business Law. This process is a lot easier, but, unlike registration as an association or NGO, includes 10% tax. One local NGO reported registering under the Myanmar Companies Act at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development. This process took only one week, and required payment of 2% tax as a service organisation.[81]

Even though a growing number of organisations have been able to register, there are still many restrictions. First, the registration process is long and frustrating. Many local NGOs have the registration process pending for a long time, while others have not bothered to try. "To get registration was not easy," says a representative of a local NGO in Mandalay. "We are registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs. We are trying to be very clear to the government about what we are doing, and that we are purely an NGO."[82] A member of a local NGO working on HIV/AIDS notes: "It is very hard to get registration, and the process is changing all the time. But if you go through the process of government recognition, it will be easier to carry out your activities."[83]

Official registration is not only helpful in daily operations and in getting permission from local authorities to carry out activities in the field; it is also a pre-requisite for some donors to be eligible for funding. Furthermore, without official government registration it is impossible to open a bank account in the name of the organisation or get accountancy statements, which are other demands from international donors.

Even an organisation that is registered with the central government is still subject to many limitations. There are

clear differences between central authorities and local authorities. Once an organisation is registered at the national level, they often still need to inform and arrange permission from the local authorities. This seems to be especially the case in central Burma, and to a lesser extent in ethnic minority areas. "Getting permission from the local authorities is a challenge for us," says a representative of a Buddhist faith-based organisation working on health issues. "To hold activities or a gathering, we need to ask permission from the village or township Peace and Development Councils. We need to explain that it is about health, and need to give every detail. We make it very clear that we are not doing anything political."[84] Again, the situation differs from place to place, and personal relations play an important role.

The government has officially acknowledged the important role local NGOs can play in, for instance, harm reduction activities. General Maung Oo, then Minister of Home Affairs, stated in December 2004 (just after the removal of Khin Nyunt and the SPDC leadership change), at an ASEAN forum on prevention of drugs and substance abuse: "The harm reduction initiatives, in conjunction with ongoing demand reduction activities, are now being strengthened through numerous interventions of local and international NGOs throughout the country. In this connection, I can fairly say that the community outreach approach initiated by NGOs is far more effective than the institutional approach pursued by the government."[85]

At a strategic workshop of the National Aids Programme in June 2011 to plan the national response to HIV/AIDS in the next five years, civil society representatives were also invited and given the opportunity to take part in the discussions. The government representative stated that they will work together with local groups and, for the first time, also with networks of local organisations.[86] Following the 2010 elections and the formation of the new government in 2011, there were initial signs that some local organisations, especially the smaller CBOs which often have no means to obtain formal registration, will be able to continue their activities with permission from the regional health minister.

In his inaugural speech, the new President Thein Sein specifically acknowledged the important role civil society organisations can play in developing the country. This was the first time a high-ranking government official had made such a statement, and was greeted by local organisations with cautious optimism. Says the director of a local NGO: "The President talks a lot about local NGOs, so all of them should apply for registration as a matter of principle, whether we get it or not."[87]

Relations with the Government

According to a 2005 survey, local organisations felt that, compared to international NGOs, they were weak in man-

Representatives of Kachin cease-fire groups, Burma Army and mediators

agement systems and processes. However, at the same time they felt that they were relatively stronger in 'working with the local government'.[88] Local organisations are often better placed and are more effective in dealing with local authorities to get permission for activities, to sort out problems, and to promote policy change.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, some local NGOs believe that it is impossible - or makes them less effective - to avoid contact with the government. Some deliberately choose to closely coordinate with local authorities to prevent misunderstandings from occurring that would endanger the project, and/or to prevent beneficiaries from getting into trouble.

The increasing number of international NGOs that are implementing humanitarian and development projects in all states and regions in the country has also created greater space and reduced the fear of community-based programmes by local authorities. Similarly, it is clear that the increasing number of local organisations itself has to some extent created greater space for other local initiatives to engage with local authorities.

Local NGOs have also been able to obtain seats in official platforms including government representatives, allowing them to engage with them on policy issues. On some issues there has been successful advocacy by local NGOs, especially on HIV/AIDS. For example, members of the Myanmar Positive Group (MPG) take part in the National Strategic Planning of the National Aids Programme (NAP). In 2010 the Global Fund, created in 2002 to combat AIDS, tu-

berculosis and malaria in the world, approved a budget of US\$ 105 million for a period of two years in Burma. Civil society representatives including people living with or affected by the diseases officially sit in the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), together with representatives from the government, international organisations, and the private sector.[89]

Not surprisingly, it is often ex-government officials in local organisations who are relatively more efficient and effective in building relationships with the authorities. Members of these organisations have intimate knowledge of how the government works, and can use their personal contacts to raise issues. Some professional associations and GONGOs could potentially play an important role in building relationships with authorities and promote change.

There are many capable and committed individuals in various government ministries with whom personal relationships can be built. Some government officials, including high-ranking ones, may not be happy with the current state of affairs in the country, and are very frustrated with government policies and mismanagement of the country.

The opportunities and challenges for civil society organisations differ from region to region. The cease-fire agreements in Kachin State and Mon State in the 1990s, for instance, created space for local organisations to start programmes in former war zones. In contrast local organisations in areas with active conflict, such as parts of Karen State and Southern Shan State, face serious obstacles and limitations. Other regions, such as the Dry Zone, have

many small CBOs working on local issues, but few larger NGOs. Local organisations in the former capital Yangon have more space than in many smaller towns and rural areas, where there are fewer local organisations, less access to trainings and other programmes of international organisations, and also less access to funding. At the same time, local authorities in these rural areas are often more suspicious of activities of local organisations, because they are not used to such initiatives.

After Cyclone Nargis, which saw a huge increase in local NGO formation and activities, some changes took place in the way both the government and civil society actors perceived each other. "After Nargis the government realised that the local organisations are essential for our community", says the leader of a large local NGO. "Before Nargis, NGOs thought that because they are non-governmental, they should be anti-government." This was also the view of the government, and there was no coordination between the two. "If the government said it was white, NGOs would say it was black. I advocate to the government that we are non-governmental, non-profit, and non-religious, but that we are not anti-government. We have to coordinate our activities with the government. The government has limited funding, limited resources, and cannot go everywhere. We have to fill that gap. This is our local NGO work".[90]

There have also been attempts by the government and/or government organised organisations, especially the USDA before it was reformed into the USDP in 2010, to take over, make use of, and to stop activities by civil society organisations. In 2006 reports surfaced that advertisements of the Yangon-based Free Funeral Services Society (FFSS) in newspapers and publications would be banned, and it was told not to accept any further donations. There were also reports that the association would be taken over by the USDA, but this never happened. The FFSS is led by famous actor and social critic Kyaw Thu. The pressure on the organisation started after its leaders attended a commemoration of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, which was organised by former student leaders.[91] Other local organisations have also faced pressure from the government and the now defunct USDA. According to one local NGO representative in Mandalay: "When the USDA holds a big public meeting, they invite us but we do not want to attend, and reply we work only on social issues, and not on political issues. The USDA wants to try to use our organisation." [92]

Opportunities for Policy Engagement

The authorities in Burma are wary of civil society actors getting involved in political activities. This is a very sensitive issue for the government, and they have clamped down hard on the activities of local organisations deemed political or critical of the government. For example, the popular poet and comedian Maung Thura, better known as 'Zargana', was arrested in June 2008 while providing relief in response to Cyclone Nargis. He had criticised the governments' response to the disaster in radio interviews with international media.[93]

Many local organisations in Burma therefore try to avoid becoming directly or openly involved in politics. Some of them feel that their role should be clearly defined as non-political, and say that they are most effective working as NGOs focussing on socio-economic issues. Conversely, many local organisations feel that political parties should focus on politics, and should not play the role of local NGOs and start implementing social welfare or other activities. They argue that this might confuse the government and will endanger their organisations and their work.

Community project meeting

Many of them strongly feel that neither political parties nor the government should try to politicise civil society.[94]

However, despite these restrictions, civil society is not immune from political events. As one study acknowledges: "It is increasingly difficult to say that civil society in [Burma] is apolitical. Yet at the same time the wide role of civil society sits outside of the competition for power of the state. [Burmese] civil society is political yet is also beyond politics."[95]

As mentioned above, several civil society organisations in ethnic regions have played key roles in the peace negotiations between the military government and armed opposition groups. Furthermore, some local organisations have played supporting roles for opposition parties. The Shan Literature and Culture Society, for instance, played a key role in the campaign of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy in the 1990 election. A number of political parties that were newly formed to contest the 2010 elections - especially in ethnic regions - originated out of civil society groups and local networks. Dr. Simon Tha, for instance, who unsuccessfully ran as candidate of the Karen People's Party, is a medical doctor and founding member of the Karen Development Committee.

The Rakhine Thahaya Association focuses only on social affairs and education, but some of its members have taken part in political activities. Dr. Saw Mra Aung, leader member of the Arakan League for Democracy[96], was president of the Rakhine Thahaya Association from 1982-1988. Some members of the organisation were elected into the Rakhine State regional parliament after the 2010 elections. The minister for Rakhine Affairs in Yangon Region, U Saw Aye Maung, is a former vice-president of the organisation. Members of the organisation also have good personal relations with some of the ministers of the newly formed Rakhine State government.[97]

The head of the central committee of the Shan Literature and Cultural Committee, Dr. Sai Mawk Kham, was appointed as one of the two Vice-Presidents following the 2010 elections. His election caused mixed feelings among Shan nationalists, as he had been elected in Lashio as a candidate of the military-backed USDP, defeating a candidate of the opposition Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP).[98]

In addition, the introduction of the new political system following the 2010 elections and the formation of a new government in early 2011 has provided civil society organisations with new opportunities to engage the government at different levels on policy issues. However, the impact of these attempts to influence policy are still unclear. The main opportunities seem to lie in the newly formed provincial parliaments in ethnic states. In four ethnic states (Karen, Shan, Chin and Rakhine) nationality parties won some 25% of the seats, enabling them to call special sessions of the local parliaments, and to initiate or block impeachment processes against local officials.[99] Perhaps more importantly, for the first time in Burma's history, these ethnic parties will be able to express their grievances and aspirations in regional parliaments. These parties are currently still defining their role and testing the waters, to see how much space they have to operate within, as well as outside of, parliament.

The parties are also defining their roles as a political party vis-à-vis local communities in their areas. Some of these ethnic parties are trying to identify and address the main concerns of local communities. In Mon State, the All Mon Regions Development Party (AMRDP) said it would introduce a farm ownership bill.[100] In Rakhine State, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) said its priority is "to reform land ownership rules and develop full access to electricity".[101] Links with local communities and the organisations that represent them will be crucial for these ethnic politicians to identify key issues of concern and formulate appropriate policy responses.

Furthermore, local organisations often have personal relationships with the people newly elected in the parliaments and with ministers in the regions and ethnic state. Says a local source working for an international donor: "Many people in the new local government have relationships with people and the community and civil society. In the past these relations were very impersonal. Now people know who these people are. There is more chance to get closer."[102]

Representatives of various local NGOs say some of the newly appointed regional ministers have already approached them for advice, as they have been appointed to positions in which they have no knowledge or previous experiences.[103] This also provides opportunities for engagement with government officials and elected politicians to advocate on behalf of civil society organisations. "Civil society organisation can be more pro-active in liaising with new local governments, and explain what they are doing," says a local source working for an international organisation. "It is also about civil society being more open. We have to take the first step. But it is very difficult. We have lived under this system for so long. Now we are limiting ourselves to this small space." [104]

Local NGOs can also assist political parties in building up their parties, as they are all newly formed and have weak structures. Furthermore, local organisations could play a role in representing local communities' interests in relation to political parties. They can also provide technical assistance on issues that are crucial to local communities, providing concrete policy recommendations to the government as well as to political parties. These include issues such as health, education and the environment, as well as, for instance land rights and how to provide alternative livelihoods for opium farmers.

Civil Society in Ethnic Regions

Ethnic minorities in Burma have long felt marginalised and discriminated against, and armed rebellions have long been their response. The situation worsened after the military coup in 1962, when minority rights were further curtailed. Successive governments have refused to take the political demands of ethnic minorities into account, for the most part treating ethnic issues as a military and security issue. The more than sixty-year-old civil war has caused great suffering for the peoples of Burma. Decades of conflict have driven the civilian population into absolute poverty and despair. The fighting has mainly taken place in ethnic areas, whose populations have suffered the most. The Burma Army's military campaigns against ethnic armed opposition groups have been accompanied by serious human rights violations against the civilian population.[105]

The main grievances of ethnic nationality groups in Burma are lack of influence in the political decision-making processes; the absence of economic and social development in their areas; and what they see as the Burmanisation policies of successive governments, which translates into repression of their cultural rights and religious freedom.

Given the prominent role the Christian churches have played in ethnic areas and their longstanding international relationships, it is no surprise that a relatively large number of Christian-based local organisations are formed in ethnic regions. Unlike Buddhist Burman groups, many of the Christian churches already had good contacts with foreign development and donor organisations. This provided these organisations with access to funds for development work, and with opportunities for trainings and international exposure. These organisations often include personnel with good English language skills.

Religious organisations have the advantage that they are already officially registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and are not required to apply for separate registration for their community development activities. Religious organisations continued to exist during the BSPP era, and the development activities of these organisations sometimes, especially in the past, went hand in hand with evangelical work.

The conclusion of cease-fire agreements between the military government and ethnic armed opposition groups after 1989 created further space to expand work of local organisations in ethnic regions. For organisations such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in Kachin State and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in Mon State, the cease-fires were not an end goal. Isolated and devastated after decades of civil war, these groups wanted to try a different path to political development. They did not want to wait for political change to come from Yangon, but took their own initiatives to rebuild their war-torn country and

promote change. They hoped that ultimately humanitarian and economic development would lead to political development and reconciliation. These armed groups administer the territories under their control, and have departments responsible for education, health, finance and agriculture. They have welcomed local and international NGOs to set up projects in their war-torn areas. Access for international NGOs and UN agencies has been limited by the military government, and local civil society actors have played important roles in delivering aid to these isolated border areas.

Literacy and Education

Recognition of the social and cultural rights of ethnic minorities in Burma deteriorated rapidly after the coup of 1962. Ethnic languages were virtually banned in the education system under the BSPP. Publications in ethnic minority languages, including newspapers and books, suffered the same fate. After 1988 a number of state colleges in ethnic states were upgraded to university status. However, ethnic leaders claimed that any change was in name only.

In Mon State, the main civil society actors to emerge following the cease-fire agreement in 1995 between the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the military government were religious and social welfare networks. The Mon Literature and Buddhist Culture Association and the Mon Literature and Culture Committee have provided training on Mon language, culture and history.[106] The Mon-region Social Development Network (MSDN) was formed in 2009 by 15 small organisations based in villages in Mon State. These were all traditional community based organisations that had existed for a long time, focussing on religious and cultural activities. They support over 50 private schools in Mon State.[107] The NMSP has actively encouraged and supported educational and development initiatives.

In Rakhine State, the Rakhine Tahaya Association, mentioned earlier, apart from giving stipends to promote education also publishes a magazine featuring articles on Rakhine culture and literacy in the Rakhine and closely-related Burman languages. It organises and sponsors literary events and contests. The organisation has facilitated trainings on child-centred education for teachers in monastic education in Rakhine State.

In Shan State, the Shan Literature and Cultural Committee have been very active at local and regional level in promoting and preserving Shan culture and literacy. They have organised Shan literacy campaigns during the summer holidays, and have initiated various seasonal cultural and religious events, and celebrations on Shan New Year. All these activities require government permission. According to a Shan journalist in Thailand: "They are quite busy the whole year round, because as the saying goes: 'only kings and Shans love festivities.'"[108]

Other ethnic groups in Burma have similar organisations working to promote and preserve the culture and traditions of ethnic groups. These include the Karen, Chin and Rakhine Literature and Culture Committees. These organisations have existed for a long time. They are sometimes also engaged in other social activities, such as establishing and running boarding schools and orphanages. There is a boarding school in Yangon for children from the Wa ethnic group who originate from isolated villages in the mountains of northern Burma. There are also boarding schools in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, for Karen children from rural upland areas.

Similar initiatives exist in the rest of the country, often run by local church networks. A Kachin Literature and Cultural Committee was formed in the early 1960s at Rangoon University, by a group of Kachin students who later became founding members of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). After the KIO signed a cease-fire in 1994, six Cultural and Literature Committees were permitted to form in Kachin State, reflecting six 'Kachin' subgroups.[109]

The continued fighting between the Burma army and the Shan State Army South in Shan State, and with the Karen National Union (KNU) in Karen State, has made it much more difficult for these cultural and literature organisations to function both in these areas and nationally. The military government has often viewed activities by these civil society actors with suspicion, fearing them to be a political front for ethnic nationalists. According to a member of the Karen Literature and Culture Committee: "They seem as much afraid of literature and culture groups as they are of armed organisations".[110]

Community Development

Despite the fact that Burma is rich in resources, the country is very poor. Decades of war and mismanagement has brought the country, once the world's largest rice exporter, to the brink of economic collapse. Ethnic areas have suffered the worst. Ethnic nationality leaders complain that, while the central government has been keen to extract natural resources from the ethnic states and sell them abroad, the money earned has not been invested to develop these isolated and war-torn regions. The central government has profited from the timber, precious stones (gold, jade and rubies) and gas and oil reserves sold to foreign companies. They have done this without any consultation with local communities, which have suffered negative social and environmental consequences from these projects. They complain that they have lost economic resources, received no compensation for damages, and have never been offered a share in the profits.

Following the cease-fire agreements, a number of local organisations took the initiative to use the momentum to expand existing activities. Other community leaders cre-

ated new organisations. In Kachin State especially, several new community-based initiatives appeared. Metta Development Foundation, one of the largest local organisations, was set up in 1998 following the cease-fire agreement between the KIO and the military government. The organisation aims "to assist communities in Myanmar recover from the devastating consequences of conflict and humanitarian emergency." The organisation works on social and economic development, mainly in ethnic minority areas where cease-fire agreements have created new room to start community-based projects in former war areas. The main focus of its work is on capacity building and making local communities self-reliant. Metta has set up farmer field schools in Kachin State, Shan State and Kayah State, and implemented a wide range of community-based activities, for instance, on agriculture and forestry and various livelihood issues. In its ten year review the organisation's director wrote: "We have worked alongside those in most isolated and neglected areas of Myanmar, former refugees, internally displaced persons and those adversely affected by the poppy cultivation ban."[111] The work of Metta Development Foundation has expanded to Mandalay and the Irrawaddy Regions as well.

The large majority of the Kachin population is Christian, and Christian churches have also been very active in community development in Kachin State. The Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) has initiated projects in many villages all over Kachin State and northern Shan State (which also has a Kachin population), including in government controlled areas as well as those under control of armed groups, including the KIO, New Democratic Army-Kachin (transformed into Border Guard Force in 2010) and Kachin Defence Army (transformed into local militia in 2010). Other church organisations in Kachin State, such as the Anglican and Catholic dioceses, have similar activities.

However, not all cease-fire groups have been equally responsive to community based initiatives by local (and/or international) organisations. Decades of conflict and civil war have contributed to a militarised environment where initiatives by civilians to organise themselves have often been regarded with suspicion. Although there are some differences, generally speaking the cease-fire groups are still top-down and authoritarian organisations, run in a military way. In areas controlled by the United Wa State Army, for instance, the space for local people to organise themselves is very limited. The only local organisations present in the Wa region are faith-based organisations from other regions, such as the KBC, which is carrying out some activities in the education sector.[112] In contrast, cease-fire groups in Kachin State (KIO) and Mon State (NMSP) have encouraged the activities of local organisations in their areas.

In areas with ongoing conflict, the fighting and the military campaigns of the Burma Army have forced large number of civilians to leave their homes. Over half a million people are displaced in the eastern part of the country along the Thai border. Today, an estimated 130,000 ethnic minority refugees are living in camps in Thailand and 35,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Following the breakdown of the Kokang cease-fire in September 2009, some 37,000 refugees fled to China, although most of them have since returned to Burma.[113]

Several local organisations, including Christian and Buddhist groups, deliver humanitarian aid to conflict areas in Karen State, Bago Region, Mon State and Thanintharyi Region. They are able to implement development projects and health and education support to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and other population groups affected by the conflict. Most of their beneficiaries live in government controlled areas or in areas under the control of cease-fire groups. These local organisations maintain a low profile as their activities are very sensitive for the government. However, several groups undertake quiet advocacy towards both the government as well as armed opposition groups, in order to improve the situation for local communities caught in the conflict.[114] Local organisations working cross-border from Thailand also provide mainly short-term relief, in the form of medical aid and cash to buy food, for IDP populations in conflict areas.[115]

Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution

Several local organisations in ethnic areas have promoted reconciliation and initiated an informal movement for peace. Apart from promoting peace talks between ethnic armed opposition groups and the military government, some civil society groups have also tried to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation among ethnic groups and communities.

Church organisations have set up commissions on "reconciliation and peace." Representatives of these organizations, in their private capacity and not under the mandate of their organisation, have played important roles as go-betweens and mediators in various cease-fire negotiations in Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), and Karen states. The role of the mediators did not end with establishment of the cease-fires. As the truces are merely military in nature, most other issues (such as political and development concerns) were left to be resolved later, and various problems had to be dealt with along the way. The mediators were the direct communication channel between the government and the armed groups. For example, Catholic Bishop Sotero from Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State, played an important role in the negotiations with several armed groups in Kayah State. Church leaders in Chin State also acted as mediators between the military government and the Chin National Front, which is fighting a guerrilla war in Chin State along the Indian border.

In Kachin State, Reverend Saboi Jum, at that time General-Secretary of the Kachin Baptist Church (KBC), played

Pao man in Shan State

a central role in the cease-fire talks between the military government and the KIO, together with his brother Khun Myat, a businessman, and Duwa La Wawm, former ambassador to Israel. After retiring from the KBC, Rev. Saboi Jum founded the Shalom Foundation ('Nyein' Foundation) to promote peace and reconciliation in the country through conflict management. Shalom also works in other ethnic regions, and it formed the Ethnic Nationalities Mediator's Fellowship (ENMF), consisting of Kachin, Karen, Mon and Chin community leaders. The ENMF aims to bring peace and facilitate talks between the government and armed opposition groups.[116]

The active role of civil society organisations in Kachin State has also strengthened their position vis-à-vis the cease-fire groups. In 2002 the three Kachin cease-fire organizations found common ground and jointly established a Kachin National Consultative Assembly. The cease-fire groups also made an effort to include civil society organisations in this platform. The aim was to prepare a joint response and input into the new constitution, which at that time was being drafted by the National Convention. The KIO has on several occasions sought the opinion of local communities on important policy decisions issues, such as the 2008 constitution, the 2010 election, and the Border Guard Force proposal by the military government.

In Karen State, various community leaders and local organisations have tried to mediate between the KNU and the military government. The first attempts date back to 1994, when Anglican Archbishop Andrew Mya Han visited the KNU headquarters Manerplaw to propose peace talks. Subsequently, an informal group of five prominent Yangon-based Karen Christian leaders was formed. They started as independent mediators, and later formed the Karen Peace Mediator Group.[117] Their efforts facilitated four rounds of talks during 1995-1997, after which negotiations broke down. Subsequently the Burma Army launched a new offensive against the KNU, conquering most of its remaining territory in the hills of eastern Burma. Since that time the KNU has been largely fighting a guerrilla war from mobile bases along the Thai border. The mediators have since continued to explore other possibilities to resume the talks.

Meanwhile, Buddhist and Christian religious leaders based in Karen State came together to set up the 'Karen State Peace Committee (KPC), consisting of nine religious leaders, four of them Christian and five Buddhist[118] The aim of the KPC is to promote peace-building and network with Karen civil society organisations. "We as religious leaders, from our point of view, when we see the people suffering like this, we feel we must do something to get peace," said a Buddhist KPC member. "People cannot liberate themselves and, as Burma is a religious country, we have to rely on religious people who are the only ones that can take the lead. It is the last hope."[119] There was clearly also some resentment among Karen State based leaders that media-

tors used by the government were all Christians based in Rangoon and not in Karen State. "People in Karen State felt that Karen Christians from outside Karen State were making all the decisions without consulting them," said a Karen NGO worker based in Yangon.[120]

The KPC has also made efforts to promote peace among different Karen communities. Karen society has suffered from fragmentation and communal conflicts, due to decades of military rule and oppression, and the lack of a common Karen platform, limiting communication and cooperation between communities. The split in the Karen armed movement between the mostly Christian-led KNU and the government-supported Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) has further aggravated the conflict, which continues until today.[121] The Karen Development Committee (KDC), a local organization working on cultural, educational and health issues, has also been involved in peace building activities. In April 2002 it organised a Karen congress attended by 120 Karen delegates representing 28 Karen civil society organisations from different geographical areas, religious backgrounds, and organisations. The Karen Development Network (KDN), formed in January 2003, focuses on capacity building in the education and communication sectors and has also been involved in bringing together various Karen communities and Karen local organisations to promote mutual trust, understanding, and peace and reconciliation.

In January 2004, the SPDC agreed to a verbal truce with the KNU, following a surprise visit by the KNU leader General Bo Mya to Yangon where he met with General Khin Nyunt. Both sides agreed to continue talks to reach an official cease-fire agreement. This led to a temporary halt in most of the fighting.[122] The temporary cease-fire with the KNU created new space for local initiatives. According to a Karen local NGO worker, it was a great stimulus for civil society organisations in Karen State: "Because of these peace talks, Karen organisations are less harassed, and Karen organisations really mushroomed. Now there are more than 30 of them."[123] Karen civil society groups include Karen faith-based organisations (Karen Christian churches and Buddhist monasteries), the Rising Sun Group (a Karen Youth group), the Karen Women Action Group, the Association for the Promotion of Karen Literature and Culture, and various other local culture, literature and music groups.[124]

Sensing the new space following the temporary cease-fire in Karen State, the KDN initiated Karen dialogue meetings in Rangoon in March 2004 and, together with the KPC, it organised a ground-breaking Karen Peace Forum in the capital of Karen State Hpa-an in May 2004, which was attended by 139 representatives from v arious Karen civil society organisations and political parties. The results of the meeting were shared with the KNU, and the military government allowed four KPC members to attend the Karen unity seminar organised by the KNU in Thailand in June 2004.[125] However, during a follow-up visit of a KNU delegation to

Rangoon in October 2004, Khin Nyunt was arrested, and the delegation went home empty handed. By the end of 2005, fighting had resumed, and the Burma army increased its presence in eastern Bago Division and northern Karen State. This led to a new wave of refugees coming to Thailand, fleeing mainly from forced labour demands and other abuses by Burma army units in the area.[126]

In February 2007, a small KNU breakaway group, led by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 7th Brigade Commander, made a separate agreement with the SPDC and was subsequently ejected from the organisation. The main body of the KNU did not join the agreement, and fighting in the region has continued. The role of go-between in the negotiation was played by a prominent KDC member Dr. Simon Tha. Some Karen community workers in Burma felt this new split in the KNU was not a positive development, as they would rather see a cease-fire agreement with the KNU as a whole.[127]

After Khin Nyunt was detained and 'permitted to retire' in 2004, the space for humanitarian aid in the country shrunk. He had promoted community development activities by international as well as local organisations. His once powerful military intelligence apparatus was subsequently purged and dismantled.

The SPDC was quick to stress that the removal of Khin Nyunt would not result in any policy changes (which were widely speculated by regime critics). In February 2006, however, the government announced new guidelines for UN agencies, international NGOs and local NGOs.[128] These include compulsory registration of local NGOs with the government. The new regulations formalised strict government policies on issuing visas and travel authorisations to expatriate staff to visit field projects. Since this time, the government has also required more detailed information about programmes and projects. Despite these restrictions, civil society continued to grow in Burma. Local organisations say that these restrictions did not have much impact on their work. Their local staff do not require travel authorisations to visit field projects.[129] However, the issue of registration for local organisations remains a difficult issue, and will be dealt with separately in the next chapter.

The fall of Khin Nyunt also had negative consequences for the cease-fires in ethnic regions. Khin Nyunt and his officers had developed personal relationships with the leaders of cease-fire groups and most direct government contact with the cease-fire groups was controlled by the Military Intelligence Service. Following Khin Nyunt's removal, government pressure on the cease-fire groups increased, and relations with them deteriorated. In 2005 the leader of the SSA North cease-fire group was arrested and sentenced to a long jail term, and two cease-fire groups were forced to disarm. Cease-fire groups complained that all the issues they had resolved with Khin Nyunt were no longer on the table after his removal.[130]

Tension remained and culminated in April 2009, when the government's new liaison for the cease-fire groups, General Ye Myint, announced a plan to transform all of them into 'Border Guard Forces' (BGFs). Under this new scheme, cease-fire groups would be divided up into separate BGF battalions of 326 troops each, with 30 soldiers from the Burma Army, including one out of the three commanding officers, who would take charge of administrative work. All cease-fire soldiers over 50-years old would have to retire. Each BGF battalion would be under direct command of the Burma army, effectively breaking up ceasefire groups into small units and weakening them.[131]

Most of the larger cease-fire groups rejected the BGF proposal, and only some small ones accepted. Tension regarding the BGF proposal increased in August 2009 when the Burma Army occupied the Kokang region after several days of fighting with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, breaking a 20-year old ceasefire agreement. The fighting in Kokang also increased tensions in other cease-fire regions, with opposition forces putting their troops on high alert.[132] In November 2010, fighting resumed with some units of the ceasefire DKBA who refused to transform into BGFs. In March 2011, the Burma army attacked part of the Shan State Army-North, which had also refused to become a BGF, and now calls itself Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA). In June the same year fighting also broke out in Kachin State between government troops and the KIO.[133]

The growing tensions between cease-fire groups and the Burma Army have also had negative consequences for humanitarian and development activities of local and international NGOs in cease-fire regions, including life-saving programmes to address tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS, as well as community-based development projects to assist marginalised communities such as former opium farmers. It is unclear how the new military backed government that came into being in March 2011 will deal with those cease-fire groups who have rejected the BGF proposal. The former cease-fire KIO, NMSP and SSPP/SSA have allied themselves with the KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party and Chin National Front in a new United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and called for joint-peace talks with the government. The government has rejected this, and instead announced that armed groups should contact the newly formed regional governments individually. An escalation of conflict would further limit activities of civil society in these areas.

Civil Society in Exile

There are also civil society organisations set up among exile communities from Burma in neighbouring countries, especially in Thailand and, to a lesser extent, in India and Bangladesh. A number of these organisations carry out important activities that are currently impossible in the

Income generation project to make slippers

country. These include various ethnic-based human rights groups who report on abuses by the Burma army in their military campaigns in ethnic minority areas. The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) are based in Thailand, from where they produce monthly reports based on research in respectively Mon State and Shan State. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP - Burma), also based in Thailand, raises funds to assist political prisoners and their families in Burma through an underground network. The organisation also carries out international advocacy for the rights and release of all political prisoners in Burma. These organisations provide important information on the long-term suffering of local communities from war and political repression. Some of them, such as the SHRF and HURFOM, have also critically reported on abuses by armed opposition groups.

Some local organisations based in Thailand provide cross-border aid to IDP populations in Burma. These organisations rely on armed groups to provide access to conflict areas to deliver much-needed relief to vulnerable populations. However, there are some concerns about the way they operate. "Cross-border groups are not neutral, most being the welfare wings of the KNU or allied insurgent groups," concludes a recent TNI/BCN report on the Karen conflict. "However, some cross-border groups operate more independently; for example those working in the field of education".[134] Local organisations based in Burma delivering humanitarian assistance to IDP populations in conflict areas mostly operate in a low-key way through religious networks. Adequate monitoring and evaluation of all assistance to conflict areas, whether cross-border or from inside Burma, remains a challenge.

The majority of the exile organisations focus on international advocacy, and on promoting democratisation and human rights in Burma. These organisations have developed strong links with campaign groups in Asia, Europe, and the US. They have successfully campaigned against foreign investment in Burma, leading to the withdrawal of several international companies. These international campaigns have raised media attention on Burma, especially by making use of the internet, and kept Burma on the human rights agenda of the international community. Most of these exile organisations have advocated international isolation of Burma in the economic and political field based on the political positions of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi.

In contrast to civil society organisations based in the country, organisations in exile have had a disproportionate influence on international policy on Burma – especially within the EU and USA. Contacts with communities on the ground in Burma are often more limited. According to one author: "As the information and advocacy activities

of groups based in Burma have to remain low-profile, they tend to be under-appreciated by political lobbying groups, especially outside the country."[135]

The advocacy of Western campaign groups working for democracy and human rights in Burma has also heavily focussed on financial and other support for refugees and exile organisations in the border area with Thailand. There have been few efforts to lobby for support to civil society inside Burma by these groups. Some of them have advocated against humanitarian aid to Burma, as well as opposing international support for civil society organisations.[136] Some exile organisations from Burma, and some Western campaign groups supporting them, have even suggested that independent civil society does not exist in Burma. A 2006 report by the Network for Democracy and Development (NDD), which is run by Burman exiles and whose main office is based in Thailand, concluded: "Burma is a country devoid of civil society. Due to the rule of the military regime, all attempts to construct and maintain civil society organisations and institutions, and to create a culture of openness and independent thought, have been thwarted. Such organisations have largely faced elimination, or have been co-opted and thus voided of any societal influence."[137]

The research for this study overwhelmingly demonstrates otherwise. Burma has a vibrant and diverse civil society, with great influence across the country. The number of formal organisations has expanded rapidly in the last two decades. These organisations are able to operate independently from the government. Many of them have existed for decades.

There is clearly more at stake than politics in the position of some exile groups, as some donors have decreased funding for exile and Thai-border based groups in recent years, in favour of support for the growing number of organisations and activities in Burma. At the same time, the number of projects and organisations in exile has increased. Almost all of these are dependent on support from international donors. Furthermore, the existence and ability of local organisations to operate in Burma contradicts advocacy efforts by some of these organisations. They claim that it is impossible for people to organise themselves in Burma, and they have used this as an argument to support their call for the international isolation of Burma.

Many civil society organisations in Burma do not agree with this isolation strategy, because they think it is impractical and counterproductive, and because they feel sanctions and isolation are hurting ordinary people. They also argue that several important crises facing the country today, such as HIV/AIDS, chronic poverty and environmental problems, cannot wait to be resolved until there is political change. Furthermore, they say that political change should also come from the bottom, and that their projects and activities at the grassroots are helping achieve this. They view democratisation as a much broader process than just having elections and getting the opposition into power. Instead, many of them have initiated projects and activities that aim at democratising society in the country at large.[138]

In recent years an increasing number of representatives of civil society organisations working in the country have been able to voice their opinion at international forums. They have challenged the position and views of exile organisations. They have also become more outspoken in public, even though they must be careful what they say as they could face repercussions upon their return home. Nevertheless, calls for international isolation of Burma by exile organisations, especially those unaccompanied by any additional strategy on how to achieve socio-economic and political change in the country, are no longer left unchallenged by civil society groups based in the country. They are now putting forward alternative policy options, which are pragmatic, engaged and reflecting realities on the ground.

However, the situation is not uniform. There are an increasing number of local organisations in exile that acknowledge and appreciate the work of civil society organisations in Burma. This has resulted in increasing informal contacts and networks between them, especially on issues that they have in common. There are for instance a large number of local organisations who work on environmental issues from the Thai and China border regions. These areas have witnessed rapid destruction of natural forests by Thai and Chinese logging companies. They are also confronting other unsustainable natural resource extraction and projects including mining, hydropower dams, and large-scale agricultural concessions. These local organisations use a rights-based approach and bring out reports, but some of them also implement community development projects on the ground. They have reached out to local organisations in Burma, and sought cooperation and coordination on environmental and livelihood-based issues. "The space for engaging on environmental issues – broadly defined – in Burma has opened up considerably over the past decade," concludes a recent report by a coalition of local organisations based in Thailand. "A broad array of organisations is working on what can be considered 'environment' issues… As a reflection of growing strength and popularity, environmental organisations operating from inside and outside Burma are increasingly coming together as networks to foster inter-organisational cooperation and solidarity".[139]

Profile of Local Organisations in Burma

Diversity of Local Organisations

The diversity of local organisations in Burma is striking. This is a reflection of the cultural and ethnic landscape. It is also a testimony to the dynamics of social organising in the country. The number of local organisations is still growing, and they vary widely in size, structure, goal, and strategy. They have different and often complimentary strengths and weaknesses. They work on different issues, such as health, education, the environment, community development and gender.

Faith-based organisations are traditionally the most obvious form of social organising in the country, and are the bedrock of civil society in Burma. They include Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu initiatives, and usually have some paid and usually large numbers of voluntary staff. Christian church umbrella groups have various nationwide projects, including on health, education and community development. Numerous Buddhist monasteries provide education, and there are orphanages run by Buddhist nuns and monks. Both Muslim and Hindu organisations have provided free health care and other social welfare services. Faith based organisations often have significant social, cultural and educational influence in their communities, but are usually more conservative – especially the leadership – in their approaches and may, for instance, not condone promoting condom use or needle exchange projects. Such policies are crucial to prevent further spread of HIV/AIDS in their communities. However, faith-based organisations have larger networks in the country than other civil society groups, and are thus able to reach more people.

Associations are organisations that strictly focus on social and religious issues, and include township associations, rice donation groups and free funeral services. They are usually are well-established organisations with solid structures, and are closely embedded in society. Many have existed for decades, some dating back to the pre-independence era. They typically solely rely on local private donors to finance their activities. Most have good financial management and accountability systems in place.

Local NGOs are larger, more formal civil society organisations. Most of them have their main office in the former capital Yangon, and maintain project offices and staff in the field. Local NGOs often focus on more than one issue, such as the environment, community development, HIV/AIDS, and education. Almost all local NGOs were formed in the last two decades, and they rely on international donors. Local NGOs usually have relatively strong organisational structures and technical knowledge to set up and run projects. Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are small grassroots civil society organisations. They are typically run

by volunteers in their community, who are also the main beneficiaries. The large majority of them are based in rural areas and do not have an official office. These include, for instance, community-based micro-credit groups or village development committees. Many local (and international) NGOs work with and support CBOs, by providing training and small funds or loans. Traditionally, CBOs in villages are religious based, and activities are financed by the community. Recent years have seen an increase in the formation of CBOs as part of projects implemented by local and international NGOs, who also provide funds.

Self-help groups consist of people who are facing similar problems or conditions, who voluntarily come together to share experiences and challenges, and try to address these together. These include groups of people living with HIV groups, men having sex with men, and sex workers. Typical activities include trying to address stigmatisation and discrimination, income generation projects, and care and counselling of group members. Many of these initiatives are new, and originate out of projects run by local and international NGOs. Self-help groups are in a better position to identify the problems and challenges their communities face in their daily lives than other local and international organisations.

Professional organisations consist mostly of ex-government servants with a focus on one thematic area, such as health. They tend to be led by high-ranking ex-government officials, with local staff consisting of practitioners. They often have nationwide coverage, but tend to be bureaucratic in nature. Although often closely allied to government policies, some of them operate relatively independently from day-to-day government control, especially at the local level. They rely on support from the government (often in-kind, such as office space) and on membership fees for their income. Because of their relation with the government, only a small number have been able to solicit funds from international donors.

Strategies and Activities

The activities of the majority of local organisations in Burma can best be described as charity-oriented and concentrating on social welfare. However, an increasing number have attempted to develop the capacities of communities to deal better with the many challenges they face. There have also been attempts by local organisations to look beyond the communities they work in and try to influence and change government policies at the local and national level. There are very few local organisations in Burma that have become part of global movements, but some have become part of regional networks. Opportunities for them to attend regional and international meetings have increased in the last decade, although in absolute number this is still very limited.

Member of drug user self-help group at needle exchange project

According to the 2004 Civil Society Study, most local NGOs worked in the sectors of health (25 NGOs), religious affairs (22 NGOs), social welfare (21 NGOs), water and sanitation (15 NGOs), HIV/AIDS (14 NGOs) and agriculture (12 NGOs). The study also concluded that many local NGOs were engaged in charity and social welfare, with few focussing on advocacy and rights-based approaches. CBOs were found to be primarily working on issues related to religion, with some others also working on social welfare (30%) and education (26%).[140]

The 2009 Directory of Local Non-Government Organisations in Myanmar confirms this picture (see Annex II). There are several old peoples' homes, mainly targeting the aged poor population in the cities, and a number of orphanages. There are also numerous local NGOs aiming to assist blind people, people with leprosy, and handicapped and deaf people.[141] Various faith-based organisations have initiated orphanages. The Aye Yeik Mon Nunnery in Mandalay has been running an orphanage for girls since 1963, and has over 150 orphans under its care. "The school provides accommodation and all facilities up to 10th standard. After that most girls will have to find their own job, like in the textile sector", said a nun working at the Nunnery. "The school will still provide accommodation for them. They leave if they get married."[142]

Other charity-oriented organisations include the large number of funeral associations that exist throughout the country. The Byahmaso Humanitarian Aid Association, for instance, which was founded in Mandalay in 1998, provides free funeral services for the poor, including transport, provisions of coffins, and payments for cemetery and funeral expenses. During 1998-2006 the organisation had assisted with over 36,000 funeral arrangements. By 2006 it had also supported medical expenses for over 14,000 poor patients worth a total amount of some 90,000 US dollars.[143] Income is all from private donations. The organisation was officially registered with the government in 2001. "In the whole country there are maybe over 100 organisations like us", said a representative of the Byahmaso Humanitarian Aid Association, and in Mandalay municipal area there are 17 similar associations." [144]

There are a wide range of local organisations providing free health services. The Muslim Free Hospital, for instance, provides free medical care to the poor, regardless of their religion. There are various other faith-based groups, including Buddhist, Christian and Hindu, with similar projects.

There are an increasing number of local NGOs who are responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Burma. Apart from providing services, these organisations are also engaged in raising awareness and policy advocacy towards the government as well as international organisations. Examples are the Ratana Metta Organisation and the Pyi Gyi Khin Development Cooperative Society and faith-based organisations such as the Karuna Myanmar Social Services and the Cholia Muslim Religious Fund Trust. The number of self-help groups of people living with HIV/AIDS has also increased in recent years. 'Phoenix' is a nationwide network of self-help groups of people living with HIV/AIDS, initiated by people who are receiving ARV treatment from MSF-Holland.

Monasteries have traditionally played a central role in education for young children, especially in rural areas. With the collapse of the education system in Burma after 1962, monasteries have increasingly become involved in education beyond the primary level. There are a great number of monastic education centres, such as the Phaung Daw Oo Monastery in Mandalay and its affiliate the Thonehtat Parahita Monastic Education School in Yangon, promoting child centred education. The Phaung Daw Oo Monastery provides education to poor children. The school started in 1993, and during the 2006/2007 school year it had 145 teachers and over 7,000 students. It promotes child-centred education in the country and has established a network with other monasteries.[145] Other examples include Loka Ahlinn, a local organisation that has initiated community education projects.

There are also a growing number of local NGOs working on the environment. Some of them are formed by ex-

government officials from the Ministry of Forestry, such as the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA) and the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA). They have been quite outspoken on environmental issues in public. Other organisations include the Friends of the Rainforest of Myanmar (FORM), the Renewable Energy Association Myanmar (REAM) and ECODEV. The Mangrove Environmental Rehabilitation Network (MERN) consists of 15 local NGOs that aim to restore Mangrove forests in Burma's coastal regions, combined with food security projects for the local population. MERN has also created the first local trust fund in the country.

In Mandalay there are also several local organisations working on environmental issues. These include the Mandalay YMCA, the Methodist Church of Upper Myanmar, Sein Yaung So Activities, and the Asia Ahlin Foundation. Activities include tree planting and campaigns against plastic bags. In Yangon there are several newly-formed youth groups working on environmental issues. A group of eight of them formed the Youth Environment Network, focussing on raising awareness and community mobilisation. The Rakhine Coastal Region Conservation Association was set up in 1987, and implements mangrove conservation and replantation in Rakhine State, as well as community forestry projects, disaster prevention and awareness-raising activities.[146] In Kachin State, the Myitkyina YMCA has carried out several projects to raise environmental awareness.

An increasing number of local organisations work on raising gender awareness and respect for women's rights. Several women's organisations have a long history. These include the Yangon Karen Baptist Women Association (formed in 1857), the Women's Department of the Myanmar Baptist Convention (formed in 1975), the Women's Department of the Myanmar Council of Churches (formed in the 1970s), the National Young Women's Christian Association of Myanmar (YWCA – inaugurated in 1951). Many others have formed recently, such as the Colourful Girls (working for teenage girls formed in 2008); Yadana Mahar (monastic education formed in 2008); Karen Women Action Group (KWAG); and the Myanmar Chapter of the Women Federation for World Peace. All of them are members of the Women's Organisations Network of Myanmar (WON), formed in 2009 to promote solidarity of women and help strengthen women's organisations. WON has 27 members and meets once a month. WON advocates women rights and plans to carry out research on women and education, as it found that many women are illiterate.[147] There are several other women's groups and initiatives to promote gender equality. The Thingaha Gender Working Group was initiated by SwissAid in 2003, but later became an independent group. It aims to promote gender equality and social justice in society.[148] The NGO Gender Group was formed in 2003, and grew out of a informal discussion platform for international and local staff of NGOs. The organisation is now providing trainings on gender is-

Pig raising project

sues, responded to Cyclone Nargis, and is implementing rehabilitation programmes in the Irrawaddy Delta. The recently formed Gender Development Initiative (GDI) works on topics related to the UN Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The 'Other Civil Society'

Civil society is often narrowly defined as organisations working on traditional development-orientated issues. A study on civil society in Burma, for instance, identifies the following sectors: education, health, religious, and social welfare, water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS, agriculture, credit, emergency, environment, nutrition, general capacity building, conflict resolution, and 'other'.[149]

Such definitions focus mainly on formal organisations, leaving out many informal traditional local initiatives. Furthermore, they exclude a wide range of other social initiatives. There are many other local actors who are independent from the government, such as in the private sector, media, and art and cultural sector, that seek inclusion in civil society networks and discussions. These offer opportunities to reach larger and different audiences, as well as improve the strategies and techniques of current ef-

forts by local actors. These initiatives are defined as having socio-economic goals and objectives that benefit the community, and which are not for profit.

Media

Decades of censorship and repression, combined with government mismanagement of the economy and the public sector, have had a devastating impact on the media in Burma. As a result, the media sector in Burma is weak. However, in recent years the space for private media has grown. The only independent media in Burma are a growing number of weekly journals and monthly magazines. Although everything they publish is subject to censorship, these media outlets are the only local source of independent information. There are currently about 180 weekly magazines, mostly covering sports, international news, and local news; and some 160 monthly magazines, mainly focussing on fashion, celebrities, religion, and short stories and literature. Their number is still growing. In early 2011, the new government announced it would relax some of its regulations for local media.[150]

Publications in ethnic languages are limited due to government restrictions. Apart from those of religious or-

Monastic school

ganisations, the only regular non-Burman publication is a Chinese language weekly journal. There are some other publications run by ethnic nationalities, but mostly in Burman language. Some irregular publications have sections in ethnic languages, such as the publication of the Rakhine Thahaya Association. The Kachin Manao Committee publishes a newspaper in Kachin language during the annual Manao Festival.

Some of these journals and magazines play an important role in educating the people on a wide-range of social-economic issues, health (especially HIV/AIDS), education opportunities, and the environment. They deliberately target a young audience by writing about celebrities, sports, and fashion, but include articles about socio-economic issues. Myanmar Dana ('Myanmar Prosperity') is a monthly magazine, featuring articles on products, but also on culture, arts and health issues such as HIV/AIDS and the medicine market. Beauty Magazine, a monthly publication on fashion and celebrities, also features regular articles promoting environmental awareness. Teen Magazine targets young people with articles about soap operas and celebrities, but also includes information on health and other social issues to prevent stigmatisation and discrimination of marginalised groups.

These media outlets could advise civil society organisations on improving their communication to the general public. Vice versa, the media could learn from civil society on important social issues, and improve the quality of information and analysis in their publications. Some efforts have been made in this regard, especially in the form of trainings for local journalists, but there is an opportunity to expand on this. This will allow them to provide their readers with crucial information on the challenges that they face in their lives.

Arts and Literature

There are a wide range of cultural, artist and writers groups in Burma. These are usually run by volunteers and rarely have offices or other facilities. Some are interested or already are involved in activities beyond their membership and the subjects they work on professionally. Writers groups have, for instance, started work on HIV/AIDS care and prevention. Informal artists groups have raised funds by selling works of arts donated by members to support emergency responses to the Indian Ocean Tsunami that struck southern Burma in December 2004. The Yangon-based Free Funeral Association, for instance, was set up by Kyaw Thu, a famous actor. The massive response to the devastation brought about by Cyclone Nargis also included many of these organisations, and some new linkages between traditional civil society organisations and these initiatives have recently been made. But there are clearly more opportunities for cooperation and coordination.

Private Sector Initiatives

Representatives from the private sector carry out social activities and established links with local organisations. The Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS (MBCA) is a local organisation set up in 2001 to address the impact of HIV on the population. The organisation encourages business leaders to initiate business responses to HIV in their workplaces. The MBCA is registered as a local NGO with the Ministry of Home Affairs since 2003. It addresses the drug-related spread of HIV in the Shan State, one of the worst hit areas, by working in the transport sector, including among truck drivers and loaders. Said a representative of MBCA: "We want to have local business involvement in kind, cash or man hours. Our targets are businessmen and workers and their families."[151] Like many local organisations, the MBCA also responded to Cyclone Nargis by providing relief including reconstruction of houses and helping individuals recover their livelihoods. According to a representative of the organisation: "We are a business NGO. We operate like an NGO, but we are run by the business sector." The MBCA feels that both sectors have comparative strengths and weaknesses. "Business people say the civil society sector just talks and asks for money. Civil society people say business people only care about money. But business and civil society should come and work together", said a representative of MBCA.[152]

The Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association (MWEA) is another example of the business sector getting involved in social activities. It has projects on health and education for girls. Myanmar Egress was founded by several businessmen as a training centre. The organisation provides various long and short term courses on a wide range of issues. Like most local organisations, Myanmar Egress also responded to Cyclone Nargis, and set up the Nargis Action Group to coordinate its efforts. There are numerous other local initiatives by the private sector that promote social change.

International Support for Civil Society in Burma

The increasing numbers of local organisations and the growing space for civil society in Burma has generated a greater interest from the international community to work with and support local organisations in Burma. This includes donors based inside and outside of the country, as well as various international NGOs and UN agencies with a presence on the ground. They have supported a wide range of local organisations for different reasons. The interest in working with civil society has further grown since Cyclone Nargis, when the military government initially limited access to the Irrawaddy Delta for international NGOs and UN agencies, who therefore came to rely on local NGOs to reach the most affected areas.

This increased interest of the international community raises a number of important issues. Until recently, few international actors developed a strategy or had a mandate to support civil society in Burma in its own right. While the new interest is a positive development, it generates a number of concerns and questions regarding how these relationships can be developed to ensure these are mutually beneficial, and do not only serve donor or programme needs of international organisations.

Why Support Civil Society?

There are several arguments why it is important to support civil society in Burma. These include promoting citizen participation and pluralism; poverty alleviation and effective delivery of development programs; and the social empowerment of particular groups.

Promoting citizen participation and pluralism

Decades of civil war and military rule in Burma have had a severe impact on the ability and space for people to organise themselves. This is not only the case in central Burma in government-controlled areas, but also in areas under the control of ethnic armed groups, most of which have signed cease-fire agreements with the military government. In such a climate, democratic traditions and decision-making processes have been almost absent.

Almost all organisations in Burma are characterised by a top-down and hierarchical leadership style. There is little or no room for local communities to influence or take part in decision making processes that affect their lives. As a result, decisions in most organisations are made by one person. When differences of opinion or conflict arise, this often leads to a split in the organisation rather than a compromise. Furthermore, conflict is often managed (and hardly solved) by use, or threat of use, of force.

Civil society is an essential element of democracy and pluralism and, as such, is an important agent for social and political change. At the moment, any activity that is seen as directly political is not allowed by the government. However, there are many examples of local organisations that have successfully promoted policy change, mainly through social and economic issues. Few of these initiatives have been coordinated efforts; many of them, although not all, have taken place at the local level only. However, the space for independent local organisations to operate in Burma is expanding, partly as a result of their own efforts. The space for policy engagement by civil society with the new government, headed by President Thein Sein, has also increased.

Therefore, it is important to occupy the existing space for civil society in Burma and try to expand it, not only as a short-term strategy to provide international humanitarian and development aid directly to local communities, but also as a part of a long-term strategy and process towards a more plural and democratic society.

Poverty alleviation and effective delivery of development programs

Civil society organisations are in a position to provide goods and services to marginalised and isolated populations and geographical areas in situations where the state is unwilling or unable to do so. Civil society organisations are also able to reach isolated and war affected areas that international organisations cannot access, due to government restrictions and the ongoing armed conflict. These include cease-fire areas as well as areas with ongoing fighting. These areas have very vulnerable population groups, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Involving local NGOs is also an opportunity to mobilise communities around the challenges they face. Promoting and strengthening community participation is important as it enables people to participate in decision-making processes that have tremendous impact on their lives. This is not only a short-term strategy to provide international humanitarian and development aid directly to local communities in a transparent and accountable way, but also as a part of a long-term strategy and process towards sustainability and self-reliance.

Civil society organisations, especially at the local level, are also often in a better position to make judgements about the needs and priorities of local communities. A large number of local NGOs, CBOs and self-help groups are already involved in providing a wide range of services, but lack resources – both financial as well as technical – to improve and/or increase their activities. They often have a better knowledge and understanding of local conditions, local security situations and how to deal with local authorities.

Involving local communities and the organisations that aim to represent them could also contribute to making programmes of international organisations more transparent and accountable to those it seeks to assist. Forming partnerships with civil society organisations is an opportunity to disseminate information about the activities, goals and achievements of international organisations to local communities and to solicit feedback.

Social empowerment of particular groups

Civil society organisations also function as interest groups of certain populations such as ethnic groups promoting their culture, language and literacy or groups of people facing common challenges, such as sex workers. By working together they are able to protect and promote their interests, advocate alternative policies and raise awareness among the general population.

With civilian job opportunities are very limited in the country, working for a civil society organisation has also become a career opportunity for many people. It is also an opportunity to learn and have access to further study and exposure trips within the country and abroad, as well as to network with international organisations. In a country that has been shut off from the outside world for decades, these are important opportunities.

Existing Support

By the end of the 1990s, there were only a few international NGOs with a presence in Burma with a specific strategy or mandate to strengthen civil society in its own right. These included SwissAid, focussing on supporting local NGOs carrying out community-based development with small grants and trainings. The Burnet Institute and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance helped strengthen local organisations working in the field of HIV/AIDS. There were also some international organisations based abroad supporting civil society in Burma. The Thai-based Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) played an important role by organising trainings on democratic leadership and peace building for ethnic civil society leaders from Burma, mainly through religious networks. The Human Development Initiative (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), that was implemented in the 1990s, also supported the development of local organisations by funding local projects and training local staff. Several local project staff of the HDI can now be found as leaders of Burma's civil society movement.

Although through the 1990s there were an increasing number of international NGOs that worked with civil society organisations in Burma, many of them initially engaged in partnerships with local organisations to implement their project and reach target populations. Some of them added

trainings for the local NGOs and CBOs they worked with. Civil society organisations thus became 'service providers' to international NGOs.

As the number of international NGOs increased, demand for staff with management and other technical skills grew. Therefore in 2000 a number of international NGOs created the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) to develop human resources in Burma. Initially, participants in trainings provided by CBI consisted of local staff of international NGOs. However, after a few years the trainings were also opened up to others, and since then there has been a significant increase in participation by staff from local NGOs. Training courses at CBI are designed and initiated after consultation with international and local NGOs. Initially, CBI also hosted the separate two-monthly coordination meeting of LNGOs and of INGOs, as well as the joint coordination meeting between local and international NGOs. These are now hosted by the Local Resource Centre (see below). However, CBI mainly focuses on training staff rather than on strengthening of organisations.

The concept of an international consortium to support local organisations in Burma emerged during a meeting in early 2005, that brought together a number of international agencies interested in improving support to local groups. A direct outcome was the creation of a consortium of international NGOs who set up a fund to support small initiatives of emerging local organisations, and to support these with other activities. This initiative came to be known as Paung Ku ('Bridge'). Apart from being a small grants fund, Paung Ku provides additional non-financial support such as various informal trainings and advice.

The Local Resource Centre (LRC) was set up in May 2008, in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, by a group of international donors and NGOs. It was created to support local organisations in their emergency relief efforts, by linking them up with international donors, providing access to information and facilitating practical support on project management. LRC tries to improve coordination between international and local organisations, and carries out advocacy on behalf of local organisations. The LRC has provided several trainings and currently facilitates weekly meetings of local organisations. The LRC has published several studies on civil society.[153]

The Pyoe Pin ('Green Shoots') project was set up in 2007 by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to increase opportunities for Burma's people to engage in decision making processes affecting their welfare, livelihoods and governance. The project works with local organisations, and supports different groups to work together around issues of common interest. The project has focussed on supporting different networks of local organisations working on HIV/AIDS, and has also supported local initiatives on informal education, community forestry, disaster risk management, as well as direct support to local

organisations responding to the suffering caused by Cyclone Nargis.

There are also an increasing number of international NGOs with an operational presence in the country with a specific mandate to strengthen civil society. These organisations not only provide funding to local organisations, but also include various capacity building activities including on financial management, monitoring and evaluation, institutional development and networking.

Needs of Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations in Burma have various needs, which are all equally important and not mutually exclusive. They are discussed below. Current support for civil society is heavily focussed on organisations with an office in the former capital Yangon. Most other support activities for local organisations also takes place in Yangon. There is a great need to expand these activities to other parts of the country.

Appropriate Funding

The main challenge for those wishing to strengthen civil society in Burma is how to support a growing number of relatively small organisations who need relatively small amount of funds. Presently it is mainly the Christian church umbrella organisations and professional associations which can claim to have a nation-wide presence. There are also a limited number of successful local NGOs that have established long-standing relationships with international development organisations and donors, and are able to meet international donor requirements.

However, the large majority of local organisations consist of relatively small NGOs, CBOs and self-help groups. They often do not have strong organisational structures, and are unable to handle substantial funds and implement large scale programmes, produce project reports and have accounting systems in place that meet international standards. International organisations have found it difficult to support smaller local organisations, as it is relatively more expensive to manage these projects. Some donor organisations also do not have a presence on the ground in Burma, which would be needed to adequately administer such projects. They would rather fund a small number of big projects than a large number of small projects.

International organisations should improve and expand existing funding mechanisms to fill this gap. Existing initiatives such as Paung Ku are important, and more such support for civil society is needed, especially in areas outside Yangon. This could include expanding existing initiatives with regional offices in other parts of the country, or creating new funding mechanisms in these areas. It could also

Local NGO providing awareness on HIV/AIDS

include supporting the formation of new - and strengthening networks of existing - civil society organisations. Furthermore, acquiring official government registration and a bank account in the name of the organisations – a prerequisite for many international donors - is a large obstacle for local organisations. Some flexibility needs to be built in donor programmes to address these challenges.

Local organisations generally prefer to be funded directly by back-donors, rather than through international NGOs. According to a representative of a Karen organisation: "In some cases, our funding comes through three international organisations before it reaches us, each of them taking their cut. The money just goes around and around."[154] However, there are also cases where international NGOs match funding with various support activities, and thus provide an important added value addressing the needs of local organisations.

Another concern of local organisations is the lack of access to core funding and prospects for long-term funding. Most support for local organisations tends to be on a project basis, and often does not include overhead costs. This limits the possibilities for local organisations to further develop. Local NGOs, especially the smaller ones, are also in no position to advance funds. While it is appreciated that donors do not provide all activity costs at the start of a project, few local NGOs can afford to wait for the last instalment after

completion of all activities and submission of final project reports.

Capacity Building

Apart from small grants, what is mostly needed to develop civil society in Burma is support to strengthen local organisations and their staff. There are many new local organisations who have a weak organisational structure. Although civil society organisations often have committed staff and are able to reach local communities better than international agencies, they usually lack technical skills to provide quality services to the communities they work in.

Many local organisations say that their main weakness and most urgent capacity building needs are related to financial management. This is important also for international organisations supporting civil society organisations, in order to be able to meet their demands on accountability and transparency. Apart from financial management, local NGOs also cite trainings in project management and project reporting as urgent needs.

Most support activities for local organisations take place in Yangon. Relatively few initiatives have taken place up-country. For people based in other states and regions it is difficult to participate in trainings in Yangon, as it is ex-

pensive and time consuming. Most training is also in Burmese which excludes people in ethnic areas who often do not speak Burmese well.

It is crucial that processes of strengthening civil society are participatory, made relevant to each organisation and their context, and carried out with a long-term perspective. The focus should be on learning processes through trainings, workshops, exchange and networking.

Institutional Development

Decades of conflict and military rule have caused deep divisions and mistrust in Burma's society. In such a context, cooperation and coordination are great challenges. As a re-

sult many initiatives by civil society organisations operate in isolation. This prevents them from learning from each other, sharing information, building trust, and working towards a common goal. There is therefore a great need to stimulate networking, cooperation and coordination between civil society organisations, international organisations and the government.

Initially, most of the networks of local organisations were sector-oriented, and were generally exclusive of each other. However, there has been an increase in cooperation and coordination between local organisations. A large number of different local networks have been formed, especially following the response by local NGOs to Cyclone Nargis. This is another testimony to the development of civil society in the country (see Appendix II).

The Free Funeral Service Society

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The first coordination meeting for NGOs in Burma was organised by international agencies, and initially few local NGOs participated. When their numbers grew, and more international NGOs entered the country, it was decided to have separate meetings for local and international organisations. The local NGOs coordination meeting resulted in the formation of the Myanmar NGO Network (MNN), which was formally set up in 2009. MNN now has over 80 members, and aims to stimulate cooperation and coordination between local NGOs, disseminate information, and carry out advocacy toward the government on behalf of local organisations.

According to the MNN, the formation of the Contingency Plan Working Group (CPWG) is among their most significant achievements. It was set up as a coalition of local NGOs to draft a contingency plan to respond to various small scale natural disasters. In October 2010 the CPWG took part in a workshop attended by officials from Ministry of Social Welfare. This meeting was seen as a new advocacy opportunity for local NGOs with the government, to share their activities and plans for disaster responses.[155]

An example of an early coordination attempt by local NGOs is the Local NGOs (HIV/AIDS) Network Initiative Group, a network of 64 civil society organisations. It was initiated in 2005 with support from the International HIV/AIDS Alliance and the Burnet Institute. Apart from organising regular coordination meetings, the group made a membership directory. The group plans to strengthen its members, and to mediate between donors and civil society groups. The group is now know as the National NGOs Network (3N). There are many other newly formed networks, such as the Mangrove and Environmental Rehabilitation Network (MERN), the Women's Organisations Network of Myanmar (WON), and the Myanmar Youth Forum. Most of the networking still takes place between local NGOs based in the former capital Yangon.

However, new networks also include local organisations in ethnic regions of the country. In Mon State, for instance, the Mon-region Social Development Network (MSDN) was set up by 15 small traditional NGOs. In Kachin State, the Relief Action Network for IDPs and Refugees (RANIR) was set up by local NGOs to help civilians fleeing the fighting between the KIO and the Burma Army following the breakdown of the cease-fire in June 2011 (see Annex II).

Equal Partnership

Civil society organisations generally see the increase in the number of international organisations working with local partners as a positive development. However, this has also generated some concerns by local actors, mainly about the inequalities in relationships between international and local actors.

A study carried out in 2010 concluded that international NGOs are "actively raising the standards of how to work in partnership", but that "most local NGOs sense a lack of equal power in the partnership." Partnerships were less effective due to "frequent changes in procedures and personnel, language and cultural barriers, disagreement over how funding is allocated between agencies, international NGOs' lack of flexible internal procedures that are conductive to partnership, and donors and international NGOs who cluster around or compete over the same local NGOs."[156]

It is crucial that all support for local organisations is implemented in close cooperation and coordination with them. Local organisations need to be closely involved in decision-making about projects and programmes aimed at supporting them. Although it is questionable whether donor-partner relations can be truly equal, there is room for improvement.

This requires establishing trust and sincerity in relationships. In a country like Burma these are huge challenges, as local NGOs as well as international agencies and donors need to act carefully to ensure the safety and security of their staff and projects. However, more equal partnerships will only ultimately emerge if information sharing about activities and future plans improves.

There are also concerns over the role of foreigners in civil society. "Organisations that are created by international organisations or foreign individuals are not local civil society", said the director of a local NGO. "Allowing these organisations to compete for funding with real local NGOs is not fair as there is a significant gap in human resources. Also the main objectives of strengthening civil society and promoting local initiative can be lost". [157]

International back donors should where possible establish direct relationships with local organisations, if necessary using new mechanisms to ensure these organisations can meet donor demands. For example, local NGOs found the requirements of the Three Diseases Fund too complicated. Following a study commissioned by the Fund, it created a special round for local organisations. In January 2009, eight local NGOs received direct grants of US$70,000 each for one year.[158]

Partnerships can and should be diverse, recognising and addressing the diversity of civil society in Burma. The dilemma for international NGOs wishing to support the development of civil society in the country is that those local organisations that have the best track record in delivering project outputs (for instance, on health or education) are usually the better-established NGOs. However, these are few in numbers and are also the ones that many other donors would like to support. The challenge is to support the majority of local organisations - which are smaller and less well established - to grow and develop their capacity. There

have been some meetings between donors and civil society organisations to discuss some of these issues.[159]

Accountability and Good Governance

The growing international support for civil society has resulted in increasing demands for monitoring and evaluation, and in introducing international standards on accountability, such as the Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management (HAP Standard) and SPHERE.[160] This increased further following the emergency response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and Cyclone Giri in 2010.

Monitoring and evaluation is important to ensure transparency and accountability. It is also crucial to measure progress, analyse strengths and weaknesses, and make necessary adjustments. However, at present many local organisations are unable to meet the standards of international donors. International organisations should complement their expectations and demands on accountability and transparency with activities to support local organisations on these issues. Demands for financial accountability in Burma should be realistic, given the fact that most local organisations in the country are relatively new and operate in a difficult environment. Monitoring and evaluation should thus focus on capacity building rather than assessments of accounting failures.

International organisations should also develop a wider concept of monitoring and evaluation. They should encourage their partners to not only focus on quantitative indicators measuring tangible outputs, but more on quali-

Accounting department of local NGO

tative indicators measuring outputs that capture process. Says a local staff member working for an international organisation: "We need to find ways to measure how civil society has been effective. We need to look at indicators; not how many patients they treat, but how they are conducting the project, and their relationship with the community."[161]

Local groups in Burma have a long history of establishing accountability systems. This is especially the case with religious organisations managing private donations from the public. Other examples are the various rice donations groups in the country. The Mandalay Malunze Sanlun Athin has 306 branches across the country, and distributes rice to monks and religious people. The organisation keeps detailed records of all donations it receives in kind (rice) and cash, and of how the rice is distributed, using strict criteria.[162] It may be more effective working with existing systems instead of solely relying on accountability standards from abroad.

Equally important is to allow and encourage local NGOs to focus more on their relationships with the communities they work in, and relatively less on reporting back to the donor. A 2009 study on effective community-based responses to Cyclone Nargis found that village committees "seemed more concerned with upward rather than with downward accountability", and that "committees and communities were not aware of their right to complain."[163] Similarly, another study suggested that the "emphasis on detailed auditing and upward reporting – while attempting to increase accountability of local groups – may actually undermine it."[164]

Opinion polls and other community feedback mechanisms can be useful tools to measure such processes and strengthen the accountability of civil society organisations to the communities they work in.[165] The Three Diseases Fund set up a community feedback mechanism in 2009, in cooperation with its international and local implementing partners. The Myanmar Health Assistance Association (MHAA), for instance, received 687 feedback letters via suggestions boxes placed in project areas in its malaria prevention and treatment project in Rakhine State. According the MHAA project manager: "When we were setting up the feedback mechanism, we had no idea how much this activity was going to motivate us to do our best for the communities."[166] A 2010 study gathered responses from communities towards local and international NGOs working in two townships in the Irrawaddy Delta affected by Cyclone Nargis. Responses included the need for improved communication between beneficiaries and local and international NGOs, and to introduce feedback mechanisms.[167]

Limitations and Risks

Clearly, strengthening civil society is not the answer to all of Burma's myriad problems. Despite the growth in num-

ber of local organisations and increasing space for them to operate, civil society is still limited in terms of what it can deliver. There are many serious obstacles from the government, interfering in people's ability to organise themselves.

The structure and management of local organisations mirrors society, which is often top-down and undemocratic in nature, and dependent on one leader or visionary founder. For young people in these organisations, there often is little space to challenge opinions or discuss decisions made by senior leaders. "Just because we are civil society does not mean we are better than the government," says a local NGO worker with long experience on civil society. "We grew up in the same environment and the same system. Sometimes I am tired of hearing only that the government has to change. We should start with looking at ourselves. We have not moved beyond the founder-leader phase."[168]

Furthermore, 'civil society' has become the new buzz-word in Burma, and there is a danger of placing too much hope and expectations on what it is and what it can do. Throwing too much money at it without adequate support may also be counter-productive and may create conflict within organisations and networks. As a result of such problems, some organisations have split or have even been dissolved. International donors and agencies should look to build on what is already in Burma rather than impose external models. There should be space for a 'Burmese way to civil society'. "Different groups can have different development models," says a local source with long term experience in working with civil society groups. "Do not stick them into one box. This does not mean people can do whatever they like. Not all traditional practices are rights based or gender sensitive, for instance. But we can use some local models."[169] An international NGO worker added: "I am very concerned what we are doing by putting everything into our framework. We are harming civil society."[170]

It is also important not to turn every local initiative into a project with proposals and external funds. Many local initiatives started as volunteer groups. Nowadays, a lot of international support focuses on project proposal writing and project cycle management, and how to report back to donors on how funding is spent. But there are other ways to support local organisations that do not involve financing them, and thus leaving their original structures intact. Said a local source working for an international donor: "A recent study found that there are some 270 local organisations working on HIV/AIDS in the country. The majority of them are not funded, but receive donations and work with volunteers. This is a positive thing because it is more sustainable." [171]

The Sein Yaung So Activities group in Mandalay, for instance, solely relies on local donations, which are used to plant trees and to raise environmental awareness. "We have no experience with receiving outside funds," said a member of the organisation. "Even if someone would like to fund

us, we need to discuss this first within our organisation and make a collective decision about it."[172] There are many other local initiatives that solely rely on local donations. The Asia Ahlin Foundation in Pyin Oo Lwin, for instance, has a working group of thirty members to collect donations door-to-door, raising about 16 lakh kyat (approximately 2.100 US dollar) per month. The funds are used to provide free medical as well as funeral services to migrant workers employed at construction sites in the area.[173]

Humanitarian assistance does not operate in a vacuum. In countries like Burma, international aid is given in the context of a longstanding and complicated conflict. International organisations should be careful to ensure that their support for local organisations does not negatively impact on the conflict in the country, and should adhere to the 'do no harm principles'. According to a famous study on international aid: "When international assistance is given in the context of a violent conflict, it becomes a part of that context and thus also of the conflict... When given in conflict settings, aid can reinforce, exacerbate, and prolong conflict; it can also help to reduce tensions and strengthen people's capacities to disengage from fighting and find peaceful options for solving problems."[174]

In a divided country like Burma, it is vital to support activities that bring people together rather than further divide them. Conflict also takes place between and within ethnic groups, as well as between religious groups. A good understanding of the conflict and the conflict actors is therefore crucial. Civil society is not conflict neutral. Working only with one ethnic or religious group may aggravate existing – or create – new tensions and conflict. It is important to realise that different local organisations have different strategies in how to deal with conflict, and how to engage with armed groups and the military government.

Many foreign donors and international organisations have established close working relations, for instance, with Karen Christian groups, but much less so with Karen Buddhist organisations, who represent the majority of the Karen population. This is because Karen Christians often speak good English, have offices in the former capital Yangon, and have good networks with international organisations through church connections. Such developments raise further suspicion that foreigners only want to work with a Christian Sgaw Karen elite, further dividing Karen communities.[175]

Good support for civil society could make a positive contribution to conflict resolution, and contribute to reducing tensions and strengthening capacity of all actors to disengage from violent ways and move towards negotiations and reconciliation. Several local organisations in ethnic regions, where most of the conflict is taking place, have taken initiatives to this effect.

Conclusion

Social organising has a long history in Burma. For centuries people have carried out social and religious activities together, mostly through informal religious Buddhist networks. Faith-based organisations are the bedrock of the civil society in Burma. Other traditional organisations include rice donation and township associations. The first formal organisations were created after the arrival of foreign Christian missionaries.

Civil society in Burma therefore existed long before it was 'discovered' by international NGOs and Westerners studying the topic. These local initiatives were not noticed earlier partly because they did not fit standard Western criteria or definitions, and partly because these local organisations were self-sufficient and not looking for international financial and other support.

Despite decades of military rule and civil war, Burma has a dynamic and diverse civil society. There are a wide variety of informal groups and formal organisations, reflecting ethnic and cultural diversity. These organisations don't just exist in an authoritarian state, but have a significant amount of autonomy in deciding how to run their organisations and implement their projects.

Civil society in Burma has grown significantly in the past two decades. Most of these are formal local organisations. In ethnic regions, the main impetus for this development was a series of cease-fire agreements in the 1990s, between the military government and armed ethnic opposition groups. Civil society in Burma further developed to fill the gap created by declining government services. New threats to natural resources and the environment in Burma's border regions, caused mainly by regional trade and investment, further stimulated their growth. Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, the space for civil society further expanded. A wide range of civil society actors, including ethnic church based organisations, played a key role in response to the devastating impact of the cyclone.

Local organisations have adopted different strategies toward the authoritarian government. While some prefer to work under the radar, a growing number of local organisations are engaging with the government. One of the main challenges is to get official registration from the government, which until now few have been able to accomplish. Many local organisations in Burma are charity-oriented and concentrate on social welfare. However, an increasing number of them work to develop the capacities of communities to make them self-reliant. Some local organisations are also engaged in advocacy towards the government on health and environmental issues, for example.

Local organisations are not just using the available space, but they are also actively enlarging the available space and creating new space. In many instances, this has involved

building trust and mutual understanding with national and local authorities, and by showing that civil society is not a threat to the government but instead can be an asset and complement the role of the government.

Civil society is an essential element of democracy and pluralism, and as such is an important agent for social and political change. Civil society organisations in Burma can provide goods and services to certain populations and/or geographical areas in situations where the state is unwilling or unable to do so. They are also able to reach isolated and war affected areas that are restricted to international organisations. Civil society organisations also function as interest groups of certain populations, including ethnic groups promoting their own culture, language and literacy, religious groups preserving old religious texts and structures, and groups of people facing a common threat or problem.

There are a growing number of international NGOs that work with civil society organisations. Initially they engaged in partnerships with local organisations as implementers for their projects. However, more now have an operational presence in the country, often with a specific mandate to strengthen civil society. They not only provide funding to local organisations, but also various trainings and other support activities.

The main challenge for those wishing to strengthen civil society in Burma is how to support a growing number of relatively small local organisations, most of which have limited capacity and often do not need large amounts of funds. A key issue is how to create new and strengthen existing funding mechanisms. Acquiring official government registration and a bank account in the name of the organisation remains difficult, and donors need to adapt their policies to this.

Other concerns of local organisations include a lack of access to core funding and long term funding. Monitoring and evaluation should be seen less as a control mechanism but rather as a means to build capacity, and should focus more on community feedback mechanisms. There is room for improvement in creating more equal partnerships between local and international organisations. It is important to have discussions about good practices and aid effectiveness in all these relationships.

There are also several limitations and risks: strengthening civil society is not an answer to all of Burma's problems. Civil society is still limited in terms of what it can deliver, and the structure and management style of local organisations is often top-down and undemocratic. There is a danger of placing too much hope and expectations on social and political benefits which civil society can deliver. Throwing too much money at local groups and networks, without additional adequate support, may be counter-productive.

International agencies should be careful not to promote only one civil society development model. More effort should be put into supporting existing structures and practices. There are ways to support local organisations without directly financing them. International donors should ensure that their support for local organisations does not negatively impact on the conflict, and they should adhere to 'do no harm' principles. In a divided country like Burma, activities should bring people together rather than further divide them.

It is too early to tell whether the new political set up, with the introduction of regional parliaments and governments in 2011, will bring more space for local organisations to operate, and whether it will provide new opportunities for them to engage with the government. Renewed fighting in northern Shan State and in Kachin State in 2011 could lead to a permanent breakdown of 20-year old cease-fire agreements in the country. This would be an enormous setback for prospects for peace, democracy and development of the country, as well as for civil society in these areas.

Appendix I
Local Organisations in Burma Listed in 2009 NGO Directory

1	Action for Public	45	Myanmar Literacy Resource Centre
2	Angel's Trumpet Self Help Women's Group	46	Myanmar Medical Association
3	Ar Yone Oo	47	Myanmar National Association of the Blind
4	Asho Chin Baptist Conference	48	Myanmar Nurses and Midwife Association
5	Ayae Mya Myitta	49	Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs Association
6	Better Life Organisation	50	Myanmar Women's Development Association
7	Border Areas Development Association	51	Myin Thar Oo Child Development & Monastic Education School
8	Charity Oriented Myanmar	52	Myitta Wardi Parahita Monastic Education School
9	Cholia Muslim Religious Fund Trust	53	Myittamon General Services Society
10	Community Development Association	54	Nan Oo Education and Parahita School
11	Dhamma Theikdhi Monastic Education School	55	National Council of YMCA's of Myanmar
12	Disabled People Development Organisation	56	National Ecumenical Church Fund Myanmar
13	Eden Centre for Disabled Children	57	National Young Women's Christian Association of Myanmar (YWCA)
14	Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association	58	New Generation Children's Home
15	Free Education Service Academy	59	NGO Gender Group
16	Free Funeral Services Society Yangon	60	Patauk Shwewar Monastic Primary School
17	Friend of Rainforests in Myanmar	61	Phoenix Association
18	Global Green Group	62	Pwo Kayin Baptist Conference
19	Goldenland Development Agency	63	Pyinya Tazaung Association
20	Grace Home for Needy Children	64	Rakhine Coastal Region Conservation Association
21	Hman Kinn Monastic Education School	65	Ratana Metta Organisation
22	Jivitadana Sangha Hospital	66	Raven Blood Donor Club
23	Kachin Baptist Convention	67	Renewable Energy Association Myanmar
24	Karuna Myanmar Social Services	68	Sasana Yetkhita Buddhist Missionary Monastic Primary School
25	Karen Baptist Convention	69	Shalom Foundation
26	Ling Emergency Aid and Development	70	Shin Thar Ma Ne Dhamma Beikman Thar Tha Na Wun Saung Foundation
27	Little Sisters of Poor - Home for the Aged Poor	71	Shwe Min Thar Foundation
28	Lokahta Cariya Foundation	72	Shwe Than Lwin Home for the Aged
29	Mangrove Service Network	73	Social Vision Services
30	Mary Chapman School for the Deaf	74	Swanyee Development Foundation
31	Metta Development Foundation	75	The Salvation Army – Myanmar Region
32	Mingalar Byu-Har Welfare Foundation	76	Thingaha Gender Working Group
33	Muslim Central Fund Trust	77	Thonehtat Parahita Monastic Education School
34	Muslim Free Hospital and Medical Relief Society	78	U Hla Tun Hospice (Cancer) Foundation
35	Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association	79	Wai-Neya Sukha Drinking Water Association
36	Myanmar Baptist Churches Union	80	Victoria Childcare Centre
37	Myanmar Baptist Convention	81	Yadana Beikman Parahita and Monastic Education School
38	Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS	82	Yadana Foster Home
39	Myanmar Ceramics Society	83	Yadanapon Yeik Nyein
40	Myanmar Christian Fellowship of the Blind	84	Yangon Kayin Baptist Women Association
41	Myanmar Christian Health Workers' Services Association	85	Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA)
42	Myanmar Christian Leprosy Mission	86	Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)
43	Myanmar Council of Churches		
44	Myanmar Health Assistant Association		

Appendix II
Networks of Local Organisations

Abbreviations

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Child Focused Network (CFN)

Mandalay CBO Network

Mangrove Environmental Rehabilitation Network (MERN)

Mon-region Social Development Network (MSDN)

Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC)

Myanmar Drug User Group (MDG+)
(Drug User Peers group composed of eight drug user groups)

Myanmar Interfaith Network on HIV/AIDS (MINA)

Myanmar MSM Network (MMN)

Myanmar NGO Network (MNN)

Myanmar Organizational Development Network (MODN)

Myanmar Positive Group (MPG)
(National PLHIV Network with regional chapters)

Myanmar Positive Women Network Initiative (MPWNI)

Myanmar Youth Forum

National Drug Users Network Myanmar (NDNM)

National MSM Network (NMM)

National NGOs Network (3N)

Purple Sky Network (MSM network)

Seven Networks (a network of 7 networks – SWIM, MINA, 3N, MPWN, NDNM, MPG, MMN)

Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM)

Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON)

Youth Environment Network

AAPP	Assistance Association for Political Prisoners
AMRDP	All Mon Regions Development Party
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BANCA	Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association
BGF	Border Guard Force
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CBCM	Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar
CBI	Capacity Building Initiative
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CPB	Communist Party of Burma CPB
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
ENMF	Ethnic Nationalities Mediator's Fellowship
FFSS	Free Funeral Services Society
FORM	Friends of the Rainforest of Myanmar
FREDA	Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association
GCBA	General Council of Burmese Associations
GCSS	General Council of Sangha Sammeggi
GONGO	Government Organised NGO
HURFOM	Human Rights Foundation of Monland
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KBC	Kachin Baptist Convention
KDC	Karen Development Committee
KDN	Karen Development Network
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
KPC	Karen State Peace Committee
LEAD	Link Emergency Aid & Development
LRC	Local Resource Centre
MBC	Myanmar Baptist Convention
MBCA	Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS
MCC	Myanmar Council of Churches
MANA	Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association
MERN	Mangrove Environmental Rehabilitation Network
MHAA	Myanmar Health Assistance Association
MI	Military Intelligence
MNMA	Myanmar Nurses and Midwives Association
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPG	Myanmar Positive Group
MSDN	Mon-region Social Development Network
NAG	Nargis Action Group
NAP	National Aids Programme
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
PAR	Participatory Action Research
REAM	Renewable Energy Association Myanmar
RNDP	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
SDF	Swanyee Development Foundation
SHRF	Shan Human Rights Foundation
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNDP	Shan Nationalities Democratic Party
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSPP/SSA	Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army SSPP/SSA
UN	United Nations
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
YBCA	Young Men's Buddhist Association
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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Endnotes

1   In 1989 the military government changed the official name of the country from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. Using either 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' has since become a highly politicised issue. The UN uses 'Myanmar', but it is not commonly used elsewhere in material written in English about the country. Therefore 'Burma' will be used throughout this publication. This is not meant to be a political statement.

2   See: TNI-BCN, Strengthening Civil Society in Burma, Possibilities and Dilemmas for International NGOs, p.4.

3   TNI-BCN, Strengthening Civil Society in Burma, Possibilities and Dilemmas for International NGOs, p.x.

4   Steinberg 2006A p.151.

5   Heidel 2006 p.4.

6   Maung Shwe Wa and Sowards 1963 p.12.

7   Ibid. p.37.

8   The name was changed to Burma Baptist Convention in 1954 and to Myanmar Baptist Convention in 1989. See Myanmar Baptist Convention http://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/regions/asia/myanmar-burma/myanmar-baptist-convention.htmland Heidel 2006 p. 4.

9   Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007 p.145. Kyaw Yin Hlaing has studied the history of social movements and civil society in Burma.

10 Interview with members of the Malunze Rice Offering Association, 8 June 2011.

11 Smith 1999a p.49-50.

12 Ibid. p.45.

13 Steinberg 2006b p.155.

14 Smith, D. 1965 p.87.

15 Ibid. p.86-87 and Taylor 2009 p. 163-165.

16 Taylor 2009 p.163.

17 Smith 1999a p. 49-50.

18 Steinberg 2001 p.106. See also International Crisis Group 2001.

19 International Crisis Group 2001.

20 Interview with member of Myoneh Athin, 6 June 2011.

21 Taylor 2009 p. 316.

22 Silverstein 1977 p.97-98.

23 Steinberg 1999 p.8.

24 Steinberg 2006a p.157.

25 The Four Eights Movement refers to 8-8-88 (8 August 1988), the height of the democracy movement in the summer of 1988, when a nation-wide strike brought millions of people on to the street all over the country to demand an end to military rule. Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2004 p.389-90.

26 Interview with local NGO worker and consultant on civil society, 6 June 2011.

27 Interview with myoneh athin member, 6 June 2011.

28 Interview with members of the Rakhine Thahaya Association, 2 June 2011.

29 Interview with Buddhist abbot in Yangon, 16 March 2010.

30 Steinberg 1999 p.4.

31 Interview with Buddhist abbot in Yangon, 16 March 2010.

32 Interview with senior Church leader, May 2004.

33 See, for instance, Human Rights Watch 2009.

34 U.S. State Department, 1999 Report on Religious Freedom, Washington, DC, p99-112.

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From Golden Triangle to Rubber Belt?
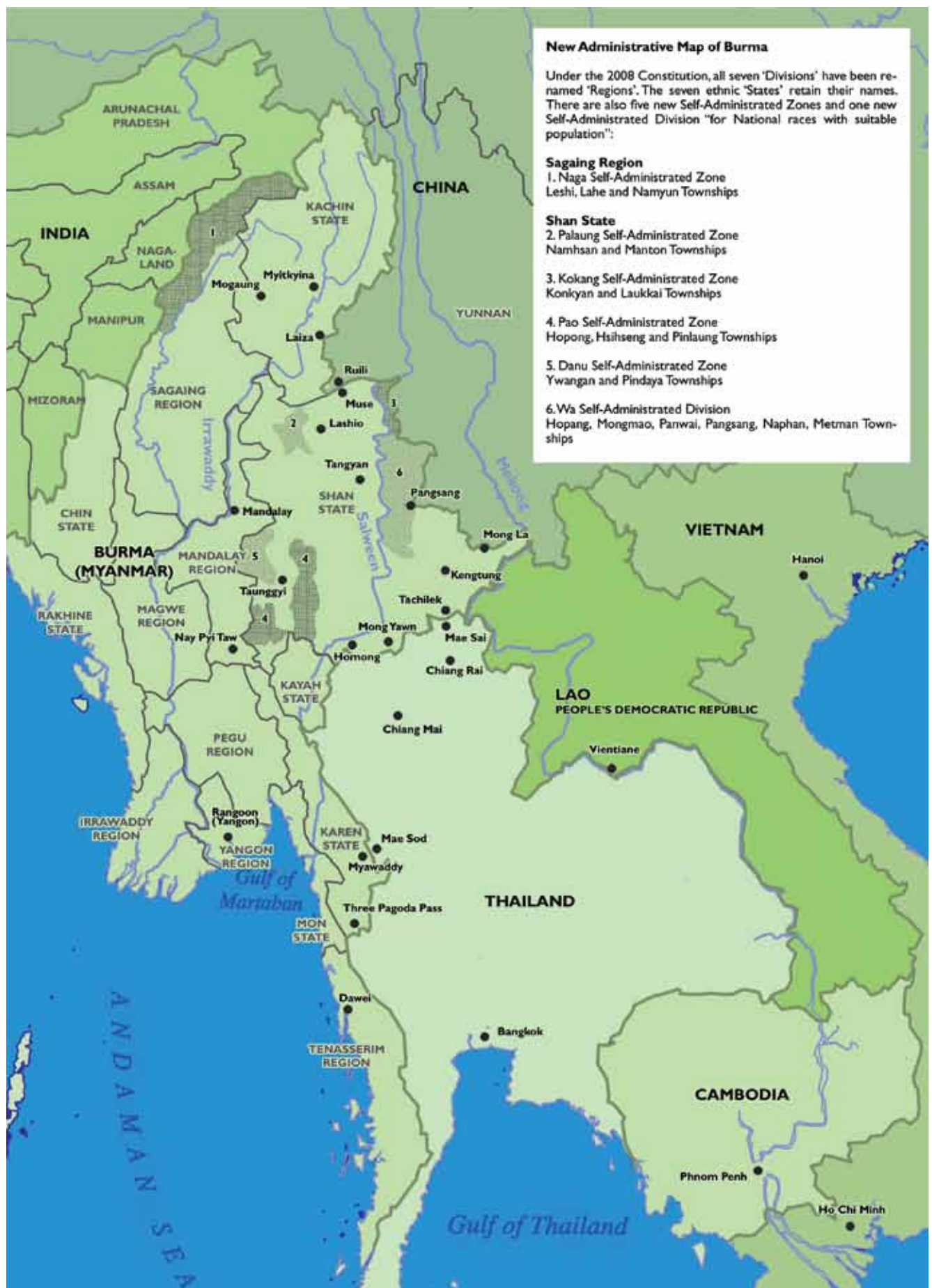**The Future of the Opium Bans in the Kokang and Wa Regions**
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Map: Burma – States and Regions

New Administrative Map of Burma

Under the 2008 Constitution, all seven 'Divisions' have been re-named 'Regions'. The seven ethnic 'States' retain their names. There are also five new Self-Administrated Zones and one new Self-Administrated Division "for National races with suitable population":

Sagaing Region
1. Naga Self-Administrated Zone
Leshi, Lahe and Namyun Townships

Shan State
2. Palaung Self-Administrated Zone
Namhsan and Manton Townships

3. Kokang Self-Administrated Zone
Konkyan and Laukkai Townships

4. Pao Self-Administrated Zone
Hopong, Hsihseng and Pinlaung Townships

5. Danu Self-Administrated Zone
Ywangan and Pindaya Townships

6. Wa Self-Administrated Division
Hopang, Mongmao, Panwai, Pangsang, Naphan, Metman Townships

Despite decades of military rule and civil war, Burma has a dynamic and diverse civil society. There are a wide variety of informal groups and formal organisations, reflecting ethnic and cultural diversity. Social organising has a long history in Burma. For centuries people have carried out social and religious activities together, mostly through informal religious networks. Into the 21st century, faith-based organisations have played an important role in the continuation of civil society..

Local organisations have adopted different strategies towards authoritarian government. While some prefer to work under the radar, a growing number of local organisations are engaging with the government. Local organisations are not just using the available space, but they are also actively enlarging and creating new space in culture, daily life and society.

Civil society in Burma has grown significantly during the past two decades. In ethnic nationality regions, the main impetus for this development was a series of cease-fire agreements in the 1990s between the military government and armed ethnic opposition groups. Civil society in Burma further developed to fill the gap created by the lack of government services. New threats to natural resources and the environment in Burma's border regions further stimulated their growth. Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, the space for civil society further expanded across the country.

The increased interest of the international community in working with civil society in Burma raises further important issues. Until recently, few international actors developed a strategy to support civil society in the country. While this new interest is a positive development, it raises a number of questions about how these relationships can be developed to ensure that they are mutually beneficial and do not only serve the donor or programme needs of international organisations. Furthermore, there are concerns about potential risks posed by international support to local organisations. These include security risks for local organisations vis-a-vis the government, as well as risks in enforcing "one-size-fits-all models" on Burmese civil society. If this happens, existing or alternative models for development will be ignored.

This joint TNI-BCN project, which started in 2010, aims to stimulate strategic thinking on addressing conflict in Burma and to provide a voice to ethnic nationality groups who have until now been ignored and isolated in the international debate on the country. It is a vital time in Burma's political crisis and transition. In order to respond to contemporary challenges, TNI and BCN believe that it is crucial to formulate practical and concrete policy options and define concrete benchmarks on progress that national and international actors can support. The project will aim to achieve greater support for a different Burma policy, which is pragmatic, engaged and grounded in reality.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) was founded in 1974 as an independent, international research and policy advocacy institute, with strong connections to transnational social movements and associated intellectuals concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable, environmentally sustainable and peaceful direction. Its point of departure is a belief that solutions to global problems require global cooperation.

Burma Center Netherlands (BCN) was founded in 1993. It works towards democratisation and respect for human rights in Burma. BCN does this through information dissemination, lobby and campaign work, and the strengthening of Burmese civil society organisations. In recent years the focus has shifted away from campaigning for economic isolation towards advocacy in support of civil society and a solution to the ethnic crises in Burma.