Mapping of Myanmar Peacebuilding Civil Society

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Executive Summary

The peace process currently underway in Myanmar represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic and state-society conflicts. The most significant challenges facing the peace process are: to initiate substantial political dialogue between the government and NSAGs (*broaden* the peace process); to include participation of civil society and affected communities (*deepen* the peace process); to demonstrate the Myanmar Army's willingness to support the peace agenda.

Communities in many parts of the country are already experiencing benefits, particularly in terms of freedom of movement and reduction in more serious human rights abuses. Nevertheless, communities have serious concerns regarding the peace process, including in the incursion of business interests (e.g. natural resource extraction projects) into previously inaccessible, conflict-affected areas. Concerns also relate to the exclusion thus far of most local actors from meaningful participation in the peace process. Indeed, many civil society actors and political parties express growing resentment at being excluded from the peace process.

A particular challenge lies in conceptualising the relationship between government structures and those of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), and related civil society actors. Many armed opposition groups, and CBOs working in partnership with them, have developed long-established, if chronically under-resourced, structures in the fields of education, health and local administration. Peace talks have yet to address how these non-state governance and service delivery regimes will relate to formal state structures. For many displaced and other communities in the conflict zones, NSAG and related civil society structures and personnel are perceived as more legitimate and effective than those of the state. It is essential that such individuals and networks enjoy a sense of ownership in the peace process.

Over the past decade-plus - and particularly since a new government took power in 2011 - the space for civil society in Myanmar has again expanded dramatically. This paper provides an overview of a dynamic and rapidly changing sector, under the following broad categories: urban/Burman areas; established ethnic actors operating from government-controlled areas; the borderlands, including areas of on-going armed conflict; refugee and diaspora communities.

As well as their underlying strategic-political and emerging peace-building roles, civil society actors have for some years been involved in service delivery in Myanmar. In areas of on-going armed conflict, such activities have included assistance to highly vulnerable communities. From the 1990s until very recently, many conflict-affected communities, particularly in the southeast, were accessible only - or mostly - to local agencies working cross-border from Thailand, whose assistance has saved many lives and served to build local capacities. In areas where the security situation still precludes access to vulnerable communities from 'inside' Myanmar (such as much of Kachin State), cross-border assistance remains viable, and indeed often the only way to access highly vulnerable groups. However, in areas where the peace process is taking hold, access is increasingly possible from inside the country. Cross-border assistance can be limited to situations where vulnerable communities are *only* accessible from the neighbouring country. This said, many groups previously engaged mostly in cross-border modes of operation will continue to play important roles.

This paper identifies a number of opportunities for supporting civil society engagement in the peace process, including: supporting the engagement of Burman civil society with the peace process (activities to expose the majority community to the realities, grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationality groups); engaging sensitively with 'traditional' civil society (building capacity and providing resources where appropriate, while avoiding the tendency to re-configure local realities in line with donors' values); supporting the agreement between government and NSAGs (in the first instance) of Codes of Conduct and local monitoring mechanisms; supporting community and civil society participation in ceasefire monitoring;

supporting consultations between NSAGs and conflict-affected communities. The paper also identifies issues which are amenable to civil society participation in political consultations, as part of the peace process.

The paper also addresses a number of caveats and risks in relation to civil society and peacebuilding in Myanmar. These include some often unhelpful assumptions regarding the progressive-cosmopolitan nature of the sector, as well as concerns regarding the ethnic 'ghettoization' of civil society in Myanmar. Other observations include the importance of outside interventions respecting local agency and operating in a manner which does not expose vulnerable groups to danger. Another risk is that an influx of peace-building support can severely stretch local and national actors' limited capacities. Those seeking to support the peace process in Myanmar should consider carefully what added value they bring, and not over-tax local resources.

Rationale and structure of paper

In the framework of the Civil Society Dialogue Network, a three-year project funded by the Instrument of Stability of the European Commission aimed at facilitating dialogue on peacebuilding issues between civil society and the EU institutions, EPLO is organising a meeting on *Supporting Myanmar's Evolving Peace Processes: What roles for Civil Society and the EU?* (Brussels 7 March 2013). EPLO has commissioned this background document to inform meeting participants, and for eventual sharing with a wider policy audience.

The paper begins by defining the key concepts of 'peacebuilding' and 'civil society', before providing an overview of peace and conflict issues in Myanmar and the development of civil society in government-controlled and contested areas, and among borderlands and diaspora communities. It goes on to examine the opportunities for civil society to be involved with and support the peace process (entry points, mechanisms and issues), and discusses some associated caveats, assumptions and risks.[3]

Peacebuilding
'*Peace-making*' aims to reduce and control levels of violence, without necessarily addressing root-causes; *'peace-building'* goes beyond conflict management, to address underlying (structural) issues and inequalities. Peace-building involves a commitment to transformative action.

Civil society
'Civil society' is a contested concept: there are many definitions of the term, used in different ideological traditions - primarily the liberal-Tocquevillean (1994) and Marxist-Gramscian (1971[4]). Furthermore, the sector itself may be contested - i.e. there are multiple civil society actors, which may be in competition for material political resources. This paper uses a non-prescriptive definition of civil society, to mean actors, voluntary associations and networks operating in the space between the family/clan, the state in its various incarnations and the for-profit market. This includes, but is not limited to, Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and community-based organizations (CBOs).[5] Local civil society in Myanmar includes village-level associations and networks whose members conceive of and undertake their work in 'traditional' ways, which differ from the western 'rational-bureaucratic' approach (see below). It is debatable whether organisations closely associated with state and non-state actors (so-called 'GONGOs' and Non-state Armed Group/NSAG-GONGOs) should be considered part of civil society.

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[3] This paper is written in the authors' private capacity. Thanks to Martin Smith, Alan Smith, Matt Schissler and Susanne Kempel for their comments on drafts of the paper.

[4] From a Gramscian (1971), political-strategic perspective, civil society is conceived of as a contested realm, in which competing forces and interest groups seek to establish 'positions', in a struggle for material and ideological dominance. While some actors aim to influence (or even overturn) government policy, others are more concerned to carve our areas of relative autonomy - while the forces of state power may seek to subvert and co-opt the wider (civil) society.

[5] The terms ('local/national') NGO and CBO are often used interchangeably. However, there are important conceptual and practical differences between the two types of organization. A CBO is used here to mean a grassroots membership organization, based in the community, which is locally managed, with the members of which as its main beneficiaries. CBOs usually exist in just one community, or a group of adjacent communities. In contrast, NGOs are service providers, which work for social, non-profit ends (for the benefit of the community). Staff may be local, national or international - but are not necessarily drawn from the beneficiary. Although NGOs often employ participatory, 'grassroots' approaches, they usually work in broader thematic and geographic areas than do CBOs.

Conflict and peace in Myanmar[6]

For more than half-a-century, ethnic nationality-populated, rural areas of Myanmar have been affected by conflicts between ethnic insurgents and a militarised state, widely perceived to have been captured by elements of the ethnic Burman majority (Houtman 1999). For decades, communist and dozens of ethnic insurgents controlled large parts of the country (Smith 1999). Since the 1970s however, armed opposition groups have lost control of their once extensive 'liberated zones', precipitating further humanitarian and political crises in the borderlands. For generations, communities have been disrupted, traumatised and displaced. In 2011 there were an estimated 500,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the southeast alone, plus some 150,000 predominantly Karen refugees living in a series of camps along the Thailand-Burma border (Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2012). In the past 12 months of ceasefire negotiations, the number of displaced people in southeast Myanmar has considerably reduced (The Border Consortium 2012), while it has increased dramatically in Kachin and Rakhine States as a result of war and communal violence.

A previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s brought considerable respite to conflict-affected civilian populations. These truces (about 25 agreements in total) provided the space for civil society networks to (re-)emerge within and between ethnic nationality communities (South 2008: ch.5). However, the then-military government proved unwilling to accept ethnic nationality representatives' political demands. Therefore, despite some positive developments, the ceasefires of the 1990s did little to dispel distrust between ethnic nationalists and the government (Transnational Institute 2012).[7]

The election of a military-backed, semi-civilian government in November 2010 represented a clear break with the past. Although opposition groups (including most NSAGs) continue to object strongly to elements of the 2008 constitution, this has nevertheless seen the introduction of limited decentralisation to seven predominantly ethnic nationality-populated States.

Despite such positive developments, in June 2011 the Myanmar army launched a major offensive against the KIO, the main Kachin armed ethnic group in northern Myanmar, breaking a 17 year ceasefire. As a result of this resumption of armed conflict, at least 80,000 people were displaced along the border with China, with tens of thousands of more IDPs in the conflict zones and government-controlled areas (Human Rights Watch 2012). This resurgence of armed conflict included some of the most significant battles of Myanmar's 50-plus year civil war. The reasons behind the resumption of armed conflict in Kachin areas are complex and contested, and largely beyond the scope of this paper, including sometimes opaque political-economic and geo-strategic factors. At the time of writing (mid-February 2013) - after several false starts - an initial ceasefire seemed to be holding between government forces and KIO.

Meanwhile, in late 2011 and through 2012, preliminary ceasefires were agreed and/or re-confirmed between the government and 10 of the 11 most significant NSAGs, representing the Wa and Mongla, Chin, Shan, PaO, Karen, Karenni, Arakan/Rakhine and Mon. By mid-2012, the only major group still at war was the KIO.

Many communities have experienced some of the benefits of the peace process. In areas where ceasefires have been effective, it was far easier to travel that had previously been the case. In the past, villagers had to fear rough handling - or worse - on the part of *Tatmadaw* personnel and/or insurgent forces. In contrast, 2012 travel restrictions greatly eased in many

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[6] This section is drawn from Ashley South, *Prospects for Peace in Myanmar: opportunities and threats* (Peace Research Institute Oslo working paper, December 2012).
[7] Trust was further eroded in April 2009, when the government proposed that the ceasefire groups transform themselves into Border Guard Forces, under the direct control of *Tatmadaw* commanders. Several of the less militarily powerful ceasefire groups accepted transformation into BGF formations. However, most of the larger groups resisted, including the UWSA, Kokang (MNDAA), KIO and NMSP.

areas, so that villagers can move more freely, spending more time in their fields and getting products more easily to market. While these benefits may not seem significant to political elites, they mean a great deal to local communities. Nevertheless, the human rights situation in remote, conflict-affected areas needs to improve further, in order to reach acceptable international standards. Nevertheless, many problems remain on the ground. In particular, people living in remote, conflict-affected areas are concerned about business activities expanding in ceasefire zones. Often, commercial activity in previously inaccessible areas is focused on natural resource extraction, with little benefit to the local community and often involving very serious impacts on the natural environment (Karen Human Rights Group 2013). The relationship between business interests and the peace process is hugely important, but under examined. The political economy of both armed conflict and peace in Myanmar involve significant economic interests, on the part of both government and NSAGs actors. If such concerns are not addressed, the grievances of local communities (and the advocacy groups seeking to represent them) are likely to increase, in relation to the peace-business nexus. Already, some NSAGs leaders have been accused of profiting personally from the peace process. Such concerns could lead to outbursts of local violence, with highly negative consequences both for communities and the peace process more broadly.

The peace process currently underway in Myanmar represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic conflicts in this troubled country. However, the political, social and economic issues at the heart of the conflict will not be easily resolved. In order to address deep-rooted, structural problems, both the government and NSAGs must act with courage and imagination. Otherwise, the present window of opportunity may close, as the peace process loses momentum. Failure of the peace process would have significant negative impacts on President U Thein Sein's reform agenda.

The most significant challenges facing the peace process are: to initiate substantial political dialogue between the government and NSAGs (*broaden* the peace process); to include participation of civil society and affected communities (*deepen* the peace process); to demonstrate the Myanmar Army and NSAG's willingness to support the peace agenda. Additional issues include the need to ensure free and fair elections scheduled for 2015, and to establish effective governance and rule of law - which is particularly lacking in conflict-affected areas on the periphery of state control, where civilian populations are often subject to multiple state and non-state authorities. As noted, related issue is the need for regulation of the private sector, particularly in relation to natural resource and other extractive industries, which are making significant inroads in remote and previously armed conflict-affected areas. This should be a key topic for capacity building among newly-decentralised State and Regional governments, where ethnic nationality political parties have some voice. Also essential to sustainable transition in Myanmar will be economic reform, at the macro-level and more locally in the conflict-affected countryside.

A particularly significant, but largely unremarked, challenge lies in conceptualising and working constructively on the relationship between government structures and those of NSAGs. Many armed opposition groups have long-established, if chronically under-resourced, para-government structures, for example in the fields of education, health and local administration. Peace talks have yet to address, let alone resolve, how these non-state local governance structures will relate to formal state structures. This is a particularly pressing question in areas of recent armed conflict, where communities are subject to multiple authorities (government, Myanmar Army and one or more NSAGs, plus local militias and other informal powerholders). For many displaced and other communities in the conflict zones, NSAGs structures and personnel are perceived as more legitimate and effective than those of the state. As noted below, civil society actors in conflict-affected areas often enjoy very close relations with (and personnel overlap with those of) NSAGs service provision actors. It is essential that such individuals and networks enjoy a sense of ownership in the peace process, if momentum is to be maintained. Deepening of the peace process therefore should include participation of affected communities and other stakeholders, such as civil society and political actors, with special attention to the roles of women and young people. (However, this

additional and unpredictable dynamic between NSAGs and these other actors may in the short-term threaten the momentum rather help to maintain it.)

The peace process therefore must be deepened, to include participation of affected communities and other stakeholders, such as civil society and political actors, with special attention to the roles of women and young people - the topic of the remainder of this paper.

The government's ability to deliver reforms is hampered by deep-rooted conservative-authoritarian institutional cultures, and limited technical capacities. This is also the case with Myanmar's diverse NSAGs. Furthermore the government (composed mostly of ex-military personnel) exercises only limited control over the Myanmar Army.[8] One consequence of the Kachin conflict has been to activate and empower 'hard-line' elements within the Myanmar Army, who actively oppose civilian control over the military. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the government is therefore to ensure that the Myanmar Army implements its policy, and to build new civilian institutions. For many actors and observers, such reforms will require significant changes to the 2008 constitution.

The President having promised so much, Myanmar may experience a 'revolution of rising expectations': prospects of change have been talked up, and people may become frustrated if the government and its partners are unable to deliver. The reform process in Myanmar may be likened to taking the lid off a pressure cooker. In a society where tensions have been building for more than half-a-century, ethnic and other grievances can easily spill over, with disturbing consequences. One example is the recent violence and ethnic hatred in parts of Rakhine State and central Myanmar. These events remind us that there is not just conflict between the government and Myanmar Army and various armed ethnic groups, but also intra-communal conflict, with the potential to be extremely violent, between some ethnic communities. Outbursts of horrific violence in Rhakine constitute a complex phenomenon, beyond the scope of this paper, involving deep-seated mistrust of the 'other', and the politics of citizenship, immigration and representation - issues which have been exacerbated and mobilised by local and national-level political entrepreneurs. Among other things, these events indicate that there are spoilers on the side-lines, waiting to utilize tensions to provoke violence in order to undermine the reforms.[9]

The peace process in Burma/Myanmar is indigenous, driven in the first instance by government initiative. In the context of limited international involvement, the process has been quite ad hoc in nature. Furthermore it is highly complex, with some 20 parallel sets of discussions underway between the government and various NSAGs.

Given the essentially indigenous nature of the peace process in Myanmar, the role of the international community context is necessarily limited. On the one hand, international stakeholders should continue to remind the government, and NSAGs, of their commitments and responsibilities under international human rights and humanitarian law, of the need to resolve outstanding armed conflicts, and of the necessity for an inclusive political dialogue, and ultimately a substantial political settlement acceptable to key stakeholders. Beyond that, the international community can support peace-building initiatives which build trust and confidence in the peace process, and at the same time test the sincerity of the Myanmar government and Army, and NSAGs, to deliver the peace which citizens long for. One way of doing so is to engage constructively with various parties to the process including civil society actors, encouraging their participation in and principled support for the peace process.

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[8] Perhaps the best way of addressing this issue is through the development of Codes of Conduct and other monitoring mechanisms, details of which lie beyond the scope of this paper but should include significant local participation (see below).

[9] In a worrying sign of possibly escalating intra-communal violence, a meeting of Karen Buddhist leaders in the State capital of Pa'an decreed (on 9-10-2012) that Karen Buddhists should have no dealings with Muslims. A few days later, grenade attacks were reported on two mosques in southern Karen State ('The Irrawaddy' 29-12-2012).

<u>Strategic roles of civil society</u>
As Alagappa (2004) and - in the case of Myanmar – Lorch (2006) warn, it is important to acknowledge the potentially 'dark side of civil society': the sector may have significant dis-contents ('uncivil society'). Civil society is not inherently progressive, but can be both reactionary and repressive, or at least, unaccountable. Indeed, civil society in Myanmar tends to be dominated by (local) elites, and as such may reproduce the inequalities of society at large (see also South 2012). Nevertheless, civil society networks are essential for the achievement of 'bottom-up' social and political transition in Myanmar, and for conflict resolution at both the national and local levels. In order for democratic change to be sustainable, the country's diverse social and ethnic communities must enjoy a sense of ownership in any transitional process, and equip themselves to fill the power vacuum that may emerge, either as a result of abrupt shifts in national politics, or of a more gradual withdrawal of the military from state and local power. The ability of people to organize, and re-assume control over aspects of their lives, which since the 1960s have been abrogated by the military (including insurgent armies), will depend on such grass-roots mobilization, and practices of local governance.

At the local level, the development of civil society networks and 'human capital' establishes patterns of empowerment, trust and participation, which can gradually change structures of governance, on the part of local authorities (including ceasefire groups). The creation of 'social capital' (Putnam 1993), and the related concepts of reciprocity and 'political trust', through voluntary cooperation in the mutually accountable activities of civil society, is one of the hallmarks of citizen engagement in liberal democracy. In the Burmese context, this is related to a shift in power relations, from 'power over' (the mode of military government, reflected in much of the wider society) to an empowering, innately democratic 'power with' form of participatory social organization.[10] Elements of re-emergent civil society in Myanmar reflect the countries' authoritarian traditions and recent history; furthermore, Myanmar civil society remains 'segmented' among ethnic lines. Nevertheless, there are reasons for hope regarding the dynamic engagement of citizens in processes of peace and democratisation.

Development of civil society in Myanmar[11]

The contest for power within and over Myanmar's civil society sector is not a new phenomenon. For half a century, the state has sought to penetrate and suppress, and or mobilise, the country's diverse social group, while members of Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationalities (including the Burman majority) have sought to carve out spheres of autonomy – both for the intrinsic value of civil society work (in providing services, promoting democratisation etc), contest dictatorial and often brutal state authority, in ways which often reflect ethnic and religious divisions in society.

Following the military take-over of 1958, and especially after the 1962 coup d'etat, the government began extending its control over previously autonomous aspects of social life (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, in Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). Many civil society networks could no longer operate independently, and opposition to the military regime was eliminated, driven underground, or forced into open revolt. The existence of renewed armed opposition to the military government provided a pretext for the further extension of state control, and suppression of diverse social groups deemed antipathetic to the modernizing state-socialist project. The military regime's suppression of non-Burman cultural and political identities,

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[10] As noted, one way of achieving this transition may be through implementing Codes of Conduct and supporting the work of local ceasefire and peace monitoring networks.
[11] This section is updated from Ashley South, 'Civil Society in Burma: The Development of Democracy Amidst Conflict' (East-West Centre, Washington – 'Policy Studies' series No. 51, 2008). For a survey of civil society in Myanmar, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing (in Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007).

epitomized by the banning of minority languages from state schools, drove a new wave of disaffected ethnic minority citizens into rebellion.[12]

By 1980, even the previously independent *Sangha* (monkhood) - members of which played key roles in Myanmar's struggle for independence - had been brought under at least partial state control. Nevertheless, Myanmar's 250,000 monks and novices retained a prestige and influence which extended across all strata of society. Among the few institutions in Myanmar not directly controlled by the state, the *Sangha* - and Christian networks- remained among the potentially most powerful sectors of civil society, especially in ethnic minority areas.[13]

Popular participation may be mobilized either for - or against - an authoritarian regime, and it seemed for a few weeks in the summer of 1988 that 'people's power' might prevail in Myanmar, as it had two years previously in the Philippines. The failure of the 1988 'Democracy Uprising' in Myanmar, like that of the May-June 1989 'Democracy Spring' in China, was in part due to the suppressed nature of civil society in these states. Under the SLORC, state-society relations were further centralized, and attempts made to penetrate and mobilize the country's diverse social groups. Particularly following the ascension of General Than Shwe in 1992, social control was reinforced by the reformation of local militias, the indoctrination of civil servants, and the major new drive by the SLORC to develop a state-controlled mass organisation. In addition to new GONGOs, these included the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) - a mass organisation (many members of which were coerced into joining), established in September 1993 along the lines of the pro-military GOLKAR party in Indonesia (Callahan 2003: 8). The USDA was transformed into the USD Party to contest the 2010 elections.[14] The USDA and pro-government militias were heavily involved in the brutal suppression of the September 2007 protests.

The 2007 monks' uprising
The significance of faith-based civil society networks in Myanmar, and particularly the Buddhist monkhood, was demonstrated during the 2007 protests. Contrary to widespread expectations that political protest in Myanmar might be led by student or other established democracy activists, the late rainy season in 2007 saw increasingly widespread and well-attended demonstrations led by Buddhist monks, protesting against the deprivations suffered by many in the country as a result of decades of military mis-rule. Focusing particularly on livelihoods concerns, the protests quickly challenged the legitimacy of the government. The brutal suppression of monk-led protests in late August resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests, including nighttime raids on monasteries - sending a shockwave through the country and alienating previously a-political elements of mainstream Myanmar/Burma and society.

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[12] According to David Steinberg, "civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered" (Burma Centre Netherlands and Transnational Institute, 1999: 8). Under the 1974 constitution, all political activity beyond the strict control of the state was outlawed (Taylor 1987: 303-09).

[13] The Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and other churches in Myanmar have well over two million members. Although most of their activities are religious-pastoral, the churches devote considerable energy and resources (including some international funds) to education, social welfare and community development projects, including in armed conflict-affected areas. These are significant, country-wide organizations, the majority of whose members come from minority communities. However, they also face considerable skills and capacity constraints. Many Buddhist voluntary associations exist too. Although many senior monks have been co-opted by the military regime, the *Sangha* still has great potential as a catalyst in civil and political affairs. However, Buddhist and other traditional networks tend to be localized, and centered on individual monks, who may not conceptualize or present their aims in a manner readily intelligible to western agencies. Such non-formal approaches are therefore often 'invisible' to western (and western-trained) staff (South 2008).

[14] The USDA/USDP's objectives include upholding the regime's 'Three National Causes' (non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of national solidarity) - a re-affirmation of the Myanmar Army's self-appointed state- and nation-building role.

<u>Civil society and Cyclone Nargis</u>
The following year, the Irrawaddy Delta and parts of Yangon Division were devastated by a huge natural disaster, which struck on 2 and 3 May 2008. Following Cyclone Nargis, in the absence of an effective government or international response, local communities took the initiative in responding to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis. In Yangon and across the Delta, monks helped to clear debris, undertook emergency rescues and repairs, and provided shelter to the destitute. This was a politically significant development, given the government's violent suppression of the *Sangha*-led 'saffron revolution' the previous year. Furthermore, a broad array of formal and informal local associations and citizens, including several prominent celebrities (and business networks), participated in an impressive range of relief activities. Church and other civil society organisations mobilised to deliver assistance, including money and material donated by international organisations (South, 2012).

Key stakeholders, and relationships with peacebuilding

Since the 1990s, civil society in Myanmar has undergone a gradual re-emergence (Lorch 2006). Until 2011, many of the more dynamic sectors of Myanmar civil society were situated among ethnic groups. The re-emergence of civil society within and sometimes between often highly conflict-affected communities was partly a result of the previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s. Assessments of the earlier ceasefires should address both the failures (in terms of inability to achieve a political settlement) as well as the successes of this period, which included a dramatic decline in human rights abuses in ceasefire areas (TBBC passim) and the re-emergence of civil society in conflict-affected areas (South 2008).

Since the new government took power in Myanmar at the end of the second quarter of 2011, the space for civil and political society has again expanded dramatically. Previous surveys of the sector (e.g. South 2008) are therefore largely redundant. The following section provides an overview of key civil society and related stakeholders in relation to peacebuilding in Myanmar. This is not a comprehensive overview of the civil society sector, and even within the parameters of exploring the peace process provides only a limited sketch.

To aid clarity and brevity, Myanmar peacebuilding civil society is mapped according to the following sectors: urban/Burman areas; established ethnic actors operating from government-controlled areas; the borderlands, including areas of on-going armed conflict; refugee and diaspora communities. It should be noted that reality is more complex and messy than intellectual schema - with many actors and networks operating between and beyond these categories.[15] Furthermore, this mapping focuses mostly on indigenous actors, and does not include the significant new presence of 'international civil society actors', including 'think tanks' and others which have sought involvement in the peace process over the past two years.

<u>Urban/Burman areas</u>
As noted, the 'saffron revolution' of 2007 and the response to the following year's Cyclone Nargis, demonstrated the capacity of Myanmar civil society, and potential as a socio-political catalyst. In relation to the peace process, until very recently the repressive political environment in Myanmar has limited citizen engagement in urban areas, with the exception of some ethnic minority communities (see below).

While urban and peri-urban dwellers include significant minority communities (including populations of Chinese and Indian origin), for analytical purposes it is possible to identify a Burman majority-orientated civil society. Before the socio-political opening of the past two years, the roles and scope of civil society action in government-controlled areas was severely restricted. Nevertheless, Christian (mostly ethnic minority) civil society groups have enjoyed

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[15] Due to the rapidly changing situation in Myanmar, there is little published material upon which to base this mapping. The following sub-section is based on the authors' first-hand experience, working to support the peace process in Myanmar through the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (see below).

considerable space and been able to maintain strong international connections, while remaining mostly disconnected from Burman majority civil society. Recent positive developments include meetings in January 2013 between Myanmar civil society actors and the President, and later his main peace envoy U Aung Min.

Over the past decade, urban civil society in Myanmar has grown, and also become more politicised. In part, this politicisation is due to the decision by some Burman elites to engage in civil society-based activism, with the intention of promoting democracy in their country (see South 2008). Those aiming to 'build democracy from below' have established a number of predominantly Burman-staffed national NGOs, many of which can claim significant achievements in the fields of service delivery (e.g. education, community development). Several of these organisations grew substantially in response to Cyclone Nargis, and some are now well-established. Some of these new NGOs quite self-consciously emulated the model of Christian/ethnic minority civil society organisation. The trend towards a more politically-engaged civil society was magnified by the National League for Democracy (NLD)'s decision to engage in social work, as a way to engage with communities and mobilise support, while outflanking the government, in a context where explicitly political ('big-P political') work was subject to outright suppression by the authorities. The NLD's engagement in the civil society sector potentially threatened the activities of longer-established actors with less explicitly political agendas.

Since mid-2011, there has been a huge increase in civil society activism in government-controlled, and particularly urban, areas. While not exclusively identified with the majority community, activism is nevertheless focused particularly around Burman intellectual classes. A newly energised civil society sector has engaged in public discourse and protests regarding rule-of-law and natural resource issues – one notable achievement being pressure mobilised on the government to suspend the giant (Chinese-implemented) Myitsone Dam on the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River (by Presidential decree, on 30 September 2011). More recently, civil and political society actors have protested widespread land seizures and other rights violations across the country. These land protests have reached beyond urban civil society with many localized disputes in the rural countryside organized by aggrieved local farmer communities.

Some mainstream civil society and political leaders have adopted strong and high profile positions in relation to the peace process, including particularly members of the '88 generation'[16]. For example, on his release from jail in early 2012, veteran 'student leader' Min Ko Naing drew attention to the Kachin conflict, and since then he and colleagues have undertaken study tours to conflict-affected parts of the country, including the main KIO-HQ town of Laiza. Members of the '88 generation' have also visited the Philippines, to better understand the peace process in Mindanao and how lessons might be applied to Myanmar. Urban-based peace activists have initiated a number of public events (demonstrations in Yangon, Mandalay, Meiktilla and elsewhere – and t-shirt campaigns, art events, public seminars etc.) and undertaken high-profile visits to Kachin IDP camps; in the process, new understandings and alliances have developed between Burman elites and (in particular) ethnic Kachin communities. However, such activities have been accompanied by significant continued state suppression, including the arrest of a number of 'peace walk' activists (who face up to six years in jail). Although such activities have thus far produced limited results on the ground, they are nevertheless of political-cultural importance. For the first time in two decades[17], middle-class activists and elites from the urban-Burman community (who enjoy

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[16] Political activists, prominent in the 1988 democracy uprising, who spent much of the next quarter-century in jail or under close surveillance by the authorities.

[17] Following suppression of the '1988 democracy uprising', and the government's failure to recognise the results of the 1990 general election, a wave of predominantly urban-based student and other democracy activists fled to the border areas, where many made common cause with the country's ethnic insurgents. This was the first time in a generation (since the mid-1960s, and the 1974 'U Thant' protests) that elites from the Burman majority had been exposed to the realities of life for minority

considerable domestic political following) have expressed compassion for and solidarity with struggling ethnic nationalities. For the peace process in Myanmar to be sustained and deepened, it is essential that members of the ethnic Burman community gain better understandings of the grievances, aspirations and realities of their minority brethren.[18] In the past, under half-a-century of military rule, urban (particularly Burman) citizens had little exposure to the realities of armed conflict and its impacts in the ethnic minority-populated countryside, beyond highly distorted government propaganda (plus the counter-narrative provided by news on the BBC, VOA etc).

These events have been covered widely in the Myanmar print and online and social media, which experienced a significant improvement in freedom of expression during 2012. The easing, and finally abolition, of censorship of the print media are some of the most visible and tangible results of the democratic reforms. While the (Burman-dominated) media has a limited understanding of ethnic minority affairs and conflict dynamics, the coverage of peace activism and the peace process has increased dramatically. Moreover, the Kachin conflict is regularly front-page news in domestic media, often highlighting the grievances of ethnic communities and the KIO. Such reporting (often facilitated by peace activists) includes interviews with local communities and ethnic leaders as well as war reporting from near the frontlines. More recently, the government has also stepped up its engagement with the media, seemingly to counter the dominance of peace activists and the KIO of the conflict narrative. However, biased media coverage of the Rakhine conflict highlights the lack of understanding of conflict-sensitive journalism in Myanmar, and demonstrates how the media as part of civil society can act as a powerful factor in inciting violence or enforcing stereotyped perception of ethnicity, discrimination and historic narratives.

With a few exceptions, the peace process in Myanmar is heavily dominated by men. Nevertheless, women activists play more prominent roles in civil society, particularly among ethnic nationality communities (see below).

Many of those who have emerged as peace activists over the past two years are members of a younger generation, who have gained valuable experience in national and international NGOs in Myanmar. Peace activism among the Myanmar majority is therefore a welcome development - so long as this remains focused on peace-building, rather than the mobilisation of ethnic issues for essentially political ends. As well as the political elites mentioned above (who by some definitions would not be included in civil society), other urban-based civil and political society networks have (re-)emerged over the past two years. These include activities extending into rural areas and ethnic nationality communities - illustrating the arbitrary nature of 'inside'/'outside' majority/minority distinctions, in the rapidly changing context of Myanmar politics. Initiatives such as Paungku and others have developed contacts between Burman and ethnic nationality communities, and between urban areas and the conflict-affected countryside. In doing so, they have engaged constructively with civil society actors in the borderlands (see below).

In addition to 'traditional' organisations (see below), other CBOs operating in securely government-controlled areas include farmer interest and village development groups, community savings groups, early childhood center committees, and local Parent-Teacher Associations. Some were staffed by retired state officials (Lorch 2006).

Ethnic actors in government-controlled areas
As noted, civil society actors in government-controlled areas of Myanmar have long been subject to state suppression and penetration, and thus have had to work with great caution

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communities in conflict-affected areas (Smith 1999). Over the past year-plus, many exiles from 1988-90 have returned to Myanmar, including prominent student activists, some of whom have contributed towards the peace process by joining the quasi-governmental Myanmar Peace Centre.
[18] There is also the prospect that urban-Burman elites may seek to mobilise alliances with regard to ethnic issues for their own political purposes,

(South 2008). Ardeth Thawnghmung (2011) describes and analyses how ethnic nationality communities in government-controlled areas have adopted a variety of (public and private) positions in relation to state-society and armed conflicts. Often, a surprising amount of space has been available to ethnic communities, providing they have been careful to situate themselves under the 'protective umbrella' of well-connected patrons, and have situated their discourse and activities within an overall pro-Union narrative.

Over the past two years, ethnic nationality civil society actors in Myanmar have enjoyed more space for action. The dynamics of this fast-changing situation vary, according to the context of particular conflict and peace processes. Among several communities (e.g. Shan, Karen), there have been long-standing, low-profile contacts between ethnic civil society actors in government-controlled areas and those in the conflict-affected borderlands and neighbouring Thailand. Often, these networks have been mediated by religious leaders (monks, pastors, priests). Since 2012, these contacts have been practiced more openly, with a number of meetings convened in both Thailand and Myanmar. However, the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act (Section 17/1) still exercises major restraint on relations between civilian populations and NSAGs, with the former fearing that contact with the latter could expose them to retaliation on the part of the state.

For the Shan, growing NSAG-community contact have involved major gatherings in Yangon (November 2012) and Taunggyi (January 2013), bringing together civil society and political actors from inside, and activist groups and representatives of armed groups from the borderlands. For the Karen, a number of community leaders have travelled to Thailand, to discuss the peace process with the KNU and border-based civil society groups, and represent the concerns and aspirations of communities living in or accessible to government-controlled areas. In its engagement with the peace process, the KNU has undertaken a number of community consultations in the borderlands (and online), as well as high-profile missions to government-controlled areas. For example, KNU leaders met Yangon and Karen State-based civil society leaders, immediately following the historic 4 April 2012 talks in Yangon, which consolidated the KNU-government ceasefire. Other consultations have been organised more independently, including a large event held during the 2012 rainy season in KNU/KNLA 2 Brigade (Taungoo District), which was brokered by trusted local civil society intermediaries (Paungku 2013, forthcoming). Like other ethnic groups in Myanmar, the Karen community is highly diverse (in terms of language-culture and religion: South 2011). This diversity is reflected in the broad range of Karen civil society actors - and in tensions between Yangon-based (predominantly Christian, Sgaw dialect-speaking) elites, and political and civil society networks in Karen State (and also, to a lesser degree, in the Irrawaddy Delta). The challenge for peacebuilding in Karen and other communities in Myanmar extends beyond relations between minority groups and the central (historically militarised and assimilationist) state, to include the need for trust and confidence-building between sub-groups of the ethnic community. Furthermore, civil society in Karen and other ethnic communities extends beyond western-orientated (and often internationally-funded) CBOs and national NGOs, to include faith-based and other more traditional types of association. While the latter may 'fall beneath the radar' of Western observers (and particularly donors, with their understandable requirements for 'programmability'), this indigenous civil society constitutes the heart of the communities in question, being a great reservoir of 'human capital' and strategic capacity for change.

In contrast to the larger and more diverse Karen community, Mon populations in southeast Myanmar are numerically smaller and generally more homogenous culturally.[19] In many areas

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[19] Demographic data in Myanmar are notoriously unreliable. *The CIA Factbook* estimates Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%. A census is scheduled for 2014 (prior to the 2015 elections). While this may give better data, there is also a risk of reinforcing unhelpful essentialisations of ethnicity in Myanmar. As Sadan and Robinne observe (2007), ethnicity is a fluid category, subject to re-imaginations. While the fixing of ethnic identity may be convenient for administrative and political elites, this does not necessarily reflect lived realities; see also Sadan (2013 -

the two ethnic communities live side-by-side - providing opportunities for cultural interchange, as well as potential for inter-communal tensions. A ceasefire was agreed between the government and NMSP in 1995. Although political relations broke down in 2010, and tensions remained very high for some time, fighting did not break out again between government forces and the NMSP - unlike in the case of Kachin. In this context, Mon civil society actors have long enjoyed close relations and much overlap between those working 'inside' Myanmar, those operating out of the NMSP-controlled ceasefire zones and in neighbouring Thailand which overlap with NMSP service-providing NSAG-GONGOs. Mon women have been prominent in the peace process, particularly in relation to community development and education activities.

Until two years ago, similar observations could be made regarding Kachin civil society. In the decade-and-a-half following the 1994 KIO ceasefire, Kachin civil society flourished in many sectors. Among the most well-known NGOs to emerge were the Shalom (*Nyein* - peace) and Metta foundations - both of which originated in the Kachin community, but grew to encompass nation-wide networks, with a special connection to ethnic nationality communities and well-connected to international civil society actors. Inevitably, with the breakdown of the KIO ceasefire in June 2011, security concerns have curtailed the work of Shalom and Metta in some geographic areas. Furthermore, in some (but not all) Kachin circles, the breakdown of the earlier ceasefire has somewhat undermined Shalom's credibility, due to its founder's close association the 1994 agreement.[20] The roles of these two Kachin foundations have been particularly important due to the committed engagement of Kachin women involved. In the context of the resumption of armed conflict in Kachin areas, a number of CBOs and national NGOs have supported IDP and other vulnerable communities. These include pioneering Kachin groups operating in KIO-controlled areas along the Chinese border. Like their Karen counterparts on the Thailand border (see below), Kachin CBOs are characterised by variety of relationships with the KIO - ranging from 'GONGO' status as the armed group's relief wings, through much more independent community-based groups, and more activist-orientated groups. In the Kachin IDP camps, local organisations (often channeling international funding, but also in receipt of money from the KIO and the Kachin diaspora) have been the only agencies assisting highly vulnerable communities. In government-controlled areas, the Kachin Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church (KMSS/Karuna), as well as Metta and Shalom, have been active in assisting vulnerable communities. A number of Kachin civil society actors and individuals in Myanmar have also engaged in peace advocacy, including the Kachin Peace Network. Kachin civil society is marked by relatively high levels of participation on the part of women.

There is a widespread perception among Kachin civil and political society actors that it is inappropriate for the broader national peace process to move forward too quickly, while the KIO armed conflict is unresolved. Indeed, some consider that efforts by the government and international community to promote the national peace process at this time is counter-productive, undermining the Kachin cause. More broadly, civil society actors in Myanmar tend to feel excluded from the peace process. Perhaps inevitably, thus far this has consisted of ceasefire negotiations between armed actors: the government (and - more problematically - the Myanmar Army) and NSAGs. As noted, in order for the peace process to be representative of the community/communities, it will be necessary to deepen participation to include civil society and political actors. This will be particularly important, as and when the peace processes is 'broadened' to include substantive political discussions. If political talks are to contemplate structural changes within a more decentralised state, address citizens' key grievances and aspirations, they must include discussion of issues concerning all in the country - including the Burman majority.[21] Given the lack of opinion surveys in Myanmar over

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forthcoming). A key challenge in the census will be to decide who is considered a citizen, in which State or Region.

[20] Shalom has been closely involved with a number of initiatives in relation to the current peace process, including supporting community-based monitoring networks in some areas.

[21] For an overview of political, social and economic issues for possible inclusion in the peace process, see South (2012).

the past half-century, observers may be surprised by some of the issues and concerns identified as priorities by various communities.

Discussion of mainstream civil society in Myanmar tends to focus on cosmopolitan elements, following a broadly democratic-progressive agenda. However, this narrow framing reproduces some widespread and unhelpful assumptions regarding civil society in Myanmar, and beyond. While the sector can certainly be a vehicle for progressive political change, recent grassroots violence in Rakhine State shows that Myanmar civil society is not necessarily cosmopolitan in nature, but can include dark elements, working towards decidedly non-liberal aims. The combination of populism, contested identities and interests, and long suppressed political and communal passions can be a volatile mix.

Returning from issues of intra-communal violence, to discuss armed conflict in the borderlands, those most directly affected by the peace process include communities in areas of on-going or recent armed conflict. Efforts to support the peace process, such as the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI)[22], have worked with communities in areas where access was previously heavily restricted, to undertake participatory needs assessments, in order to implement locally-owned projects helping households/villages recover from decades of insurgency, and brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. In the process, spaces have been created, allowing for substantive discussions between representatives of the Myanmar Army and government, NSAGs, the international community and displaced ethnic minority villagers. These unprecedented engagements have been profound and moving experiences for those involved (including the authors of this paper).

It is essential that such efforts are extended and replicated, in order to bring the victims of armed conflict in Burma/Myanmar into dialogue with both the government and the NSAGs (i.e. to win recognition of civilians as autonomous actors). In such efforts to test the emerging peace, the roles of women and youth will be particularly important. Other ways in which the MPSI has sought to deepen participation in the peace process include supporting consultations between NSAGs and the communities they seek to represent, and also working with civil society and NSAGs to support community-based monitoring of the peace process.[23]

The borderlands; areas of on-going armed conflict
Most literature on armed conflict and its humanitarian impacts in Myanmar distinguishes between areas of ongoing conflict (and assistance provided mostly cross-border from Thailand and other neighbouring countries) and ceasefire and government-controlled areas (e.g. South 2008). As the peace process gains ground (with the important caveat of recent heavy fighting in Kachin areas), this distinction is beginning to break down. Vulnerable, armed conflict-

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[22] The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative aims to build trust and confidence in – and test – the peace process, by supporting peace agreements between the government and NSAGs. The MPSI was initiated in January 2012, when Myanmar asked the Norwegian government to help support the peace process. Since then, a number of other governments and donors have become involved. The MPSI has sought to move quickly in response to political imperatives in a fast-changing context. It is committed to substantial consultations with conflict-affected communities, civil society, and government and non-government political and military actors, and to consulting and sharing information with a broad range of stakeholders. The MPSI is committed to working in a manner which does not expose vulnerable populations or other partners to increased danger (including due to any breakdown in the peace process). It is supporting local partners and NSAGs to implement projects in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Karen and Mon States, and Bago and Tanintharyi Regions. For regularly updated information on the MPSI (in English, Burmese and minority languages), see http://www.emb-norway.or.th/News_and_events/MPSI/
[23] Other elements of Myanmar society with a claim to be key stakeholders include ethnic political parties, representatives of which were elected to provincial and national-level parliaments in 2010. These parties have a credible claim to represent their communities – but so far have been largely excluded from the peace process. Increasingly, above-ground, civilian ethnic politicians are demanding a voice in the peace process, and particularly in emerging political discussions. To a degree, such actors are rivals to the NSAGs for the support of ethnic communities.

affected communities in remote areas are increasingly accessible from inside the country - making the case for cross-border assistance more problematic (see below).

In areas where ceasefires have taken hold, conditions on the ground have improved for civilians. However, conflict-affected communities and other non-armed actors have so far been largely excluded from meaningful participation in ceasefire negotiations (which constitute the initial door-opening stage of a longer peace process). Initiatives such as the MPSI are endeavouring to build trust and confidence in – and test - the peace process, by facilitating engagement on the ground between conflict-affected communities, NSAGs and Myanmar government/Army. As noted above, Myanmar civil society actors are also engaged in processes of trust and confidence-building, developing networks between previously isolated (and sometimes mutually fearful) communities.

Myanmar civil society networks include those based in the insurgent-influenced and opposition oriented borderlands, as well as actors working out of government-controlled areas. Over the past two decades, a veritable 'aid industry' has grown up along the Thailand border, under the broad patronage and protection provided by the refugee camps (home to some 150,000 ethnic minority - mostly Karen and Karenni - refugees: TBBC 2012). Under western/donor tutelage, a number of civil society groups have flourished - staffed by dedicated Myanmar personnel, as well as long-term foreign actors.

During the many years of armed conflict and state suppression in Myanmar, border and exile-based civil society networks were among the few viable mechanisms for supporting anti-government and pro-democracy activities in ethnic nationality-populated areas. During this period, enterprising and committed local actors learned to orientate their rhetoric and activities along lines favoured by Western donors and solidarity networks - and were able to communicate the plight of their communities to international audiences. From the late 1990s, increasing amounts of assistance were provided cross-border to highly vulnerable IDP and other conflict-affected civilians, particularly in southeast Myanmar (in areas broadly adjacent to the refugee camps in Thailand). Some cross-border organisations have the characteristics of CBOs, or at least local NGOs - operating in cooperation with, but fundamentally being quite independent from, NSAGs; others constitute the relief wings of armed groups. Donors have encouraged the latter to distance themselves from their 'mother organisations', and focus on the impartiality and supposed neutrality of their work. While most cross-border NSAG-GONGOs can be said to be impartial, inasmuch as assistance is provided regardless of beneficiaries' ethnic/religious identity, most are far from neutral - being actively engaged in anti-government and solidarity struggles. Indeed, some border-based organisations resent their patrons' insistence on camouflaging the political nature of relief work in the borderlands.

A number of cross-border groups have undertaken important work in the fields of community development, and the provision of essential health and education services. As the peace process in Myanmar moves forwards, these activities should be integrated constructively with existing state governance and service-delivery mechanisms, rather than displaced by the latter.

Other cross-border groups and networks focused mostly on advocacy work. Their activities include documenting and denouncing the systematic human rights abuses which occur (primarily, but not exclusively, on the part of Myanmar Army) in conflict areas, as well as more general anti-government messaging. The changes in Myanmar over the last two years have caught many of these actors by surprise, challenging long-held assumptions: rather than a radical decapitation of the military regime (in the context of some kind of popular uprising, with the expectation that exiled political elites would be parachuted into positions of power), there has instead been a pacted, incremental - and still very fragile and uncertain - transition. Many border-based groups have responded to the changes in Myanmar with strategic vision. As noted, there are growing contacts between civil society and political actors 'inside' the country, and those in the borderlands and overseas. Large numbers of exile activists have returned home, either permanently or on scoping visits, including some 'intellectuals' who have been

drawn into the President's 'advisory group' working in support of the peace process. However, for some border and exile-based activist groups, the changes in Myanmar are perceived as threatening. Over the past two decades exile-based activist groups and networks have become used to controlling the political agenda, framing ethnic conflict in Myanmar for international consumption, and in the process channeling donor funds to their own client conflict-affected populations. Local opposition groups face a dilemma: whether and how to reinvent themselves and work for change around the new peace scenario, or to become increasingly marginalised in the borderlands and overseas, frustrated and angry as the political narrative shifts 'inside' Myanmar.[24] In many respects of course, concerns regarding the trajectory of the peace process are both credible and legitimate. The peace process in Myanmar is fragile and unfinished, and many stakeholders remain understandably sceptical regarding the true intentions of government (and in particular the Myanmar Army).

Such issues raise a key question: who speaks on behalf of civil society? Who does civil society represent? In the past, exile-based organisations could represent themselves as spokespeople for conflict-affected ethnic communities in Myanmar – despite having access to only the conflict zones. However, as and if the peace process (and broader reform agenda) gathers momentum, communities will increasingly be able to speak for themselves, and should be supported to have direct access to political dialogue, and to donors and diplomats seeking to support the reform and peace processes in their country.

The peace process is also raising interesting questions along another dimension of state-(NSAG)-society relations. As noted, ethnic civil society Myanmar is highly diverse, including in the borderlands. In the past, there was generally little distinction between the (sometimes implicit) political positions of opposition-orientated civil society groups and the NSAGs with which they cooperated closely. However, as the peace process builds momentum, some (e.g. Shan and Karen) civil society actors have grown critical of the NSAGs they have long worked alongside – accusing the latter of lacking transparency, and failing effectively to engage with local communities (or at least failing to take account in the ceasefire negotiations of the positions of well-established border-based activist groups).

Refugee and diaspora communities
Over the past several decades, millions of (predominantly, but not exclusively) ethnic nationality civilians have been internally displaced in Myanmar. At the time of writing, up to half-million IDPs remain in southeast Myanmar (TBBC 2012). Their plight and prospects are covered above, in relation to situations of ongoing armed conflict in recent ceasefires.

Among those with the greatest stake in the peace process in Myanmar are refugee communities in Thailand and elsewhere. Many of these people have legitimate concerns regarding agendas for possible repatriation (on the part of the Thai and Myanmar governments, UNHCR and perhaps NGOs), which have not been widely discussed with beneficiary communities. As the peace process in gathers momentum, it can be expected that large numbers of refugees (and IDPs) will return 'spontaneously' to Myanmar, rather than waiting for assistance through officially-sanctioned and organised packages. Such patterns of migration have the potential to provoke conflicts over land and resources, as well as the danger of accidents in the context of widespread landmine contamination in conflict-affected areas.

As well as the refugee communities in Thailand, there are some two-three million migrant workers and their dependents in the kingdom. Many of these have fled for similar reasons to those who enter the refugee camps - but instead of seeking asylum in the border areas, have sought to enter the 'grey' and 'black' economies. Some may return to Myanmar once political

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[24] Meanwhile, civil society actors in Kachin State enjoy no such luxuries. Local communities and CBOs have been struggling to respond to a humanitarian crisis, with the Myanmar Army and KIO engaged in intensive armed conflict. The recent negotiation of a tentative ceasefire in Kachin State may prove a very positive development, moving the peace process in Myanmar onto a constructive new phase.

conditions allow, but most will presumably require significant social and economic changes before deciding to return home.

Refugee and migrant communities have been largely excluded from discussion of the peace process - except for some limited opportunities to communicate their concerns and aspirations to the KNU and other NSAGs. As noted, many activist and exile groups in Thailand and beyond have sought to play constructive roles in the peace process - while others feel more threatened by the changes in Myanmar, and have positioned themselves as 'spoilers'. Such dilemmas are particularly acute for refugees in third countries and other members of the diaspora. To the extent that the reality of change in Myanmar is recognised, this raises issues regarding whether refugee and exile communities may be willing to return home.

Opportunities - potential entry points, mechanisms and issues

As recently as ten years ago, observers - and donors - were asking whether civil society existed in Myanmar. Since then, commentary has shifted towards mapping this dynamic sector, and discussion of which actors to engage with, and how. Although such deliberations have sometimes proceeded according to a rather simplistic understanding of civil society, they nevertheless represent a positive development.

During the previous round of ceasefires in Myanmar in the 1990s, international donors failed to adequately support the peace process, resulting in lost opportunities to move from peace-making towards an environment of genuine peace-building (South 2008). It is essential that these mistakes are not repeated. The reforms underway over the past two years, and particularly the peace process of the last 18 months, remain fragile, incomplete - and still problematic. In particular, the relationship between the government and Myanmar Army remains fraught with tension, with serious implications for the long-term prospects for peace. Nevertheless, this represents the best opportunity in many decades to address issues which have long structured state-society and armed conflicts in Myanmar. In order to succeed, the peace process must be broadened (to include political talks), and deepened (to include participation on the part of civil society and other key stakeholders).

As well as their underlying strategic-political and emerging peace-building roles, civil society actors have for some years been involved in service delivery in Myanmar. In the context of a militarised and predatory state, civil society actors have provided services which in other countries are more commonly provided (at least in part) as part of government health and welfare programs. In Myanmar, in areas of on-going armed conflict, such activities have included assistance to highly vulnerable communities. From the 1990s until very recently, many conflict-affected communities, particularly in the southeast, were accessible only - or mostly - to local agencies working cross-border from Thailand. Such cross-border aid has saved many lives, and also served to build the capacity of local actors; it has largely been complimentary to relief and community-development assistance provided by actors working 'inside' the country. In areas where the security situation still precludes access to vulnerable communities from 'inside' Myanmar (such as much of Kachin State), cross-border assistance remains viable, and indeed often the only way to access highly vulnerable groups. However, in areas where the peace process is taking hold, such as most of southeast Myanmar, access is increasingly possible from inside the country. Cross-border assistance can be limited to situations where vulnerable communities can *only* be accessed from the neighbouring country. Rather than being the default approach to providing assistance, continued cross-border assistance needs to be justified on the case-by-case basis. This said, groups previously characterised primarily by cross-border modes of operation will often continue to have important roles to play, if they can re-imagine their work in relation to supporting - and testing - the peace and broader reform processes.

In this context, it is important to address emerging relationships between government structures and those of, and associated with, NSAGs. As noted, many armed opposition

groups have long-established, if chronically under-resourced, para-government structures, for example in the fields of education, health and local administration. Peace talks have yet to resolve how these non-state local governance structures will relate to formal state structures. This is the case also for border-based civil society actors, some of which have access to vulnerable communities, and whose should be supported to enhance their capacity, rather than being marginalised in the peace process. Such an approach can help to build trust and confidence in the peace process.

Opportunities for supporting civil society engagement in the peace process include:
- Support the engagement of mainstream mainly Burman civil (and political) society with the peace process - including activities to expose the majority community to the realities, grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationality groups, and people in conflict-affected areas.
- Encourage government (including, but not limited to Myanmar Peace Centre) to continue engagement with Myanmar civil society - and extend this to groups working in conflict-affected areas, including border-based actors.
- Build the capacity of Myanmar (including ethnic nationality) media, in relation to the peace process and political reforms more generally.
- Engage sensitively with 'traditional' civil society, building capacity and providing resources where appropriate, while avoiding tendency to re-configure local groups in line with donors' expectations/demands.
- Provide financial and capacity-building resources in line with civil society actors' needs, rather than top-down, donor-driven priorities. This should include donor support that facilitates the evolution of civil society actors' priorities.
- Support voices of women and youth in the peace process, including through awareness-raising and information-sharing activities.
- Support constructive engagement of Myanmar (particularly ethnic nationality) political parties with the civil society sector, and the peace process more broadly.
- Support the agreement (between government and NSAGs, in the first instance) of Codes of Conduct and monitoring mechanisms; support community and civil society participation in ceasefire and peace process monitoring.[25]
- Provide political and timely financial support to peace mechanisms: support consultations between NSAGs and conflict-affected communities (including civil society and political actors); support local peace-monitoring networks (capacity-building, financial support and encouragement to government and NSAGs).
- Civil society participation in political consultations, as part of the peace process, could be facilitated by establishing sectoral 'working groups' to address key issues, eliciting significant input from a broad range of stakeholders.[26] Issues likely to elicit substantial engagement from civil society actors:
  o Land rights issues and land-use conflicts (including compensation for and/or restitution of property confiscated from or abandoned by forced migrants);
  o Environmental regulation and natural resource management (including revenue sharing between the central and State/local governments);
  o Language policy and education (including the status of minority languages in government administration, the justice system and schools, and the situation of non-state ethnic education regimes);
  o IDP and refugee resettlement, including the complex issue of secondly settlement (where displaced or other communities have re-settled on land previously occupied by people who themselves have been displaced), and roles of local, national and international agencies;
  o Economic development, job creation and vocational training.

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[25] Continue facilitating exposure of state and non-state actors to other country contexts in which monitoring mechanisms have been used successfully, particularly those that have included participation by civil society and affected communities (e.g. southern Philippines).
[26] For details of such an approach, see South (2012).

Caveats, assumptions, risks

As noted, intra-communal violence in Rakhine State, and elsewhere, and the on-going conflict in Kachin State threaten to undermine the peace process, and potentially derail still fragile nationwide reforms. Clashes in southwest Myanmar are a salient reminder that grass-roots activism and popular mobilization can be undertaken in a spirit far removed from the normative progressive-cosmopolitan framework within which most discussions of civil society are framed.

This issue touches upon another concern: to a significant degree, civil society actors working on the peace process are identified with particular ethnic communities. There is a need to continue building bridges between ethnic nationality and Burman majority communities, developing Myanmar's long-suppress civic traditions - rather than encouraging a further 'ghettoization' of civil society. The risk otherwise is that an expanded civil society may take the form of separate networks of ethnically and religiously based associations, reflecting existing lines of ethnic and political conflict, rather than bridging such divides.

Peace is an issue which affects all sectors of society, and everyone in Myanmar is a stakeholder. The exclusion of conflict-affected communities, and more broadly of civil society actors and networks, is both unjust and liable to cause resentments that could undermine the peace process itself. In this context, the question of who speaks for communities will become increasingly urgent. Those working to support the peace process in Myanmar have a responsibility to ensure that they engage respectfully and constructively – and above all, safely – with communities which have suffered so much, for so many years.

On the relationship between conflict-affected communities and peace-building support, it is essential that outside interventions respect local agency *and* operate in a manner which does not expose vulnerable (and often traumatised) individuals and communities to further risk. Well-intentioned international agencies visiting previously inaccessible areas should be cautious about the impact of their brief visits on longer-term security and political dynamics in remote areas. When engaging with civil society actors and conflict-affected communities, those supporting the peace process in Myanmar should ensure clarity regarding the distinctions between information-sharing (engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, to ensure that they are informed) and consultations (which imply some kind of veto on the part of interlocutors).

Another risk is that the influx of peace-building 'think tanks' and other support networks currently entering Myanmar can severely stretch the limited capacities and time of local actors. Therefore, those seeking to support the peace process in Myanmar should consider carefully what added value they bring, and not over-tax local resources.

A further concern of many communities in relation to the peace process is widespread environmental damage, especially in the context of increased business activities in previously inaccessible, conflict-affected areas - a problem which is on the increase (Karen Human Rights Group 2013). Those supporting the peace process should work to address these concerns, in partnership with affected communities, civil society actors, government and NSAGs. Issues of environmental protection and business regulation should be placed on the agenda for forthcoming political talks.

If civil society and political parties are not included, there is a risk that Myanmar may experience a backlash in relation to the peace process. If they do not feel a sense of ownership and participation, civil society and political actors – especially ethnic political parties and urban-based civil society – may begin to mobilise to demand their inclusion as stakeholders. This could lead to protests on the part of groups who should be partners in the peace process.

As Myanmar approaches the 2015 elections, these concerns are likely to become more pressing, as national politics enters a zero-sum mode. Given the demands of the country's forthcoming chairmanship of ASEAN, followed by the elections, this year (and hopefully, the first part of 2014) represents a window of opportunity. Despite the many problems, there are great possibilities for social and political progress in Myanmar, including in the peace process. However, more needs to be done to engage the broad spectrum of actors in the peace process, or these opportunities may be missed.

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