



Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies  
Mahidol University

EDUCATION IN TRANSITION:  
A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF  
CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FOR CIVIL  
SOCIETY ACTORS IN  
BURMA/MYANMAR

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## 2. Executive Summary

Burma/Myanmar<sup>1</sup> is currently in a transition with important ramifications for capacity development efforts. The present preliminary study explores some of the critical issues at stake for capacity development activities in order to better understand how the field as a whole can continue to undertake effective trainings and evolve to adapt to current trends. Of particular interest to the researchers is the question of how to teach human rights and social sciences in complex settings such as in Burma/Myanmar and how this field may evolve. The preliminary research has two research interests: contemporary issues of concern in capacity development which need to be addressed by the current stakeholders; and the interaction between the stakeholders within the capacity development network (including Burma/Myanmar participants, Burma/Myanmar organizations, universities, Thai based organizations, political groups, and so on). As a preliminary study, this report seeks to give some first impressions of the current situation of the capacity development field during a period of change in Burma/Myanmar. This research does not attempt to quantify the field or undertake a mapping of it. Rather, the preliminary study intends to draw out issues and concerns expressed by stakeholders in capacity development which can guide future directions of activity, development, and research

The capacity development field is large, yet there has been limited analysis of how this field works and few studies of how stakeholders adapt to current changes. This report wishes to contribute to the understanding of capacity development in the field of human rights and social sciences in three specific ways:

- Understanding how and why young Myanmar people get involved in civil society activities.
- Understanding how the capacity development field is structured and how it operates.
- Understanding what organizational and quality concerns capacity development organizations should be addressing.

The report includes the viewpoints of students or participants in the capacity development field in order to gain a greater understanding of the paths and choices made by youth in Burma/Myanmar who want to work in civil society related areas.

Participants provided many reasons why they undertake civil society activities: some were drawn by the opportunity to be trained by trainers with education from abroad, by access to jobs in the civil society sector, by the opportunities to study abroad, or by being encouraged by their parents and other elders in the community. The students also voiced criticism of the public education system, including colleges and universities. Indeed, as one external observer noted, students in Burma/Myanmar seem to be grabbing at straws in order to make up for what the public system does not offer. For most of the respondents, capacity development by civil society groups, either in Burma/Myanmar or along the border and in neighboring countries, serves to replace a dysfunctional public system. Education plays an important role in the personal and social development of youth, and could also lay the foundation for a better future for Burma/Myanmar by encouraging a more democratic culture and active citizenship. At the same time, education can also be part of the problem if it becomes politicized and serves to reinforce antagonism between groups, or when it creates false expectations of work and

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<sup>1</sup> This research uses Burma/Myanmar to avoid the contested usage of either Burma or Myanmar.

better future without addressing the wider context. While many student informants started at a Burma/Myanmar university, there are few opportunities created by these institutions and the students were often forced to look for education elsewhere, either through alternative education (such as degrees not recognized by the Myanmar Government available at Myanmar Institute of Theology or Myanmar Egress), or through other education organizations such as the American Centre or British Council. As detailed in the study, the weakness of the university sector contributes to shape the type of capacity development that civil society institutions provide.

The report explains the dynamics between the different sectors, mainly the larger NGOs, international organizations, the universities, political groups, and more grassroots actors in order to show the impact (or lack of impact) of these organizations on the development of civil society. It is difficult to accurately map or measure the field: there are a large number of trainings, and many are small in size. The number of capacity development providers keeps changing, and there is a lack of documentation perhaps because of security issues, but also due to limited capacity to fully document their activities. With more openness in Burma/Myanmar, however, the capacity to produce public reports could gradually increase. As an expert informant pointed out, this ability to document activities and produce reports increases may lead to increased funding and assistance.

In the field there is a distinction between Thai-based and Burma/Myanmar-based organizations. Those operating in Thailand face limitations in terms of accessing new participants and access to communities. Training can be dislocated from - and in the worse cases unrelated to - the situations where the impacts are expected to show up. Yet Thai-based organizations have more freedom to address root causes and political issues. They are able to provide participants an open, secure

environment where topics can be discussed in a relatively frank and open manner, with high quality facilities and trainers. Burma/Myanmar-based organizations are able to influence the domestic landscape at the individual and community level. The general strength of those organizations operating inside Burma/Myanmar is that trainings can have direct community level impact. Recognizing that those who participate in capacity development can initiate their own activities, Burma/Myanmar based organizations have the potential to forge a greater role in multiplying the impact of training by ensuring that trained participants continue to work in the field. Security, however, is an ever present element in programming around capacity development. This may range from the protection of the identity of some participants, to the cautious distribution of training material which may contain documents considered to be risky. While this preliminary study set out to examine critical issues raised by individuals working on and around capacity development it would be misleading to ignore the many positive aspects of capacity development efforts such as the diversity, quality, and quantity of training.

Some simple lessons can be seen in the structure and development of this field. Firstly, trainings have been inexorably moving across the border to inside Burma/Myanmar for the past decade and this movement is set to continue. Secondly, gradual changes within Burma/Myanmar are providing more space for capacity development. While the solidity of these new freedoms is yet to be fully tested, there is enough of a critical mass inside Burma/Myanmar to show that capacity development will be a permanent feature. Finally, training organizations in Thailand will remain relevant because of their established experience, their easier access to education resources, and their high quality.

A major finding is that the 'heart' of capacity development is with the small 'reading groups' in Burma/Myanmar which engage in education activities, community level development, or provide a space

for discussion and debate. Every student interviewed had been a member of one, most are still actively involved in them, and these groups are a major engine of growth and dynamism for Burma/Myanmar youth. Many actors gain their first experience of civil society work through them. It is difficult to determine how many groups there are because of their rapid proliferation. Most groups are small – numbering less than 20 or so core members – which means they are not large enough to attract attention, and if they do become too large they will break into two smaller groups. Their *ad hoc* structure allows them to adjust to infrequent funding, and sporadic changes in membership.

While Burma/Myanmar has a large number of universities and a large graduate cohort, universities are largely dysfunctional. Universities have poor infrastructure, they are often located miles from the city centre in Yangon, and are overtly cautious about innovation and change. Degree programs are overly technical, leaving little room for critical or analytical skills to develop. There are further structural issues such as the student admission process which locks in students to degrees, and there is little competition between university programs resulting in poor quality and reluctance to innovate. Teachers are teaching according to curriculums whose quality has not been assessed and teaching methods focus on rote learning. Social sciences that could encourage critical thinking are not taught. Universities tend to focus on quantity rather than quality. Though large numbers of students graduate, their knowledge of the discipline is often highly technical and rather basic. Many students go to university merely to sign their attendance sheet before leaving for other activities; if students stay for the lectures they describe these as watching their professors read from a book. Assessment comes in the form of a final course exam where cheating is common, and learning is based on memorization. The use of a system of additional tuition classes outside of the formal education system and normal class hours, upon

requested by teachers is widespread. The impact of an underperforming university sector on capacity development is significant. It ranges from the structural issues of the burden on capacity development organizations, to the educational issues, such as a lack of space and lack of capacity to undertake research of a critical and analytical nature. Organizations felt they were taking on tasks which would normally be expected to be done by a university, such as basic education in political science, sociology, or research methodology. Organizations noted that they must devote time to develop knowledge which is normally expected of a university graduate, including basic critical analytical skills. Also, it adds a complexity to education policy and planning across all sectors because education standards and knowledge of staff in general is both diverse and little known.

The study lists ten areas of concern related to organizational and quality issues. These have been formulated as questions that those engaged in capacity development ought to be asking.

### **Ten Questions related to Organizational and Quality Issues**

1. **Do trainings polarize the community? What are organizations doing to address the growing disparities between population groups in Burma/Myanmar? Is capacity development in itself a potential source of cleavage or does it reinforce existing cleavages?**
2. **What is the place of politics in capacity development: Are capacity development efforts too politicized? Do training organizations give too much emphasis to political ideology rather than developing capacity?**
3. **The different roles of civil society: When are differences between advocacy oriented and development oriented networks destructive? Or, how should the current debates between sectors, political groups, and training locations be managed so that training maintains its quality?**
4. **Should training be targeting a critical mass or focusing on select individuals? Is the point of training to develop a small expert group or to train as many people as possible? What does this reflect about conceptions of the political?**
5. **Are Thai-based trainings creating a drain?**
6. **How does the culture of Saya/teacher impact trainer-trainee relations and does capacity development promote an alternative approach to learning?**
7. **How do dysfunctional universities impact the capacity development landscape? And how can universities become more productive in developing civil society actors?**
8. **What purpose should the trainings serve? Should organizations be building capacity for the sake of building capacity or is there a need for a clear agenda to development?**
9. **Is there quality in pedagogical development? How can quality be evaluated in this sector?**
10. **Is it constructive to be publicly arguing standards and qualities in capacity development?**

The research was undertaken over a period of June 2011 to September 2011 by three researchers from The Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University. Field work was undertaken in Thailand (Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot), and Yangon<sup>2</sup>. The primary tool of collection was a semi-structured interview with representatives from Thai and Burma/Myanmar based capacity development organizations, interviews with training participants, and visits to organizations and institutions involved in capacity development, including universities in Yangon. The main focus was on capacity development broadly in the sector of human rights and the social sciences. Over 100 interviews were conducted with people working in or participating in capacity development. The research also included ethnographic interviews with individuals who are unable, or choose not to, take part in capacity development activities. The report was written in September and October 2011, but its distribution was delayed by the floods which affected Bangkok in October and November 2011.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to time constraints, this pre-study focuses primarily on the education sector in Yangon. There are also a large number of universities in provincial centers of Burma/Myanmar, which are not covered in this report.

### 3. Background

Over the past few years, civil society in Burma/Myanmar has faced a number of changes which affect the capacity development field in the country. While the lasting impact of these changes at various levels of politics and society in Burma/Myanmar remains uncertain, they are beginning to have tangible effects for capacity development efforts. The present study, undertaken by Mahidol University's Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies (formerly the Centre for Human Rights Studies and Social Development), seeks to identify critical issues that are of importance in these transitions. It focuses primarily on two main issues of concern: contemporary issues of concern in capacity development which need to be addressed by the current stakeholders; and the interaction between the stakeholders in the network (Burma/Myanmar participants, Burma/Myanmar organizations, universities, Thai-based organizations, political groups, and so on). The report does so in order to better understand how the field as a whole can continue to produce effective capacity development and evolve to adapt to current trends. Further, given that there has been little overall analysis of the capacity development field in Burma/Myanmar, the report also intends to initiate a discussion on the direction, structure, and outcomes of capacity development. Of particular interest to the researchers is the question of how to teach human rights and social sciences in complex settings such as in Burma/Myanmar.

The extent and diversity of civil society-based capacity development networks in Burma/Myanmar is the product of a weak government education infrastructure, the large need for skilled people working in development areas, and very active political networks. As this report outlines in Part Two, a large number of organizations and programs for capacity development in civil society-related areas have emerged over the past two decades (far too many to be recorded in this report). The environment in which these organizations and programs operate is wrought with

complexities and risks. Until quite recently travel across the border to Thailand was risky, and training on some issues, such as human rights and democracy even today must be done with caution within Burma/Myanmar. Security concerns ensure that many organizations are not public about their work, especially if the activities are taking place inside Burma/Myanmar. The majority of people undertaking capacity development as students, while smart and hardworking, often have only had limited and more technical education due to the weak Burma/Myanmar education system. Yet, regardless of these constraints, as this report details, the capacity development field is seen to be relatively successful.

This report wishes to contribute to the understanding of capacity development in three specific ways. Firstly, the report includes the viewpoints of students or participants in the capacity development field in order to allow for a greater understanding of the paths and choices made by youth in Burma/Myanmar who want to work in civil society related areas. Secondly, the report will attempt to explain the dynamics in the field between the different sectors, mainly the larger NGOs, international organizations, the universities, political groups, and more grassroots actors in order to show the impact (or lack of impact) of these organizations on the development of civil society. Civil society in Burma/Myanmar has been impacted by the divisions between some of these organizations in the past, and this report addresses if these divisions are still pertinent in capacity development. Third and finally, the research focuses on what organizational and quality concerns capacity development organizations should be addressing. This study is not an assessment or evaluation of trainings or organizations, but rather an attempt to provide an initial understanding of the capacity development field in Burma/Myanmar, areas and issues of concern to actors involved, and where and how organizations, funders, and interest groups can cooperate to improve the quality of

Burma/Myanmar's civil society. The main questions addressed by the study are:

- What are some of the critical issues given the changing political and socio-economic changes in Burma/Myanmar, and what are the challenges and possibilities for capacity development by civil society in this transitional context?
- How do Burma/Myanmar nationals navigate the field of capacity development?
- What is the impact of a dysfunctional university sector on capacity development by civil society?
- How could external stakeholders better engage with the network, and how could the network better engage with external stakeholders?

### **Scope and Limitations**

When undertaking this study, the researchers did not want to simply 'map' the field or describe activities and list organizations, as various versions of such studies have already been undertaken (and a simple Google search can do most of this). Rather the research also seeks to obtain alternative views of the field, firstly from Burma/Myanmar civil society actors themselves. A new generation of development activists has emerged from the recent changes within civil society in Burma/Myanmar. Some of these people have trained abroad in areas of human rights and development, some are active in small community level groups within Burma/Myanmar, and others are now working in mid level positions in civil society organizations. Yet others have established their own groups and organizations. By gaining a view from civil society actors, the study attempts to show how Burma/Myanmar nationals can access trainings, how various requirements determines who gets training, and the opportunities that come from building capacity.

Secondly, the research provides an understanding of how various types of institutions, ranging from local community-based organizations (CBOs), to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs, universities, and donors relate to each other. In particular, the report wishes to examine the effect of a dysfunctional

university system on capacity development. Indeed it appears that the dysfunctional university system has a number of ramifications in capacity development; much knowledge and skills which should have been generated by universities is instead provided through NGOs and other actors. Further, there are few other venues for critical and theoretical development of knowledge

The research is a preliminary study on capacity development, and is thus more of an exploratory sketch of the capacity development field. However, it is intended that this study will highlight areas of importance and interest for further development in the capacity development field. Given the limited time (three months) the researchers could only interview a small selection of organizations and other stakeholders. Further, the pre-study is one of the first of its kind and the focus is on understanding the field and not attempting to assess quality. For these reasons, the pre-study does not include the following:

- A listing or directory of capacity development organizations
- An analysis of course content in capacity development
- Attempts to assess or monitor the quality of the trainings
- Capacity development in border refugee camps in Thailand
- Education for high school and university entrance
- Capacity development under the umbrella of the United Nations, including under the Human Development Initiative (HDI) of the UN Development Program (UNDP).

## Definition of terms used

**Capacity Development:** The report uses the term capacity development (rather than more simply training), to signify the broad field where Burma/Myanmar civil society actors can learn, ranging from university degrees courses to student directed reading groups.

**Civil Society:** The research focuses specifically on 'civil society actors' in Burma/Myanmar, which for the report means people working in positions which deal directly with civil society. The report uses the term civil society in a broad sense to focus on organizations, groups and networks operating between the state, the market and the family. Most commonly this would mean NGOs in the field of development and humanitarianism, but it can also include education, monitoring, or the media. Further, the focus for this study is on Burma/Myanmar-based civil society actors, that is, people who will work (or intend to return) to Burma/Myanmar to work on civil society activities.<sup>3</sup> The study also focuses primarily on activities within Burma/Myanmar and Thailand, where there is the greatest concentration of activities, though there are also programs in India and a number of other countries. The focus of the research is on training for activities which relate to the strengthening of civil society, broadly in the sector of human rights and the social sciences, including development and community development, peace, human rights, the environment, women and gender issues, social work and counseling.

## Methodology

The research was undertaken over a period of June 2011 to September 2011 by three researchers from the IHRP, Mahidol University. Field work was undertaken in Thailand (Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot), and also in Yangon with Yangon-based organizations. The primary tool of collection was a semi-structured interview. The field phase entailed a balance between interviews with representatives from Thai and Burma/Myanmar based capacity

<sup>3</sup> This study does not address capacity development activities for people in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, nor does it look at capacity development internal to an organization.

development organization and interviews with training participants. Additionally, the researchers conducted a series of ethnographic interviews on both sides of the border with individuals who are unable to, or choose not to engage with the available training opportunities. Visits to organizations and institutions involved in capacity development, including universities in Yangon, were also made. Interviewees were selected based on their experience and knowledge of the capacity development field. These interviews broadly covered issues and concerns related to capacity development. In total around 35 expert interviews were conducted with different people involved in the field. The experts were representing these organizations:

- Two universities in Burma/Myanmar
- One political opposition party
- Six NGOs or training centers in Burma/Myanmar
- Eight Thailand-based NGOs or training centers in Thailand
- Five international NGOs with a base in Burma/Myanmar

Students/trainees from Burma/Myanmar were also interviewed in order to gain their perspectives. Interviews were done with students at different stages of training. These were selected by using a snowball sample, where students known to the researchers or based at some organizations were interviewed and also asked if they could put the researchers in touch with other students at different stages of their training. Through this sampling method the research was able to get the following interviews with people at various stages of capacity development:

- 12 individual interviews were conducted with young Burma/Myanmar-based individuals in Yangon who were beginning to explore the possibilities of civil society work.
- 13 individual interviews were conducted with Burma/Myanmar-based students of capacity development programs.

- 3 individual interviews with Burma/Myanmar scholarship students based in Thailand.
- 3 individual interviews with Burma/Myanmar people who have returned from training overseas to work in Burma/Myanmar.
- 14 interviews with youth trainers working in political, educational or youth networks.
- 3 group interviews were conducted with 18 students who participated in British Council and American Centre activities, and also the numerous small groups related to these centers.
- 4 group interviews were conducted with 30 students studying in civil society related areas at Yangon universities or formal training centers.<sup>4</sup>

exploratory pre-study on the status of the capacity development field, which resulted in the present report.

Data collected from the interviews was used to formulate a list of what were considered the most important issues and crucial findings. A summary of this list was distributed to experts who were interviewed for comments and to test the accuracy of the findings. The report was written in September and October 2011.

### **Background to IHRP**

The Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University delivers postgraduate degrees (MAs and PhDs) in human rights and peace studies. It has been involved in human rights training in the Southeast Asia region for over a decade and has contributed to human rights education training through its degree programs, professional development programs and research projects, as well as the work of many graduates in this field. When the institute started to explore ways to expand or improve its contribution in this area in Burma/Myanmar it became clear that capacity development is a large and complex field with many educators of high quality and it was felt that simply doing more training would not contribute much. Hence, the institute proposed doing a broader

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<sup>4</sup> Some individuals are in more than one group.

## 4. Literature Review

The study of education and civil society in Burma/Myanmar is a small, but active field. The first study of the civil society landscape in Burma/Myanmar consisted in a series of papers by scholars and practitioners developed for a conference in Amsterdam in late 1997, later brought together in a publication by Burma Centrum Netherlands and Transnational Institute in 1999 (BCN/TNI 1999). The conference hosted by BCN/TNI and subsequent publication marks the beginning of growing international interest in the role of civil society for democratic change in Burma/Myanmar. Indeed, a purpose of the Amsterdam conference was to identify space for Burmese civil society and examine how it could be supported. BCN/TNI's decision to begin addressing the role of civil society in Burma/Myanmar came at the same time as an emerging interest in the concept of civil society and its potential role in political change among Burmese activists exiled after the 1996 student movement, as witnessed by a series of articles published in *The Irrawaddy* by two former members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), Thar Nyunt Oo and Min Zin, during 1998-1999, which drew attention to the relationship between democracy and civil society. While Min Zin's articles called for a change of strategy by the democracy movement towards greater attention to the potential of civil society development for democratic change, Thar Nyunt Oo's articles called for an end to military rule in order for civil society to flourish (Min Zin 1998; Min Zin 1999; Thar Nyunt Oo 1998; Thar Nyunt Oo 1999).

In this initial period, however, the dominant view of many observers was that there was no independent civil society of significance in Burma outside of that created or co-opted by the authorities. As Steinberg wrote, "civil society died under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP); perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered" (Steinberg 1999; Steinberg 2001). The prospects for civil society to develop were also seen as grim, given the context of the time (Liddell 1999). At the same

time, there was an early recognition that if the situation was to change, it would be necessary to engage government and state institutions, and to review the many pitfalls of international NGO engagement in Burma/Myanmar (Purcell 1999; Smith 1999). Within a few years this dim view of Burma/Myanmar's civil society had begun to shift. In 2001, the International Crisis Group (ICG) released its first report focusing on the twin role that civil society could play both in relation to democratic change and in fostering inter-ethnic understanding in Burma/Myanmar. While the ICG concluded that civil society was not likely to be able to push for a transition in Burma/Myanmar, the group recognized the role of civil society in creating conditions for change and in sustaining change once a transition had taken place. The report also called for greater external assistance in order to promote civil society in Burma/Myanmar, including in areas controlled by armed groups.

Publications such as these began to shift the debate over Burma/Myanmar. The question was no longer whether civil society exists in Burma/Myanmar, but what form it assumed and how it operated given the numerous constraints in the country. From being a topic that had rarely been investigated in relation to Burma/Myanmar, civil society had become a staple of international Burma/Myanmar debate by the early 2000s. The international donor community paid increasing interest in supporting civil society developments in Burma/Myanmar, as exemplified by the activities of the UNDP and other international agencies from 2002 onwards. However, Burmese civil society was often still seen as fairly inactive. During the first decade of the 2000s, a growing body of literature was produced, which was focusing on the operations of Burmese civil society in particular geographic or thematic areas, including the reemergence of civil society in former conflict areas of Burma/Myanmar (Ganesan *et al.* 2007; Kyaw Yin Hlaing *et al.* 2005; Lorch 2008; South 2007; South 2008). Studies were also done that compared conditions in Burma/Myanmar with conditions in other countries

in the region, as exemplified by a major publication released by the Heinrich Boll Foundation in 2006 which compared Vietnam to Burma/Myanmar. In addition to these research publications, there is a growing number of Master degree written by Myanmar students studying abroad, many from Thai universities.

This interest in civil society development in Burma/Myanmar is part of a broader research focus in civil society that reemerged during the 1990s largely through studies of globalization, global civil society, and global governance (Keane 2003). As noted by Weiss (2008), questions related to the form, development, function and impact of civil society was appearing in work on Southeast Asian politics by the mid-1990s. One aspect of this research was greater recognition of the differences between the civil society that originated in the western world and civil society as it emerged in Asia. More emphasis was also given to the possibilities and limitations for civil society's transformative potential given the different political contexts in Southeast Asia. Around 2000, these findings slowly began to influence research and case studies related to Burma/Myanmar. One example is a report released by the 88 Generation Students in March 2008 detailing the findings of a letter-writing campaign conducted by the group in 2007. Another example is a study of civil society in Burma/Myanmar by Heidel (2006), which also highlighted the large number of local community based groups operating at village level in Burma/Myanmar.

The end of the first decade of the 2000s marks another turn in the focus of literature on civil society in Burma/Myanmar towards greater emphasis given to civil society actors themselves. Civil society response to the disaster of Cyclone Nargis played a key role in this regard, as can be seen for instance in the report *"I Want to Help My Own People": State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis* published by Human Rights Watch in 2010. In 2009, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Phnom Penh initiated a listening project with the expressed goal of ensuring that the opinions, ideas, experiences and insights of civil society leaders were brought into

external discussions about Burma/Myanmar. Two reports have been released so far, one focusing on civil society response to Cyclone Nargis and one focusing on people belonging to ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar. CPCS identified capacity building as a great need for civil society organizations in Burma/Myanmar and an area in which external actors can assist.

While the present review has looked over a broad set of literature focusing on civil society in Burma/Myanmar, the dire straits of the education sector in Burma/Myanmar has also long been recognized by observers and analysts. Since the mid-1990s, human rights advocates based outside the country have covered the field of education in documentation of human rights violations in the country (for example see the various yearbooks put out by the Human Rights Documentation Unit). In 2002, the exiled Foreign Affairs Committee of the ABFSU brought out an extensive report focusing on the education sector in Burma/Myanmar (ABFSU 2002; see also Thein Lwin 2000a&b). Research on education provision in the context of political and armed conflicts in Burma/Myanmar has also been conducted since the early 2000s, including one PhD thesis (Thein Lwin et al. 2001; Thein Lwin 2002; Thein Lwin 2006; Thein Lwin 2007; Zarni Maung no date). However, education and civil society have often remained separate fields of scrutiny by observers and analysis. One of the turning points in bringing interest in the civil society and education fields together for analysis by scholars and practitioners was the annual Burma/Myanmar update conference that took place at the Australian National University in 2008 and the subsequent book publication which brought together contributions by Lorch (2008) on education provided by civil society, Han Tin (2008) on the challenges and prospects facing the education sector in Burma/Myanmar, and Mohammed Mohiyuddin Mohammed Sulaiman (2008) on the Islamic education system in Burma/Myanmar. However, there continues to be a genuine lack of research focusing on actors and participants in the capacity development field in Burma/Myanmar. The present pre-study is one of the few studies to examine this area.

## 5. Contextualizing Capacity Development

Capacity development for Burma/Myanmar civil society actors has undergone a number of significant changes since 1988. This historical context is important because it provides an understanding of the current structure of the capacity development field, as well as the direction it is taking. Most significantly, there has been a move towards Burma/Myanmar-based trainings for the last ten years as well as a change in focus from training of a primarily political basis to more development/humanitarian oriented training, which is also reflected in this report.

### **Phase one: 1990-2000: Post '88 Political Developments**

The first phase of civil society-based capacity development began in the 1990s and was directed towards the growing number of exile groups based in Thailand. The 1988 student led uprising and subsequent political repression and military crackdowns resulted in a large number of activists escaping to Thailand. These individuals were joined by large numbers of refugees seeking safety from the conflicts in the ethnic areas, making for two significant populations: one political and one ethnic. A range of organizations provided assistance for these groups, though the assistance was distinct. For the ethnic groups the focus was on humanitarian aid through the refugee camps. For the exile community the focus was mainly on solidarity building and organization development. The many exile groups needed to organize themselves better to improve their advocacy; hence development around solidarity building was seen as crucial. Further, many of these groups emerged firstly as social movements and had to transform into non-government organizations once in Thailand, a change which required them to develop their structure, programming, and management, hence the need for organizational training. These kinds of trainings were provided by a range of organizations, from international development agencies to national level Burma/Myanmar interest groups (such as the Danish and Norwegian Burma Committees). A different

track was taken for many of the groups fleeing conflict in the border areas, as camp-based education, delivered as a part of humanitarian aid, became the main form of capacity development (this area is not covered in the present research).

The network of organizations founded during the 1990s by exiles has been a destination for political and social activists from both sides of the border. Over the years the exile organizations worked on advocacy, capacity development, media, women's issues, human rights, community development, the environment, as well as the provision of education and health. A diversification of attitudes towards political activism took place in the exile communities in this period, which has had an impact on the development of capacity-development. People entering the exile network could choose from many approaches and disciplines: ranging from the more activist contentious politics, to "apolitical" approaches, to peace negotiation and community development. This first generation of capacity development was marked by a focus on political activities protesting the unelected military junta, and on raising awareness in the movement to issues around human rights and political organization. Later capacity development has focused on issues such as media training, gender, community development, and health. During this period, the opportunity for civil society training within Burma/Myanmar was limited and mostly conducted by Burma/Myanmar nationals for Burma/Myanmar nationals. The universities were closed on and off from 1988 to 2000, and the government was suspicious of groups spreading information on civil society related issues (such as human rights and peace). Those who wanted to learn more about these areas generally traveled outside Burma/Myanmar (and often had to go into exile) to do so.

### **Phase Two: Turning towards Myanmar (2000-2006)**

Since the early 2000s a gradual change in funding priorities and changes in the political context has

moved focus away from the exile community towards support for organizations working either cross-border, or fully in Burma/Myanmar. While there is no single event that signals this change, interview subjects note that the increased numbers of activities by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) from around 2002, and the more pro-active role played by the British Ambassador at the time (which had long term ramifications in the crucial role played by the British Council in capacity development) significantly contributed to this change in attitude. Further, research, including reports by the International Crisis Group (2001), bolstered a growing recognition of the existence of civil society in Burma/Myanmar, giving many organizations a justification to initiate projects inside Burma. Some international NGOs also increased their activities inside the country, such as Save the Children and UNICEF, while others such as Action Aid initiated programs. There was also more involvement in public health with organizations working in AIDS prevention. By 2005 a number of small scale training programs were operating across the border from Thailand, and a growing number of Burma/Myanmar nationals were able to leave the country for training and return. Many Thai-based organizations such as the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) and the Alternative ASEAN Network (Altsean) initiated activities inside Burma/Myanmar. There was a significant growth in the opportunities for Burma/Myanmar based students to study overseas through various scholarship programs such as those now managed through Thabyay education. One of the results was that Thai university programs such as the Master in Human Rights program at Mahidol University, the Master in International Development program at Chulalongkorn University and the Master in Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University began to receive applications from students within Burma/Myanmar.

### **Phase Three: Cyclone Nargis Tipping Point (2006-2010)**

Cyclone Nargis is often noted as the turning point for civil society in Burma/Myanmar. Indeed, the

disaster marks a dramatic change in the nature of capacity development in the country. However, as people working in the area have noted, Cyclone Nargis provides a tipping point rather than a precedent. Changes were already underway both in Thailand and Burma/Myanmar and many organizations had started working inside Burma/Myanmar before Nargis, but their activities were solidified by the response to the cyclone. Many INGOs rapidly expanded their work in Burma/Myanmar and employed local people in community development or programming, or made their presence permanent, as part of their humanitarian relief exercises. The reaction to this humanitarian disaster was strong and widespread because there was already a basic infrastructure in place that could rapidly develop into a full humanitarian response. Further, there were many Burma/Myanmar nationals who had received training in humanitarian and civil society related areas who were prepared to begin working in this area. Following Cyclone Nargis, approximately 100 INGOs established a permanent presence in Burma/Myanmar, a number much larger than before the cyclone.

### **Current Phase (2010 - )**

The current phase is marked by the apparent move towards democracy by the Burma/Myanmar military regime, as seen in the election of the first parliament, the establishment of a civilianized government and the creation of a national human rights commission, as well as the increased tolerance of the government towards training, discussion, and development in civil society oriented activities. Changes in domestic capacity development networks reveal a variety of approaches, especially surrounding the 2010 election. During the 2010 election in some areas there were divisions between individuals and organizations in capacity development networks who supported the election, those who called for a boycott, and those attempting to be neutral. Discussions of whether to vote or boycott the 2010 election aside, the 2010 election has proved to have implications for capacity development as there is now a formal parliamentary system and constitution, however flawed, to engage with. Some INGOs have

softened their stance towards the government, as seen in the willingness for people to reconsider the anti-sanctions position. Most respondents inside Burma/Myanmar, however, continue to hold a 'wait and see' attitude to the changes, and few, if any, people are willing to state that democracy has arrived. Many respondents also stated that they were unsure if the changes were real, showing the high level of distrust people still have for the military rulers. Current changes are seen as easily reversible. It is within this current phase where there are dynamic and changing positions by organizations and a fluid political context in Burma/Myanmar that this research takes place.

### **Summary**

Three simple lessons stand out from this overview of the various phases of the capacity development field. Firstly, trainings have been inexorably moving across

the border to inside Burma/Myanmar for the past decade and this movement is set to continue. Secondly, gradual changes within Burma/Myanmar are providing more space for capacity development. While the solidity of these new freedoms is yet to be fully tested, there is enough of a critical mass inside Burma/Myanmar to show that capacity development will be a permanent feature. Finally, training organizations in Thailand will remain relevant because of the high quality of the resources and expertise of these organizations, compared to those inside Burma/Myanmar. Organizations in Thailand have significant and extensive experience in capacity development, they have developed the training networks which cross the border, and they have easier access to education resources such as universities that ensure they will remain of relevance at least for the medium to long term.

## 6. Capacity Development Networks at a Glance

### 6.1. Brief Overview

Capacity development for Burma/Myanmar civil society actors occurs across a wide range of organizations and in great diversity. Within Thailand, organizations offer training positions to thousands of individuals every year. Larger organizations, such as HREIB, Altsean, and Earthrights International, have over the past five years had thousands of people undergoing their trainings. Giving a quantitative estimate of the trainings undertaken is nearly impossible due to a number of reasons: there are constant changes in the number of organizations; there are large number of small scale civil society activities which are difficult to find; some organizations do not keep open records of their participants for security reasons; often organizations are working within limited funds and capacity, and cannot keep accurate records; many organizational representatives explained that people who are involved in capacity development will go on to run their own training in a cascade effect, but this is not always documented. Experts in the area will at most give a rough estimate of somewhere around 3-5,000 places a year. Because nobody knows how many trainings are going on, and the numbers provide little insight regarding the substance of efforts, this research instead focused on the how the field works as a network, and what are the challenges faced by the network.

### 6.2. Comparing Burma/Myanmar and Thai-based Trainings

*“However politically unpopular it may be to say, you have to acknowledge the clear separation between Burma and Thai based training. They serve different people and see the situation in Burma differently.”*

*-Chiang Mai based organization representative*

*“One of the biggest, and most common, mistakes is to make a false distinction between efforts on the inside and initiatives in Thailand. This is both destructive and inaccurate, each and every Thai based organization is involved on the inside.”*

*-Chiang Mai based organization representative*

As these two statements from capacity development organizations indicate, questions regarding the difference between Burma/Myanmar-based and Thai-based organizations sometimes reveal contending positions. Some informants believed that there no distinctions between the Burma/Myanmar-based and Thai-based training, and that any discussion regarding such distinctions is misguided. Other informants posit that any discussions about capacity development needed to be placed in a framework which separates Burma/Myanmar-based and Thai-based efforts. Individuals who challenged the idea of distinguishing between Thai-based and Burma/Myanmar-based training argued that all capacity development is working towards the same end – a robust civil society operating in a democratic Burma/Myanmar – therefore capacity developed in Thailand is no different than that in Burma/Myanmar. On the other hand respondents who highlighted the distinctions between Thai-based and Burma/Myanmar-based capacity development often pointed to differences in privileges and vulnerabilities. On the Thai side individuals are safe to speak and act as they please, Thai based trainings can be more political, and take advantage of more global resources (whether this is material or resource people). Many respondents noted that the importance of Thai-based capacity building tends to be downplayed, despite providing capacity development which could not take place within Burma/Myanmar. One respondent noted “Thai based organizations can discuss things which can’t be discussed on the inside, and remain the only platform where individuals can speak and write without fear

of repercussions.” For organizations in Burma/Myanmar individuals must speak carefully due to constant fear of reprisal.

At the same time, those operating on the Thai side of the border face limitations in terms of accessing new participants and access to communities. Training can be dislocated from - and in the worse cases unrelated to - the situations where the impacts are expected to take place. Generally, individuals who argued that there were distinctions noted that the Thai based capacity development is oriented towards promoting activism and accountability tools, whereas Burma/Myanmar based capacity development was oriented towards community level development. Thus, while Thai-based organizations are able to address root causes, including a focus on human rights and politics, and seek to address them, Burma/Myanmar-based organizations are able to influence the domestic landscape at the individual and community level. Additional concerns related to brain drain, cost, and selective recruitment factors which limit the accessibility to trainings in Thailand. Questions on the impact of this division in training will be addressed in the key questions for stakeholders in Section 8.2.

### 6.3. Thai-Based Organizations

*“The role of Thai based capacity development is to work on the most sensitive subject matters. And we fulfill this vital role well.”*

*-Mae Sot based organization representative*

Thai-based capacity development is born out of the exile movement seeking to implement large-scale political change. For many years the dominant thinking was that Burma/Myanmar would transform through revolution rather than incremental change, which led a number of people to doubt gradual change (such as is now occurring) will result in anything significant. The viewpoints of some Thai-based organizations reflect such positions. But many other organizations are concerned with providing development in skills and knowledge for civil society development which is not available within Burma/Myanmar. Given this context, this pre-study

found three general commonalities regarding the Thai based organizational view of capacity development. This is not to say that all organizations had the same viewpoint on these elements, but each organization saw a necessity to engage with them:

Root Causes –Thai based organization tend to focus on identifying and addressing root causes of the development problems in Burma/Myanmar. Many Thai based organizations noted that capacity development which does not address these root causes will contribute to prolonging the situation in Burma/Myanmar. Such root causes often centre on the lack of democracy, a poorly equipped and illegitimate government, ethnic tensions, a history of significant human rights violations, and cultural barriers to equality and non discrimination. At the same time, there was disagreement as to how root causes should be dealt with. Some felt rights advocacy was the way to go, while other promoted a more peace or development oriented approach. Root cause issues are often highly political, meaning acting on them is more commonly associated within adopting a more ‘revolutionary’ paradigm of democratic transition.

Constructive Suspicious. Thai based organizations rarely criticized outright the capacity development efforts taking place inside Burma/Myanmar. Many hailed the progress which various organizations had made on the inside, and the political changes as significant. However, there was skepticism regarding the political contexts of some training and questions as to whether various efforts were challenging or reinforcing the legitimacy of the government. Many Thai-based respondents argue that this skepticism should be seen as appropriate and not as negative attribute. Indeed, for the exile community in particular, which has experienced the duplicity of the Burma/Myanmar government, there is an understandable caution when it comes to the recent opening of space to civil society. Further, Thai-based organizations do not need to feign complicity with the government in order to operate and can maintain a more political position.

An Indispensable Contribution. Thai based organizations recognized that they are able to provide participants an accessible, secure

environment where topics can be discussed in a relatively frank and open manner. Thai based organizations provide high quality facilities and trainers, and offer a variety of courses. The standard of training in Thailand on the whole is seen as better than in Burma/Myanmar because of these advantages.

#### **6.4. Burma/Myanmar-Based Organizations**

The general strength of those organizations operating inside Burma/Myanmar is that training, trainers and participants are part of the political landscape on a daily basis. Organizations are capable of having a direct community level impact, and the various initiatives are developed with this in mind. Recognizing that those who participate in capacity development initiatives go on to initiate their own capacity development activities, Burma/Myanmar based organizations have the potential to forge a greater role in multiplying the impact of training by ensuring the trained participants work in the field. As numerous participants explained, capacity development is also a lived experience; it is not just the community level work they do, but even in the process of going to and from work participants interact with individuals from all walks of life, whether it is in a taxi, tea shop or along the street. The very fact of being present in the country gives quite specific value added qualities to the Burma/Myanmar-based organizations. The importance of the presence on the ground was continually reinforced by capacity development stakeholders, and is a defining feature of the capacity development field in Burma/Myanmar. Due to this, the main features of these organizations are:

##### Community Level Oriented Activity:

The largest networks of capacity development participants which surfaced during this research took the shape of small student groups, interest groups, community clubs, and education initiatives under Buddhist monasteries or other religious umbrellas in urban and rural areas. This report uses the term 'reading group' to signify the large, diverse and dynamic sector of small, youth orientated civil

society education groups. The term 'reading group' is used because many of these groups are based around discussion and education on civil society issues, though the reading aspect is frequently applied in development and education activities. There are large numbers of these groups and clubs, often set up by young people and of a size around 10-30 people. They meet informally, are focused on an issue – perhaps the environment, education, development – and based around organizing activities. While there is no record of the number, there are hundreds and perhaps even up to a thousand active in Yangon alone. The clubs may be as informal as a group of students regularly meeting to discuss environmental issues, or they may be funded to undertake activities and training for a community. These efforts are easy to access for individuals who would normally lack access to more formal training, and they have a significant impact on the capacity development landscape in Burma/Myanmar. Respondents in Burma/Myanmar recognized that these club or group efforts were key vehicles of capacity development distribution. Many organizations urged participants to contribute to such efforts in any way possible. This makes the Burma/Myanmar based organization viewpoint of capacity development unique, as many recognize that much of the capacity development is taking place outside any organizational structures.

##### Defined Relationship with the Government

All Burma/Myanmar based capacity development organizations need to define how they work with the government. Some, like the many small reading groups, choose to avoid a relationship by staying small and being difficult to notice, and perhaps appearing to small to for the government to be concerned about. Other organizations have a policy to engage with the government as a process of development. Organizations, trainers and participants may choose to involve local authorities or higher level government officials in the capacity development initiative. In some cases, the interaction may be limited to gaining approval to pursue a particular initiative. How the organization positions itself in terms of the government is a fundamental element of its identity. Some organizations like

Myanmar Egress explicitly state their intention is to engage with the government. Many NGO trainings conduct the minimal amount of contact with the government as possible – enough so the organizations can operate but no more. Thai based organizations can be more fluid or undisclosed in how they position themselves with the government; but for a variety of reasons this option is not available to Burma/Myanmar based organizations.

#### Security Oriented

Capacity development efforts in Burma/Myanmar need to give significant attention to security issues. Security is an ever present element in programming around capacity development: this may range from the protection of the identity of some participants, to the cautious distribution of training material which may contain documents considered to be risky. Given the relatively nascent approval the state has given to training programs there is not yet an established understanding of what is permitted and what is not allowed. The heightened security is also met with creative responses. For some organizations trainings on sensitive topics are reworded, so human rights trainings are called ‘human dignity,’ or ‘human security’ workshops. As one organizational respondent explained, “certain words and approaches can be dangerous here. We have the responsibility to explain what may happen if participants decide to talk about human rights and act in defiance of local authorities.” Many organizations have training centers within their office so a workshop can be organized without being noticed.

### **6.5. Distinct Organization Features**

Commonly, capacity development organizations are categorized by their organizational structure (as either international NGO, local NGO, community based organization, university, etc.). For this study we found that these categories were not useful in determining how the organizational identity relates to the capacity development activities. Instead we are proposing to distinguish organizations by specific features which identify and influence the delivery of capacity development, and should be taken into consideration when understating how the capacity

development field is constructed. These elements capture more accurately the diversity in the field of capacity development; they also highlight the complex interaction between financial models, organizational structure, and ideologies of the organization. Organizations rarely fit one type or another; rather they find themselves on a continuum at numerous levels. Variables that need to be taken into account can include religious affiliation, level of certification, capacity to fundraise, degree of formalization and level of interaction with the government. For instance, an organization can be simultaneously faith based, non certificate giving, informal and have links to the government. This can tell us much about the structure and delivery of its programs, its potential participants, and the types of trainings it can do.

#### **Level of religious affiliation**

The pre-study covered capacity-building initiatives organized both by secular and faith-based entities. Indeed, much educational initiatives by civil society in Burma/Myanmar takes place under a religious umbrella, whether Buddhist or Christian or ethnically-based<sup>5</sup> (Lorch 2008: 170). In the course of this pre-study, many respondents recognized that religious organizations were granted a certain level of freedom from government scrutiny, which provided a cover of protection for capacity-development activities. At the same time, a capacity-building organization’s affiliations with a religious institution may have implications for its mandate and autonomy. Religious affiliation may also have implications for recruitment and participation, with the majority of participants coming from that religious group, though, it is important to note that no organizations examined during this pre-study deliberately excluded people because of their religions belief. Religious institutions also provide cover for secular capacity-development. In the course of the research, religious affiliation, or lack thereof, was also not reflected as a source of controversy or frustration with most respondents,

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<sup>5</sup> There often is a close connection between the religious networks and the ethnic groups in Burma/Myanmar.

although some noted that religious affiliation could cause controversies in their communities. Instead, feedback surrounding the religious dimension of capacity development was largely positive. Further, the funding streams for the more religious organizations are distinct, with many faith based organizations having direct contact with outside funding sources. The pre-study did not engage in an analysis of the possible impact of such affiliations on the training content adopted by organizations, though this could be a subject for further study.

### **Level of certification**

In an environment where government degrees are not given great value, alternative certificates or degrees are often sought from capacity development organizations in the civil society sector. Some organizations can almost be called quasi-community colleges, for instance Myanmar Egress runs semesters and puts through batches of students who 'graduate' at the end of the course. The emphasis on certificate giving ceremonies, the recognition of the certificate, and the production of cohorts of students show that NGOs are moving into the capacity development space left by the weak university system and the absence of community colleges. The non-certificate groups are normally looser in structure and include the reading groups or ad hoc and specialized trainings. Granting certificates also raise some concerns. Providing degrees and certificates entail a certain level of visibility, which may increase security concerns for organizations and individuals. In addition, the increased importance of certificates relates to the poor perception of the university, where formal degrees may not be as recognized or respected, and forcing people to look for accreditation for their knowledge in other forums such as civil society trainings, especially those with foreign connections.

### **Capacity to fundraise**

Education and training can be a lucrative business, as demonstrated by the growing number of private colleges and private tutoring in Burma/Myanmar. The large number of advertisements and commentaries on the scope of education companies in the

education supplement of the *Myanmar Times*<sup>6</sup> are further indicators that there is a large private sector for education outside the formal education system, which is run as a business. While most civil society related trainings are quite separate from this, organizations still need to raise funds and keep to budgets. Regardless of the pressures created by funding limitations, almost no civil society trainings run as fee paying courses. While there are some exceptions within the American Centre and British Council, this is a clear divide. Another distinction runs between capacity building organizers with capacity to raise external funding and those dependent on their own resources. For those seeking external funding, the source of funding is a political concern for many. The funding system is heavily politicized in Burma/Myanmar. Government donors and international organizations operating in a context of sanctions are cautious about not doing anything which may be interpreted as supporting the Burma/Myanmar government, while organizations inside the country are concerned not to be seen as too closely linked with 'foreign influences' whether for legal or political protection.

### **Level of formal structure**

Capacity development may take place in a classroom style training environment, involving professional trainers, formal curriculum, and set activities. Alternatively, capacity development may occur in the most informal of settings. The largest provider of capacity development in Burma/Myanmar are the numerous 'reading groups' or small, community level clubs where likeminded youth get together and discuss current issues in a very informal setting. Because these groups are unstructured they are often not considered training organizations. However, as this report has found, these are the engine room for much civil society development in Burma/Myanmar. At the other end of the scale some programs have a far more formal structure with semesters, regular training timetables, and permanent staff. The level of structure is an

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance "Education Myanmar: Investing in the Future", *Myanmar Times Special Feature*, January 2010.

important feature in determining the capacity of organizations, and the ability to incorporate quality standards.

### **Level of Burma/Myanmar government interaction**

As stated above, Burma/Myanmar organizations need to consciously decide upon the amount of government interaction they have to undertake. Thai based organizations can choose to take on government interaction as an organizational policy. Those organizations which were willing to work with the Burma/Myanmar government could do so at a number of levels, but they would do so under the

umbrella of social development. Those who choose not to engage often assume the job of monitoring and criticizing the government. Most organizations exist somewhere in the middle, adopting a mixed engagement, and accountability oriented approach to capacity development. The two ends of the spectrum represent different priorities, directions and vulnerabilities. Examining the tensions between the two ends of the spectrum leads to sensitivities where many respondents advise one to avoid this discussion. This research found that while the divisions between these two groups are real, the commonalities are extensive and there is sufficient room for constructive discourse.

## 7. Views from Non-Organization Stakeholders

### 7.1. Views from participants/students

As in many developing countries, a significant share of the population in Burma/Myanmar consists of youth, adolescents in their late teenage and young adults in their early twenties. In the ASEAN region, Burma/Myanmar does not stand out: The projected ratio of youth in the population is more or less comparable to that of, for instance, Indonesia, Malaysia and India.<sup>7</sup> However, while the numbers are unclear, Burma/Myanmar has a very low university participation rate as compared to the rest of the region, and a much weaker university system. Opportunities for any education for young Myanmar nationals are thus already limited before seeking training in civil society related fields. Years of political repression, violent conflict and economic mismanagement have left a sense of malaise in Burmese society, as witnessed for instance by high rates of drug abuse among youth (Safman 2005) or in the large number of young people who have left the country. Many young Myanmar are now living outside the country's borders, with Thailand alone being host to an estimated three million migrant workers, refugees and political dissidents from Burma/Myanmar. For large sectors of Burma/Myanmar society, however, education remains out of reach all together. Widespread poverty, child labour, poor infrastructure in rural areas, as well as ongoing armed conflicts are obstacles for families seeking to ensure that their children complete their education. Hence, most children in Burma/Myanmar enroll in school, with an equal share of boys and girls, but less than 60 percent of children complete five years of compulsory basic education, and only about 49 percent of girls and 50 percent of boys attend secondary school. There are significant differences between urban and rural areas, and between the Burman ethnic majority and ethnic minorities. In

such a context, the research for this report asked a small group of youth in Burma/Myanmar who either work in, or want to work on civil society related issues, about how they seek education, what they think of the present opportunities, and what they see in the future.

### Pathways to Capacity Development

Most students interviewed for the pre-study were in their early to mid 20s and came from the middle class in Burma/Myanmar, with families able to support their education and other activities. This population is representative of the people who undertake civil society training (with some exceptions for programs which deliberately select people from ethnic and remote areas such as the Action Aid Fellowships program), though clearly not representative of Burmese/Myanmar youth in general. In the interviews students were asked why and how they got to the position they were in, and also what future training they hoped to take. Although students in the diverse group do not follow a single path, it is possible to map these paths and point out interesting findings in order to understand how young Burmese/Myanmar gain civil society capacity skills. The resulting map of the paths is given below in Figure one.

As figure 1 illustrates, there are some important findings to make. Firstly, multiple paths are taken by students. Capacity development is often not a single path, but multiple paths taken at the same time. Secondly, while most students start with a Burma/Myanmar university, there are few options from this institution and students are often forced to look for education elsewhere, either through alternative education (for instance unrecognized degrees such as the Myanmar Institute of Theology BA in Religious Studies program), or through other education organizations such as Myanmar Egress, the American Centre or British Council. Thirdly, another major finding is that the 'heart' of capacity development are the small 'reading groups.' Every student had been a member of one, many were actively involved in one of these groups, and these

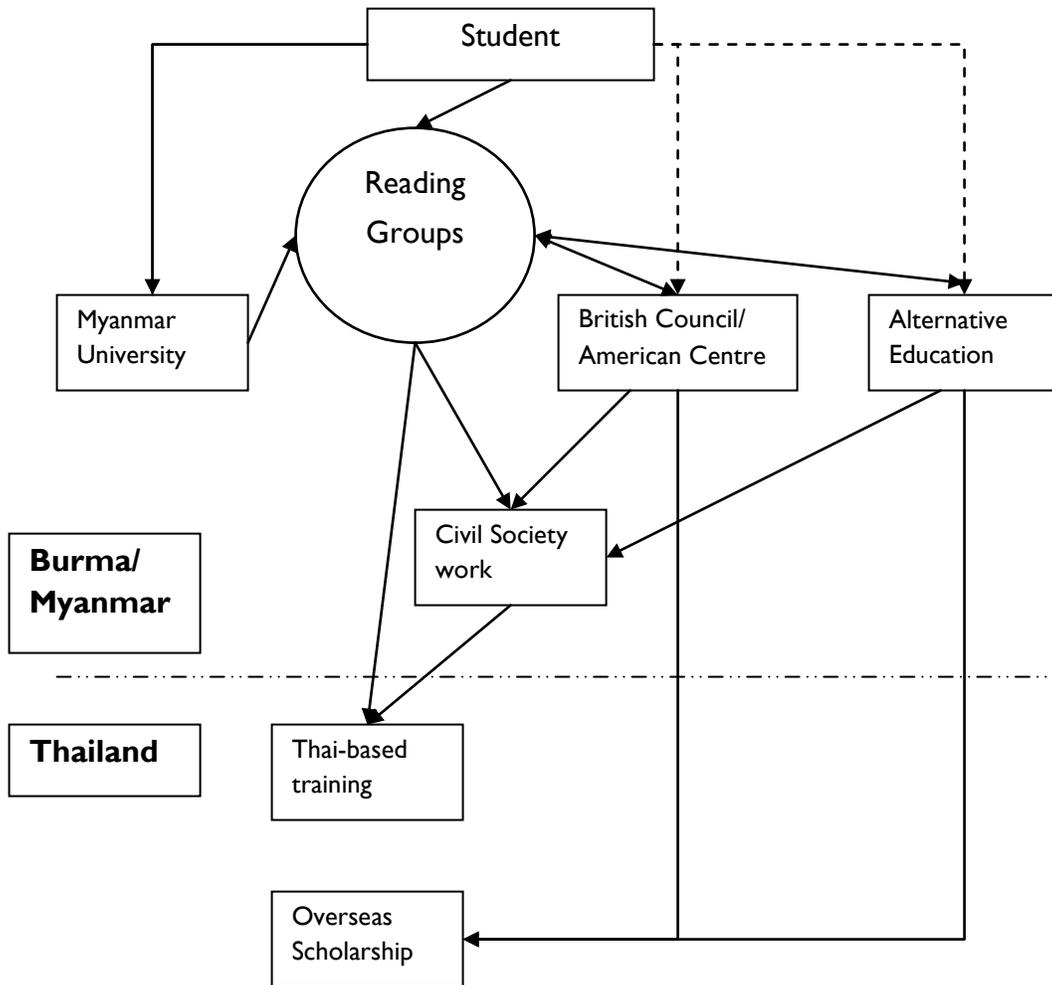
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<sup>7</sup> World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision, available: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm>, accessed on September 22, 2011.

groups are a major engine of growth and dynamism for Burma/Myanmar youth. Fourth and finally, organizations like the British Council and American Centre (and to a lesser extent Myanmar Egress) are

fundamental to the development and support of capacity development especially through the reading groups.

**Figure I. Capacity Development Paths for Myanmar Civil Society Actors**



### **Phenomena 1: The key organizations**

Some organizations have been hugely influential in how the paths have been created. The main actors are:

a) The British Council and American Centre. These centers have been influential in that they both attract the brightest students who are looking for further study (and hence need English); they are also one of the few sources for civil society training (in topics as diverse as leadership to political science); they have initiated and supported some of the community level groups; finally, they are part of the few organizations who will engage in political issues.

b) Community level reading groups. Many actors gain their first experience of civil society work through the numerous small groups which engage in education activities, community level development, or provide a space for discussion and debate. The groups are of critical importance because of proliferation – it is impossible to determine how many groups there are, but it would number in the hundreds, if not thousands. Some larger groups have started libraries or non formal schools. Others undertake small development activities and environmental projects. Most groups are small – not numbering more than 20 or so people in the core – which means they are not large enough to attract attention, and if they do become too large they will break into two smaller groups. Because of their ad hoc structure, infrequent funding, and transient population groups do regularly start and stop. These reading groups are the engine room for civil society development as most recruiting, awareness raising and capacity development occurs within them.

### **Phenomena 2: Actors take different paths at the same time**

Most students were engaged in more than one organization and group at the same time. Students were often completing a degree at a university or through distance education; however due to the lack of quality education at the university, and lack of opportunities it created, they were also frequently

either undertaking a separate degree, involved in the 'reading groups' or gaining training from organizations like the British Council or American Centre.

### **Phenomena 3: The field is divided by politics, language, and ethnicity.**

While most interviewees in Yangon came from the city or had lived in Yangon for an extended period of time with other family members, interviewees along the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border represented more diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, thus mirroring the social and ethnic geography of Burma/Myanmar itself. Several respondents knew of friends, who would have wanted to attend the capacity development, but were unable to afford so, while other respondents with ethnic minority background or coming from rural areas spoke of the additional obstacles they had faced due to their backgrounds and their sense of being at a disadvantage compared to their peers from more urban areas.

Respondents describe youth in Burma as divided into two groups, the majority who stay away from politics and social affairs, and those who are engaged and committed. The respondents interviewed for this pre-study represent mainly, but not entirely, the latter category. In determining why students undertook this process to learn about civil society activities, some students knew well beforehand what training they wanted to do and why, while others took up training more 'by accident'. Some explained how they were drawn to the trainings by the reputation of the trainers, the opportunity to be trained by trainers with education from abroad, or by the access to jobs in the civil society sector or the opportunities for studies abroad that might follow capacity-building. Others had picked one kind of training over another because of accessibility, frequency of training or scholarship opportunities. Hence, while some respondents had fairly clear ideas of why they wanted training and what they wanted to do after the training, others did not have any concrete follow-up in mind and came more for the experience or opportunity being offered. Most told of having heard about the

trainings from former trainees, family and friends. Several spoke of how former alumni serve as role models whom they would like to emulate, and hence the decision to take up a similar path.

### **Analysis**

As noted by Han Tin (2008), today's generation of students seem to have a greater variety of expectations but they are also more focused than their predecessors. Several respondents noted that they had not been active in social or political affairs before engaging in capacity development. In other words, capacity development for these respondents had a mobilizing effect and had helped them to become more active citizens in Burmese/Myanmar society. Others respondents, however, were already politically engaged. For these respondents, capacity development was a necessary step in order to be able to become more actively engaged in social and political affairs.

Several of the stories told by respondent highlighted the role of family and community and linked aspects of capacity development to intergenerational relations. Some respondents spoke of how their decision to go ahead with capacity development had been either the outcome of a family conflict or had resulted in a conflict within their families. Indeed, one adult observer noted that while youth in Burma/Myanmar seem eager to engage in society, the older generation is more reticent and wary after years of repression. She predicted the possibility of a future clash between generations over issues such as these. Other respondents, however, including a youth and political activist, emphasized the need to understand the older generation and appreciate the background and experience that has shaped their views of the world, and many respondents spoke of getting into capacity development as a result of being encouraged by their parents and other elders in the community. Some youth leaders also spoke of concerns for what they saw as the older generation taking advantage of the younger generation. They found it particularly disturbing that commercialization has entered the education and entertainment sectors for young people in Burma/Myanmar and argued that youth in

Burma/Myanmar are poorly prepared to handle the effects of globalization on the country.

Another recurrent theme among many respondents was criticism of the public education system, including colleges and universities. Indeed, as one external observer noted, students in Burma/Myanmar seem to be grabbing at straws in order to make up for what the public system does not offer. Under such circumstances, students are looking towards other alternatives. Those who can afford so go abroad, while the less well-off revert to the traditional monastic schools run by Buddhist monks or other faith-based education systems. But faith-based education is not an option for all. One respondent noted how she felt that Myanmar Egress or studies abroad were the only realistic options for those seeking a complete education. An increasing number of students study part time or attend distance education, evening classes or diploma courses. Refugee camps in Thailand have also reported cases of children and youth being sent to the camps with the hope that they would be getting an education there. In the cities, students also have access to training by civil society groups and voluntary associations, such as those examined for this pre-study. For most of the respondents, capacity development by civil society groups, either in Burma/Myanmar or along the border and in neighboring countries, thus serves as a replacement for a dysfunctional public system. Several respondents reported that they were undertaking education programs – formal education through a university in order to get an official degree, and capacity development through a civil society group or private institution in order to get “real knowledge”.

A view by many actors was that international assistance for capacity-building in Burma/Myanmar has often been targeted at initiatives for particular groups in society, or is seen as providing opportunities that primarily benefit the country's elites. Observers also note a lack of local participation in decision making when international donors are involved. Interventions by the international community can also serve to reinforce the sense of disempowerment of youth. Some

respondents among the youth networks spoke about feeling that the international community, when deciding upon interventions in Burma/Myanmar, is listening too much to the elites of Burmese/Myanmar society, within as well as outside the country, and that the voices of youth were not taken into account. In this context, a number of respondents argued that it was time for initiatives that could reach out to the entire population, not particular groups in either the political sector, the civil society sector or among the country's many ethnic minorities. While such calls can be interpreted in various ways, they should probably be seen as a response to the deterioration of the overall education system in the country rather than criticism of the groups currently targeted for capacity development opportunities.

Some trainers noted how youth seem to already be taking matters into their own hands to provide what they feel is not provided by either the current capacity development networks or by international interventions. A case in point are informal networks that have formed among youth from various capacity building initiatives with the goal of overcoming organizational and political differences and engaging in informal outreach with individuals and communities who for various reasons do not have access to the capacity development currently being provided by civil society groups in Burma/Myanmar. Participants in such networks tend to emphasize the need for mass outreach in the country to ensure that basic knowledge and skills are available to all. For most people, capacity development provided by organizations would not correspond to needs, and thus there is a view that NGO training is seen as providing false hopes and unrealistic expectations, and of failing to address the need for broad-based social empowerment in order to move Burma/Myanmar towards a better future.

Education plays an important role in the personal and social development of youth, and could also have the potential of laying the foundation for a better future for Burma/Myanmar by encouraging a more democratic culture and teaching students to be active citizens. At the same time, education can also be part of the problem, when it becomes politicized

or serves to reinforce antagonism between groups, or when it creates false expectations of work and better future without the wider context also being addressed. The education sector in Burma/Myanmar has been in a protracted crisis for almost 25 years. Several generations in Burma/Myanmar have grown up with war, military dictatorship and poverty. They need to regain hope that the future for themselves and their country can improve. Providing quality education for all would be a key step.

## **7.2. Reflections from Those on the Outside of Capacity Development**

*"They criticize us for not getting involved in politics. We want them to come live a day in our shoes before they give us advice."*

*Female waitress, Yangon*

As part of the pre-study, efforts were also made to seek out respondents who are not part of the capacity development networks. Lack of language skills in English or Burmese as well as money are two reasons for not being able to access formal capacity development opportunities. In some cases, individuals explained that they would like to be involved in capacity development, but they either lacked access to the networks or were unable to take time away from their existing commitments. Others gave the viewpoints of family and friends. Some of this feedback suggests that capacity development may struggle to engage with the broader sections of the population, a sentiment that was also echoed by some respondents involved in capacity development. It is important to note that though the report calls these people 'outside capacity development,' many of them pursue education informally. Almost all interviews, however, have a critical view that they were barred from access to existing opportunities, or possessed no voice at any level in current capacity development.

Four interrelated themes consistently surfaced during these conversations:

Reserved for the elites – When asking people about capacity development trainings and other efforts, it was not uncommon to quickly move into a

discussion about class. Many who were working as laborers or who came from poor families noted that capacity development initiatives often required one to take time off work and have easy access to transportation. One young man noted that he did not have nice enough clothes to be involved in capacity development projects.

Self serving – Respondents pointed to two things as evidence that capacity development was self serving. Firstly, numerous informants explained that the people in capacity development networks would only share information about training and other opportunities with their friends. This criticism was perhaps the most commonly cited. Secondly, the capacity development projects focused mostly on communities where NGO workers were from. Thus, they explained, in order to benefit from capacity development, someone from your community had to gain access to the networks.

Politics as problems – This was the most common and straightforward position maintained by individuals who choose not to access capacity development opportunities. Much of the population inside Burma/Myanmar, as well as much of the migrant population in Thailand, view politics of any kind as an arena of possessing few benefits and many problems

Dependency – Many individuals equated social, political and development organizations of any kind as entailing a sort of dependency. The idea was that anything which involved donors or support organizations required you to be dependent on that organization. This was, perhaps, a self empowering position taken by individuals who are often treated marginally. They described pride in their employment as it entailed ‘earning money’ and ‘not depending on others’

### **7.3. Burma/Myanmar-based Universities**

While Burma/Myanmar has a large number of universities and a large graduate cohort, all respondents noted that the universities in Burma/Myanmar were not functioning to near their capacity, and that the quality of education is

questionable for many programs. The education sector in Burma/Myanmar has paid a high price for the efforts by the authorities to avoid further student protests since the popular uprising in 1988. Universities and colleges were closed for many years after 1988. They only fully reopened around the year 2000, but student unions were then prohibited, universities were divided by subjects and campuses spread out across Yangon, while class time was reduced to a minimum to avoid the possibility for students to meet and organize. The poor infrastructure for education is well documented.<sup>8</sup> Although Burma’s new government has increased the budget for education in 2011 and 2012, it remains far too low compared to needs. Teachers are teaching according to curriculums whose quality has not been assessed and with traditional teaching methods focusing on rote learning. There are few opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students and for students to ask questions and develop their ability for independent thinking (see also Thein Lwin 2010). Social sciences that could encourage critical thinking are not taught. Concerns were raised that universities tend to focus on quantity rather than quality, as more than one interviewee noted, they are degree mills. Though large numbers of students graduate, their knowledge of the discipline is often highly technical and rather basic. Many students merely go to university to sign their attendance sheet before leaving for other activities; if students stay for the lectures they describe these as watching their professors read from a book. Assessment comes in the form of a final course exam where cheating is common, and learning is based on memorization. It must be noted that there are some programs and courses which do

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<sup>8</sup> UN estimates that Burma has spent about 1.3 percent of GDP for education over the last several years, much less than the average of 2.8 percent of GDP for East Asia and the Pacific. The outcome is a public education system that is falling apart, school buildings in poor conditions, teaching of poor quality and a lack of qualified teachers. In the whole of Burma, with about 55 million people, there are only 1,099 secondary schools according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma. The universities lack laboratories and other facilities for research.

not fit this rather dim view.<sup>9</sup> However, as detailed below, given the structure and organization of the university system, it is hard for improvement to occur.

Burma/Myanmar has nearly 200 universities, the majority being in Yangon, but most states and divisions also have a number of universities. Given the historic role of students and universities in anti-government activities, there has been a history of closing, under funding, relocating, and closely monitoring the universities. The result has been that while previous generations of students in Burma/Myanmar had a strong awareness of the role of students in the history of Burma/Myanmar, grounded in powerful narratives such as the 1920 university strike, the founding of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions in 1936 or the role of students in launching the 1988 movement against military rule, such references were not so visible in interviews for the pre-study. There are natural reasons for this reluctance to take on a political profile as a student, as student politics continue to be a risky venture: A number of students currently remain political prisoners according to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners – Burma (AAPB).

The result is that universities have poor infrastructure and are overtly nervous about innovation and change. Degree programs are overly technical, leaving little room for critical or analytical skills to develop. There are further structural issues which hinders the improvement of education standard at universities. Firstly, the universities face weak monitoring and assessment of their quality and systematic dilution of their role as institutions of higher learning. Commonly when a university is considered to be of a poor standard an initial indicator would be student complaints and a drop in student numbers. Next step would be for government regulators to intervene. However, this will not happen in Burma/Myanmar. When students enroll in a course they are often 'locked in' to a program and do not have the opportunity to change

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<sup>9</sup> Because this report does not want to appear as a assessment of the field, programs which were noted by respondents as of good standard will not be listed.

their studies, meaning they are unlikely to complain and less likely to quit. Because the universities are divided by discipline (computer, dentistry, education, economics, languages, law, etc are separate universities and not separate faculties), a student changing studies means s/he must change university, which is difficult. This structure means universities are closed to competition. There are basically no competing faculties between universities, and thus little incentive for the universities to innovate or improve in order to attract or keep students. Further, students are often selected for a course by their marks or by their parents, regardless of a student's interest. For them to change studies would also mean disobeying their family's wishes. The result is that students look outside the university to pursue their preferred education, whether this is through a private institution such as MIT and the community level reading groups, or, for those with money or political connections, the extra programs offered by the British Council or American Centre. The structure described here inevitably leads to stagnation in the development of university education.

The impact of an underperforming university sector on capacity development is significant. Many organizations ignore or underplay the role of universities in civil society, they argue that universities are isolated from everyday activities and do not act at the community level activity; yet this ignores the role of university in capacity development and as a venue for critical engagement. The study found that an underperforming university sector has widespread and significant impacts on the nature of the capacity development field. These impacts range from the structural issues of the burden on capacity development organizations, to the educational issues of a lack of space and lack of capacity to undertake research of a critical and analytical nature. As became apparent from the field work, many organizations felt they were taking on tasks which would normally be expected to be done by a university, such as basic education in political science, sociology, or research methodology. For some organizations this is overt, where they provide university equivalent certificates or training. For

other organizations it means that much civil society related capacity development may need to devote time to develop knowledge which is normally expected of a university graduate, for example in the basic skills of critical analysis.

Another issue which was noted by some interviewees was the lack of people with critical and analytical skills, which are useful for problem solving or creative approaches to problems in development. Much NGO level education is output directed, with skills and education seen in a more quantitative way, rather than in a qualitative and analytical way (the common phrase is education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire). This is not a fault of NGOs, as normally it would be the role of universities to provide actors who have the necessary critical analytical skills; yet NGOs capacity development, based on more short term, output and skills related training programs do not have the necessary resources to provide critical analytical learning.

For those people who wanted to gain advanced education in development related areas, the primary direction was to seek scholarships to travel outside of Burma/Myanmar to study. There are few degree programs in Burma/Myanmar which provide a solid learning opportunity relevant for civil society issues. Mainly this is because the government sees these topics as more potentially subversive, so there are basically no programs in for instance political science and human rights. What programs are on offer (such as the Development Studies degree at Yangon Institute of Economics, or studies in International Relations or Anthropology) tends to be more technical than analytical. Though there are many scholarships available for people who wish to study in these areas, all the main scholarship organizations are overwhelmed by numbers, and can often only take small proportions of applications. In addition, a secondary impact of scholarships is the higher potential for brain drain, where the best students may look to work outside the country.

Outside of the state universities are the elite military academic institutions, which are much better funded and of higher quality, and the distance education universities which are more accessible, but the quality of distance education is less. Further,

access to universities for rural and remote communities is difficult<sup>10</sup>. Access to education in these areas starts at a more basic level, with much less access to primary education. And even if primary and high schools are accessible, there will be economic and language issues which reduce their availability for students in rural and remote areas.

In summary, dysfunctional universities have many ramifications, from other civil society actors which have less capacity being compelled to take up the learning which should be done in universities, to a lack of space for critical and creative intervention into development in Burma/Myanmar. Universities could play a much more productive role in developing capacity to undertake research, which will lead to a more sustainable capacity development system. Further, universities are in a unique position to bridge government and civil society activities.

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<sup>10</sup> A number of universities have opened in provincial centers in recent years, of which little is known.

## 8. Positive Findings and Points of Contention

### 8.1. Positive Attributes of Capacity Development Networks

While this preliminary study set out to examine critical issues raised by individuals working on and around capacity development, it would be misleading to ignore the many positive aspects of capacity development efforts. The list of positive attributes comes from comments made during interviews for this research. It should be noted that these comments are not tested or proven by this research, and in most cases these are the organizations considering their own strengths. Attributes mentioned during the research include:

Continuity – Despite working in a highly adverse context – politically, economically, and socially - the capacity-building network has come a long way in catering to the needs of the population in Burma/Myanmar. In some cases, the adverse context has led civil society actors to take on responsibilities that normally would have belonged to the public sector, and to step in where a repressive state has been either unwilling or unable to take on its responsibility.

Diversity and equilibrium – Capacity development efforts seek to cater to a wide range of population groups, and unsurprisingly, there are disagreements and differences within the capacity-building network resulting from the situation in Burma/Myanmar. The provision of peace, rights, and development orientated capacity development efforts, however, reflects flexibility in the networks.

Quantity – The large number of trainees trained through current capacity development efforts reflects an ability to reach a great number of people with minimal resources.

Training Quality – Initial assessments suggest that the quality of capacity development training is generally high in terms of trainer competency and training methods.

Accessibility – Capacity development efforts have systematically sought to reach out to new and marginalized communities as well as to open more channels and opportunities for those communities which have already accessed capacity development. Such efforts help ensure that an increasing number of people are able to access capacity development initiatives, and that such initiatives can also reach out to some of the more marginalized communities in the country.

Self Reflection – The capacity-development network displayed a propensity for critical self reflection regarding the implications of approaches, statements, and initiatives, which the current pre-study seeks to draw on and encourage.

Context Adaptability – Capacity development efforts need to adapt to both continuous and sporadic changes, in the shorter as well as longer term, and to be able to meet new demands for capacity-building. The capacity building network has generally shown itself to be able to adapt to changing contexts; indeed the adaptability of actors in the capacity development networks might be one of the most impressive attributes observed in the course of the field work for this pre-study.

### 8.2. Ten Questions Capacity Development Stakeholders should be Asking

This preliminary study focuses in particular on challenges and concerns in the area of capacity development. Some of these challenges and concerns were specifically referred to by informants. Other challenges and concerns became apparent after examining the data. The section below presents issues that were recurrent in discussions and interviews and which surfaced as questions for reflection. Individually, each of these questions represents an area where pitfall or shortcomings may be found. Taken together, these different

questions provide a framework which can be used as a tool for reflection and programming.

### **I. Do trainings polarize the community?**

Burma/Myanmar used to be a socialist state in which all citizens were supposed to be equal. This is no longer the case. Anecdotal evidence suggests growing disparities between population groups as a result of broader societal changes. Most advanced training is only conducted in English, and English language proficiency is expensive for most people, thus creating unequal opportunities for access. Most recruitment is done through Yangon based networks with limited regional initiatives, thereby reinforcing an urban-rural divide. What is not clear, and what many capacity development organizations are becoming aware of, is how to operate within existing or emerging cleavages in Burmese society, such as class, ethnicity, gender, urban-rural divides or interpersonal relations. Organizations should be considering how they may mitigate the impact of these cleavages? Is capacity development in itself a potential source of cleavage? Several respondents raised the issue of whether capacity development can be polarizing, but the responses were divided; while some took the position that capacity development efforts can have a polarizing effect, others emphasized that the polarization comes from other and more fundamental factors, such as class, ethnic politics, or language and that capacity building cannot be held responsible.

Ethnographic interviews conducted with a number of young men and women who do not take part in the capacity development networks often revealed negative views of those taking part in such activities. Discussions quickly turned to matters of social class and resources. Criticism was voiced of what was seen as the self serving nature of these activities and of trainings as “a bunch of rich people getting paid to talk about poor people”, as one respondent formulated the issue. Young respondents from non-political families stated that more scholarships and opportunities were often available for family members of political activists, thus not giving them the same chances. Issues of access and recruitment were raised as well. Such feedback

suggests that capacity development can also be polarizing by increasing the divide between those with access to capacity building and those outside the networks, or between those with limited access to some of the capacity development and those with extensive access.

### **2. What is the place of politics in capacity development: Are capacity development efforts too politicized?**

*“All trainings promote an ideology of some kind. So, ideological approaches aren’t the concern. The concern is when training promotes one ideology by tearing down another.”*

*-Yangon based trainer*

While no respondents called for capacity development efforts to be entirely neutral, several respondents suggested potential problems with excessive politicization among stakeholders in the capacity development networks, and more specifically with how political differences among key actors in the capacity development field are addressed and dealt with. Some of these suggestions are likely to reflect the recent experience of the 2010 election, during which the capacity development field became openly divided, with a number of organizations and trainers debating whether to boycott or support the election.

The concerns of too much politics entering the trainings may be grouped into two areas: firstly, that the quality of the training is affected with less space for independent thinking and fewer alternative viewpoints; secondly, that the participants get ‘marked’ by the training – because they did a particular training it is assumed that they are of the same political position (for example being ‘pro-government’ or in the ‘exile group’). Concerns of excessive politicization were expressed in relation to what some respondents saw as coming trends of capacity development networks transforming into think-tanks seeking to advance competing political ideologies as a result of the commitments of leading actors in the field. The research did reveal a number of cases where participants had dropped out of training because the trainings were seen as either

too politically charged, or not politically charged enough. This suggests that the perceived extent of politicization is a question of balance, and not of eradicating politics from the training room.

**3. The different roles of civil society:  
When are differences between  
advocacy oriented and development  
oriented civil society networks  
destructive?**

*“The challenge facing the network isn’t to unite; it’s to work towards healthy rather than unhealthy divisions.”*

*-Chiang Mai based organization representative*

This question asks if different visions and approaches to the role of civil society are counter-productive. What has emerged on both sides of the border is an array of visionaries who appear to be more defined by an approach than a geographical position. More specifically individuals and organizations are defined by how they view Naypyidaw. This distinction could best be described as a difference between advocacy oriented and development oriented trainings. While advocacy oriented training tends to focus on accountability and campaigning for human rights, development training tends to focus on opportunities and negotiation. While one curriculum tends to focus on the rule of law, the other dedicates attention to conflict resolution and development work. It should also be noted that many Thai-based organizations are advocacy oriented, and many Burma/Myanmar based organizations are development oriented, so at times this division gets over-simplified as an ‘inside-outside’ Burma debate.

While some capacity development stakeholders argue that organizations should attempt to adopt similar approaches to capacity development in order to capture the potential strength of a unitary movement, others argued that different approaches created diverse networks, which could complement one another through dividing roles and labor. Numerous informants advocated the idea of participants attending both advocacy and development oriented trainings. Through doing this, participants can gain exposure to both approaches

and are able to employ whatever skills or tactics they please. They recognized that both approaches have a role in capacity-development, while at the same time acknowledging possible tensions between the two approaches. The challenge of the capacity development networks is to ensure that such tensions remain productive.

**4. Should training be targeting a critical  
mass or focusing on select individuals?**

*“Training isn’t meant to be a public movement. Training a critical mass takes pressure off of the government and enables incompetence.”*

*-Yangon based trainer*

What part does capacity-development play in sociopolitical change and what is the role of capacity development organizations in relation to the political field? How should these questions be reflected in the recruitment of participants? This appeared to be a recurrent question for many of the organizations engaged in the capacity development networks. Two key positions stood out.

On the one hand were respondents who argued that capacity building should train a select and smaller number of people. The rationale behind this approach is to provide individuals who are seen to have the potential of mobilizing organizations and movements with training and experience that would put them in a position of holding the government accountable and addressing the root causes of what is seen as the problem. In this perspective, training organizations must also be mindful of not bailing out the government and fulfilling a role that should normally be played by government institutions. Examples of such trainings could be those provided by the Foreign Affairs Training (FAT) in Chiang Mai or some of the Vahu trainings, which train few people over an extended period of time, including seeking to provide hands-on experience through internships and fieldwork.

Proponents of a ‘critical mass’ training approach, on the other hand, argue for the power of numbers. By adopting mass outreach training models, organizations such as Myanmar Egress may train thousands of people a year. Rather than

offering extensive trainings, these organizations emphasize efficiency. The objective is to provide the best training possible in the shortest amount of time. Advocates of the idea of the critical mass tended to note that having tens of thousands of graduates every year was a step towards mobilizing mass capacity development as graduates then network into the broader society. Also, these organizations in a way are compensating for not having a functioning university sector.

While arguments for both approaches remain valid, questions may need to be asked about how the current transitions taking place in Burma/Myanmar may also result in changing needs in the field of access and recruitment to capacity development and which approaches best meet those needs.

#### **5. Are Thai-based trainings creating a drain?**

Organizations are concerned that the need for civil society actors to leave the country for training increases the risk of losing these people to opportunities outside the country. This may have been more pronounced in the 1990s and early 2000s, where education in fields such as politics or human rights would mark someone for increased military scrutiny, and thus make them more unlikely to return. During the course of the present research, the issue of a brain drain was seen as more of a concern by the Burma/Myanmar based organizations. The fact that it was mentioned in interviews tends to reinforce the perception of different perspectives between Burma/Myanmar based and Thai-based organizations. However, anecdotal evidence collected during the research suggests that this may be less of a problem than anticipated and that the root of the problem of brain drain is no longer with the Thai-based trainings. For instance, interviews with scholarship students and civil society actors showed that most intended to return, and regularly did return. However, the situation may also depend on disciplines. While this may be the case for more development/social welfare related disciplines, it may not be the same

for areas such as public health and nursing, which were not in focus for the pre-study.

One interview conducted with a young female student studying for a master degree in social sciences at a university in Bangkok, for instance, reveals the broader factors at play behind brain-drain in Burma/Myanmar. During the interview it transpired that her motivation for leaving Myanmar and studying in Thailand had been to return for work in the Yangon area. However, visits back home had repeatedly reminded her of the financial and environmental concerns of taking up a career in social or political work. When asking around about employment opportunities, she found that there were few paying positions left. By the time the interview was conducted, she had concluded that it would be easier for her to remain in Thailand where there were more opportunities to work in the realm of social and political issues.

#### **6. How does the culture of Saya/teacher impact trainer-trainee relations and does capacity development promote an alternative approach to learning?**

Teachers have traditionally been regarded as one of the five “gems” in Buddhist dominated Burma/Myanmar, together with the Buddha, his teachings (Dhamma), the monkhood (Sangha) and parents. Despite variations across class and ethnicity, respect for teachers remains a core aspect of Burma/Myanmar culture. This can be noted for instance in the use of titles in front of names, notably the title of Saya/Sayama, which is used not only for teachers, but in general for people with higher education, or in body language, such as the *gadaw*<sup>11</sup> gesture. Other relevant cultural norms with possible implications for trainer-trainee interactions are respect for age and seniority, in the family and the community, as well as the concept of *anadhe*, which refers to an obligation of being considerate of other people’s feelings in order not to impose or put

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<sup>11</sup> The term refers to the tradition of a person of lower social standing paying homage to a person of higher social standing, including monks, elders, teachers and the Buddha. This is done by kneeling in front of them, join hands and bow as a sign of respect and in order to show gratitude and reverence.

burdens on another person or put another person in a difficult or embarrassing situation.

There are consequences of these norms for interaction between trainer and trainees. The “Saya culture” does not promote learning for understanding and does not challenge hierarchies. It may be difficult for trainees to let it be known that they do not understand what has been stated or discussed in the classroom, thereby conveying that the trainer has not been able to get his/her message across. It may be difficult for trainees to criticize or challenge trainers on points of contention. It may be difficult for trainers to let it be known that they are not familiar with an issue or able to answer a question, thus revealing gaps of knowledge. It may be difficult to publicly criticize the publications of well-known scholars. The norms may also have broader implications in setting the parameters for academic debate.

Respondents note that strict expectations on behavioral norms may be an impediment to communication in the classroom as well as in other settings related to learning. Instead, such norms may lead to situations of self-restraint/self-censorship or lead students to drop out of class all together rather than expressing disagreements. They also give rise to other forms of communication, emphasizing indirect and metaphorical messages rather than direct criticism. Flaunting the norms can lead to various accusations or even ostracization.

Many informants felt that the Saya culture needs to be addressed in the course of capacity-building. But, the extent to which respondents focused on teacher-student interaction varied. While some mentioned teacher-student interaction in passing and did not suggest that it was focused on in training, others treated it as a central concern. The Vahu trainings in particular represent a capacity building initiative that gives much emphasis to this question. As an informant from Vahu noted, an important purpose of exercises focusing on the teacher role is to get participants to think new about issues of power and authority. While not all initiatives need to go to the same extent, a useful question to ask may be whether and how capacity

development can contribute to alternative modes of learning.

### **7. How do dysfunctional universities impact the capacity development landscape?**

Currently universities in Burma/Myanmar are not institutes of higher learning or centers for research. While some may see this as having little impact on the development field because training can be done by the NGOs, this is a short term and unsustainable response. Without more in depth learning that comes from the university, organizations in Burma will remain reliant on international experts or overseas-trained Burma/Myanmar nationals and the understanding of development concerns will not be owned by Burma/Myanmar organizations but by international organizations or foreign researchers. Recognizing that local and international organizations will continue to have trouble filling the gaps left behind by a non functioning higher education system, numerous informants noted that the next step is to engage with public universities in Burma/Myanmar. This raises a major question of how to assist in the rebuilding of the higher education sector in Burma/Myanmar. What is also unclear is how existing capacity development efforts by civil society will coexist with more functional universities and the future role of capacity development by civil society. Capacity development networks should be asking how they are able to assist the emergence of functioning universities and a dialogue needs to be initiated on the future relationship between these two sectors.

### **8. What purpose should civil society trainings serve?**

Is capacity development an activity in its own right or is it a complement to other activities by civil society? Should organizations be building capacity for the sake of building capacity or is there a need for a clear agenda to development? For the pre-study, the research team looked into this question in particular through focus group discussions with graduates from different Yangon-based organizations who had started an ad-hoc training group together for local communities well as group interviews with other

youth. There were a wide variety of positions on what exactly was the purpose of capacity development for civil society, and there seems to be a certain mismatch between the expectations of youth attending such trainings and the goals of those providing the trainings. Several youth participants responded that capacity development should be for a change in capacity at individual level, which fulfills their rights. In other words, capacity development trains the person and is not aimed at achieving a development goal. On the other hand, those organizing or managing the initiatives, expressed that capacity development should contribute to broader socio-political change in Burma/Myanmar by building a human rights culture founded on greater awareness of rights, community organizing and critical thinking. As a political youth activist expressed, ignorance acts as a form of oppression in Burma/Myanmar, and training is politics by other means for people's empowerment. Some respondents were mindful that democracy and human rights need to be taught in a safe manner, others spoke out on the need for trainings to be open about the need to sacrifice and challenge authorities in order to gradually change the root causes of Burma/Myanmar's many problems. Further, others acknowledged the need for priorities in capacity development: certain areas and issues (such as rural poverty) should be the focus. Long-time observers of the capacity building networks noted that organizations tend to stick with training, as it seems a safe activity for various reasons, but question the need to move beyond the trainings and focus more on the purposes of the trainings. There is perhaps a looming crisis as growing numbers of people come out of capacity development trainings with expectations of being able to use new knowledge and new skills, but the civil society sector may not be able to take up all these newly skilled people.

Another field of discussion is the need for training to go beyond elites and urban areas in order to ensure capacity development for the population at large. Others noted the need to target efforts towards marginalized groups as a means to assist for

a smoother transition and reconciliation in Burma/Myanmar.

#### **9. Pedagogical issues in adult post-high school education in Burma/Myanmar - trends and challenges: Is there quality in pedagogical development?**

As some respondents noted, it is difficult to make a proper assessment of the quality and degree of innovation in the various approaches used by capacity development actors. Some challenges, however, were repeated by various respondents. Many respondents use curriculums developed by the Curriculum Project based in Thailand, which they adapt to local contexts. Other trainers adapt the curriculum of trainings they have attended previously or design their own curriculum. Some respondents spoke of the need for a more broad-based curriculum and some respondents acknowledged that the curriculum is, to some extent, very "political" to the detriment of other subjects.

The pedagogical difference between Thai and Burma/Myanmar based trainings is sometimes seen as a difference between trainings focusing on human rights versus trainings focusing on peace, or training participants to challenge root causes versus training how to mobilize and coexist within a system. While the pre-study found that there is more variation on either side of the border and some notable exceptions on both sides, several respondents acknowledge that there is some truth to such distinctions. In some cases, it is a result of circumstances, as capacity development actors adapt to their surroundings. Hence, certain topics that cannot safely be taught in Burma/Myanmar are taught in Thailand. But there also seems to be an increasing cross-over between topics taught outside the country and topics taught within Burma/Myanmar, in part as a result of evolving responses to meet evolving needs. Some respondents noted that the content of some trainings had evolved over time from human rights education to community organizing, because capacity development organizations realized that knowing about rights is not enough unless trainees were also provided with skills needed to bring change back to their

communities. More participants began attending with the intention of going back to their local communities and not with the intention of joining the organizations providing the trainings. Distinctions in training can be the result of differing approaches by organizers and trainers and reflect ideological and political differences between actors rather than a distinction between Thai-based and Burma/Myanmar-based organizations per se. Indeed, several respondents felt that political rifts between organizations and individuals were now a more important reason for differences in content of curriculum than lack of coordination.

Despite efforts to the contrary, it was felt that the content in capacity development continues to be a decision made primarily by organizers, international organizations supporting local capacity development and donors, and with little space left for input by trainees/participants and their communities. As one of the organizers noted, there seems to be a capacity-building mindset in which those organizing and providing capacity start off with a sense of knowing what trainees need and seeking to fill this need. This is an approach that needs to be questioned and mechanisms need to be found to allow for greater participation by trainees in decision-making regarding capacity-development and education. A number of capacity development initiatives follow a model of training of trainers. However, several respondents noted that this model does not work. Trainees are told how to teach a topic, but don't have the capacity to run a training. They often feel they do not have sufficient knowledgeable or teaching abilities to take the training back to their own local contexts, and assistance post-training is also often non-existent. Instead, the participants may move on to seek further trainings. Changes are needed at the recruitment and the follow-up of train-the-trainer trainees.

Several respondents highlighted the need for trainings to be made more applicable, both in terms of input – which needs to be based on prior knowledge and skills among participants and on adaptation to local contexts – and in terms of output, with more emphasis given to how the

trainings can be put into practice. Some capacity development programs seek a solution to this dilemma by organizing periods of course work that alternate with field work or practice, sometimes over an extended period of time. However, the challenge remains at a broader level.

A key challenge for the capacity building network is to develop teaching methods that encourage active learning and empower trainees for more student-initiated learning and problem solving processes that will lay the basis for independent and critical thinking and build the self-confidence of trainers and trainees. Respondents also noted the challenge of developing teaching methods that take into account the local context, for instance by encouraging trainers not to be dependent on materials and modern technologies that are not easily available. Other respondents noted their interest in developing teaching methods that would make use such new technologies, for instance in e-education or online education.

Good interpersonal relations are another core requirement for good learning. Several respondents noted the importance of trust between trainers and trainees as well as among trainees as a condition for successful learning. For this, they need to overcome deep-seated skepticism. Fear of sensitive and contentious subjects also remains deeply ingrained. Indeed, some trainer respondents felt that the only way to achieve such trust so was to go beyond the organizations and make particular effort to show that they were not part of an establishment or seeking to earn income from engaging in capacity development.

Many of the respondent networks had adapted a facilitation model for their trainings rather than more traditional teacher roles. Some respondents noted that while student-centered learning is a goal for most, many capacity development actors are yet to be comfortable and the practice remains incomplete. Rote learning and memorizing are rooted in the traditional methodologies for learning the Buddhist scriptures, as has also been noted in other contexts, such as Laos and Northern Thailand (McDaniel 2008), and reinforced by poor teacher training. Hence, the need

to focus more on teaching skills remains. In addition, some respondents also noted the need for current trainers to be able to formalize their competence.

These preliminary findings raise several questions for further enquiry about what, and how, human rights education for civil society actors should be taught. How can capacity development be designed to meet various expectations? Should the focus be on certain topic/issue areas – and what should the core topics be – or should it rather be geared towards developing certain skills and practical abilities? Is there a need to professionalize the trainings further?

**10. Is it constructive to be publicly arguing about standards and qualities in capacity development?**

*“The divisions between people and organizations have always been over-represented because those who throw rocks at each other become the center of attention.”*

*-Chiang Mai based analyst*

Media can play an important role in human rights education. While this research did not interview actors in the media in relation to capacity development, some respondents brought up the issue of public scrutiny, by exile media in particular, of actors in the capacity development field. At the core of such concerns are different viewpoints about

the desirability of airing differences within the capacity development field in public. The distinction runs between those more in favor of private or face to face discussions and those more in favor of public and media based discussions. Those in favor of publicizing differences tend to emphasize that diversity is healthy, and public discussions between those with opposing viewpoints is a way of promoting transparency, which provides a level of accountability and awareness of issues of concern.

Respondents who felt that public airing of divisions is destructive tended to describe the expression of differences in terms of contradictions and infighting. These individuals felt that a united movement was a strong movement, thus any public signs of division is a sign of weakness. For these respondents, the public nature of divides exacerbates the destructiveness of the divisions. Rather than attempt to work within divisions, these respondents note that such separations should be bridged. Most respondents, however, felt that such divides can be both destructive and constructive, depending on how the debates or divisions are disseminated. Many who were not convinced of the constructiveness or destructiveness of public debates noted that if the discourse remained constructive and balanced, airing of concerns could be useful.

## 9. Conclusion: Moving Forward

*“The ‘space’ inside Burma is changing, and we need to change with this space. But, we also need to account for sporadic and immediate closure of this space.”*

*-Mae Sot based organization representative*

There are significant changes underway in capacity development in Burma/Myanmar. Capacity development networks face the tough task of simultaneously reacting to the ongoing changes occurring in Burma/Myanmar, and mobilizing new change. One thing is certain: There will continue to be disagreement regarding the extent of change which has occurred in Burma/Myanmar, as stakeholders apply different measurements of change. There will also be debate as to who prompted this change, and what further changes are needed. Currently, the significant change puts extra demands on these organizations to keep up to date. Perhaps the most pressing thing to do in this transitional environment is to ensure that capacity development continues its positive forward momentum.

Regardless of whether one promotes incremental or more radical change, a number of things can be done in the area of capacity development to ensure progress. The research has found that politics continues to play an important

role and that a balance needs to be made between political conscientious raising and politicization. By examining the paths taken by young Burma/Myanmar activists, a better understanding can be gained of the people who are now developing their capacity, in particular how the small, *ad hoc* structure of the reading groups is a major breeding ground for civil society actors, but also how afterwards they must negotiate a difficult field which for many is polarizing and politicized.

These preliminary findings also raise several questions for further enquiry about what, and how, human rights education for civil society actors should be taught. How can capacity development be designed to meet various expectations? Should the focus be on certain topic/issue areas – and what should the core topics be – or should it rather be geared towards developing certain skills and practical abilities? Is there a need to professionalize the trainings further?

## 10. Recommendations

### To civil society groups:

- Consider gaining more information on participants to determine how generally accessible capacity development is.
- Consider ways to support capacity development of Burma/Myanmar based grass roots organizations
- Consider how to work with Burma/Myanmar universities in the long term
- Consider monitoring and evaluation of courses, including issues of access and recruitment, teaching methodology and pedagogy, course content

### To universities:

- Monitoring and evaluation of education quality
- Examine policies on student entry and changes of subjects in the course of study
- Promote education in social sciences, politics, and civil society and conduct needs assessment to this effect
- Seek networks and contacts in the ASEAN region for cooperation and assistance

### To Funding bodies of Burma/Myanmar capacity development:

- Consider ways to support capacity development of Burma/Myanmar based grass roots organizations
- Consider how to work with Burma/Myanmar universities in the long term
- Consider providing support for organizations to develop monitoring and evaluation programs

### To the Burma/Myanmar government:

- Create a framework that will allow greater academic freedom
- Provide more and better resources to education sector
- Seek networks and contacts in the ASEAN region for cooperation and assistance

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