BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURES FOR PEACE

The Role of Liaison Offices in Myanmar's Peace Process

A CPCS Learning Paper

Quinn Davis

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Introduction

The rapid nature of developments in the past few years has placed Myanmar[1] in a precarious position, without a solid infrastructure of institutions to effectively ground and sustain the country's transition towards a more peaceful future. Contentious issues such as the formation of a federal union and a framework for political dialogue exacerbated by continued outbreaks of violence have threatened to undermine the country's recent progress. In this context, the presence of local institutions dedicated to supporting the growth of peace in the country and to addressing the root causes of conflict is essential to the success of Myanmar's peace process.

The importance of establishing an infrastructure to sustain and promote a country's progress towards peace has attracted growing attention as a core component of sustainable peacebuilding. The term "peace infrastructure" or "infrastructure for peace" (I4P) is used to describe interconnected structures or mechanisms that span across all levels of society to foster more strategic, sustainable and locally rooted interventions to conflict. This paper examines the Myanmar peace process under a framework of peace infrastructure to identify spaces to strengthen the foundation of peace in Myanmar, namely by building the capacity of liaison offices, institutions that have been established to strengthen communication and coordination between conflict parties and facilitate wider community engagement in the peace process. Based on the Centre for Peace and Conflict (CPCS) observations and interviews with over 100 liaison office staff, it provides an analysis of liaison offices in the scope of the larger peace process to provoke insights on how liaison offices can work

[1] In 1989 the ruling military Government changed the country's official name from Burma to Myanmar. As a result the use of terminology referring to Burma/Myanmar is a highly contested and politicized issue. This paper will use "Myanmar" as it is referred to in its present day state rather than the more historic term "Burma." "Burman" is used to refer to the ethnic group who comprises the majority of the country's population and who speak the Burmese language as their native tongue.

to address some of the more deeply rooted causes of conflict in the country. This paper concludes with a series of recommendations for providing greater support to liaison offices so they can fulfil their potential as effective structural supports of peace in Myanmar.

What are Peace Infrastructures?

In the past decade, the peace infrastructure framework has emerged as a key aspect of conflict transformation. The concept was first developed by John Paul Lederarch who introduced the term in 1999.[2] Since then, scholars and practitioners have used the peace infrastructure framework to analyse the success of existing structures and initiatives in supporting a country's transition to peace, identifying a number of key theoretical characteristics that distinguish peace infrastructure as a unique approach to peacebuilding.[3]

Central to the idea of peace infrastructure is its multi-sectoral approach. Peace infrastructure engages all levels of society and connects peacebuilding tracks to form a platform for constructive relationship-building between relevant stakeholders. It reflects an inclusivity that challenges the traditional notions of official peace actors, incorporating local and grassroots actors in addition to conflict parties and other state actors. By linking these stakeholders, peace infrastructure facilitates greater communication, collaboration and coordination between diverse stakeholders to increase collective action. Bridging different sectors, peace infrastructure implies commitment from the government, often elevating and incorporating local mechanisms or practices into national agendas and structures. This endows peace infrastructure with a comprehensive sense of legitimacy that spans from government to grassroots levels.

Peace infrastructure framework is one that arises out of local demands and initiatives to support active community engagement in peacebuilding processes. The domestic foundation of peace infrastructure has meant that current models have not been

[2] John Paul Lederach, *Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, 1999).
[3] Authors who have written extensively on peace infrastructure include: John Paul Lederarch, Paul Van Tongeren, Chetan Kumar and Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka

consciously modelled on other pre-existing structures, but have each arisen organically as responses to the demands of unique contexts.[4] Today, peace infrastructure embodies many diverse structures across numerous contexts, including peace committees, peace museums, peace secretariats, early warning mechanisms and ceasefire monitoring missions. The peace infrastructure framework has been used to analyse institutions and peacebuilding initiatives in Colombia, Peru, South Africa, and Ghana among other countries, where local dynamics have given rise to a diverse set of mechanisms, platforms, and groups with varying functions and objectives.[5] It should be noted that in these cases, as in the majority of current studies of peace infrastructure, the framework is used as a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of existing institutions rather than an approach to establish new structures.

The domestic foundation of peace infrastructure has oriented the framework towards a focus on internal capacities for addressing and resolving conflict, rather than on imposing outside approaches. Peacebuilding initiatives are derived from local practices and customs, and at times, elevated into national structures and agendas to facilitate more strategic and sustainable interventions. By recognizing and utilizing local capacities and resources, peace infrastructures help develop competencies for effective peacebuilding within local contexts.

Finally, inherent in the term, peace infrastructure implies an organisational structure, dedicated to the development of institutions and structures to support more effective peacebuilding, providing

[4] Andries Odendaal, "The Political Legitimacy of National Peace Committees" *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development. 7*, no. 3 (2012): 40-53,

[5] Articles examining cases of peace infrastructure in these regions include: Borja Paladini Adell, "From Peacebuilding and Human Development Coalitions to Peace Infrastructure in Colombia" *Berghof Handbook Dialouge Series* No.10. (2013): 42-52. Andries Odendaal, "The Political Legitimacy of National Peace Committees" *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development. 7*, no. 3 (2012): 40-53. Paul Van Tongeren, "Creating Infrastructures for Peace—Experiences at Three Continents" Pensamiento Propio, (2011): 91-126 and Giselle Huamani Ober, "Dilemmas of Developing a State Infrastructure For Peace in the Case of Peru" *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development. 7*, no. 3 (2012): 75-80.

what Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka denotes "an address for peace."[6] The concept of peace infrastructure is built on the belief that changing the attitudes of conflict parties is not enough, and that structural support is needed to achieve conflict transformation. These structures are necessary to coordinate and fortify peacebuilding initiatives to ensure their longevity and effectiveness.

Peace infrastructures may be established at any stage of a peace process and across all levels of peacebuilding in two primary ways: top-down and bottom-up. In top-down infrastructure, the primary initiative comes from national institutions, as seen in Nepal with the foundation of the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006 ended years of conflict between Nepal's Government and the Communist Party of Nepal. To ensure the implementation of the agreement and to coordinate national peace efforts, Nepal established the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction. While housed in government institutions, the ministry was linked to local peace councils and mediation centres in an effort to strengthen grassroots peacebuilding capacity.[7] Working at both government and grassroots levels, the ministry delivers an array of peace-services including negotiation support and advice to political parties, as well as community mediation around issues of accessing local justice.

Bottom-up infrastructures for peace are those derived from local peacebuilding initiatives, as most notably witnessed in Kenya, where attempts to address conflicts over local resources culminated in the foundation of the Wajir Peace and Development Committee in 1997. The Wajir model of addressing local conflict was so successful it eventually became institutionalised into national policy with the establishment of the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding

[6] Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka, "Giving peace an address? Reflections on the potential and challenges of creating peace infrastructures" *Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series* No.10. (2013): 2-19.
[7] Jeannie Suurmond & Prakash Mani Sharma, "Like yeast that leavens the dough? Community mediation as local infrastructure for peace in Nepal" *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development 7*, no. 3 (2012): 81-86.

and Conflict Management (NSC) in 2001 to coordinate the work of peacebuilders and institutions and ensure the promotion of peace throughout the country. The NSC's location within the ministry of state provides it with critical access to key information and state resources, while at the same time presenting a national, structural framework for peacebuilding that unites civil society and other government bodies. The NSC has worked to establish district peace committees to build local capacities, decrease tensions and de-escalate potential for violence in regions across the country. After post-electoral violence broke out in 2007, the NSC focused its attention on establishing measures to identify early warning signs of conflict. These systems proved to be successful in preventing violence during the country's 2010 constitutional referendum.[8]

There has been debate[9] on the success of these models—both have come under criticism for issues including; limited scope and capacity, unclear missions, political dominance and additionally, in Kenya's case, lack of clear mandates and coordination, funding restrictions and competition with other institutions. Indeed, no existing model of peace infrastructure is perfect. While peace infrastructure holds great potential in establishing sustainable practices and systems that address the underlying structural causes of conflict, it still faces several challenges, as seen in the critique of the Kenyan and Nepali contexts. Though, cases of peace infrastructure built on bottom-up initiatives that are locally owned and not driven by national agendas or vulnerable to political manipulation are generally more effective. It seems that, to be truly successful and sustainable, peace infrastructure must look beyond official peacebuilding levels to include not only relevant political stakeholders but all of society, focusing on people's needs as a starting point for peace.

[8] For more on Kenya's peace infrastructure refer to: Aeneas Chuma and Ozonnia Ojielo "Building a Standing National Capacity for Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Kenya". *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development,* 7, no.3 (2012) 25-39.

[9] See notes 7 and 8 for critiques on the success of these cases as well as Jeannie Suurmond & Prakash Mani Sharma, "Serving People's Need for Peace: Infrastructures for Peace, the Peace Sector, and the Case of Nepal" *Reader's Comment on Berghof Handbook Dialouge Series* No.10. (2012): 1-10.

Myanmar's Peace Process: Background, Developments and Challenges

In 1948, British colonizers left a newly independent Myanmar in the hands of a central government dominated by ethnic Burmans. This provoked much resentment and dissent among other ethnic groups who, after decades under foreign rule, felt marginalized and excluded in the formation of this new state. Shortly after, Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs)[10] began an armed struggle for secession and independence that was waged over the next 60 years. Conflict in Myanmar was compounded by a military coup in 1961, launching a succession of military regimes that were collectively responsible for substantial human rights violations and crimes against humanity.

Initial signs of reforming this vicious cycle of military rule and repression came in 2008 when the government decided to hold a national referendum on a new constitution. Widespread signs and reports of corruption and manipulation during this process have somewhat undermined the validity of the new constitution as a vehicle of positive change. Today, prominent opposition groups strongly object to elements of the 2008 constitution, which guarantee the military a place at the centre of government with provisions reserving at least a quarter of parliamentary seats for the military. Under the new constitution, the armed forces continue to hold an effective veto over any proposed future changes.

In spite of such controversial developments, Myanmar continued to show signs of progress, moving ahead with the elections of 2010, the country's first elections in two decades. The elections ultimately resulted in the appointment of a nominally civilian government dominated by former army generals. Though the legitimacy of the

[10] Ethnic Armed Groups-this term is used to refer to the range of non-state armed groups formed on the basis of ethnic identity who do not speak Burmese as their native tongue.

elections was largely questioned by the international community, Myanmar witnessed a number of notable democratic reforms in their wake, including the release of political prisoners, the relaxation of censorship and greater economic freedoms in the following years.

Recently, the new government under President Thein Sein has made overt attempts at embarking on a new path towards national peace. The year 2012 saw the establishment of a Union Level Peacemaking Central Committee and Working Committee to carry out and coordinate the government's official peace plan. This was followed by the foundation of the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC), established as a secretariat for the committees to coordinate peacebuilding activities and facilitate dialogue between conflict groups. Together, these three bodies have effectively helped institutionalise the country's transition towards peace; the Myanmar Government is currently engaged in peace negotiations with more than a dozen EAGs, the majority of which have signed preliminary ceasefire agreements.

In 2013, the Myanmar Government called for the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), based on a document originally developed by the Working Group on Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) which was tasked with developing a political framework representative of the ethnic groups engaged in the peace process. Shortly afterwards, 16 major armed groups signed an agreement to work together on the text of a NCA, forming a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) to handle negotiations with the government on its development.[11]

Since then, the NCCT has met regularly with the Myanmar Government, yet the deadline for the signing of a NCA has been postponed several times[12]. The delayed signing of the NCA is largely due to the number of sensitive issues that the NCCT has been working

[11] Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Burma News International, 2014).
[12] This paper was written in early 2015, before the signature of a National Ceasefire Agreement between the Myanmar Government and eight EAGs (October 15, 2015).

to address before the signing of a nationwide agreement, including amending the 2008 constitution and establishing a federal army. Most recently, in March 2015, positive steps were taken towards the signing of an NCA with both parties agreeing to the text of a full draft. The developments around the NCA and NCCT represent significant milestones in Myanmar's peace process, bringing together major EAGs engaged in political dialogue with the government into a united negotiating front.

However, Myanmar's peace process is still in its early stages and continues to face a number of significant challenges. While developments like the NCA and NCCT sustain optimism for a common vision of peace, the process still suffers from a lack of collaboration between actors. With a significant number of diverse actors engaged in separate negotiations, many stakeholders remain relatively isolated from one another. Terms of ceasefire agreements differ between each group and conflict parties are still divided on what the future of Myanmar will look like, evident in the number of contentious issues that have curbed the progress of peace. Currently, these include the formation of a federal union and federal army, how to establish a framework for political dialogue, as well as issues around ceasefire implementation and codes of conduct.

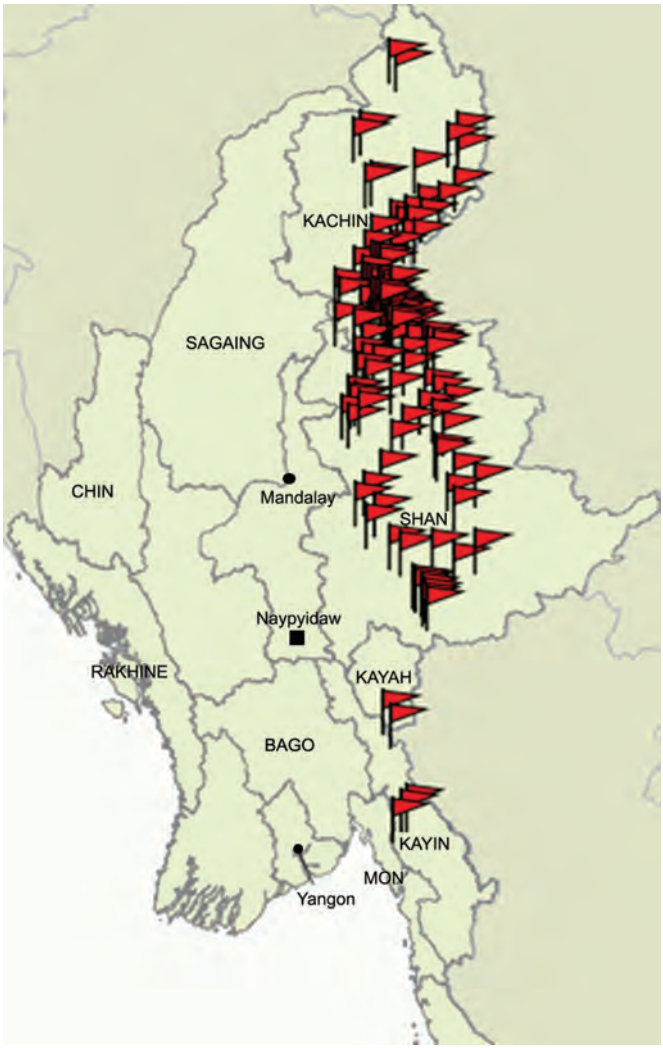
The current process is also exclusive with a focus on key stakeholders that has largely alienated civil society. There are a limited number of opportunities for community engagement in order to ensure that the peace process reflects the needs of the people it affects the most, the larger public. For years, communities have been deeply and directly affected by encounters between conflict parties, yet so far, the current peace process has denied them an opportunity to voice their concerns and express their challenges and needs for the future. Several communities have reported lack of concrete ways to engage in the peace process as a continued source of mistrust in the process at large.[13]

[13] Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices: Karen Communities* (2014).

The history of protracted conflict has ultimately inhibited a general sense of confidence in the peace process among communities and EAGs alike. A history of failed ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar government and the EAGs, most notably in the 1990's, has led most citizens to question the legitimacy of the current process and as a result, building trust between the conflicting parties has become imperative to the progression of peace in the country. Mistrust and suspicion about troop movements has been cited as a major source of continued clashes between EAGs and government forces. Mutual mistrust is heightened by constant rumors of military recruitment and training on both sides. Since the launch of the Government's official peace process in 2012, military encounters between conflict parties have continued to occur on a relatively wide scale (Figure 1).

Adherence to ceasefire agreements is another source of continued tension between conflict parties. EAGs as well as communities state breaches in ceasefire agreements such as the Myanmar Army's infringement on non-state armed group controlled territory and the mobilization and reinforcement of troops, have significantly eroded their trust in the sincerity of the Government and the peace process at large. Continued violence, particularly in ceasefire areas, undermines the legitimacy of ceasefire agreements, and in turn, of the process itself. Myanmar's process is unique in that the Government serves as the primary negotiator with no official third party involved in peace negotiations. Lack of outside observers to monitor the process and ensure parties adhere to signed ceasefire agreements has led to a general lack of accountability among actors. The peace process has not yet addressed the issue of how to create a binding ceasefire or ensure its implementation.

Figure 1: Armed Clashes Between Ethnic Armed Groups and Myanmar Military Reported in 2013.



Sources: Data of armed clashes above only represent those that were reported in the media, the actual number may be higher. Figure taken from Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Burma News International, 2014).

Peace Infrastructure in Myanmar: The Role of Liaison Offices

Analysing Myanmar's peace process from a perspective of peace infrastructure highlights the shortcomings of current initiatives as well as spaces for new approaches to strengthen peace in the country. While organizations like the MPC have helped institutionalise the country's peace process, they fail to meet some of the core criteria of peace infrastructure. In theory, the MPC is meant to serve as a platform for interparty communication and collaboration, providing a space for civil society organisations, EAGs and government officials to meet and negotiate. Yet, as a government structure, the MPC lacks a connection to grassroots peacebuilding and local ownership that has been so central to the success of peace infrastructure in other contexts. EAGs are reluctant to engage with government bodies like the MPC. Such limitations of existing organisations have left the country without core structures in place to support and sustain its progress.

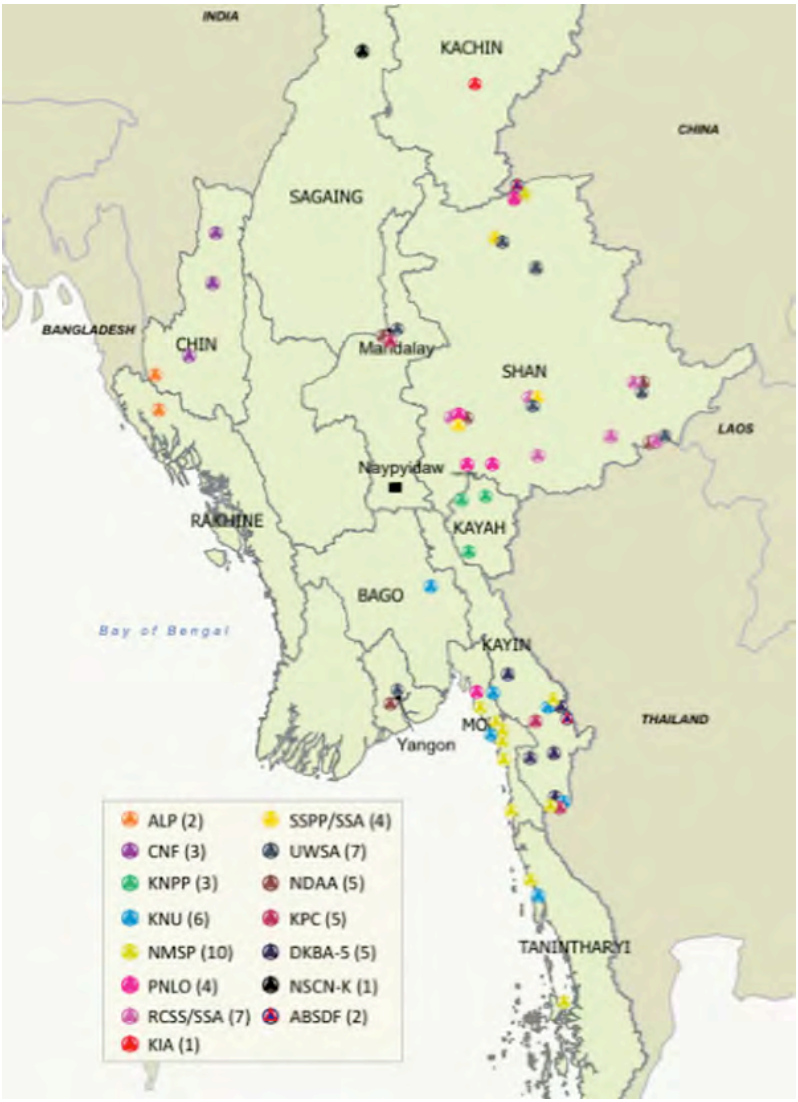
The establishment of liaison offices is mandated by the Government in ceasefire agreements signed with EAGs, yet beyond this, the Government makes little contribution to the set up and management of liaison offices. These structures are largely run and staffed by the EAGs, providing them with greater distance from the Myanmar Government (both physically and metaphorically). They are thus, less prone to government manipulation and also unevenly resourced. As structures established to strengthen and maintain communication between EAGs and the Myanmar government, liaison offices are intended to facilitate the types of exchange between parties that strengthen the foundations of peace.

Today around 30 offices have been established throughout the country representing over a dozen EAGs (Figure 2). The number of liaison offices under each EAG is negotiated in individual ceasefire agreements signed with the Myanmar Government. Currently the number of liaison offices spans from one to seven offices within each EAG. Generally EAGs set-up their liaison offices in regions corresponding to their areas of control, though major cities and central areas often contain multiple liaison offices representing different EAGs.

The composition of liaison offices is particularly significant given the diversity of conflict parties engaged in separate, concurrent peace negotiations in Myanmar. Liaison offices are a universal structure across peace negotiations that may be utilized to foster much needed correlation and collaboration. In particular, in areas far from the Yangon centered and Government dominated process, liaison offices serve as structural conduits of peace.

In many cases, liaison offices are the only structure of communication between key groups, and in this way they build ties between traditionally isolated actors. Though the roles and functions are diverse among liaison offices; contingent on local needs and demands, liaison offices across the country serve as primary conduits of exchange between community members, EAGs and local government authorities. They have helped establish standards of communication that have mitigated conflict and strengthened ties between these actors. While in the past, infringement on enemy controlled territory was a major source of conflict between EAGs and Tatmadaw, liaison offices have helped establish guidelines to facilitate information exchange about troop movements and limit clashes between the groups. For example, the Chin National Front (CNF) has noted the presence of liaison offices in Chin State as a key structure in reducing violent clashes with Tatmadaw troops and implementing ceasefire agreements.

Figure 2: Liaison Offices in Myanmar 2014.



Sources: Figure taken from Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Burma News International, 2014).

Liaison offices have also played an integral role in building relationships between EAGs and the Myanmar Government. In central areas, such as the Karen National Union's (KNU) Hpa'an office, in CNF's Hakka office, or New Mon State Party's (NMSP) Mawlamyine office, liaison offices are in direct communication with the State Minister of Border Affairs and Security. Central offices like these that engage in frequent communication, maintain more personal connections to government authorities and typically report good relationships with State Government. In some cases, these relationships provide a direct avenue for wider discussion that go beyond standard topics such as military troop movement to also include broader political issues.[14] In Hakka, CNF liaison officers report that the State Government has a broader level of knowledge on the peace process and elements of ceasefire terms compared to more rural areas in Chin State, which in turn has facilitated deeper discussion and closer relationships between the two groups. By creating and formalising channels of communication, liaison offices have begun to provoke sincere discourse and relationship-building between key groups.

For communities that have been traditionally isolated from other actors, liaison offices serve as an important connector to EAGs and the Myanmar Government. In many areas, liaison offices function as mediators for community members seeking redress on a number of issues including land confiscation, arrest of civilians and resource extraction. Community members utilise liaison offices to officially register complaints, including those implicating Government and Tatmadaw, providing more accessible avenues of redress rather than direct engagement with local authorities. In some of these cases that extend into government jurisdiction, liaison offices provide access to local government that some community members may be hesitant or unable to forge on their own.

[14] Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (2014). Ceasefire Liaison Offices: Observations on Roles and Functions (2014).

In these capacities, liaison officers are beginning to bridge the gaps of mistrust and suspicion between government authorities, the Myanmar Army, EAGs and the local population. In several instances, they have been primary actors in defusing tensions between conflict parties and effectively preventing escalation into violence. For example, in one instance in the region of KNU Kyauk Kyi liaison office, a Myanmar Army truck ran over a landmine, resulting in four casualties. Instead of responding with accusations and force, the Myanmar Army contacted the KNU and together returned to the scene to demine the area of denotation, discovering an additional five mines.[15]

In the KNU Kyauk Kyi's office, liaison officers state that this intermediary role has strengthened local relationships in the area and ultimately begun to shift general perceptions of the Government. Officers cite a growing acknowledgement of change in the Government's position, which is believed to be no longer as harsh as in the past. In this sense, the role of the liaison office has been crucial in bringing the peace process to the people, forging the connections between individuals that are essential to a lasting and positive peace.

Offices are increasing inclusivity by creating avenues for wider community engagement. The majority of liaison offices support community outreach activities, such as community consultations, spread awareness of the peace process and engage the community in discussions around pressing issues such as federalism. The CNF, for example, has held a series of democracy trainings in Chin State that focus on building local knowledge on topics such as democracy, federalism and peace process developments. Many EAGs also use community consultations as an opportunity to share more information about their policies, ceasefire terms, and respective roles in the peace process. For isolated communities that have

[15] Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, Lessons Learned From MPSI's Work Supporting the Peace Process in Myanmar (2014).

little access to information, such trainings represent important opportunities to build local knowledge and capacity to increase community engagement in the peace process.

Community consultations also serve as a platform for EAGs to gain better understanding of community needs and concerns. For example, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) has instituted a feedback box in their Mawlamyine liaison office as a space for communities to voice suggestions and questions about the peace process.[16] Facilitating this kind of exchange between communities capacitates liaison offices to better support community grievances and inject community voices into peace negotiations to ensure the process addresses the concerns of communities across Myanmar.

Liaison offices have expanded their role in communities beyond engagement in the peace process. Many also provide some form of social assistance and welfare. Some offices, such as the KNU office in Three Pagoda Pass, provide access to important community services including health care and transportation. Local residents wishing to access the Thai hospital across the border report to the liaison offices where officers work with local authorities to grant permission and provide transportation for crossing into Thailand. To date, since it opened in 2012, the KNU Three Pagoda Pass liaison office has provided transportation for over 1,750 individuals seeking cross-border medical treatment.

In several areas, liaison offices serve as local contact and coordination points for INGOs, collaborating to provide humanitarian assistance and other social services. INGOs seeking information and work requests often approach local liaison offices for assistance. The KNU Hpa'an office serves as an interface for all INGOs that work around the seven KNU districts, meeting with international organisations to assess whether their intended work is in line with KNU policies and does not threaten KNU security.[17] In Chin State, international

[16] See note 15
[17] See note 15

organisations such as the Nippon Foundation have utilised liaison offices as a key structure in delivering aid to local communities, coordinating with liaison offices to store and distribute food to communities across the state.

Many liaison offices also provide crucial access to government services and benefits. In the past, a central aspect of this work has been liaising with government agencies, such as the Ministry of Immigration and Population to issue ID cards to the general population. Over several years of internal conflict and ensuing displacement, individuals have lost their official ID documentation, which has made it impossible to travel through government controlled areas, or access public services. Previously, application for new IDs was a very difficult process requiring people to travel at their own risk and expense—not a viable option for the majority of villagers living in conflict-affected areas. In 2012, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Ministry of Immigration and Population launched a new initiative to issue new national identity cards but experienced some trouble accessing citizens living in EAG controlled areas. State presence in these areas can be viewed as threatening to community members and EAGs. With the support of the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI), liaison offices have developed as core institutions that spread awareness of the programme and facilitate access to these communities. With the help of liaison offices, thousands of ID cards have been distributed to citizens living in EAG controlled territories.[18]

Increasing access to identity cards has significant benefits for Myanmar civilians. Identity cards are integral to helping citizens access basic rights including freedom of movement and the right to vote. They represent a gateway to services including education and healthcare and are necessary for vital tasks such as the purchase and registration of land (the lack of IDs has fuelled many cases of land-grabbing for citizens living in conflict affected areas), applying for a Myanmar passport, opening a bank account and registering a

[18] See note 15

business.[19] In short, by aiding the distribution of ID documentation, liaison offices have created pathways to ensure the basic rights of local communities.

In these capacities, liaison offices are working to safeguard basic human rights and prevent exploitation of conflict-affected communities in Myanmar. Despite the presence of official peace negotiations, arrests and detention of civilians by the Myanmar Army have continued in some areas. In the case of Shan State, the Myanmar Army has detained civilians under the Unlawful Associations Act of 1920, which makes it illegal for individuals to be in contact with any organisations that the Burmese authorities have deemed illegal. Today EAGs are still considered illegal organisations under Myanmar law, granting Myanmar military legal jurisdiction to arrest or detain individuals seeking assistance in local liaison offices. The Restoration Council of Shan State's (RCSS) liaison offices have worked to intervene in cases where civilians have been detained under the Unlawful Associations Act. RCSS liaison officers report that to date, over 100 villagers have been detained in Myanmar Army barracks where they are threatened, at times beaten and warned against interacting with EAGs. In response, RCSS liaison offices work to spread awareness of such events through surrounding communities, building knowledge of the peace process and ceasefire terms, and alerting local media.

The cases above provide brief insights to how liaison offices are strategically supporting and strengthening Myanmar's peace process, and combating some common obstacles such as access to information on the peace process and lack of communication between stakeholders. While more research on the activities, structures and objectives of liaison offices is needed to examine the full extent and significance of their role in the peace process, it is clear that liaison offices hold great potential as future infrastructures of peace. As the diversity of roles indicate, liaison offices are contextually grounded, responding to local needs on the ground.

[19] See note 15

Rather than directly engage government authorities, community members are utilising liaison offices for an array of services, a preference that demonstrates certain levels of reliability and trust in liaison offices. Even though liaison offices may provide limited paths of official redress, they are supporting communities in several positive ways that build local confidence in the peace process. By advocating for communities, supporting their grievances and safeguarding basic rights, liaison offices have made significant strides in building local trust and encouraging wider participation in the peace process. This has placed liaison offices in a position to enhance local active engagement and build a more inclusive and sustainable peace process.

As they have developed to better comprehend and support community concerns, liaison offices have built an increased understanding of local dynamics and contexts. This knowledge has capacitated liaison offices to better identify and respond to local conflicts, working to decrease tensions and prevent outbreaks of violence between conflict parties. Though liaison offices are government mandated, they are largely armed group owned mechanisms, recognised and utilised by local communities and government authorities alike. As a result, liaison offices hold legitimacy from a wide range of actors that allows them to effectively address local conflicts between different stakeholders.

Functioning as these intermediary structures, liaison offices are critical in fostering communication and collaboration between key stakeholders including the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Government, civil society, local communities and EAGs. Particularly in areas with volatile relationships between EAGs and local government or army, liaison offices may represent an important first step towards defusing tensions, providing an organisational structure for increased engagement. As a first point of contact between conflict parties, liaison offices can help integrate EAG and government structures into a coherent system of communication that strengthens more effective

cooperation between the two. Because these structures exist within each EAG engaged in separate negotiations with the Myanmar Government, they have significant potential as a unifying force in the peace process. Particularly in areas of dual control, (two liaison offices of different EAGs based in the same area) liaison offices can play an important role in strengthening networks of communication and fostering greater collaboration between EAGs.

For communities removed from official developments taking place in Yangon, liaison offices are not only building community awareness of and engagement in the peace process but playing key roles in implementing and monitoring ceasefire agreements, reducing violent confrontation between conflict parties. The widespread legitimacy liaison offices hold is indicative of their significant role in transitioning Myanmar to a post-conflict context. Widespread utilisation of liaison offices as centres to seek forms of local justice and redress indicates an essential mind shift to a post-conflict context where citizens feel secure enough to air their grievances and advocate for basic rights.

Challenges for Liaison Offices

Liaison offices represent a long-term approach to peacebuilding by addressing underlying forces of conflict such as mistrust, isolation, exclusiveness and lack of collaboration and communication. They also constitute the beginnings of alternative structures not previously seen as necessary, for example to channel community grievances, defuse conflicts, and consult on community needs. These characteristics of liaison offices reinforce their potential as infrastructures of peace in Myanmar.

However, this potential has been undermined by a number of factors that have limited their effectiveness. Though the Government has sanctioned the creation of liaison offices in signed ceasefire agreements, they have done little to make sure liaison offices operate effectively. Offices have been tasked with responsibilities such as "identifying barriers to success of meaningful talks," "promoting active participation" and "providing parties with needed tools to overcome the issues concerning trust, transparency and accountability" as listed in the KNU Liaison Office Terms of Reference, yet there is no clarification on activities or programmes an office might implement to achieve these objectives.[20]

While a lack of defined roles, structures and guidelines has endowed liaison offices with flexibility in responding to the local needs of their context, it has also led to conflicting perceptions and some confusion around the objectives of liaison offices. Though officers report common problems such as tenuous relationships with local government, the lack of guidance or knowledge of how to best address these issues has diminished the capacity of liaison offices. These challenges have been exacerbated by limited communication both within and between armed groups, which can further isolate liaison offices and perpetuate role confusion and redundancy.

[20] Karen National Union (2012). Liaison Officer's Responsibility. Unpublished internal document.

Most significantly, liaison offices are struggling without the necessary funds and competencies to reach their full potential. Although established by the Government, offices are not funded by it, and constantly cite lack of funding as a major obstacle towards achieving their objectives. Because liaison offices are largely perceived as institutions of EAGs, funding these structures has been a controversial issue among international donors, who wish to avoid accusations of endorsing what Myanmar law still dictates as 'illegal groups.' As a result, lack of funding has severely impacted the scope and effectiveness of liaison office work in the country. For some EAGs like the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), lack of funding for office setup and running costs have impeded the process of establishing the agreed number of liaison offices stipulated in their ceasefire agreements with the Government.

During training sessions with CPCS staff, liaison officers have alluded to how lack of resources and funding has prohibited them from carrying out activities to support their objectives and strengthen the peace process. For example, several liaison officers from the KNU discussed hopes of holding community consultations and disseminating information in order to address low levels of local knowledge of and engagement in the peace process. However, absence of computers and Internet (to follow recent peace process developments), combined with lack of funding and human resources has made reaching out and mobilizing communities difficult for liaison officers. Other officers felt they lacked the skills to engage community members in such capacities.

Discussions with liaison officers also highlighted how limited resources have impacted local perceptions and images of liaison offices. In particular, KNU liaison officers expressed vulnerability towards maintaining a positive public image due to widespread conflict-insensitive reporting in the country. Insufficient knowledge on how to address media that contained false reports, facts or accusations had negative repercussions on the image of the EAG.

This ultimately impacted the operations of liaison offices that relied on relationships with communities and other stakeholders to work effectively. Lack of knowledge on how to conduct interviews, release public statements and work with local media combined with lack of resources has also impaired the effectiveness of liaison offices as infrastructures for peace.

Reports also indicate that inefficient liaison offices can exacerbate conflicts, as ineffective communication between conflict parties increases tension and leads to continued outbreaks of violence.[21] Without the proper attention, funds and resources, there is a great risk of liaison offices succumbing to the very roots of conflict they are established to address. Not only can supporting liaison offices help strengthen the peace process, but continuing to ignore their potential could be a dangerous oversight.

[21] See note 11

Recommendations

The challenges liaison offices currently face are relatively small in relation to their significant potential as infrastructures for peace. There is much that can be done to support the development of liaison offices as core peacebuilding structures in Myanmar. Listed below are some actions individuals and organizations can take to aid liaison offices' support to Myanmar's peace process.

Increase skills and knowledge for liaison officers: Liaison offices are perfectly poised to support the peace process and are one of the only structures doing so on the ground. However limited knowledge and capacity have created several challenges for liaison officers attempting to reach their objectives in supporting the progression of peace in Myanmar. Liaison officers would greatly benefit from more information and capacity building on a number of issues including public relations, dialogue management tools for community engagement, basic office management skills and federalism/ government structure. Implementing trainings for liaison officers on these issues will give them greater knowledge and confidence to work more effectively in their areas.

Create opportunities for liaison office coordination: Lack of coordination and collaboration within and between liaison offices of EAGs is a major barrier towards achieving objectives and implementing effective activities. A mechanism for inter-office communication and collaboration is needed to organise offices and prevent role duplication, competition and allow offices to work together as a cohesive system rather than as sole entities. Currently, the Euro-Burma Office (EBO), a Myanmar-based organisation coordinating internal liaison office support, is developing a series of workshops that bring together around 100 representatives from liaison offices across the country. More opportunities like these are needed to support exchange and collaboration between liaison offices.

Build resources of liaison offices: As discussed above, it is clear that there is a universal struggle for funds and resources among liaison offices in Myanmar, and that this greatly impacts their ability to support the development of peace in the country. Though the Government has mandated the establishment of liaison offices, it has done little to make sure offices have the resources to operate effectively. Donating basic resources, such as Internet connections, to liaison offices can go a long way in increasing access to information and building the knowledge of liaison offices. For donors and individuals unwilling to support liaison offices directly, there are other organizations working directly to support and finance liaison offices, such as EBO. International organisations could also encourage the Myanmar Government to remove ceasefire groups from the proscribed list.

Increase knowledge of the peace process among liaison officers (and others): Lack of knowledge about the peace process has amplified the level of mistrust and uncertainty about the legitimacy of the process. Increasing liaison officers knowledge of peace developments, may in turn, create wider access to such information among communities, spreading awareness of the country's progress towards peace and building greater sense of security and trust in the process.

Spreading awareness about the role and potential of liaison offices: Many actors involved in Myanmar's peace process have focused their attention on official level negotiations rather than on the implementation of the process at the grassroots level. Located between these levels, liaison offices are uniquely placed to translate official peace discussions and agreements into peacebuilding activities on the ground, yet they receive little outside support. Even among local authorities in Myanmar, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about the function and role of liaison offices, and their activities are often regarded with suspicion. For example, offices of the RCSS encounter difficulties delivering trainings and consultations to surrounding communities in Shan State, which the

local government perceived as military training and recruitment seminars. Often government authorities intervene to block such events including narcotic awareness seminars, even though the Myanmar Government and RCSS ceasefire agreement stipulates joint action and greater collaboration to combat the spread and use of drugs in the area. Spreading more awareness about the role of liaison offices is essential towards gaining the attention, resources and funds they need to work more effectively to support the peace process in Myanmar.

Liaison offices foster collaboration between key stakeholders in a long-term approach that builds relationships among isolated actors, connects peacebuilding tracks and draws on local resources and capacities. Though liaison offices were mainly established to strengthen communication between conflict parties, their role has diversified from meeting the demands of the official level peace negotiations to include addressing local peace needs of communities across the country. This dual domestic foundation of liaison offices has centered them as cross-cutting sectors equipped to strengthen linkages between national and local peacebuilding processes and promote a collective and cohesive vision for peace across stakeholders.

They also have the capacity to play important roles in the implementation of peace agreements. Although attention currently is focused on negotiations, it will eventually be necessary to implement anything agreed. At that moment, liaison offices could provide vital, trusted links and communication between communities, armed groups and governments. In this sense liaison offices represent important infrastructures for peace that can play a crucial role in addressing some of the country's root causes of conflict.

To date, the limited resources of liaison offices have impeded their development as core infrastructures of peace in the country. Yet, given the current roles of liaison offices, it is evident they are one

of the few institutions actively working to bring the peace process to the grassroots level, supporting a more inclusive and sustainable process. Amidst the complex and rapidly evolving dynamics of Myanmar's peace process, supporting liaison offices represents one of the few tangible ways that individuals and organisations can contribute to a more peaceful Myanmar.

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