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Institutionalization of Civil Society in Myanmar

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A Discussion Paper

Acronyms

AAM	Action Aid Myanmar
ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBI	Capacity Building Initiative
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
EC CSO	European Commission Civil Society Organisation
EU	European Union
GAD	General Administration Department
GONGO	Government Organized Nongovernmental Organization
MMCWA	Myanmar Maternal Child and Welfare Association
MRC	Myanmar Red Cross
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
PTE	Phan Tee Eain
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association
WB	World Bank

Background and Rationale

This research was conducted on behalf of a consortium of three organizations comprised of Phan Tee Eain, Capacity Building Initiative and Action Aid Myanmar to complement an ongoing project aimed at strengthening civil society to engage better with government over policy formulation and implementation. The 4-year project entitled “Strengthening a responsive, diverse and democratic civil society in Myanmar” is co-financed by the European Union (EU). The project started in March 2016 and has lent support to 92 civil society organizations, including 10 civil society networks, across the country. The publication was authored by Shaivalini Parmar, Independent Consultant, with input from ECCSO team members.

This discussion paper looks at the impact of the institutionalization of civil society in Myanmar. It assesses how donor’s influence shape the development of local civil society in the image of international organizations. Donor support is primarily channeled through funding (typically, project-based) or through capacity development initiatives. The research evaluates whether civil society organizations are defining and sustaining their own agendas, their own goals and objectives and their own values or priorities.

This piece will look at the power dynamics that donor dependency creates and how it impacts on autonomy. The methodology for this paper was primarily a literature review, coupled with key informant interviews to supplement the research. Due to sensitivities around this topic the identity of interviewees will remain confidential. The research is not intended to be conclusive, rather the aim of this work is to stimulate interest and instigate discussion on the impact of institutionalizing development on civil society in Myanmar.



Disclaimer

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Summary

The post-modern understanding of civil society was developed in 1980s for the promotion of development, moving beyond a model that exclusively relied on the state or market as prime drivers of economic development¹. This was closely linked to a wider neo-liberal agenda of minimizing the role of government and seeing nongovernmental organizations as alternative providers of social services and welfare. It was also in part due to the recognition that social and political development was a necessary precondition towards achieving equality. It was around this time when donors increasingly channeled funds to civil society organizations globally, typically in pursuit of a combination of goals that coupled traditional economic development with democratic values and human rights.² In Myanmar, decades of social isolation under military rule meant that the entrance of donor support to civil society organizations came much later.³

In 2011, a political transition under former President Thein Sein marked the most significant shift in donor engagement and diplomatic ties for Myanmar.⁴ Thein Sein effectively convinced the international community that his government's commitment to economic and political reform was sincere. The years of political transition, including now under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, have seen an influx of donors and foreign investment into the country, leading to rapid political transformation and economic growth.⁵ Who are donors selecting and what factors guide their selection process?

Alongside the type of internationalism that large donor organizations and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) bring is a pressure to professionalize, where local organizations are increasingly expected to develop in areas and ways considered important by Western donors.⁶ This paper uses the concept of "institutionalization" to describe

the demands from donors and INGOs from civil society. These demands often include a shift from a horizontal and loosely organized platform for collective action to something that is typically vertical in structure and has a set of clearly defined policies and practices often inspired by Western models of organizational structures.⁷ While there are vertical structures, often staff wear multiple hats and carry different roles based on the nature and size of the organization. What kind of impact does this have on indigenous movements or popular politics? Can this shift lead to more structural integrity where civil society gains enhanced sustainability and greater accountability to communities and donors?

In Myanmar, the practice of volunteering is a common method of civic participation.⁸ These efforts are largely undocumented and unrecognized, save for emergency contexts where community-instigated responses in mobilizing both funds and human capital are paramount, as evidenced by the response to both Cyclone Nargis and Cyclone Giri. How has the professionalization of community led responses impacted on this volunteer culture?

For most civil society actors there is a high level of material dependency on donor funding, where many of the smaller organizations rely almost exclusively on highly sporadic funding.⁹ To what extent is capital dictating the agenda and is this inherently harmful or can it be beneficial in promoting interest or awareness in an otherwise undervalued issue or cause? Donors tend to support institutions through project-based funding that often looks at impact and development in a linear way, progress is measured through a clearly defined set of outcomes that may or may not reflect nuances on the ground. The way funds are dispersed have obvious implications on the concentration of power **between donors and grantees**. Do these structures compel organizations to abandon some activities which they value to undertake others that donors are willing to support? In terms of capacity building too donors typically bring a universal, one-size-fits-all, blueprint for capacity development or strengthening. How does this impact the development of civil society actors and the work they undertake?

Current Political Context

Myanmar has seen significant political changes after more than five decades of authoritarian rule came to an official end and a quasi-civilian government entered into power in 2011. The period prior had seen relative international isolation, but political and economic reform under former President Thein Sein invited a proliferation of international presence and financial support into the country.¹⁰ So began a gradual opening and move towards democratic leadership in the country.

The National League of Democracy (NLD) took office in March 2016, marking the first ever democratically elected government since 1962. Their victory was received with much optimism both nationally and internationally, where it was believed that the country would see far reaching reform under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership. That parliament itself was comprised of approximately 100 former political prisoners was, for many civil society actors and donors, a sign that you would see the space for civil society develop with the new administration.¹¹ Despite some positive signs in the early days of the new administration, including the release of hundreds of political prisoners through official amnesties, reforms have largely stalled or regressed.¹²

The military still retains significant control over the civilian government, with 25% of parliamentary seats at both the union and state level allocated to members of the military, giving them an effective veto over constitutional change.¹³ Additionally, the military maintains control over key ministries integral to internal governance, specifically the Ministry of Home Affairs (under which both the police force and special branch sit), the Ministry of Border Affairs and the Ministry of Defence.¹⁴ This means that the military can use their control to exert undue influence, including on civil society actors. This remains true for the judiciary as well, where government and military influence over judges remains a major obstacle to an independent judicial system and access to justice more broadly.¹⁵ The NLD's plan to move the General Administration Department (GAD) under civilian control by transferring it out of the Ministry of Home Affairs stands as one of the more significant reforms under the current administration, effectively demilitarizing a key institution for public administration and placing it under civilian control.¹⁶

Despite the ongoing peace process, fighting between



the military and ethnic armed groups has seen periods of dramatic escalation across the country and in numerous contexts, which have provided numerous challenges for both local and international groups involved in humanitarian relief services. A significant portion of foreign aid is dedicated to the peace process, humanitarian assistance and improvement of social protection and security/safety across the country.¹⁷ Security in this report doesn't mean supporting the military. It's the security/safety of the people and that also includes protection of citizens. Ongoing hostilities have left 241,000 people in a state of protracted displacement across Kachin, Kayin, Northern Shan and Rakhine States who are reliant on aid for survival.¹⁸

History of International Donor Engagement in Myanmar

Aid After Independence

After Myanmar's independence in 1948 Japan situated itself as an important donor following the 1954 peace treaty that facilitated the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Even after Ne Win's rise to power in 1962 and the period of international isolation that followed, Japan maintained some levels of engagement with the country. The sporadic donor engagement by other countries and institutions from 1948 up until 1988 diminished after the military defaulted on paying back loans. The World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) closed their programming in the 1980s after the government refused to make their loan repayments.

The 1988 nationwide protests had a significant impact on donor engagement in Myanmar. The 8888 Uprisings saw many thousands of people take to the streets, including monks, students, professionals, children, housewives and some members of the military from March-September 1988. The military ordered its troops to open fire on the protestors, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 10,000 and wounding of countless others. An estimated 10,000 students fled to ethnic areas to take up arms against the regime, the majority of whom joined the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF).

suppression of protestors with a temporary suspension of aid. Governments closed their embassies and evacuated their personnel. Japan was the first to reinstate financial assistance in 1989, but restrictions by OECD countries did not begin to ease until the early 2000s. The period between 1988 and 2011 saw the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) pursue a stronger relationship with China and look towards regional integration.

After the 1988 uprising many activists were either forced into exile or pushed underground, fleeing to areas under the control of ethnic armed factions. This coincided with mass displacements along the Thai-Burma border in the 1990s, where organizations in exile became instrumental in the provision of humanitarian assistance and basic services to communities along the border and in ethnic armed organization (EAO) controlled areas. Civil society movements in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot gained momentum during this period, where civil society actors were able to be more vocal about human rights concerns. At the time, almost all international organizations refused to provide support directly to the regime and were unable to reach CSOs inside the country and instead funded organizations on the border.

Cyclone Nargis marked a major change in donor engagement after civil society proved itself so capable as first respondents to emergency relief. Cyclone Nargis was believed to be one of the worst natural disasters in Myanmar's history. An estimated 140,000 people were killed and another 2.4 million were severely impacted by the cyclone that struck southern Myanmar in May 2008. Local civil society groups effectively mobilized to become first respondents to the emergency, playing a critical and leading role in supporting recovery. Where international assistance was initially declined by the military, financial and in-kind support for relief efforts were provided by both individuals and private companies from inside Myanmar.¹⁹

The overall effectiveness of civil society contributions in leading and executing the Nargis response in the first weeks of the emergency when all international assistance was banned highlighted a number of significant points. Importantly, it revealed, to both the international community and the military, that civil society actually did *exist* and had enormous potential to develop.²⁰ The period following also saw an influx of international nongovernmental organizations into Myanmar, where the number of foreign organizations



more than doubled in the direct aftermath of Nargis (from 40 to 100).²¹ A slower but consistent growth of international presence followed in the years to come.

After Cyclone Nargis donors started channeling aid directly into the country, a trend that has continued up until today. Cross border aid remains vital in some areas where the conflict makes access to certain communities impossible from within Myanmar.²² Still, most funding on the border has been cut, and media and advocacy organizations have suffered particularly from this shift in donor policy.²³

Political Transition

The political transition under former President Thein Sein marked the most significant shift in recent times of donor engagement and diplomatic ties for Myanmar. General Thein Sein effectively convinced the international community that his commitment to economic and political reform was sincere, attracting an approximate USD 10.6 billion in debt forgiveness, with Japan taking the majority in this debt write-off.²⁴ In the years that followed there was a gradual expansion of bilateral and multilateral aid programs, with a proliferation of INGOs and donors establishing a presence in the country. The volume of aid increased exponentially, with Myanmar becoming the 7th largest recipient of aid globally in 2015.²⁵

The influx of donors and foreign investment into the country has resulted in rapid political transformation and economic growth.²⁶ As of November 2016, donors report 522 projects underway with combined budget of USD 8.6 billion in aid commitments.²⁷ Today, Myanmar receives significant foreign aid. From January 2019 to December 2019 alone, aid with a total worth of USD 294.10 million was injected, and three sectors – basic health, government and civil society, and conflict resolution and prevention – makes up more than 50% of the total aid.²⁸

Donors had long prioritized support to cross border civil society movements during the country's long period of isolation, but once the political transition was underway donor funding started to deplete along the Thai-Myanmar border.²⁹ Norway, which had long been a major supporter of cross border funding for over two decades, took the lead on scaling back aid. In the years that followed, many groups saw a massive decline in funding. Human rights and media groups were hardest

hit by this move, despite comparative advantages to maintaining a base outside the country. Holding a foreign bank account or being registered outside of the country meant that the government couldn't interfere with groups in the same way; it gave them more space to be more vocal and critical about human rights or political developments. Additionally, for the many thousands of refugees still in displacement camps along the border, cross border aid remains vital even today. Many groups on the border are still servicing communities inside Myanmar in conflict areas that are inaccessible from within the country.³⁰

Many civil society representatives report that donors are increasingly shifting funding towards the peace process³¹ with most of the funding going directly to the government. It is notable that civil society has been largely excluded from formal mechanisms in the ongoing peace process. Many civil society leaders expressed discontent with their limited mandates and a perceived donor focus on government initiatives and formal processes.³²

Few donors have an exclusive focus on civil society and peacebuilding, though many are still supporting the issues.³³ This is in part because there is no consensus on what constitutes peacebuilding and donors tend to support different types of activities under the broader umbrella of peace.³⁴ It is with this understanding that civil society has found ways to influence the process and continues to play a key supporting role. Civil society has and continues to take on a myriad of roles, including monitoring and advocacy, protection, service delivery and social cohesion.³⁵ Myanmar CSOs are typically fluid in their functions and adaptive to mutable contexts, taking on multiple roles and responsibilities according to changing needs.³⁶ A major trend following the 2015 elections was that donors starting prioritizing support to the government more broadly across different sectors.

Impact of Institutionalization on Civil Society

Who are Donors Selecting?

The selection of civil society actors that donors work with is largely determined by past practices, knowledge and expertise exhibited by civil society in addition to adherence to compliance, personal networks or initial impressions. Donors like to believe that they support a range of different types of civic actors, but there is often a tendency to preference support for some type of actors over others.³⁷ Arguably, the very nature of donor requirements is a self-selecting process in and of itself. Organizational structures, be it the kind of policies, compliance processes, formal constitutions or monitoring systems a given organization has, is the basis for engaging with particular organizations over others. Legal status is often a determining factor in this selection process. In a context like Myanmar, where arguably most civil society actors are still at their very nascent stages of development, there are only a small number that can meet these requirements. Subconscious biases, whether it is fluency in English or ease with donor rhetoric, also influences this selection.³⁸ These biases are then often exercised by international organisations when they are seeking to partner with local organisations.³⁹

Proximity alone can be a factor that influences selection.⁴⁰ Most civil society organizations that receive the bulk of support are situated in or near urban centers. While all civil society organizations struggle with financing, civil society organizations in rural or remote locations remain heavily under-supported, despite the fact that they are more likely to engage with the most vulnerable and marginalized communities that benefit from programming and have a better understanding of the needs and priorities on the ground.⁴¹

Some civil society actors reported increased tension between urban civil society organizations and smaller rural groups, where donor funding inadvertently contributed to increased politicking and in-fighting between different civil society actors. This is also true for faith-based organization, as some faith are preferred

by donors over others⁴². For instance, many foreign donors and international organizations have established close working relations, with Karen Christian groups, but much less so with Karen Buddhist organizations, which represents larger section of population.⁴³

Volunteerism

In Myanmar, a culture of volunteering has always been a common aspect of life.⁴⁴ These efforts are largely undocumented and unrecognized, save for emergency situations such as cyclones Nargis and Giri. Myanmar is a deeply religious country and the culture of volunteering is often linked to making merit. The Buddhist Sangha is made up of over half a million monks, nuns and novices and holds moral authority over the majority of the Buddhist population. Faith leaders belonging to minority religions including Christianity and Islam also have significant influence in their constituencies and have taken active roles in social and political life both historically and to the present.⁴⁵

Historically, Western development actors neglected the role of religion and faith in social and political transformation.⁴⁶ This can be, in part, explained by a legal separation between the church and state that characterizes most Western liberal democracies. It can also be explained by a commitment to secular reductionism where human behavior is understood through material factors and other defining characteristics, e.g. class, gender or ethnicity. This began to shift during the 1990s where religious leaders and institutions were widely recognized as legitimate agents of social transformation. Globally, Western donors started to look at how faith and development interfaced, not simply in the provision of charity to the poor but in leading major social movements.⁴⁷

In Myanmar's more recent history this is best embodied by the 2007 Saffron revolution, where thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns took to the streets in a campaign of nonviolent resistance.⁴⁸ The military responded with heavy handed measures, executing raids on monasteries and forcibly disrobing and attacking monks. This marked one of the largest political shifts in the country's history.⁴⁹ Today, religious institutions and faith-based organizations, across multiple faiths, have a significant role in facilitating humanitarian assistance in areas of ongoing conflict. This role has given them legitimacy in the eyes of both donors and authorities.⁵⁰ Some religious leaders,

of all faiths, have been outspoken on social justice issues, including religious freedom and protection for minorities. It is worth noting, however, that the past few years has also given way to the rise of ultra-nationalistic Buddhist contingencies that have promoted discriminatory practices, and in some of the worse instances, actively incited violence.^{51 52}

When donors began to seek active partnerships with informal, community-led organizations, as well as civil society organisation and social movements, organizations had to fulfill their expected roles for donors.⁵³ In essence, this constituted a professionalization of volunteer groups that had typically been associated with flexible mandates and mutable organizational structures.

A civil society activist spoke of a distinct divide between traditional volunteer groups and other organizations that had "professionalized." The latter were perceived of as elite and motivated by greed, where they were not representative of the communities, they served and prioritized accountability to donors over accountability to their beneficiaries. Real activism was perceived of as community driven and its professionalization as a threat to community ownership. Others disagreed, highlighting the importance of time and resources to sustain civil society movements or that volunteer movements lacked accountability precisely because of their lack of structure or mutable aims.⁵⁴

When asked whether the professionalization of roles jeopardized the culture of volunteering interviewees again held divergent perspectives. One interviewee said it was different for the younger generation, who were aspiring to join well-structured organizations and used volunteering to build experience to get there. The professionalization of development work encouraged volunteers to see it as a potential career. Conversely, staff who are paid salaries are unlikely to want to return to volunteer work. An interviewee also spoke of how this impacted beneficiaries, where the payment of per diems for attending trainings or events dictated both attendance numbers or which trainings people attended.⁵⁵

Autonomy

For most civil society actors there is a significant level of material dependency on donor funding.⁵⁶ Few organizations have core funding and rely exclusively

on project-based funding. For those that do have core funding, many rely almost exclusively on a single donor. Whereas this has obvious implications on sustainability, it also can have a lasting impact on the autonomy of organizations and the work that they are implementing. It also has an impact on the credibility of organizations in the eyes of the communities or constituencies, when these organizations are not delivering adequately because of funding restrictions and therefore are perceived as ineffectual or irrelevant.

Where civil society organizations have a material dependency on donors, there is a very real risk that this will encourage organizations to work on activities and issues that do not fully align with their own organizational mandates.⁵⁷ This can have a negative impact on the strategic development of organizations, where they fail to develop a coherent or consistent set of priorities, values and agendas. But it can also mean that the pressure to implement such projects is beyond the existing capacity of the organization, which means that it might not always translate into meaningful change on the ground.⁵⁸ Civil society have to be clear in setting their own agenda so that they are able to lead the direction and focus of their programmes without being swayed in different directions.

A loss of autonomy can cause significant reputational damage for civil society actors among both the constituencies that they represent and with authorities. This becomes particularly relevant in the current political climate where discrediting campaigns are being used to question the legitimacy of civil society organizations challenging the government. In a context of heightened mistrust and fear, it is easy to discredit an individual or organization on the grounds of foreign influence, political motives and identity.⁵⁹

In 2015 the number of organizations working on hate speech issues and interfaith dialogue saw an exponential increase that was ostensibly linked to donor funding.⁶⁰ One interviewee said that while it was true that the surge was donor driven, it was important and relevant for this work to be undertaken. Available funding meant that people started to address the issue, even though it was not a priority area at the time.⁶¹ Still, some interviewees also spoke of how donor endorsement has also hurt campaigns challenging hate speech precisely because of legitimacy issues. If an international donor is seen to have supported or funded a campaign or initiative, it can very quickly delegitimize the campaign or initiative entirely.



Donor and Funding Structures

Most civil society organizations in Myanmar can only absorb funds of a limited scale. This generally means that larger donors, including multi-donor trust funds, will provide funding to international partners who then disperse funds to smaller local civil society partners as third-party grants, thereby extending the reach of donor funding. In most cases, local organizations will have to partner with international NGOs to access these funds.⁶²

Where donors expressed a willingness to support local organizations, some said that bureaucratic and staffing limitations made it difficult to disperse small amounts of money to local organizations. They noted their own obligations towards accountability, for example to Western taxpayers, necessitated a cap on donor staffing and a bare minimum standard of reporting and processes.⁶³

This has significant implications for national civil society organizations. Arguably, these reporting requirements are unrealistic for many civil society actors in Myanmar who are still at very nascent stages of development. Local organizations are often compelled to choose between being excluded from funding or drastically altering their ways of working in order to accommodate general donor standards for “professionalization.”⁶⁴ Civil society actors are also having to shift their own values and priorities to align with what donors have identified as priority issues in order to access funding. At times, it could also mean that some groups end up committing to programming that knowingly exceeds organizational capacity.

Demands for accountability can mean that donors and international organizations become both risk averse and conservative in their approaches to programming and implementation. A national civil society representative spoke of how more donors were working only with legally registered civil society partners, a marked change after the NLD came into power. This then excludes several civil society actors who are either unwilling to register because of perceived risks to their autonomy or unable to register because of government opposition to their work.⁶⁵

Partnerships and Localization

The way funds are dispersed have an obvious implication on the concentration of power. Where funding channels revolve primarily around international actors, organizations typically adopt three approaches to national partnerships: subcontracting, where the national partners meet objectives set by an international organization; locally led responses, where the national actor leads on the vision and strategy of programming and the international counterpart plays a supporting role and; the direct approach where the international partner provides direct support to beneficiaries with minimal involvement or input from national actors. Localization in this context is understood as a collective process that ensures that local actors have a central and greater role in the intervention with impoverished or crisis impacted communities. This demands a fundamental shift in power and control over resources.

History has pointed to the delicacy of partnerships and the myriad of issues that are borne of such approaches, particularly if and where there is a concentration of power associated with money.⁶⁶ Access to and competition for the same funding can lend to heightened tension between local organisations and between local and international actors. Differences in treatment, be it in decision making or access to information, also contribute to dysfunctional partnerships. For international organizations, concentrating on improving partnership policies and focusing on longer term relationships that strengthen partner capacity and support local civil society through the facilitating of exchange and learning is key to addressing some of these issues and adopting an approach that better aligns with a localization agenda.⁶⁷

This would imply greater risks taken by donors and international organisations to support civil society development. While there has to be a careful balance between being accountable to tax payers and delivering change, for programmes that are targeted towards expanding civic space, supporting grassroots civil society, donors and international organisations have to find ways that accommodate for mistakes and teething troubles related to institutional development and growth of civil society. Furthermore, more emphasis is needed to support unstructured progressive social movements and mass mobilization on key issues.

The Busan Declaration of 2011 pushed for the greater

recognition to the private sector's role in development. Subsequently, this was incorporated to the Nay Pyi Taw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation of 2013. The engagement of private sector in Myanmar can be envisioned in two possible ways, 1) through private investment and 2) partnership with donor agency or INGOs. While the former one is expected to dwarf the foreign aid in the long run⁶⁸, the latter one has encouraged the donors and INGOs to work more closely with private sector in a similar fashion as they are working with civil society.

Kramer noted private sector as "other civil society" and also reminded that Myanmar has ongoing private sector initiatives related to social activities, forming linkages with local organizations.⁶⁹ The Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS (MBCA), the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association (MWEA), and Myanmar Egress are some examples in this regard working as civil society. These groups also responded to the cyclone Nargis like many other civil society organizations in Myanmar. Furthermore, though not studied and researched in the field of development and aids, there are private consultancies both national and international acting as CSOs with more capacities and technicalities. Will the emergence of these private consultancies impact the space of civil society in the future and how?

Donors, working along with civil society and private sector, from this avenue can play an important role in linking smaller domestic companies with larger companies to make value chains more inclusive. The Naypyitaw Accord offers some hope that Myanmar's aid donors will be more helpful in these areas. On the other hand, civil society actors are skeptical of using aid to try to catalyse changes in business models and cautioned donors not to provide subsidies to companies to increase their profitability but for the public good. However, though the involvement of private companies in addressing development sector-related issues appears to be helpful, it also disengages political issues. Instead, the political issues are increasingly viewed with a technical/technocratic lens, and that might indirectly make the relations and trust with communities less important.

Project Based Funding

Core funding, understood as costs which cover undefined administrative and organizational expenses, are hugely important for all civil society actors because it enables



flexibility and enhances their sustainability beyond a specific project. Core funding is more valuable than project-based funding in supporting both ownership and autonomy of an organization. It also often allows organizations to be more strategic and develop long-term planning.

Still, most donors typically prefer project funding as it better supports their own requirements for accountability. Where donors do support core funding it is typically given to organizations that donors can hold to account, favoring INGOs or “professional” organizations. This leads to a concentration of power and runs risk of creating divisions within civil society or reinforcing existing inequalities. Where there is no provision for overhead costs to local actors inequality between international and national organizations is reinforced and militates against successful cooperation.⁷⁰

Capacity Building Efforts

There is a substantial and diverse need for capacity strengthening for CSOs in Myanmar yet standard training packages are often provided to CSOs with the underlying assumption that the same set of skills are necessary for all organizations. Many of these skills tend to focus on accountability to donors rather focusing on building skills that are relevant to the issues in focus or communities. Much of this tends to focus on project design or organizational management, that reflect a singular and donor-driven vision of what constitutes professional aid work. While the majority of CSOs would and can benefit from such training, multiple CSOs articulated the need for trainings that were more issue based.⁷¹

Multiple civil society actors expressed a need for capacity support to be tailored and demand driven, moving away from a one-size-fits all package of skills. Many advocated for the inclusion of flexible training packages in budgets allocated to supporting civil society, where civil society actors had control in determining where they want technical strengthening. They also advocated for sustained training and support, as one-off workshops rarely lead to substantial improvements in capacity.⁷² INGOs need to design programmes that cater to specific needs of local organisations and it is through adaptive and iterative programming that can allow for meeting a range of needs as articulated by civil society. A middle ground, where donors provide support to CSOs and its specific requirements may need to be further explored.

Conclusion and Discussion Questions

External interventions influence the development of local civil society actors in a myriad of ways. The professionalization of civil society through standard organizational models or skills development has a lasting impact on the development of civil society. What results is complex, where institutionalization is often paradoxical, the results of which are both positive and negative. Still, alongside renewed support and commitment to national civil society actors should be an ongoing dialogue to ensure that donors are minimizing potential of harm to the groups that they support and local groups are able to articulate and sustain their own agendas.

1. The aim of this discussion paper is to stimulate interest and instigate a conversation on how international assistance is strengthening and or undermining civil society in Myanmar. With this in mind, the following questions may further this discussion.
2. Are there other trends or shifts in donor support for civil society over recent years, particularly as the country has become more democratic?
3. What type of organizations are excluded from donor support and how is this impacting on the movements they represent?
4. Who determines “good development” in the Myanmar context?
5. How has international support impacted on particular projects or interventions and what are examples of best practices?
6. Does the emphasis on “professionalism” enhance or undermine the benefits of volunteering?
7. What impact does professionalization have on indigenous movements or popular politics?
8. Does professionalization lead to more structural integrity where civil society develops improved sustainability and greater accountability, both to communities that they represent and donors?
9. What sort of role can/should the private sector occupy in Myanmar’s development in the coming years?⁷³

Endnotes

- 1 Zaleski, Pawel Stefan. *Neoliberalizm i społeczeństwo obywatelskie (Neoliberalism and Civil Society)*, Wydawnictwo UMK, Torun, 2012.
- 2 Howell, Jude. "In their own image: donor assistance to civil society." *Lusotopie*, 9.1 (2002): 117-130.
- 3 Civil society in Myanmar has gradually re-emerged as a result of rounds of ceasefires in the 1990s.
- 4 International Crisis Group. *Myanmar: The Role of Civil Society*. Bangkok/Brussels: ICG, 2001.
- 5 Carr, Thomas. *Supporting the Transition, Understanding Aid to Myanmar Since 2011*. Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2018.
- 6 Howell, Jude. "In their own image: donor assistance to civil society." *Lusotopie*, 9.1 (2002): 117-130.
- 7 Howell, Jude. "In their own image: donor assistance to civil society." *Lusotopie*, 9.1 (2002): 117-130.
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- 10 International Crisis Group. *Myanmar: The Role of Civil Society*. Bangkok/Brussels: ICG, 2001.
- 11 Asian Development Bank. *Civil Society Briefs Myanmar*. Yangon: ADB, 2015.
- 12 "While political prisoners released, Myanmar's Judicial Reforms Stall," *The Irrawaddy*, January 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/political-prisoners-released-myanmars-judicial-reforms-stall.html>.
- 13 Constitutional change requires buy-in from more than 75% of members of parliament, giving the military an effective veto over any constitutional amendments. However, changing regular legislation only requires a simple majority vote, so the military does not have the ability to block this, giving the civilian government power to make changes to existing laws.
- 14 In December 2018, the government announced plans to move the General Administration Department (GAD) out of the Ministry of Home Affairs, placing it under civilian oversight. This would be a significant reform given that the GAD remains critical in the country's public administration, particularly at a township level. It is responsible for maintaining law and order, managing land, collecting taxes and others. Source: "Government reveals plan to bring GAD under civilian control," *Frontier Myanmar*, December 2018, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/govt-reveals-plan-to-bring-gad-under-civilian-control>.
- 15 International Commission of Jurists. "Myanmar: Independence and Impartiality; Judicial Integrity and Accountability." March 2014. <https://www.icj.org/cijlcountryprofiles/myanmar-introduction/judges/independence-and-impartiality-judicial-integrity-and-accountability/>.
- 16 The GAD has a wide remit, acting as the backbone of public administration. It is tasked with numerous

duties including maintaining law and order, land management and tax collection.

- 17 Carr, Thomas. *Supporting the Transition, Understanding Aid to Myanmar Since 2011*. Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2018.
- 18 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Myanmar," October 2019. <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar>.
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