INTERNATIONAL PEACE SUPPORT AND EFFECTIVE PEACEBUILDING IN MYANMAR

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In partnership with Canada

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List of Acronyms

AA	Arakan Army
ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
ALP	Arakan Liberation Party
ANC	Arakan National Council
CNF	Chin National Front
CSO	Civil society organization
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
EAO	Ethnic armed organization
EU	European Union
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JMC	Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee
JPF	Joint Peace Fund
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
LDU	Lahu Democratic Union (LDU)
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MPC	Myanmar Peace Center
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NDAA	National Democratic Alliance Army
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NSCN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
NUG	National Unity Government
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PNLO	Pa-O National Liberation Organization
PSF	Peace Support Fund
RCSS	Restoration Council of Shan State
SSPP	Shan State Progress Party
SITES	Sustained Incremental Trust Establishment and Support
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
USAID/OTI	USAID Office of Transition Initiatives
USD	United States Dollar
UPC	Union Peace Conference
UWSA	United Wa State Army
WNO	Wa National Organization

Introduction

Myanmar's subnational, or ethnic conflicts are among the world's most enduring, posing significant challenges to national political reforms, economic growth, and human development.[1] Since the military takeover in February 2021, violence has spread to much of the country. The various ethnic conflicts in Myanmar have their own distinct histories and pathways, and yet their ongoing dynamics and long-term persistence are closely associated with the overall national political direction. Between 2010 and 2020, efforts were made to address these conflicts while also transforming the political environments towards democracy and a free-market economy. Understanding what happened and how conflict prevention efforts progressed during this period offers important lessons for the future in both Myanmar and other complex, conflict-affected environments.

For many in and outside of Myanmar, this was a time of great optimism. Peace dialogues took off, a key moment being the October 15, 2015 signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).[2] A month later, the National League for Democracy and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi won the 2015 elections, and economic reforms began to bring rapid growth and new opportunities, particularly to urban communities.

But further progress towards peace proved to be elusive. Even before the military coup of February 2021, much of the earlier hope had dissipated as it gradually became clear that the fundamental problems perpetuating armed conflict in Myanmar had not been tackled. Commitment to the ceasefire was partly undermined by the military's continued efforts to establish greater control in contested areas and the absence of some of the largest armed groups from the main process. The new civilian-led government that came to power after the 2015 election struggled to maintain momentum amid competing priorities. The Covid-19 pandemic slowed down an already stagnant process, and the 2021 military coup spelled the end of dialogue efforts for many ceasefire signatories. Despite these and many other shortcomings, the NCA process advanced conflict resolution and related political steps in unprecedented ways, creating a legacy that has built understanding and offers valuable lessons for future initiatives.

This study, titled *International Peace Support and Effective Peacebuilding in Myanmar*, aims to provide useful background, analysis, and recommendations so that future international peace support in Myanmar at an appropriate time, and in a suitable form, enables both conflict transformation and the establishment of sustainable civilian-led government. The study was directed and managed by The Asia Foundation with funding from the government of Canada's Peace and Stabilization Operations Program.

Many existing studies address both historical and contemporary politics and conflict in Myanmar, but there have been very few critical analyses of the overall role of foreign policy and specifically of foreign aid in supporting conflict resolution in the country. Much independent information on donor support for peacebuilding, including many evaluations of key programs and projects, is not in the public domain. This research study builds an evidence base through interviews with national and international stakeholders who were and remain deeply involved in these efforts, combined with existing published and grey literature from academia and peacebuilding practice. It also draws on the observations and insights of the researchers themselves, all of whom have extensive experience of peacebuilding programs in Myanmar. The study builds on past research on conflict in Myanmar and across the region conducted by The Asia Foundation, including *The Contested Areas of Myanmar* (2017), *Supporting the Transition* (2018), *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* (2021), and a series of focused area studies.[3]

The study findings are divided into three main papers. The first and second papers were mainly researched and drafted by Simon Richards, independent consultant, with substantial further inputs from Adam Burke and Tabea Campbell Pauli of The Asia Foundation. The first paper, "The Context for Building Peace: Entrenched Challenges and Partial Reforms," outlines the many contextual factors that are key to understanding the challenges, failures, and successes of various peacebuilding initiatives. The second, "Lessons from Foreign Assistance for Peacebuilding in Myanmar", offers reflections and perspectives from stakeholders on the NCA and other peace initiatives. It draws practical lessons from an assessment of international peace support and related assistance to Myanmar, with a particular focus on the NCA process. It considers the implications of international efforts of various types for any future peace support for Myanmar or other complex environments, and is intended as a tool to inform potential engagement.

The third paper, "Women, Peace, and Security Funding Dynamics in Myanmar," focuses specifically on women's rights and gender equality in Myanmar's peacebuilding efforts, researched and drafted by Khin Khin Mra and Cate Buchanan. The paper adds depth and insight to the other two, with detailed analysis of women's meaningful participation and gender inclusion in the NCA process and related initiatives. All of the authors have extensive

experience of conflict prevention and peacebuilding support in Myanmar. Drafts underwent a rigorous review process involving Myanmar and international experts.

Methods

Analysis is based on interviews as well as existing or secondary material.[4] Key informants, including ethnic leaders, international stakeholders, peace practitioners, advisors, and independent analysts and researchers, as well as civil society organizations involved in different aspects of the NCA process in Myanmar, were asked to reflect on their experiences and articulate aspects that in hindsight seem important, were missed opportunities, or might be approached differently in the future. Insights into successes and constructive support were also shared to document what and how solutions were achieved. Interviews were conducted confidentially, in person or virtually. Consultations did not include Burmese military perspectives due to the acute political sensitivities throughout the research period. For security reasons, a list of respondents' names is not provided.

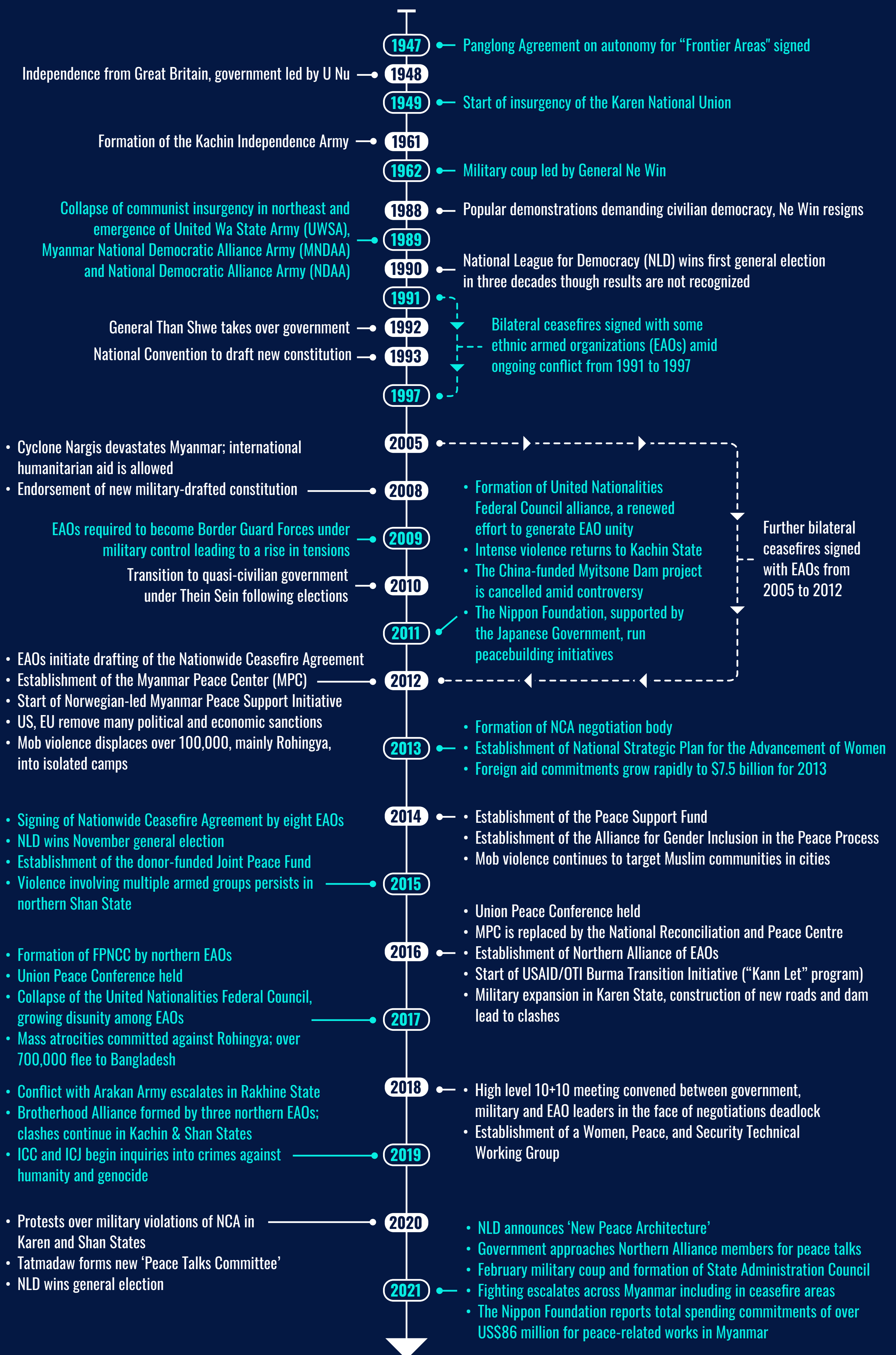
Interviewees were asked to provide data and examples where they could, to illustrate their reflections and opinions. Given the nature of the peace processes and respondents' differing experiences, however, these perspectives are inevitably subjective, often open to various interpretations, sometimes speculative, and hard to verify. In addition, while common narratives did emerge around particular points of view, many important insights derive from experiences that cannot be easily triangulated. Due to the period under consideration, the breadth of the overall process, and the number of possible perspectives from stakeholders, this study does not pretend to be comprehensive.

Peer reviews and critical feedback sessions for this study with national and international experts who participated in and observed major peacebuilding efforts from 2010 to 2020 revealed that many of the key findings from the research continue to characterize international peace support efforts today. While the context on the ground and the circumstances around aid delivery are very different in 2024 than the years preceding the coup, many of the underlying dynamics, particularly around power and positioning, remain the same. This realization confirms that the lessons and recommendations contained in this study are highly relevant to the foreign donors and peacebuilders operating in Myanmar today, and can help to shape and improve their current and future engagements in the country.

The global context in the years after the 2021 coup is vastly different from the optimism and abundance of the 2010s, and future peace support interventions will likely have fewer resources and foreign expertise. There is a real risk that lessons from the past will not be taken into account. International security concerns have led to foreign aid priorities being increasingly defined around narrow domestic interests, rather than being driven by a careful assessment of what will work in the context. In those circumstances, there is a need for stronger partnerships and efforts to find common ground. International peace support actors will need evidence and examples of good practice from the context, together with strategic, cost efficient and creative approaches to ensure that the best ideas and solutions are brought to the fore. Prioritizing collaborative leadership and decision-making with Myanmar experts and stakeholders, through thoughtful and cautious ways of working, can lead to interventions that are appropriate and reflect the needs and aspirations of the populations on the ground.

A Note on Terminology

The Myanmar armed forces are often referred to using the honorific term "Tatmadaw." Since 2021, there have been calls to refer to them as "Sit-Tat," Burmese for "Myanmar military." This research uses the term "Myanmar military," or simply "military" when there is no ambiguity.[5] The term "Myanmar" is used in this report to refer to the country, while the authors also recognize the validity of the alternative term, Burma. Armed groups opposing the military are referred to here as "Ethnic Armed Organizations" (EAOs) given the prevalence of the term during the period under analysis.


1947
Panglong Agreement on autonomy for "Frontier Areas" signed
1948
Independence from Great Britain, government led by U Nu
1949
Start of insurgency of the Karen National Union
1961
Formation of the Kachin Independence Army
1962
Military coup led by General Ne Win
1988
Popular demonstrations demanding civilian democracy, Ne Win resigns
1989
Collapse of communist insurgency in northeast and emergence of United Wa State Army (UWSA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)
1990
National League for Democracy (NLD) wins first general election in three decades though results are not recognized
1991
1992
General Than Shwe takes over government
1993
National Convention to draft new constitution
1997
Bilateral ceasefires signed with some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) amid ongoing conflict from 1991 to 1997
2005
Further bilateral ceasefires signed with EAOs from 2005 to 2012
2008
• Cyclone Nargis devastates Myanmar; international humanitarian aid is allowed
• Endorsement of new military-drafted constitution
2009
EAOs required to become Border Guard Forces under military control leading to a rise in tensions
2010
Transition to quasi-civilian government under Thein Sein following elections
2011
• Formation of United Nationalities Federal Council alliance, a renewed effort to generate EAO unity
• Intense violence returns to Kachin State
• The China-funded Myitsone Dam project is cancelled amid controversy
• The Nippon Foundation, supported by the Japanese Government, run peacebuilding initiatives
2012
• EAOs initiate drafting of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
• Establishment of the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC)
• Start of Norwegian-led Myanmar Peace Support Initiative
• US, EU remove many political and economic sanctions
• Mob violence displaces over 100,000, mainly Rohingya, into isolated camps
2013
• Formation of NCA negotiation body
• Establishment of National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
• Foreign aid commitments grow rapidly to $7.5 billion for 2013
2014
• Establishment of the Peace Support Fund
• Establishment of the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process
• Mob violence continues to target Muslim communities in cities
2015
• Signing of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement by eight EAOs
• NLD wins November general election
• Establishment of the donor-funded Joint Peace Fund
• Violence involving multiple armed groups persists in northern Shan State
2016
• Union Peace Conference held
• MPC is replaced by the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre
• Establishment of Northern Alliance of EAOs
• Start of USAID/OTI Burma Transition Initiative ("Kann Let" program)
• Military expansion in Karen State, construction of new roads and dam lead to clashes
2017
• Formation of FPNCC by northern EAOs
• Union Peace Conference held
• Collapse of the United Nationalities Federal Council, growing disunity among EAOs
• Mass atrocities committed against Rohingya; over 700,000 flee to Bangladesh
2018
• High level 10+10 meeting convened between government, military and EAO leaders in the face of negotiations deadlock
• Establishment of a Women, Peace, and Security Technical Working Group
2019
• Conflict with Arakan Army escalates in Rakhine State
• Brotherhood Alliance formed by three northern EAOs; clashes continue in Kachin & Shan States
• ICC and ICJ begin inquiries into crimes against humanity and genocide
2020
• Protests over military violations of NCA in Karen and Shan States
• Tatmadaw forms new 'Peace Talks Committee'
• NLD wins general election
2021
• NLD announces 'New Peace Architecture'
• Government approaches Northern Alliance members for peace talks
• February military coup and formation of State Administration Council
• Fighting escalates across Myanmar including in ceasefire areas
• The Nippon Foundation reports total spending commitments of over US$86 million for peace-related works in Myanmar

THE CONTEXT FOR BUILDING PEACE: ENTRENCHED CHALLENGES AND PARTIAL REFORMS

A Short Overview of the Context

Given the vast body of existing material on Myanmar's conflicts and peace processes, only limited background information is provided here, sufficient to enable any interested reader to comprehend the insights offered by interviewees and other stakeholders. Those who seek additional depth and detail are referred to alternative sources along the way.[6]

Myanmar has been beset by political contestation, center-periphery tension, and internal conflict since its independence in 1948, and a broad consensus on how the country should be governed has proved elusive. National-level tensions have persisted, leading to repeated political crises, underdevelopment, and violent suppression of mass protests. The national situation following the 2021 military coup rapidly became acute amid widespread resistance across much of the country. In the first half of 2022, more incidents of violence against civilians by state forces operating domestically were reported in Myanmar than in any other country in the world.[7] At the subnational level, long-running conflicts also continue between ethnic nationality groups and central authorities, especially the military. This report focuses on these conflicts and specifically on international support for efforts to solve them through dialogue during the decade before the 2021 coup. The tensions at national and subnational levels intersect, as seen in the range of responses by ethnic leaders to the 2021 military takeover, and yet the conflicts at the subnational level also have their own distinct dynamics. Many of Myanmar's border regions are home to ethnic nationality or religious and linguistic minority communities that make up around one third of the country's total population, in contrast to the Bamar ethnic group which is primarily concentrated in central and lowland areas.[8] Over time, violence in these areas has come to be characterized as ethnic conflict related to the political, social, and economic marginalization of minorities along with the wider lack of legitimacy of successive Bamar-dominated authoritarian regimes.

Power holders have failed to create a nation state that unifies and reflects the various aspirations for autonomy and self-governance of ethnic groups and their leaders, instead pursuing a centralized, authoritarian approach. The 1947 Panglong Agreement, despite its lack of fulfilment, is still cited by many as the basis for a future Myanmar federalism, and is seen by some ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) as an historical reference point in their continued struggle over equality and self-determination: it is listed in the first article of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), and it informs the concept of the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference.[9] The very basis of ethnic nationality aspiration in Myanmar is contested given that successive military regimes adopted outmoded and overly rigid identity categories as a central aspect of state organization. This perpetuated the long-term dominance of those who were Buddhist, Bamar, and male.[10]

Although the military has kept trying to extend its control through force, assimilation, expansion of Bamar state authority, and other means, it has also pursued efforts to end hostilities with leaders of nonstate armed groups, primarily through negotiations and bilateral ceasefires. For example, General Ne Win conducted a "nationwide peace parley" in 1963–64; and in 1981, negotiations were undertaken between the military and the Communist Party of Burma (at that time a strong, armed force), leading to a series of ceasefires. These efforts were neither comprehensive nor sustainable, however, and the result has been such a proliferation of EAOs that by 2016 there were more than 20 such groups operating across the country in addition to other paramilitary groups affiliated with the Myanmar military such as Border Guard Forces and militia.[11]

In 2016, a research team from The Asia Foundation identified areas affected by active or latent subnational conflict in at least eleven of Myanmar's fourteen states and regions (figure 1). Each of these contested areas, which represented 118 of Myanmar's 330 townships and almost one-quarter of Myanmar's population, hosts one or more EAOs that challenge the authority of the central government. Armed violence, and the presence of these groups, which are normally affiliated with one of Myanmar's many ethnic communities, are not just a concern for remote border zones of the country: some affected areas lie within 100 kilometers of either the capital, Naypyidaw, or the largest city, Yangon. Many of the older EAOs operate both political and military wings,

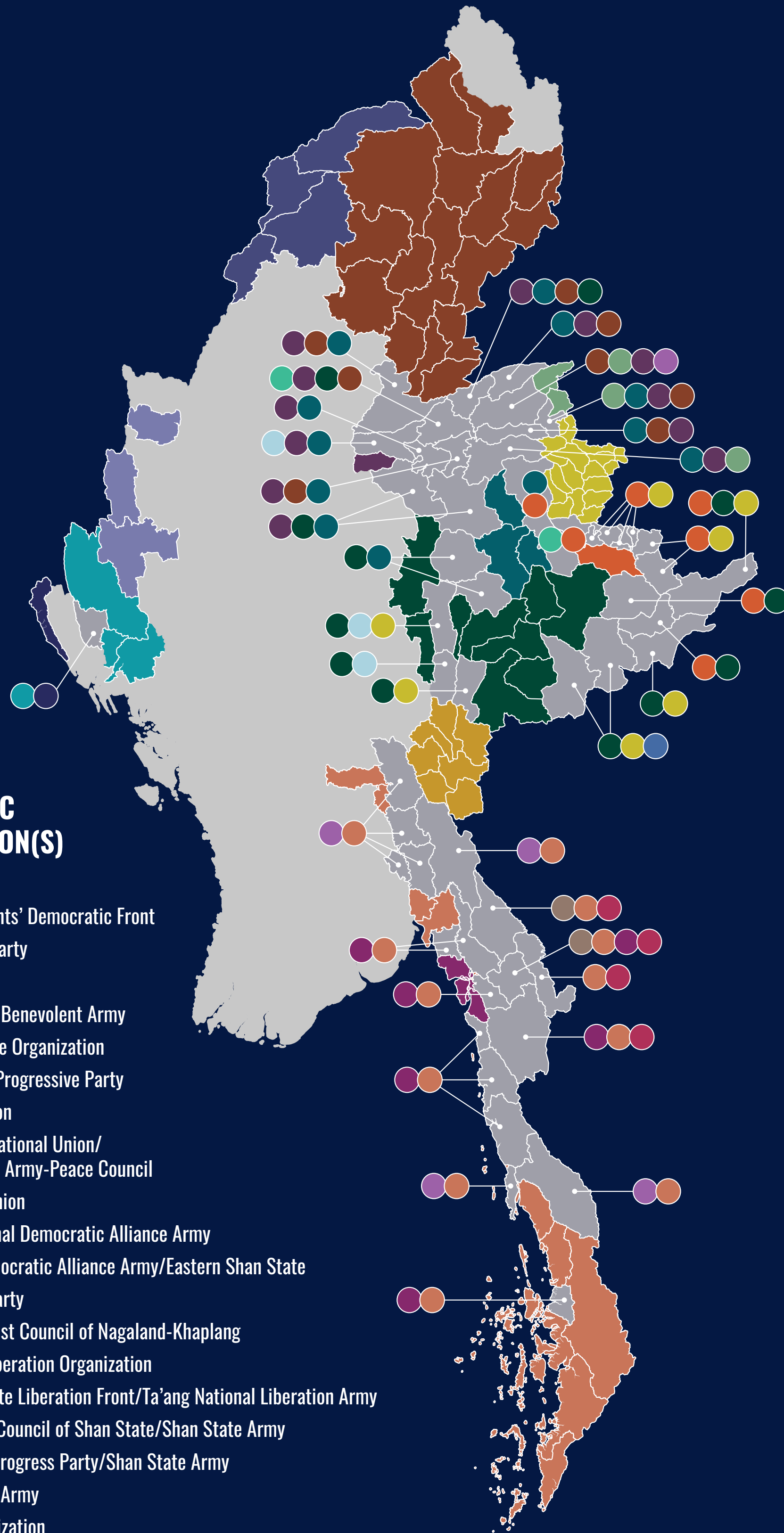


Figure 1. Overview of EAOs in Myanmar, from *Contested Areas of Myanmar* (2017)

though fighting capabilities vary hugely. The larger groups control swathes of territory and have major economic holdings. The strongest armed wing of an EAO, the United Wa State Army, can mobilize as many as 30,000 troops.[12]

The late 1980s and 1990s saw a series of bilateral ceasefire agreements with several EAOs, forming the foundation for the development of the NCA under President Thein Sein.[13] Alongside these conflict-management efforts, the contested 2008 constitution introduced some elements of democracy while further entrenching the political influence, durability, and independence of the military. Meanwhile, a combination of war fatigue and the possibility for change encouraged some military and EAO leaders to seek a more enduring resolution. Thein Sein's inaugural speech was considered by many to be the first time a leader of the Myanmar military had expressed regret and sorrow for the "Hell of untold miseries" that people had suffered over many decades.[14] Striking a chord with civil society actors and key EAO leaders, the speech signaled a major change.

Starting in 2010, the country experienced numerous reforms, including the first general election in 30 years, resulting in a quasi-civilian government (run by a military-aligned party and made up of retired officers); the release from over two decades of house arrest of long-time pro-democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi; the gradual lifting of economic sanctions by many countries in the Global North; and rapid growth in the country's business sector. In some parts of the country, people's living conditions improved rapidly. These changes, together with the signing of the NCA in 2015, generated significant excitement among international diplomatic and development actors.

In the process of developing the NCA, leaders of participating EAOs undertook several reflection meetings in late 2012, from which the key elements of the document emerged.[15] Existing bilateral agreements between the military and each EAO were analyzed, the common features were compiled, and missing elements addressed. For example, existing negotiated ceasefires included no implementation mechanisms, nor had they led to any broader reforms. As a result, the NCA refers to both. As one key participant in the process recalls:

> First, we drafted the code of conduct and the principles… but in addition to a ceasefire, the EAOs wanted the NCA to be the beginning of a constitutional process, so there had to be an element of systems change. This then became a three-part structure and considerably more than just a ceasefire: the ceasefire, the political dialogue commitments, and finally the transitional arrangements, including the governing structures, with the latter being the most contentious part to implement.

Three drafts emerged from this process: that of the EAOs and counter-drafts from the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) and the military, to be reconciled using a single-text procedure. The resulting foundational document was considered the skeleton of the change process, which would identify and address future fault lines.[16]

The development of the NCA was a remarkable achievement, even if many of the envisioned components did not eventuate. The NCA process also served the important function of moving the discussion of ceasefires and the peace process squarely into the public sphere and the purview of the government. Prior to the NCA process, negotiations had involved small, discrete groups of stakeholders, resulting in agreements more easily reached and administered, but narrower in scope.

Another laudable development of this period was the establishment of the MPC, with support from the European Union and the government of Japan. The MPC was to be a quasi-governmental body that coordinated all peace initiatives and participants, serving as a platform for conflict protagonists and stakeholders to meet and negotiate in a designated setting—a first in decades of negotiation efforts.[17] Many senior staff were Bamar exiles who had returned to Myanmar after studying in the Global North. A range of issues could be discussed, and research on peace issues was undertaken under its auspices and control. Communications and problem-solving were high on the agenda, and the team reportedly learned how to navigate networks and leverage influence and power to move agendas forward towards the NCA. For example, if there were blockages on the military or quasi-civilian government side, a judicious call to a senior person from a well-known monk might unlock intransigent positions.[18]

The MPC was pragmatic in approaching different groups when issues needed to be discussed or EAOs were ready to progress. Recognizing that building trust was a fundamental part of the process, a number of initiatives were taken forward during this period:

- ***Significant investment in "normalizing" relationships and breaking down communication barriers between parties***. Recognizing each other's humanity involved sharing meals and socializing in informal settings.
- ***Proactivity and responsiveness***. EAO requests for meetings or discussions always received a positive response, even if they required immediate travel to Chiang Mai or other locations.
- ***MPC as a safe haven***. EAO leaders were told to "consider the MPC as your home" when in Yangon. Linked to this were other efforts to assist EAO leaders with personal challenges. For example, if a family needed medical care or some other assistance, it was facilitated and the costs were covered.

Another telling detail of the negotiations, described by an ethnic leader, was the Thein Sein government's straightforward approach. Chief negotiator Aung Min reportedly had a four-step progression of possible responses to proposals from his opposites: "I will take responsibility for this, please go ahead"; "I need to check with the commanders"; "I have to go back to the president"; and finally "I dare not cross this line." EAOs could return to Aung Min, however, with further arguments to convince him to move forward.[19] The initiative was considered an interesting development, in which the military-aligned government created a separate space to think differently, interpreted at the time as an indicator of a new openness.[20]

At the same time, this period brought new tensions and challenges. Areas not covered by NCA dialogues could risk being left out of promised progress, while certain groups faced pressures to sign, perhaps against their own judgement. In Kachin State, a 17-year ceasefire broke down in 2011, while EAOs in northern Shan State fought one another for control of lucrative territory along the Chinese border. In Rakhine State, political oppression of the majority ethnic community by Bamar elites produced violent incidents, while the Muslim Rohingya community experienced long-standing persecution, multiple atrocities and mass displacements in the region from 2012 onwards. This culminated in a multidimensional crisis in 2017–18, leading to the forced movement of over 750,000 Rohingya people into Bangladesh and the region, and has been categorized as a genocide.[21] As early as 2016, national and international observers were beginning to view such developments as signs that reforms were not taking hold. Though peace talks continued to attract financial and political support, including the Union Peace Conferences (UPCs) of 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2020, there was a clear sense that progress toward tangible peace had stalled even before the military takeover of February 2021.

Further challenges arose from the military's inconsistent treatment of EAOs in the NCA process, inviting some to participate and excluding others, creating divisions between groups.[22] On the EAO side, there were various positions on signing the ceasefire or joining the political dialogue, a further complication. Some EAOs already had bilateral ceasefire agreements with the military or were in negotiations with them. There were also differences between groups as to which had been involved in the various ethnic summits or participated in or been observers at the UPCs. In addition, a range of armed actors did not qualify as EAOs—militia and other groups whose activities would not be covered by the ceasefire agreement. This differing treatment had implications for the NCA process and how much each group was willing to trust the military. Through these variations, it is possible to discern several broad categories of EAOs according to their peace-process participation (figure 2).

Figure 2. Summary of Signatories and Non-Signatories to the NCA[23]

Signatories to the NCA	Non-Signatory EAOs
• Government of Myanmar • All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) • Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) • Chin National Front (CNF) • Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) • Karen National Union (KNU) • KNU/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC) • Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) • Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) • Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) (signed in 2018) (d) • New Mon State Party (NMSP) (signed in 2018)	**Groups invited to sign by the military/government** • Kachin Independence Army (KIA) (a) • Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) (a) • National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) (b) • National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) (c) • Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) (a) • United Wa State Army (UWSA) (b) **Groups not invited to sign by the military/government** • Arakan Army (AA) • Arakan National Council (ANC) (e) • Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) • Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) • Wa National Organization (WNO)

Notes:
(a) The KIA, KNPP, and SSPP felt that their conditions for signing the NCA were not met.
(b) The UWSA and NDAA showed little interest in signing the NCA.
(c) The NSCN-K was undecided, the role of India being a complicating factor.
(d) The LDU was originally not invited to sign the NCA, but later allowed.
(e) The ANC was not invited to sign, but reportedly would be allowed to participate in the political dialogue process.[24]

Critical Aspects of the Peace Process

This section unpacks the contextual complexities of recent peace efforts, offering greater understanding of their challenges and successes. It lays out the positions and actions of domestic actors, while those of foreign governments and aid donors will be further discussed in the second paper of this study, *Lessons from Foreign Assistance for Peacebuilding in Myanmar*. The kind of complexity explored in this section is sometimes referred to as a "wicked problem," an issue that is particularly difficult to solve due to the many connected and even contradictory factors that produced it and the difficult and often changing requirements for resolution. Myanmar's political, social, and economic landscape in the early 2000s certainly fits the definition of a wicked problem, and this lens may offer new perspectives on solutions, further explored in box 1.

***Box 1.** Wicked Problems Inside the NCA Process*

First coined by Horst Rittel in 1973, a "wicked problem" can be defined as "a social problem that is difficult or even impossible to solve because of its complex and interconnected nature." Myanmar's peace process faced a number of intractable challenges that affected the possibility for constructive sustained and continuous progress.

Generating positive political will from key protagonists

- The Myanmar military was unwilling to cede power and continued aggressive behavior toward opposition groups at different times, sometimes placating one with a ceasefire while ramping up offensives against others. Considering these behaviors, optimism for the NCA process was misplaced, especially after Thein Sein was no longer president.
- All stakeholders were relying on the military to change their position, perspectives and objectives. However,as a historically isolated institution whose main leaders were unlikely to deviate from their self-defined goals, the military was not well understood by many foreign donors and peacebuilding actors.
- The National League for Democracy (NLD) government's approach to the NCA process and relationships with the EAOs raised questions about its level of political will. It is possible that Aung San Suu Kyi could have been swayed by strong public demand for a peace process, if this had been generated through a broader public campaign.[25]

Long-term cultural shifts in Myanmar

- Despite President Thein Sein's desire for rapid change during his time in government, the ability to take advantage of political opportunities and maintain momentum was hindered by insufficient levels of political will and capacity constraints.[26]
- The inadequacy of existing political standards or cultural expectations to underpin such processes created a huge gap between theory and practice. The skills needed by all the different stakeholders to be able to engage with one another constructively were in short supply.

Developing trust and respect between groups

- Western donors were often short-sighted and set unrealistic goals for progress toward peace, particularly around the need to establish foundations of trust and confidence between opposing groups before agreements could take hold.[27]
- Many ethnic actors reported a lack of respect for them and their priorities from the Myanmar military, the civilian government and even at times the international community. The MPC and others involved in initial coordination activities worked hard to develop respect and trust between groups.

Challenge 1. The political legacy of military authoritarianism

The system of governance operated by the Myanmar military at the time of peace dialogues in the early 2010s was highly centralized and unaccountable to the population. This made it difficult to establish representative and participatory processes within the peace architecture, weakening its ability to foster truly transformative outcomes.

Decades of military authoritarianism in the second half of the 20th century hardened divisions within society and deepened hierarchies of power along lines of class and gender as well as ethnicity and religion. The government stifled open dialogue and produced a fractured political system in which many groups led their own populations and pockets of territory in different ways—from supporters of the NLD, largely concentrated in ethnically Bamar urban centers, to large and small EAOs in border regions with varying aspirations for self-determination, to the Myanmar military. Myanmar's ethnic nationality populations have often felt doubly marginalized, both by the widespread lack of respect for citizens' rights and by an unequal system that prioritized the economic interests, cultural identity, and legal status of privileged members of the ethnic majority population. The overall fabric of governance, including the management of diversity and ethnic nationality rights and status, remains a challenge. Without addressing these fundamental problems, peace will continue to be elusive.

Majority-minority power-sharing has been an historically intractable issue that has prevented a political model from taking shape which can satisfy constituencies across the country. In this context, a focus on ethnic nationalities in Myanmar has typically been associated with ethnically defined control over territory. This approach hits barriers where ethnic categories are arbitrary (as seen in the formal recognition of 135 groups inside the country) and where claims to authority overlap.[28] While some discussion around peacebuilding emphasized the need to allow local groups to administer identified enclaves or zones, the increasing dispersion and diversity of ethnicities across the country mean that long-term solutions will require ensuring ethnic nationality rights rather than focusing solely on ethnic self-determination.

In the context of the NCA, power-sharing emerged repeatedly as an issue during discussions of federalism and constitutional reform. However, meaningful consideration of different models of devolution and the construction of a more inclusive national identity were not a sufficiently significant part of the peace process. In addition, assumptions around the roots of power are contested, with many ethnic communities refuting the fundamental legitimacy of the central state's authority. EAO leaders pushed for federal arrangements for armed forces and a variety of governance systems at the local level. At the same time, the military, along with many national civilian leaders, proceeded to establish a centrally managed system of partial decentralization of responsibilities and functions with a limited scope for locally defined forms of power-sharing. Finding an appropriate form of democracy for both national and regional levels that is able to meet the needs of all groups to participate and be represented in power-sharing and governance must be a cornerstone of sustainable peace in the future.

Challenge 2. Weak accountability and shallow democracy

Successive postcolonial military regimes prevented Myanmar from developing an open, democratic, and pluralistic political culture. EAO and civilian leaders lacked the capacity and experience to develop effective solutions as challenges and roadblocks arose.

Another legacy of Myanmar's successive military regimes was the lack of a strong culture of democratic dialogue that would have helped actors to negotiate the political issues facing them. The public's experience of authoritarian culture also shaped the tenor of civil-military relations because the military and the civilian government were perceived as natural enemies, resulting in confrontation and a lack of interest in compromise.[29] Central issues proved extremely difficult to resolve, illustrating both the long-standing and intractable nature of the issues and the distance between the protagonists' respective positions. The Myanmar military was unused to dealing with a political opposition, and the core leadership of the NLD had little experience in governing collaboratively through coalition. Neither side demonstrated strong accountability to the public.[30]

Establishing trust between opposing stakeholders is an especially critical aspect of negotiations in Myanmar, due to the prevalence of personalized politics and limited confidence in formal structures or rules. Trust-building was heavily emphasized during the negotiations under President Thein Sein. Aung Min, the former general appointed as a key broker for talks with EAOs, is seen as a successful example due to his ability to establish rapport with armed group leaders. Unlike his immediate predecessors, he was reported to be modest, straightforward, and willing to consider other points of view. At the time of the bilateral ceasefires, Aung Min shocked the KNU when the latter proposed 12 conditions and all of them were accepted immediately with no need to negotiate.[31] This approach

Figure 3. Photo of the first Union Peace Conference (2016). Aung San Suu Kyi sits center with senior national figures and representatives of EAOs. While the conference generated some support, it was criticized for being superficial and failing to redress power imbalances. Photo credit: Reuters.

to negotiation and progress was discarded when the NLD assumed leadership of the government. Little was invested in trust-building with EAOs by Aung San Suu Kyi's government, and the attitude shown towards ethnic leaders was characterized as patronizing and insufficiently respectful.

EAOs exhibited various democratic and collaborative behaviors. Some had developed consultative mechanisms and skills in these areas. The KNU, for example, are considered to be relatively democratic and legitimate representatives of their people because of their governance mechanisms and consultation processes.[32] Others, such as the KIA and the KNPP, began to formally encourage responsiveness to civil society.[33] Many other groups are more autocratic, dominated by their military wings and offering little opportunity for communities to participate in decision-making or governance.[34] As a result, the legitimacy of EAO claims to represent their people varies, and respondents noted that they were often decidedly patriarchal and top-down in structure.

Challenge 3. Addressing drivers of conflict

Armed actors accrued considerable wealth and power from economic activities, both legal and illicit, under their control. Finding acceptable alternatives that would allow these sectors to be dismantled or formalized was not included in peace discussions.

The Myanmar military pursues both legal and illicit economic activities, the latter including direct or indirect involvement in the drug trade, "grey" resource extraction, casinos, and other enterprises. EAOs are also involved in many economic areas, in some cases developing long-term business ties with the military or their proxies. EAO leaders have been involved in legitimate local businesses, owning them or reaping dividends or revenue from them through taxes or protection money. Complex, cross-party relationships developed between adversaries involved in the informal or illicit trade of a range of goods, from jade and gold to timber and other resources.[35]

Informal wealth-generation activities have been crucial for many EAOs to increase their influence and resources and maintain the viability of their resistance. Economic opportunities have long been used by the military as an incentive to gain support from local power holders and to divide and rule ethnic opposition. Aung Min, a key figure for the military in the peace process, stated that his objective was to "make the EAOs rich" so that they would "automatically abandon their armies."[36] The links between development and conflict are rarely so straightforward, especially in Myanmar's contested areas where economic and security interests are closely entwined. This complexity is visualized in figure 4.[37]

While the challenge of dismantling these conflict economies was acknowledged by analysts and donors alike, the peace and development sectors never effectively engaged with it. According to a political analyst interviewed for this research:

> For there to be a stable state later, there were obviously actors that would have to give up political power and wealth for the greater good. This meant needing to look at how to integrate the economies: the war economy involving drugs, extractive industries, casinos and the central formal economy.[38]

Little consideration was given to the transition of illicit and informal businesses into the formal economy, including income substitution for armed actors involved in illicit activities. Complex challenges over how to fund the eventual disarmament or integration of groups and militias into a federal or national military were also not approached. Past military strategy involved co-opting leaders rather than transforming the enabling conditions.

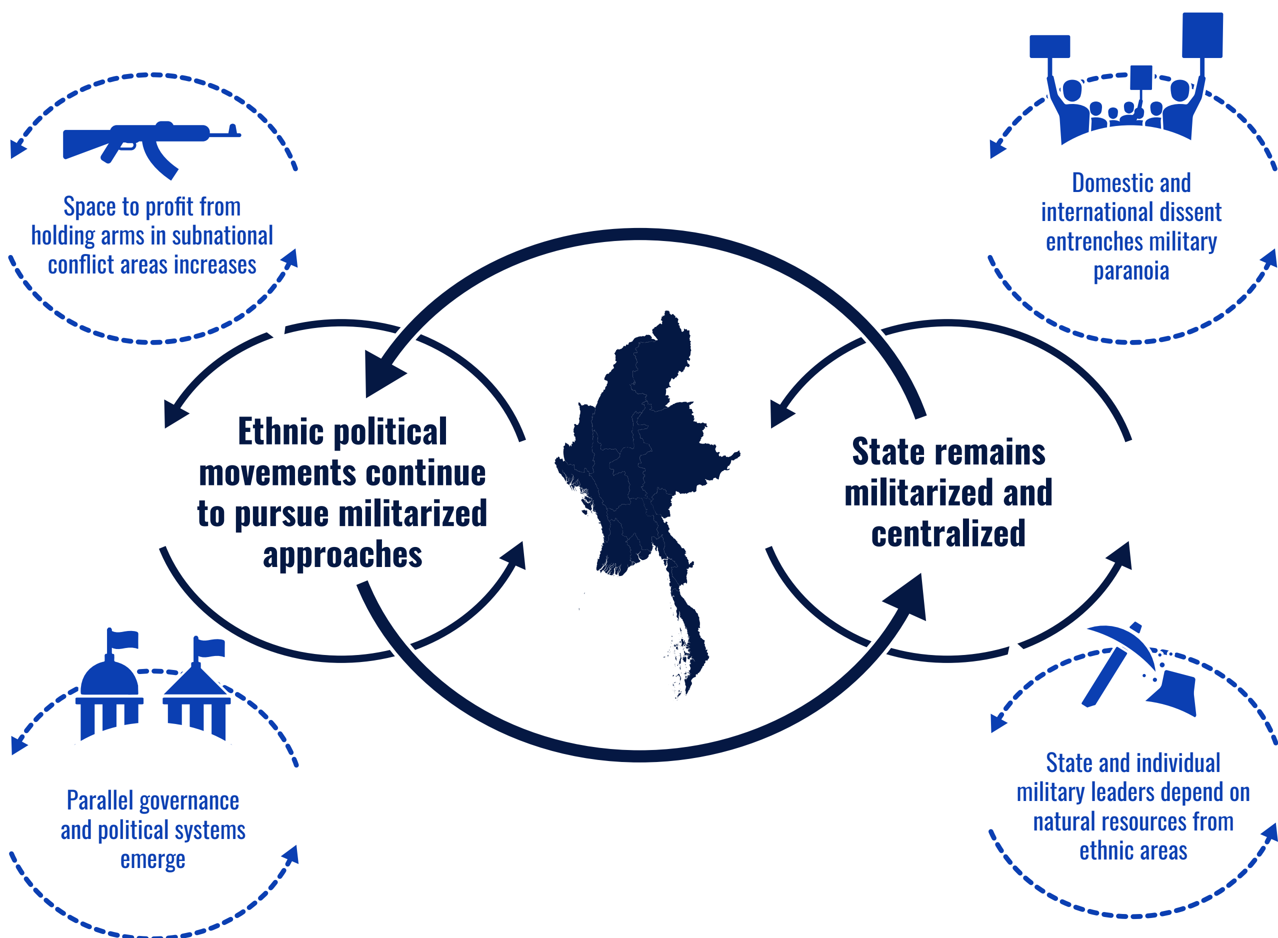


Figure 4. Drivers of Conflict Cycles, from *Contested Areas of Myanmar* (2017)

Challenge 4. Bringing in all the parties

The outcome of the NCA development process was an agreement that did not reflect the interests or incentives needed for all armed groups to sign it at the time. Consequently, it was unable, as an instrument, to bring an end to conflict.

Despite the variety and complexity of conflicts in the country, expectations for progress were based on the idea that "others will follow if the *big guns* are on board."[39] Yet several key EAOs did not sign the NCA, including the northern groups: the UWSA, NDAA, MNDAA, TNLA, SSPP, and KIA. Within the NCA framework, Rakhine State was only represented by the Arakan Liberation Party, a small and divided group of limited relevance. The powerful and emerging Arakan Army was not involved, and the ethnic Rohingya had no voice in the process.[40]

A comprehensive agreement was merely aspirational given the EAOs' range of relationships with the military noted above. Groups such as the UWSA chose not to join the NCA process, seeing little advantage in shifting from their existing position. Other groups wished to see specific elements included or conditions met before joining, perhaps the most critical being a halt to military operations. Some EAOs were formally excluded, although they often participated in informal meetings. While the creation of a functioning peace agreement inevitably requires a balance of power, with some parties ceding some power to others, sufficient incentives are needed.[41]

Respondents also pointed to the need to consider subregional diversity and intercommunal tensions that might affect a national peace process in the long term. The assumption that the KIA was the sole nonstate stakeholder in Kachin State raised concerns about the views of smaller ethnic communities such as Lisu and Shanni groups. Similarly, the highly complex dynamics and interactions within Shan State were viewed with insufficient nuance.[42] Other locations have a plethora of militias or Border Guard Forces in operation, and Western donors had limited insight into their structures, activities, and relations with the dominant EAO stakeholders.

This lack of engagement and understanding of other players meant that progress towards peace reinforced the formal effort but did not widen engagement, though efforts were made by civil society coalitions to add alternative perspectives through informal channels.[43] Significantly, progress toward building support for the peace process among the majority population was limited. With the process failing to gather momentum, hopes that it would build incentives for reform and marginalize hardliners did not materialize. Many senior military leaders and most of the EAOs outside the NCA appeared to maintain limited interest in genuine participation, instead using the peace process as an opportunity to expand and strengthen control.

The NCA as a process was able to bring a very diverse group of ethnic groups to the dialogue table. That was quite exceptional; and while fraught, the process was able to hold some very important meetings.

(An ethnic leader who was part of the NCA development process, March 7, 2023)

Reflections on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

This section focuses specifically on the NCA as the primary vehicle for seeking a formal peace. It considers the agreement's distinct components and analyzes the anticipated trajectories of progress.Just eight EAOs were the first to sign the NCA in 2015, and the Myanmar military, the civilian government, and donors each anticipated different trajectories for the agreement. A prominent prediction was that the NCA would provide the central architecture for a Framework for Political Dialogue, and that non-signatory EAOs would negotiate to join the process, eventually resulting in a peace accord that applied uniformly and comprehensively to all groups. Many foreign governments, also, assumed that both the military and the government of Myanmar shared a genuine interest in pursuing the peace process, and so would continue to work together as they had before signing the NCA. In fact, many expected that the election of the NLD would accelerate the process. This section explores aspects of the research that examine the NCA's inability to deliver on its promises.

Reflection 1. The transition to NLD-led government

The NLD's electoral victory in 2015 was a pivotal moment in Myanmar's peace process, and it had significant implications for the institutions and leaders tasked with making the NCA work. Despite the climate of progress, poor alignment between the ongoing democratic reforms and the peace process resulted in missed opportunities and a loss of momentum. The transition to a new government was not sufficiently factored into the peace architecture, with major effects on its functioning.

Peace processes are never linear and rarely follow predictable paths. They depend on wider events and reforms that build political support and enable ceasefires to progress towards peace agreements. In Myanmar, the reform process that enabled the NCA was insufficient to take it further forward. Key stakeholders failed to demonstrate the understanding, flexibility, political will, and experience needed to redeem the commitments made in the NCA. Shortly after the NCA was signed, the NLD took over government and began to implement its own agenda of political transformation, principally inside the government and parliament.

The NCA process was largely controlled by military and government negotiators who appeared unwilling to make real concessions. Further problems stemmed from the absence of functioning links between the military and the government (exacerbated by the acrimonious relationship between Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi). With the election of the NLD in 2015, the government side of the negotiations shifted from a unified presence with a single leader to a divided body made up of fractious military and civilian components. As one ethnic leader noted, "We basically had to negotiate with two parties; this was not based on principles but rather around personal disagreements between the leaders."[44]

The government did not take firm responsibility for the existing process, inherited from the previous military-aligned administration which had rushed the signing of the agreement before the 2015 election. Neither did the government always demonstrate leadership in areas where it clearly had a moral mandate, as in the political dialogue process. Instead, amendment of the constitution, through parliamentary procedure and executive decision-making, was prioritized as the primary route for change, despite major overlaps with the core objectives and stakeholders of the NCA process (figure 5).

Meanwhile, the resources and influence of the existing peace architecture were dismantled: the Union Peace Central Committee and the MPC were replaced by a new body, the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre. As a result, the NCA lost political momentum at the national level. The so-called "10+10" meetings in October 2018 illustrate both the political stakes and the real risk of the NCA failing. The two-day summit brought together the government, military and EAOs to address a deadlock in NCA talks, and rebuild trust in the process to achieve a federal democratic union. The meeting did not resolve the issue and highlighted for many the inability for the NCA process to incorporate the divergent views of non-signatories into the NCA, nor to leverage other ongoing political reform processes.[45]

Other practical challenges emerged. Aung San Suu Kyi was reportedly a micromanager, wishing to know deep levels of detail and unwilling to devolve authority or entrust decision-making to others within the NLD.[46] The Myanmar military, for its part, did not take seriously its leadership role in the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) within the NCA (see below), failing to adequately address ceasefire violations and breaches of the NCA code of

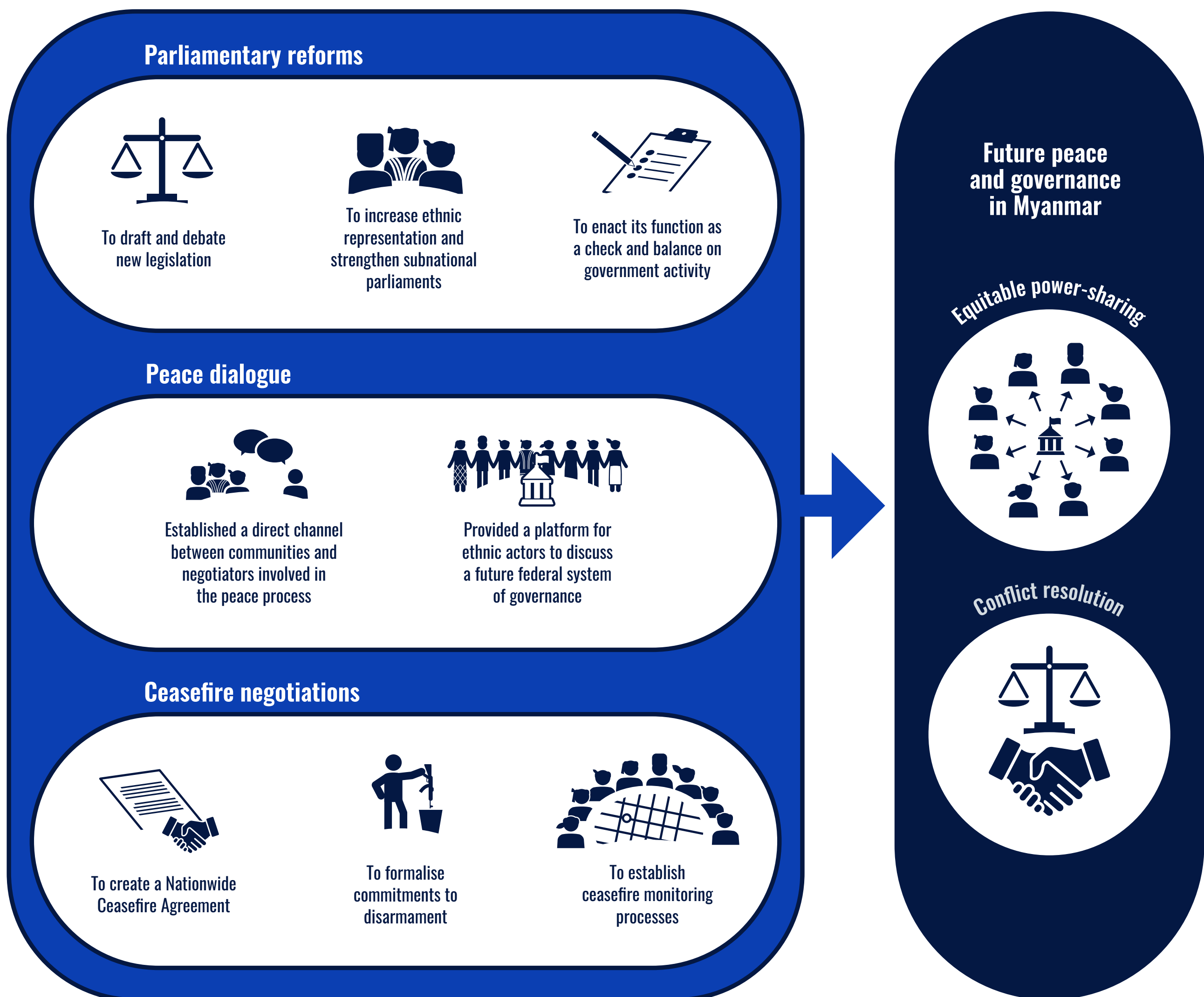


Figure 5. Multiple Political Change Processes

conduct. The autocratic approach of the commander in chief, Min Aung Hlaing, reflected the hierarchical culture of the Myanmar military. While a strong chain of command is necessary for an effective military, power within the Myanmar military was held by a very small leadership group, and this severely limited independent decision-making by the JMC on the ground.

The changes to the government's approach may have reflected pragmatic political reasoning, including the simple assertion of control by the NLD, but they raise questions about how the transition took place and the new government's understanding of the issues at stake. In other contexts, prior to elections, opposition leaders would engage on sensitive issues like the peace process to minimize disruptions. The lack of experience in managing transitions and in political leadership, alongside enduring hostility between military and civil leaders, may have played a role here. As one observer noted, under Thein Sein's government, the peace process was accepted as a political process, while the NLD government viewed it more as a security issue, shifting responsibility towards the military. Ideally, the NLD should have been consulted early in the transition process, but this would have required the Thein Sein government to show some humility and the NLD to show interest in engagement. The NLD would also have needed a strong understanding of ethnic grievances and a willingness to nuance their view of national democracy as the solution at that point in time. The international community could also have offered advice as a "critical friend," though it would have been difficult under the circumstances.

Reflection 2. Was the agreement too complicated?

The agreement that was ultimately developed was complex in its details and inflexible in its ability to respond to real context. As a result, the process moved slowly and risked losing buy-in.

A common view from respondents was that the NCA was overly complex and too ambitious. Box 2 outlines the many components of the agreement. Perhaps it should have focused more narrowly on ceasefire provisions. A related observation is that the political dialogue framework and the committee structures were also too complex and a departure from successful negotiations of the past (often between key leaders and dominated by the armed protagonists).[47] On the positive side, the structure was more flexible than it appeared.

A key ethnic nationality contributor to the framework also noted that an alternative structure for the political dialogue might, in hindsight, have been more effective:

> Now, [in the political dialogue process] we would probably not put all of the political parties or the EAOs together by category. This was a mistake, as it meant the most powerful groups dominated [their own category]. It would probably have been better to have mixed groupings based on geography—Kachin, Shan, and so on—as these are the groups that will have to work together in the future, and it might have mitigated the power differential element.[48]

Observers noted that insufficiently comprehensive oversight of the different NCA streams caused a lack of coherence and undermined confidence in the overall process. It also made positive interventions difficult when progress faltered, like investing more negotiating energy at key moments or responding to trouble spots with renewed focus. Such interventions require flexibility and a willingness to follow the ebbs and flows of the negotiations, recognizing when progress is occurring while simultaneously working on the obstacles.

Reflection 3. Disunity among EAOs

Many observers thought that more unity would have increased the collective leverage of the EAOs in negotiations. It could also have increased the likelihood that more EAOs would sign the NCA after 2015. Instead, following the NLD's accession to government, there was a fracturing of the ethnic stakeholder side.

Respondents noted a combination of factors that influenced this dimension, including the diversity of EAO positions, expectations, and demands. A critical demand of some EAOs (e.g., the KIA and the TNLA) was the complete cessation of Myanmar military operations before they would sign the NCA or engage in negotiations.[49] Prior to the signing of the NCA, the United Nationalities Federal Council was established to represent groups that sought to engage in the peace process and provide a platform for inter-EAO coordination. After 2015, the differences in proximity and participation among different EAOs allowed political divisions within the NCA process to grow. Unity in the EAO bloc was further complicated by the post-2016 split in the government negotiation side between the new NLD administration and the military leadership. The establishment of a new Wa-led alliance in 2017, the Federal

Box 2. Outline of Key Elements of the NCA Agreement

Preamble

Chapter 1: Basic Principles

Chapter 2: Aims and Objectives

- Political dialogue and political roadmap
- The Joint Monitoring Committee
- Recognize previous ceasefires
- Include all relevant EAOs

Chapters 3 & 4: Ceasefire-Related Matters

- Rules and regulations
- Military code of conduct
- The Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee
- Liaison offices

Chapter 5: Guarantees for Political Dialogue

- The political roadmap
- Political dialogue
- The Union Peace Conference

Chapter 6: Future Tasks

- Confidence-building measures
- Interim arrangements

Chapter 7: Miscellaneous

- Joint dispute resolution
- Entry into force
- Signing of the Agreement

Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, built closer links between several powerful northern-based groups and Chinese influence in the peace process grew. This led to the collapse of the United Nationalities Federal Council and thus effectively halted negotiations with the main non-signatory EAOs.

At individual and institutional levels other factors conspired to prevent greater unity, including the uneven quality of leadership across the different groups, with tensions often arising from civil-military divides, self-interest, and the military's continuing divide-and-rule tactics. In this regard, one respondent noted that it was unfortunate there had not been a central "Aung Min type" negotiator on the side of the EAOs, but this was impossible given their many differences. As noted by a key ethnic participant in the formal peace process:

> In the beginning, we were able to keep the EAOs more unified together, but during the NLD government phase there were multiple camps, and so negotiations became secondary. The NCA process at this point tended to harden positions. Though everyone basically agreed on the text, there were significant divisions within the non-signatories. Some personalities were very difficult to work with, and the KIA were very upset, as essentially their leaders had come to Yangon in 2015 and agreed on the NCA text but were then rejected from participation.[50]

Foreign governments and aid agencies also played a role in encouraging or hindering the various EAOs' participation in peace talks at the time. Many Western countries that had invested in Myanmar's trajectory toward liberal democracy saw greater buy-in to the peace process amongst EAOs as one aspect of wider progress. Many EAO leaders did not share this view and felt that Western pressure to agree to the NCA was counterproductive.

"Daw Suu wanted everyone to get onboard her 'peace train,' but she did not really understand that they had all bought tickets to different stations."

(An international observer to peace process activities, interviewed July 19, 2023).

Reflection 4. Neither nationwide nor inclusive

Further along in the NCA process, problems developed from the issue of who was or was not involved and who was or was not bound by the agreement. The NCA did not include major EAOs, which lessened its effectiveness in reducing levels of violence in Myanmar.

The NCA went beyond a conventional ceasefire document by including a major commitment to political transition. A respondent who was involved in its drafting noted that, while it was a "game-changing" element, the call for transformative political dialogue was included in the NCA without the involvement of key political stakeholders in its design, suggesting that the NLD, and possibly other political leaders, could have been involved or consulted.[51] This emerges as a perennial peace process dilemma: whom to include and at what point in the process? Involving too many people too early may scuttle a vulnerable process by alienating other stakeholders (in this case the military) who fear a loss of control. What's left is a tension between a placeholder for longer-term *political* aspirations, and having a more structured and potentially prescriptive process that leaves less room for flexibility in its evolution.

A further ambiguity related to the recognition of previously signed ceasefires, prompting some EAOs to question why they should join the NCA at all. This allowed some to stand on the sidelines and observe before committing themselves. Others may have thought they would have an advantage if they waited to negotiate until the NLD took over the government. Both perspectives focused primarily on the ceasefire component, without giving due weight to the possible advantage of a collective EAO negotiation within the political dialogue.

In addition to complexities surrounding the inclusion of EAOs, political parties remained peripheral to central NCA negotiations, uninvited to meetings and generally only informed after agreements were reached between the army and EAOs. In many areas of the country such as Rakhine State and parts of Shan State, opposition to the central authorities had shifted from armed groups to political parties. The NCA was not set up to encompass these, but neither did parliamentary process make room for these voices to be heard. The approval (possibly symbolic) of political parties was sought in the later part of the NCA, such as after the 10 + 10 meeting, but their marginalization reinforced the idea that armed groups were the key decision-makers.

Reflection 5. National ownership and central government oversight

Efforts to assert central government control over the NCA process added further complications.

Myanmar's leaders were clear that they had embarked on what they termed a "nationally owned peace process." According to the Myanmar Development Assistance Policy, taken forward under the NLD government after 2015,

> The first objective of the Economic Policy of the Union of Myanmar is to support national reconciliation and the emergence of a united federal democratic union... All development assistance should be designed and delivered in such ways as to align with and support Myanmar's nationally owned peace process and national reconciliation efforts. (28-9-2017, Section 2.2)[52]

This policy was operationalized through a number of mechanisms intended to ensure central government oversight, and in some cases direct decision-making authority, over external support for peacebuilding activities, from funding flows to technical assistance. A well-known example of such a mechanism is the Joint Coordination Body, an agency established in 2016 to scrutinize funding allocations and spending limits on activities related to implementing the peace process. The goal, as stated by Aung San Suu Kyi, was to "fairly and effectively manage the funds by coordinating and allocating them to the sectors based on the real situation rather than donor-oriented ones."[53] The Joint Coordination Body featured equal representation of government and EAOs, though commentators have suggested that real decision-making influence rested with the government. Within the context of the multi-donor Joint Peace Fund, there was concern as to what such government oversight might mean for control of their funding, as well as potential risks in sharing sensitive information on EAO and civil society organization (CSO) fund recipients.

The policy of national ownership meant that the structures and procedures of the peace process were less influenced by common practices from other contexts, nor was there international involvement in monitoring or mediation. Ultimately, the progress and achievements of the process did not follow an internationally recognized trajectory (ceasefire first, followed by a political settlement), which may have resulted in false expectations and misinterpretation by the international community of observers and supporters. National stakeholders were unclear about the meaning of a national peace process in the Myanmar context, where the issues to be resolved had not been fully expressed within the peace agreement, and the concept of national identity and the legitimacy of the state itself were fundamentally disputed.

Reflection 6. Problems with monitoring and enforcement

The part of the NCA that sought to monitor and enforce the ceasefire would be a key factor in its overall success. Two major aspects complicated its functioning: its complexity, like the rest of the NCA, and the lack of genuine will amongst all conflict actors to reduce violent incidents and allow third-party monitoring.

The Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) was established in 2015 as a critical element of the NCA. Through a complicated and multilayered system of committees and secretariats, the JMC mechanism aimed to establish accountability and manage disputes or ceasefire infringements at the local, state, and national levels. The highest level of dispute resolution rested with the chairman, General Yar Pyae of the Myanmar military. Thus, with no third party or neutral mechanism, a structural dead end was created if the military refused to compromise or acknowledge fault, frustrating the EAOs and resulting in "a finger-pointing experience [with EAOs and the Myanmar military] blaming each other."[54] To some extent, the external role was intended for civilian parties, but their role within the JMC structure was not well understood by armed actors, creating further tensions.[55]Given limited trust between groups, it became an arena for further disputes between the parties, with the balance of power firmly tipped towards the military. Some observers considered the setup more suited to conventional interstate wars than to asymmetric conflicts involving nonstate groups and guerrilla armies.[56] At a practical level, an example of how this dysfunctionality worked was provided in Karen State:

> The Tatmadaw had entered and used a monastery's grounds for military purposes. This is exactly the sort of violation supposed to be addressed at the local level, but it had to go all the way up through the layers to the Union level for a decision. This would take months or never happen. There was a clear mandate for the JMC at the local level, but the reality did not accord with the intentions. The civilians involved were clear regarding their role and these issues, but the military did not accept their perspectives.[57]

Demarcation, security sector reform, and de-mining were all included in the JMC mandate. Given the complexity of the issues and their contentious nature, as well as the inevitable challenges of moving forward in each aspect, considering separate approaches and institutions might have been a more effective strategy. The JMC and its ceasefire monitoring also appeared isolated from ongoing political dialogue, which was regrettable given its critical role in the roadmap to peace. This isolation was given greater prominence by the NLD government's lack of inter-

est in the JMC, which they appeared to consider a purely military matter. Civil-military tensions certainly existed, but the lack of interaction was a missed opportunity for NLD engagement with the military and sent the wrong message to NLD ministers.

The many failures and few successes of the JMC raise questions as to whether there was any real commitment to the peace process by the Myanmar military. While there were violations on all sides, respondents close to the JMC felt that the Myanmar military were uninterested in abiding by the rules, as evidenced by their continued construction of roads and military posts in ceasefire areas. Some suggested that this was simply another tactic of the military to prevent progress in the NCA.[58]

Box 3. EAO Liaison Offices

Liaison Offices were valuable conduits for communications with the military and others who would otherwise be completely reliant on personal relationships and informal avenues.[59]

Liaison Offices were first set up following bilateral ceasefire agreements negotiated by the government in the early 1990s, prior to the NCA although acknowledged within it.[60] After 2011, many of the bilateral ceasefire agreements refer to the establishment of ceasefire liaison offices, and as of 2013 there were up to 30 "across Mon, Chin, Kayah, Shan, and Rakhine States, and Thanintaryi and Bago Regions."[61] In addition to their official functions, the offices provided an open and legal profile for EAOs, normalizing their presence and offering visual evidence in some areas of the positive changes brought by the NCA. When the NCA process was not progressing, their capabilities "contributed to a slowing of the worsening."[62]

Reflection 7. The role of civil society

Civil society had varying levels of influence on the initial development of a nationwide agreement, particularly in some ethnic majority regions. Civic leaders were not given a formal role in the peace architecture set out in the NCA, relegating their ideas and contributions to "Track 1.5" spaces, including the Civil Society Forum for Peace.

CSOs in different geographic areas exerted a strong influence on EAO behavior, such as raising awareness of conflict-related injustices and advocating respect for human rights. While this type of engagement generated space for discussion of these grave issues, it also alienated some stakeholders, with some respondents suggesting that a more subtle approach would encourage greater behavior change. They posited that civil society actors worked more effectively across divides than EAOs in the peacebuilding sphere, so they could push the agenda forward and encourage dialogue among the EAOs.

CSO leaders also noted the relationship between a vibrant civil society and greater recognition of civic issues by EAOs, a dynamic that was particularly visible in the KIA, KNU and KNPP. In Kachin areas, civil society had significant power, and some leaders were very courageous. The Kachin Baptist community leader Reverend Samson, for example, confronted KIA leadership, challenging them to reflect democratic principles in their structures and to hold elections. Respondents to this study noted that in areas where civil society was weaker, leaders were more likely to end up with a military mindset at the state level. The Myanmar military themselves implicitly acknowledged this as they tried to capture civil society, and they often attempted to put "military civilians" into mechanisms and CSOs.[63]

Civil society also influenced the NCA process, often playing a technical role influencing policies for the political dialogue framework, and playing leadership roles on humanitarian issues.[64] The Joint Strategy Team was formed by nine civil society organizations to deliver humanitarian relief to those affected by the resumption of fighting between the KIA and Myanmar military in 2014. This network was able to deal with and manage their own local stakeholders in their own areas, preventing conflict, negotiating access, and encouraging open communications.

The political transition in Myanmar also brought forth several key challenges for civil society actors. The election of the NLD brought a reduction in civil society space, attributed by respondents to the former's distrust and adversarial view of CSOs. Furthermore, poor relations between the NLD government and a predominantly ethnic-based civil society sector focused on conflict issues led to a bigger division in the civil society space: between Bamar organizations connected to the NLD and its political agenda, and ethnic actors who were less supportive of the central government.

LESSONS FROM FOREIGN ASSISTANCE FOR PEACEBUILDING IN MYANMAR

Overview: Peacebuilding Support for Myanmar, 2010–2020

This paper explores how international aid donors supported peace processes in Myanmar, 2010–2020. It first presents an overview of international engagement in Myanmar and foreign aid flows during that period, then discusses the factors that affected support for conflict resolution, presenting eight key findings. These findings are relevant to development practitioners, diplomats of donor countries, government officials, and others supporting peace in Myanmar or elsewhere. Information is drawn primarily from interviews with national and international stakeholders who supported peace processes in Myanmar in the years in question. The preexisting literature also informs this assessment, enabling the research team to identify key findings and the implications for future peace support. The first paper in this series, *The Context for Building Peace: Entrenched Challenges and Partial Reforms*, assesses the context in which foreign aid for peacebuilding was provided, and further detail on background and methods are included in the paper series introduction.

The foreign aid described here comprises primarily official grants and concessional loans from countries in the Global North (members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD) as well as multilateral organizations including United Nations (UN) agencies, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank. Support from China and other Asian countries is also considered.[65] The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the government of Myanmar and eight ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) was the most significant step towards peace in the period of study, and the focus of most peace-related foreign assistance at that time. This paper looks mainly at support associated directly or indirectly with the NCA, while also considering interventions linked with other steps to curtail conflict, including longstanding bilateral ceasefires with individual EAOs, efforts to resolve tensions in northern areas of the country where EAOs did not sign the NCA, and other measures such as community-level programs not associated with a specific peace process.

International Relations with Myanmar and Foreign Aid Flows

With the advent of reforms in 2010, Western countries began to reconsider their ties with Myanmar. What the OECD calls “official development assistance,” which had waxed and waned in the country since 1948, soon started to flow.[66]

Following elections and the formation of a quasi-civilian government under Thein Sein, Myanmar rapidly renewed its engagement with the full spectrum of official donors, including Western countries and multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the regional Asian Development Bank. The country went from being the 79th-largest recipient of aid in 2010 to the seventh-largest in 2015. By 2017, it was the third-largest recipient per capita in the region—behind only Cambodia and Laos, which have far smaller populations. Expectations were for close, sustained engagement with the international community.[67]

Diplomatic relations with Western countries had been characterized mainly by the imposition of sanctions in response to human rights abuses and the suppression of democracy. Many donors reduced their development cooperation with Myanmar during the period of successive military regimes that started in 1962. During this period, Myanmar looked for support from Asian nations instead.[68] Japan, followed by China and other neighboring and regional countries, were the most important providers of foreign aid in the form of grants, concessional loans, and other assistance such as training and exchanges of officials. As China’s economy and influence grew beginning in the late 1980s, it became Myanmar’s primary external partner and influence. Beijing built a relationship with the military government while keeping links with EAOs operating along the shared border, and backed strategic public and private investments in mining, dams, transportation, and farming.[69]

In the early 2000s, Myanmar's military government was slowly implementing some internal reforms while maintaining political control. A key priority was to improve foreign relations, especially with Western countries, in response to growing concern about the overbearing influence of China. Aid flows gradually increased at this time, including support for infectious disease control through the Three Diseases Fund. A new constitution was introduced in 2008, soon after mass protests had been violently suppressed in what became known as the Saffron Revolution. The constitution laid out partial reforms for a semi-democratic system, while also defining the continued influence of the military over politics. Foreign aid flows from Western nations and multilateral agencies started to change in 2008 after the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's recorded history, Cyclone Nargis, devastated the delta area south of Yangon and caused an estimated 140,000 fatalities. While local groups mobilized to support affected communities, the Myanmar government opened the doors to international humanitarians. In a separate sign of increasing openness, India bolstered its economic relations with Myanmar in 2008 by negotiating the Kaladan River Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, aimed at boosting trade and commerce.[70]

Following elections in 2010 that were deemed illegitimate by many observers, reform accelerated with the release of political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, and steps to encourage the return of nationals from the international diaspora. As demonstrated progress increased

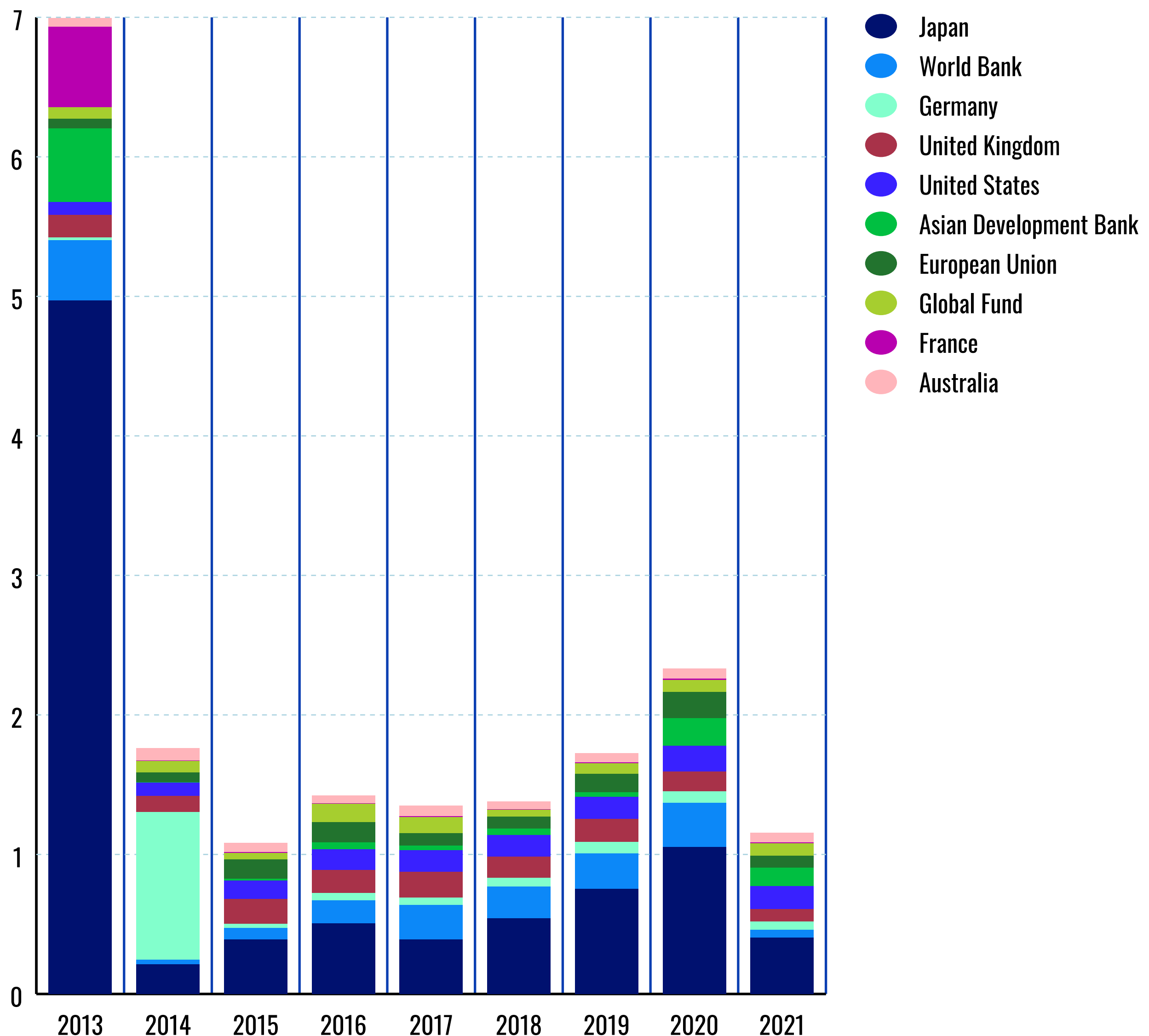


Figure 6. Official Development Assistance Disbursements to Myanmar from Top Ten Donors (from OECD Creditor Reporting System).

international confidence, sanctions were eased. Western donors added to their in-country presence, scaled up their development assistance, and gradually expanded their work with government departments. The cancellation of the China-funded Myitsone Dam project in 2011 was regarded as a watershed, both distancing the Myanmar government from Beijing and indicating a more responsive approach to public interest.[71] Aid flows rapidly grew as new frameworks were adopted and agreements were signed. Two events in 2015 ensured that the trend toward normalizing relations with the West would continue. The signing of the NCA by Myanmar's quasi-civilian government and eight EAOs was followed by democratic elections that were convincingly won by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

OECD data shows that between the start of 2011 and the end of 2015, Myanmar received USD 13.7 billion in aid commitments. Over USD 6.5 billion of past debts were forgiven. Japan, the World Bank, the United Kingdom, and the United States were the largest contributors. Programs operating at a national level made up the bulk of aid contributions, with the health, energy, and transport sectors receiving the most funding.[72]

Problems stemming from Myanmar's entrenched conflicts persisted, however. The NCA process was only a ceasefire and did not include many EAOs; the power of elected civilian leaders was strictly limited by the 2008 constitution; and the military remained independent and unaccountable. While the NCA could have been a foundation for further progress towards peace, events took a different turn. The newly elected NLD government struggled to build a more inclusive peace dialogue out of the ceasefire agreement, and changes instituted by the new government led to a hiatus in the peace process.

The Rohingya crisis of 2017–2018, in which the Myanmar military was accused of ethnic cleansing and/or genocide by Western countries and at the UN, effectively ended the brief honeymoon period and generated a perception among many aid donors and diplomats that Myanmar's entrenched problems were far from resolved. Following the 2020 elections, a second term of office for the NLD offered some new hope for the peace process, as discussions on a revamped peace architecture emerged. At this point, the military surprised international observers by taking over the government in a military coup in February 2021 and setting off widespread conflict.

Box 4. *Methods and Data Challenges*

The wealth of information, diversity of views, and range of donor-funded programs operating in Myanmar between 2010 and 2020 make it hard to identify common threads. A standard "meta-evaluation" approach, which would involve assessing and comparing across projects or programs, does not work in this case because much of the relevant information remains restricted. In addition, the main points of interest often lie above the level of operational projects or programs, since they relate to the strategies, priorities, institutions, and relationships that shape how foreign aid is delivered. At this higher level, little information currently exists in the public domain.

The lack of comprehensive data on aid flows for peacebuilding limits the scope of analysis. The OECD Creditor Reporting System, the most comprehensive single dataset for tracking official development assistance on a yearly basis, includes a "conflict, peace, and security" category that can be used to track aid earmarked for peacebuilding.[73] The data alone does not give a full picture as the OECD only reflects the reports of 173 donors, of which 50 are countries and the rest multilateral institutions, UN agencies, and private donors. Significantly, of the 50 countries that report their foreign aid through this mechanism, the only Asian nations are Japan, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, and Timor-Leste. In the case of Myanmar, this discrepancy leaves out major contributions from countries including China and Singapore. The sensitive nature of conflict-reduction efforts can also cause many activities to go unreported. In addition, the end recipients of funds are often unknown, making it difficult to get a picture of how support was balanced between different beneficiaries. Finally, aid was not the only driver of development in Myanmar at this time, with significant private capital flowing into the country between 2011 and 2015. Private-sector growth led to poverty alleviation and improved living conditions all over the country, including in conflict-affected areas.

Supporting Peace Through Foreign Aid

Following the end of the Cold War, increased operational space for aid agencies, combined with concern over rising levels of subnational conflict in many parts of the world, provided a basis for new approaches to peacebuilding. Early emphasis was placed on the need to ensure that aid funds at the very least "do no harm," given the depressing track record of policies and projects that have unwittingly contributed to organized violence.[74] Conflict sensitivity soon became established as a working approach, and agencies developed specialist peacebuilding units.[75] International guidelines published by the OECD laid out how to help prevent violent conflict through development cooperation.[76]

A significant, global body of knowledge has been acquired from the complex interactions of foreign aid, peacebuilding, and conflict. By the time of Myanmar's reforms, most aid agencies had experience operating in conflict-affected contexts, even if they were not familiar with working in the country itself. Some looked to support Myanmar's emerging peace process where it was useful, and many bilateral donors included it in their diplomatic engagement, often harnessing development funds to do so. Longstanding connections with international campaigners, the Myanmar diaspora, and opposition groups within the country provided the basis for programming. Initial work often focused on southeastern Myanmar, along the border with Thailand, where humanitarian operations had worked for many years, and donor support typically flowed through specialist international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other intermediaries.

Initiatives proliferated across a range of operations and sectors involving support to government, civil society, and EAOs:

- ***Mediation and dialogue support***. Often low-profile and high-level, initiatives worked to support discussions on ceasefires, peace processes, and political dialogue and offer negotiation advice to government and EAO leaders. Agencies supported by donors included the Euro-Burma Office, Nyein Foundation, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and Intermediate.
- ***Confidence-building initiatives***. Many programs were established in conflict-affected areas to address ongoing tensions, reduce barriers to peace, provide a peace dividend, or placate potential "spoilers." These often involved local development or humanitarian activities. Some initiatives worked directly with EAO and military leaders to support ceasefire and peace-process negotiations; others worked with grassroots organizations. Examples include work supported through the US-funded Kan Lett, the Norwegian-initiated Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, the Japan-funded Nippon Foundation, and many Myanmar NGOs.
- ***Direct funding for peace architecture***. Donors, typically following requests from the Myanmar government, were willing to support elements of the peace process. This included paying for leaders of EAOs to attend vital meetings and providing other resources, backing the government-led Myanmar Peace Center, and realizing elements of the NCA including the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) and Liaison Offices for EAOs.
- ***Capacity building and training***. Assistance was provided at many levels through intermediaries. Programs offered expert advice, courses, seminars, and study tours for government officials and leaders, EAOs, NGOs, women, youth and community groups, and ethnic organizations. Initiatives covered awareness-raising, research, policy development, and support for technical aspects of the peace process, as well as related subjects such as decentralization, natural resource management, democracy, gender equality, and accountability.
- ***Large-scale development initiatives in conflict-affected areas***. Large programs, often funded by multiple donors, were expanded to conflict-affected areas. Examples include the 3MDG health fund, the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund, and the Myanmar Education Consortium. Some donor-funded initiatives were implemented by local NGOs such as Metta Development Foundation and the Kachin Baptist Convention, while others focused on infrastructure, government services, or private-sector economic growth.
- ***Research and analysis.*** Donors funded many assessments, often to build their own understanding. They invested resources in "conflict sensitivity" work to inform specific programs and their overall approach. Grants were also given to national institutions, such as the Salween Institute, the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, and the Karen Human Rights Group, to develop their research skills for conflict monitoring and analysis and key NCA political dialogue topics.
- ***Public information to enhance citizen awareness of the peace process***. Donors were late to fund this field, but supported "knowledge, attitude, and practices" studies to understand public opinion on the peace process and enhance social cohesion. Assistance supported skills development in media organizations like Burma News International and promoted peace through radio drama (BBC Media Action) and cultural interactions among the general public.

Box 5. Japanese Support to Myanmar and the Nippon Foundation's Peacebuilding Work

Japan has been one of Myanmar's major aid donors since the 1960s, having long-term ties through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the Nippon Foundation. According to OECD data, Japan was the largest single donor to Myanmar for most of the period 2010—2020 (see figure 6). Much of Japan's extensive aid program in Myanmar is directed toward infrastructure development and training.[78] Allocations explicitly for peacebuilding were a very small proportion of its official development assistance, although Japan also provided unofficial funding for peace-related work conducted by the Nippon Foundation and others.[79]

The Nippon Foundation, a private philanthropic organization from Japan, has backed humanitarian and development projects in Myanmar since the 1970s, including support for people in border zones and other contested areas. Since 2011, with support from the Japanese government, it has run peacebuilding initiatives based on three overlapping aims: building trust between the government and EAOs, providing support to conflict-affected people, and promoting understanding of civilian governance. By 2021, the Nippon Foundation reported total spending commitments of more than USD 86 million for peace-related work in Myanmar. [80]

The Nippon Foundation's emphasis on building trust is especially significant. It includes efforts to establish communication between different parties involved in peace talks, distribution of food and nonfood items to conflict-affected areas, and confidence-building infrastructure projects such as housing, schools, and health centers.

One insider account of the Nippon Foundation's work on the peace process described a "hybrid Asian way to peacebuilding" and compared this more personalized, discrete, bureaucratically light, and nonthreatening approach to the more formal engagements of many Western actors.[81] This difference increased following the August 2017 massacres of Rohingya communities in Rakhine State, as the Japanese government remained supportive of the government in Naypyitaw and its handling of the ensuing crisis.[82] In southeastern Myanmar, the Nippon Foundation attracted controversy over its efforts for failing to adequately consult communities and placing too much confidence in unaccountable leaders.

As reforms took hold, international relations improved, and the peace dialogue continued, peace-related aid commitments grew rapidly, from USD 11 million in 2010 to USD 18 million in 2012, and to over USD 120 million in 2015.[77] Overall, peace support was extensive, making vital contributions in many fields. Yet it remained a very small proportion of overall foreign aid to Myanmar, accounting for between 0.8 percent and 3.6 percent of all aid funds over the years 2012–2021 (figures 7).

The highest levels of international support for peace (defined by the OECD as "Conflict, Peace and Security") occurred in 2015, reflecting the broad investments by the international community in developing and operationalizing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). While the drop in 2016 may simply have been a result of the large sums already committed in 2015, the later decline in commitments mirrors the declining confidence in the peace process. Problems were beginning to emerge openly in 2018, as several key EAOs suspended their participation. This deadlock left many international donors unsure how to continue seeking progress in peacebuilding outside of the NCA framework, and caused them to reassess their relationship with the Myanmar government in light of military actions against Rohingya in Rakhine State.

Peacebuilding aid is typically delivered through relatively small, focused programs whose cost to the donor is low when compared to major infrastructure programs or nationwide health and education initiatives. Peacebuilding investments in Myanmar were relatively small (tracking with global trends throughout this period), given the absence of international institutional involvement such as deployment of peacekeepers or major post-conflict development initiatives. Figure 8 describes some major peacebuilding programs operating during this period. Three of these were funded by multiple donors, and all operated across different conflict-affected areas of Myanmar.

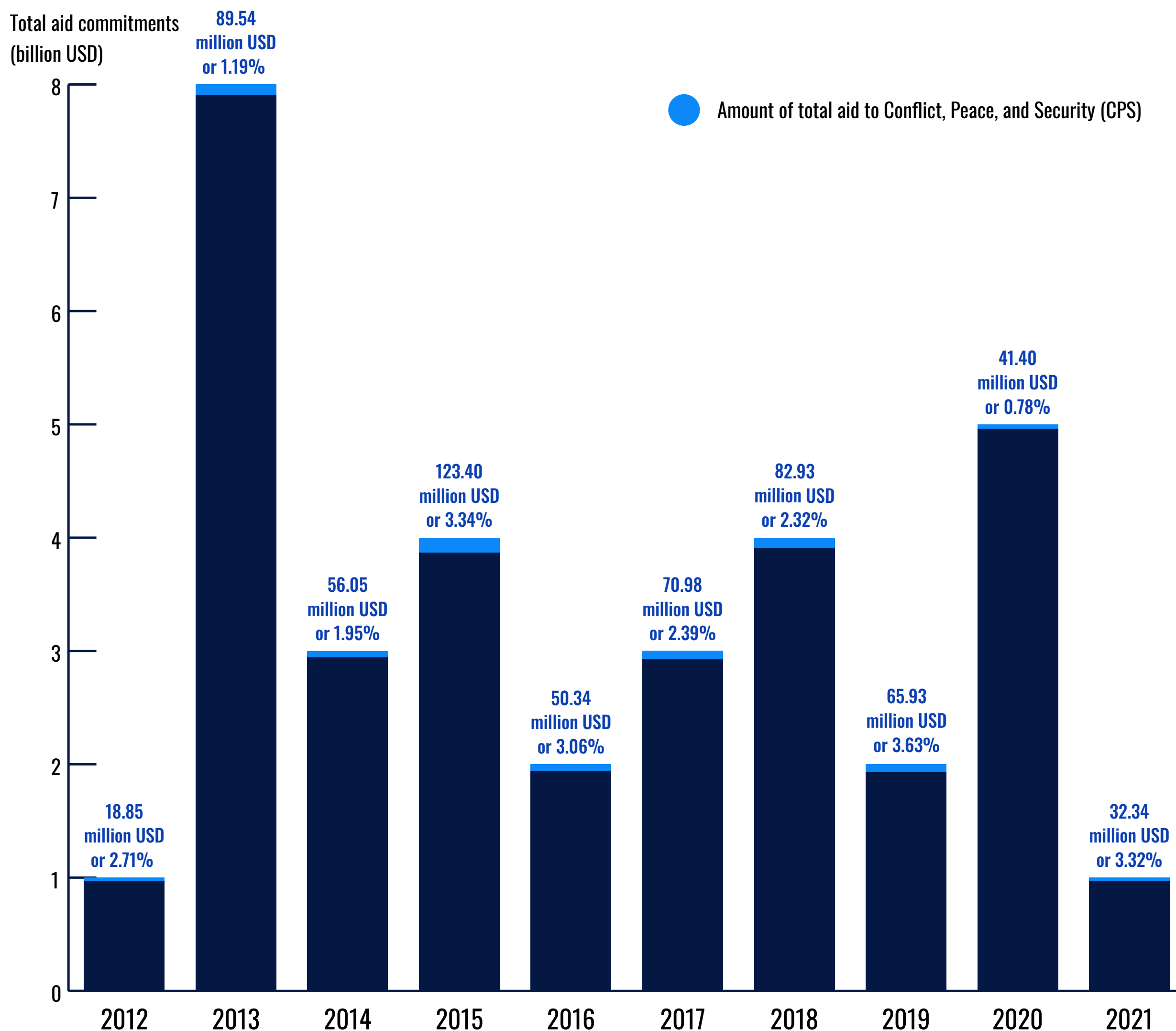


Figure 7. Total and Peacebuilding-specific Aid Commitments to Myanmar from OECD Donors (from OECD Creditor Reporting System)

High impact can still be achieved in various ways through well-designed and carefully implemented programs, particularly those with a specific or local focus (see box 6). The impact of aid for peacebuilding was especially high for local organizations. The creation of the USD 100 million Joint Peace Fund in 2015 offered major opportunities for civil society organizations to advance their objectives. Equally, there were real risks that new grievances would arise from decisions over funding allocations.

At the same time, major flows of funds are significant, whether aid expenditures or commercial investments. In conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, private- and public-sector development initiatives have long exacerbated conflict tensions. Central authorities have intentionally used development funds as a means to expand control through new infrastructure initiatives such as roads and dams, extending public services, and resettlement schemes.[83] Meanwhile, well-connected private investors in mining or agriculture have been able to act with relative impunity.[84] This background made the agenda of conflict sensitivity across aid programs a core priority for civil society, many local inhabitants, and some EAOs. The NCA reflects these concerns, stating clearly that EAOs have the authority to receive foreign aid in their areas of control, and that EAOs and the military need to coordinate "to improve livelihoods, health, education, and regional development for the people."[85] Box 9 below further explores the issues related to cross-border aid and convergence.

Name	Donors	Key Focus
Myanmar Peace Support Initiative	Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the European Union, and Australia	A short-term effort to support ongoing ceasefire negotiations and provide peace dividends to help build confidence and establish a conducive environment for the separate political processes.
Kann Lett	USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI)	*Phase one:* to increase participation and inclusion in reform and peace processes and to address critical impediments to the transition. *Phase two:* to deepen and sustain reforms and foster legitimate processes for pursuing peace.
Nippon Foundation[86]	Japan	Sustained Incremental Trust Establishment and Support (SITES). This approach engaged state governments in dialogue together with EAOs to build trust between principals by jointly implementing programs to address the needs of conflict-affected communities.
Peace Support Fund, later the Paung Sie Facility	United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden	Support to small-scale, gender-responsive, demand-driven initiatives that promote social cohesion in Myanmar communities.
Joint Peace Fund	United Kingdom, USA, Finland, Japan (initially), Norway, Switzerland, Canada, the European Union, Germany, Italy, Australia, Denmark	The overarching goal, until 2020, was an "inclusive peace…reached through agreements and strengthened stakeholders, institutions, and processes," thereby strengthening conflict-management mechanisms, dialogues and negotiations and national and subnational participation in the peace process.

Figure 8. Overview of Major Myanmar Peacebuilding Programs, 2010–2020.
Based on information compiled from aid agency websites and project reports.

Box 6. Developing Future Leadership Capacity: an Example of Long-Term Peace Support

One research respondent, a diplomat previously working on Myanmar, considered the long-term investment in peacebuilding and academic skills of the '88 Generation and other Myanmar democracy advocates to be one of the most far-sighted contributions towards peace because of their role in promoting national reforms.

Multiple threads have converged over many years as individuals and organizations have worked to pave the way for a peace process. Myanmar exiles and graduates of various international universities started initiatives such as the Bangkok Dialogue and the Burma Studies Conference in Singapore, and capacity building organizations such as the Vahu Development Institute. Entrepreneurs and intellectuals within Myanmar started Myanmar Egress to encourage dialogue and build trust between key senior leaders, and to foster a new generation of leaders. Hope International slowly built a cadre of peacebuilders within civil society (in particular within the Nyein Foundation) by supporting their study at peacebuilding institutions in the USA. This years-long investment in capacity, skills, and dialogue laid the foundations for like-minded individuals who came after them.

Key Findings on Foreign Aid Approaches

Finding 1. Donor assumptions about the transition to peace

International aid donors were insufficiently cautious about persistent tensions and the risks, particularly for the NCA process. These risks could have been mitigated by more locally-grounded understanding of the context and less reliance on Western models of reform.

From the perspective of Western observers, the broad transitions and reforms underway in Myanmar beginning in 2010 had three interlinked components: economic liberalization, political democratization, and peacebuilding through the emerging NCA process. This triad of reforms fit wider expectations of progress towards a post–Cold War model sometimes termed the "liberal peace." The apparent alignment of Myanmar with this vision reassured diplomats, donors, and politicians of positive, linear progress towards peace and a more inclusive, democratic form of nation-building.[87]

The assumptions of the liberal peace model have been widely criticized as overly prescriptive, narrow, and naïve.[88] In the case of Myanmar, uncritical adoption of this approach failed to consider complex domestic elements. For example, there was no guarantee that more democracy would improve core-periphery relations or address the deep-seated concerns and grievances of EAO leaders. It may even have had the opposite effect, depending on electoral and other political systems, the presence of checks and balances to protect minority voices, and the degree of authority enjoyed by leaders below the national level.[89] There was therefore no guarantee that political reforms in Myanmar would enable further progress beyond the NCA. The NCA had to confront the long history of central military control while the wider reform process was limited by the conditions of the 2008 constitution.[90]

More thought, and more suitable frameworks for supporting peace, might have better addressed these contextual complexities. For example, the approach outlined in the World Bank's *Pathways for Peace* report recommended designing an approach based on the interactions among a different triad: contextual structural factors, key actors, and key institutions.[91] Most donors (and many domestic interests) had a limited grasp of these nuances and the complexities of a real-world peace process.

This occasional blindness to nuance among donors was more problematic when working closely with the government. Myanmar was, for the most part, a functional state with a strong background of independence, and foreign aid agencies had to respect the norms of sovereignty. The same respect did not have to be shown to EAOs, given their status as nonstate actors and the asymmetry of the conflict.[92] After the 2015 election, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government sought more control over foreign aid flows. In 2016, the government established a Joint

Box 7. Limited Recognition of Past Efforts Towards Peace: Donor Views of Liaison Offices

Absent from Myanmar for many years before 2010, many donors had little institutional or personal knowledge of the country. As a result, they supported some initiatives that were assumed to be newly emerging, unaware of some important earlier achievements. For example, EAO Liaison Offices, intended to allow local interaction between contesting forces to defuse conflict, have a long history in Myanmar. Some of the Liaison Offices involved in the NCA process were first established after ceasefire agreements in the early 1990s. The Pa-O National Army, for example, now transformed into a militia group, first established a Liaison Office in 1991.

Western donors supported EAO Liaison Offices as part of the peace process. These offices were valuable conduits for communications with the military and other groups, including development actors, that were otherwise reliant on personal relationships for information. Foreign missions and donor-funded project staff found the Liaison Offices useful for engaging EAOs. But donors were often ignorant of the past achievements, assuming that the establishment of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) was the starting point for ceasefire monitoring and failing to recognize the important work that took place before its signing. This relatively minor issue illustrates the failure of donors to fully understand past peace efforts in Myanmar. The reservations of many conflict actors and members of the public about the NCA process are partly a result of this failure.

Coordination Body to scrutinize funding allocations and spending limits on activities related to peace process implementation.[93] The government view was that the relatively opaque volume of aid provided for peace activities should be more tightly under their control and allocated to the main NCA process.

Finding 2. Understanding the problems rooted in the civil-military divide

Donor programs showed mixed awareness of the tensions between central military and civil elites. The unstable environment was characterized by entrenched tensions at the highest levels of politics, and government effectively relegated the peace process to a secondary level.

It became increasingly apparent to donors that military leaders acted independently and that civilian officials were mostly focused on their relationship with the military. As the 2021 military takeover emphatically demonstrated, expectations that reforms had created a stable platform for a peace process were misplaced. Reaching agreement with the military to reduce their political role remains Myanmar's most abiding challenge. Aung San Suu Kyi sought to improve her position by pushing against the military's political role while also siding with them at opportune moments. Released from decades of military-enforced house arrest, she played on her family's military credentials, often recalling her father's historical role as a founder of modern Myanmar and its military by referring to "my Tatmadaw." In 2019, she defended military leaders from charges of genocide against the Rohingya at the International Court of Justice. This ongoing political struggle tended to marginalize other concerns, especially the interests of ethnic leaders and minority populations, including the Rohingya.

In this challenging environment, donors moved too quickly to support the government with standard development projects unsuited to the context. An example is the World Bank's high-profile Community-Driven Development project, whose initial steps upset observers by appearing to assume that conflict tensions had subsided.[94] Problems emerged when the program moved into minority areas of Myanmar, including a conflict-affected township in northern Shan State where the government had a track record of using development initiatives to establish control of contested or recently acquired territory. Wider consultation with ethnic leaders at this initial stage could have identified difficulties. Over time, the World Bank responded positively by seeking advice from specialists and engaging intensively at the local level. Partnering with NGOs at pilot sites, rather than working solely with the government, helped mitigate the challenges facing field operations in areas of live conflict. Gradually improving relationships with government counterparts also enabled project managers to navigate tensions and find solutions.

Finding 3. Recognizing the importance of China

China exerts the greatest external influence on Myanmar, and it was pursuing its own approach that reduced the scope of the NCA process. Western donors in particular struggled to understand China's broad involvement in conflict reduction activities within the larger history of cross-border relationships and China's foreign policy position toward rapid development in Myanmar.

All the countries bordering Myanmar have significant policy and investment interests there, but China remains the most influential external power, even after the reengagement of several Western countries. Aung San Suu Kyi paid a priority visit to Beijing after the 2015 elections, traveling there before visiting Washington, D.C.[95] The Chinese government retained close links with military and civil leaders in Myanmar, while also maintaining their strong historical relationships with EAOs, especially those close to its border like the powerful United Wa State Army. China provided assistance for some aspects of the NCA process but was never fully involved.[96] Both Chinese officials and Myanmar's military appeared to discourage the involvement of northern EAOs in the NCA.[97] China did later put pressure on them to attend Union Peace Conferences following a formal request for assistance from Aung San Suu Kyi.[98] China also worked to limit the influence of the West close to its border. US involvement was especially sensitive to Chinese officials, who on one occasion advised the US Ambassador in Yangon not to visit Kachin State.[99]

While China's importance in Myanmar was broadly understood by Western donors, aid officials at ground level were typically unsure how to respond. As one China expert noted,

> The West did not sufficiently recognize the trends in China's support to strengthen Northern EAOs, having no strategy in place to tackle it, let alone understanding how these conflicts might change and affect the NCA.[100]

Despite a few diplomatic efforts with northern groups and with China, Western donors were indecisive in building those relationships possibly for fear of upsetting the Myanmar military or civil government.[101] Unsurprisingly, aid workers and officials working in Myanmar were poorly situated to address the effects of deep-rooted rivalries.

Some Western diplomats saw their presence in Myanmar as a geopolitical coup on China's doorstep, in line with political and security measures elsewhere to counter Chinese influence in the region. Others were unsure how to engage, partly because Chinese officials rarely participated in donor coordination activities.

Most Western aid donors did not have a nuanced understanding of the strategic interests guiding Chinese policy in Myanmar or the complex relationships between China and the EAOs. China's interest in access to the Bay of Bengal, the importance of related investments and infrastructure, their discussions with northern EAOs, and how this affected their support for the NCA were also poorly understood. At times, China was seen one-dimensionally as a "spoiler" to be avoided rather than an important actor. At a more conceptual level, peace support seemed to presuppose an "international community" with a shared vision. The failure among Western officials to consider China in this group contributed to overly optimistic assessments of the peace process and to the neglect of alternative, non-Western approaches to peace in Myanmar (see box 5 on Japanese support to Myanmar and the Nippon Foundation's peacebuilding work.)

Finding 4. Pacing engagement

Donors struggled to take the long view, accept setbacks, and adapt approaches to mitigate risks.

From 2012, aid agencies rapidly established a presence in Myanmar, often moving long-term posts from Thailand to Yangon. Some arrived on a wave of optimism that led to a "terrible free-for-all at the beginning," with donor agencies pursuing and protecting their own areas of interest and respective comparative advantages.[102] This gold-rush mentality sometimes led to short-sighted decisions—for example, the rapid phase-out of village-level nongovernmental programs, developed over many years, once it became politically acceptable to work with the government. The title of a 2013 study of foreign aid to Myanmar, *Too Much Too Soon*, succinctly captured these concerns.[103]

The excitement of the rapid reforms, especially after the 2015 elections, also resulted in donors treating Myanmar as a post-conflict environment, despite evidence that signed ceasefires were not being upheld and violence was growing in northern Shan State, Rakhine State, and elsewhere. Expectations of how long it would take for a genuine, comprehensive peace to emerge and what was needed to unravel and address the political complexities of Myanmar, were also unrealistic. While many individuals were aware of this institutional over-optimism, the strong international commitment to achieving liberal peace and reform in Myanmar tended to mute overt criticism. Critics were labeled nay-sayers or cynics who needed to "get with the program." This attitude made it difficult to moderate expectations, and reduced the ability of international actors to effectively support local peacebuilders.

Many donors were slow to adopt flexible approaches that learn from failure and adapt to changed circumstances. With their unrealistic expectations, they were ill-positioned to acknowledge inevitable failures or recognize ways to build on the experience. An instructive example was the haste with which some donors dismissed the JMC as ineffective rather than critically assessing its contribution and potential to support change (see box 8). In the face of a process carrying high expectations, the response of donors to non-functioning mechanisms was to continue support while bemoaning the lack of progress—in effect, "flogging a dead horse" in the forlorn hope that it might bring change.

***Box 8.** Missed Opportunities – the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee*

Specialist ceasefire advisors closely following the peace process noted that neither EAOs nor donors capitalized on the JMC as a tool to constructively engage the military.[104] In the light of hindsight, it was suggested that donors could have encouraged and funded the following approaches:

- Recognize that the JMC was not the best tool to address every issue; remove some problematic aspects of its mandate (such as boundary demarcation, security-sector reform, and demining); and test alternative mechanisms, institutional homes, and approaches.[105]
- Differentiate more clearly between small infringements that could be resolved locally and fundamental issues that might derail the overall peace process and should be elevated to high-level bilateral political negotiations.[106]
- Test local, pilot solutions in areas of identified success. Donors could have advocated with the government and military for the advantages of local models and offered flexible, innovative resourcing, in this way reinforcing positive and devolved problem-solving.

Finding 5. Working around capacity constraints

The need for reliable delivery partners constrained the support provided by international actors. While existing NGOs and CSOs did play a vital role as delivery conduits and sometimes important advisors on context and strategy, such partnerships could divert national actors' attention from their core work, or spark local tensions over funding access and reach.

The need for rapid expansion of programming highlighted the lack of credible partners and initial low capacity to deliver interventions according to international development norms and expectations. Very few partners for program delivery, whether inside or outside of government, were able to run large programs without training and institution-building. As one donor noted:

> There were a number of options, but none of them was ideal. What were the trade-offs, and how willing were respective capitals to follow one path or another? It was a question of hammers looking for recognizable nails to hit! Some of the funds were "hammer defined."[107]

The Myanmar government's lack of experience working with the international community was challenging for all stakeholders. On the one hand, donors found it difficult to work with government institutions due to the lack of long-standing ties, the opaque systems, and the resulting concerns about effectiveness, accountability, and transparency. It was equally hard to work with EAOs or their associated CSOs, also due to their inexperience with donor processes and to concerns about the risk of supporting armed actors. This situation reinforced the common trend of seeking NGO intermediaries or delivery partners to support ethnic capacity building and to offset their own fiduciary, legal, and reputational risks. Donors interviewed noted the potential for consequent distortions, including the possibility of warping the way such organizations were perceived by stakeholders and shifting the focus of their work.[108]

One complex feature of the peace process was international support for negotiation specialists. Two main types of expert were involved: high-profile individuals who tended to provide advice during rapid fly-in-fly-out visits, and lower-profile individuals who provided advisory and capacity support over longer periods. Ethnic leaders often considered the long-term specialists more effective, as they offered context-driven advice and invested the time required to generate trust. Individual specialists tended to be senior, male, and from a European background, and there were few efforts to broaden the pool. Many of the local or national groups promoting dialogue, like the Peace-talk Creation Group in Kachin State, offered more diverse participants and alternative perspectives.

Donors' search for delivery partners also led to the uneven provision of aid—through established relationships with civil society groups in Karen communities, for example, but with fewer effective partners elsewhere. Since information flows often followed established funding relationships, donor agencies' understanding of the peace process was skewed toward areas where they were already most engaged.

The rapid growth of Myanmar's international development sector from 2012 onwards significantly altered the civil society sector. Positive contributions to building civil society are noted in box 12, but respondents also said that short-term funding—rarely more than annual cycles—tended to create "project machines" that reflected donor funding practices rather than recipients' own understanding of the situation. The weight of donor compliance and administrative regimes shifted their focus and deployment of human resources, and led to the creation of large, dominant organizations which were preferred recipients over smaller, local groups or those not confirming to Western organizational forms (see also box 11 on "projectization" and "timescapes").

Finding 6. Peacebuilding approaches did not substantially include women

Foreign aid projects and programs in Myanmar often included stipulations regarding women's participation, but many of these ultimately fell short of gender-transformative outcomes through a combination of operational challenges and lack of will.

Structural gender inequality is present across all social and political domains, including peacebuilding institutions and activities associated with conflict reduction. There were varying levels of women's participation in key stakeholder groups, with many EAOs considered to be more open.[109] Organizations focused on women's rights and leadership were present nationally and locally, and there were some well-known cases of Myanmar women playing a key facilitation role in dialogues and negotiations. Within civilian government, political parties, and the Myanmar military, however, female representation in decision-making was close to zero (Aung San Suu Kyi being the notable exception), resulting in the absence of women from the top table in peace discussions.

In this context, foreign aid actors could play an important role in amplifying calls for greater gender equality from Myanmar stakeholders, linking their efforts and objectives with global evidence and good practice from other peacebuilding contexts. There were significant challenges to putting this into practice, beyond the difficulties of getting traction amongst senior national decision-makers. Substantive inclusion of women and changing gender norms were not prioritized as core objectives

of peacebuilding programs, limiting the scope of real change on these issues. For example, quotas for female participants in donor-funded activities were often the main indicator for gender inclusion. While the practice of setting benchmarks for female participation represents a positive step, these quotas were set largely without regard for who the participants were and whether they were able to make contributions, doing little to influence the content or outcomes of the discussion.

The tendency toward superficial approaches to gender inclusion also affects the dynamics between donors and implementing partners. Women-focused and women-led organizations are best placed to undertake the long-term work of creating change in gender norms; however, these groups are often small and amorphous, making it more difficult for them to access foreign funds through cumbersome and technical administrative processes. In addition, funding for gender equality and social inclusion is often constrained by relatively short funding windows, with limited scope to support institutional strengthening such as through core funds. For more detail on the challenges around gender inclusion in peace support, see the paper titled *Women, Peace, and Security Funding Dynamics in Myanmar, 2010–2020*.

Box 9. *Cross-Border Aid and Convergence*

Cross-border aid, principally from Thailand, was a significant way that Western donors engaged with Myanmar prior to 2012, though funding levels were comparatively low. Efforts focused not only on displacement centers and refugee camps in Thailand, but also on support for civil society organizations (CSOs) operating across the border, especially in Karen State.

Support was provided to groups such as the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network and the Karen Department of Health and Welfare, which were partly independent but strongly associated with the major EAO in the area. Over time, a wider range of ethnic CSOs received funding, mainly for delivering essential local services, seen by EAOs as a legitimate aspect of their governance in areas of influence.

Strong donor encouragement to normalize relationships with Myanmar led cross-border organizations to open offices in Yangon and regional towns inside Myanmar. Donors tended to view service delivery from a technical perspective, at times seeing alignment with central government as the most important and efficient element. Donors also often held assumptions about "governance vacuums" in conflict-affected areas, when in practice a range of administrative and service delivery systems were in place at the local level.[110] From the perspective of ethnic health and education providers, as well as EAOs, service delivery was nuanced and far more political.

With a growth in aid to support service delivery, central government departments sought to expand their reach while ethnic service providers preferred hybrid arrangements or their own systems. Donors and the central government encouraged the "convergence" of different and often overlapping systems under a national model that enabled what they perceived as rational service delivery. By contrast, ethnic service providers preferred hybrid arrangements or their own systems, and often saw the donor push for both convergence and for ending cross-border support as unwarranted support for the continued expansion of the central state which could threaten carefully devised local arrangements.

At their best, those involved in supporting convergence saw it as a conflict-transforming process driven by local actors coming together across conflict lines. But at the local level, there was limited confidence in political reforms and the peace process. Challenges and lessons involved in promoting convergence included:

- The time needed to overcome the deep distrust between actors across divides
- Tensions between donor bias towards vertical integration and ethnic preference for locally defined provision of services
- Different understandings of demarcations, names, and areas of influence among actors, particularly when both sides claimed control
- Ever-present concerns over the expansion of state control and "Burmanization."

Finding 7. Applying conflict sensitivity across aid programs

Despite a significant body of experience and international good practice amassed over the past few decades, the extent to which donors incorporated conflict sensitivity into their strategies and funding mechanisms in Myanmar varied. More could have been done to mitigate possible negative impacts from donor supported activity at national and local levels.

Conflict sensitivity approaches are commonplace within aid agencies seeking to operate effectively and safely in conflict-affected areas worldwide.[111] To implement conflict sensitive approaches, these actors need sufficient capacity to understand the contexts in which their programs are operating, to assess their possible impacts on the conflict, and to take these .into account in program design of the project. Careful and sensitive consultation with local stakeholders is typically a critical part of the design process. Conflict sensitivity also encompasses the policy arena and the need to consider how national and donor policies influence conflict-affected areas and conflict dynamics. As noted earlier, it was easy for donors (and government officials) to overlook conflict-affected parts of Myanmar, or to falsely assume that the NCA process had ended violent incidents, when working in Yangon or traveling to and from Naypyitaw, well away from affected areas.[112]

Integrated approaches. Some aid agencies took significant measures to integrate conflict sensitivity into their programs. For example, Sweden's government donor agency Sida contracted advisory support for at least five independent pieces of work, one assessing its ability to consider conflict sensitivity across its portfolio and others to inform funding decisions on specific initiatives. Similarly, the UN-run national health fund invested in assessments of its strategic approach in conflict-affected environments before employing specialist advisors, supporting the capacity of implementing partners, and carefully navigating relationships with the government and EAOs.[113]

Poor practices. Many documented examples of insensitive practice exist. Questions have been raised over the direct and structural impacts of broad approaches including humanitarian support for the Rohingya in Rakhine State, especially for those confined to camps and denied freedom of movement. Specific projects have also raised concerns, such as Japanese support for government planning in southeastern Myanmar that failed to consult local stakeholders or meaningfully take into account the complex governance arrangements in large swathes of contested and EAO-held territory (see box 10 below). One factor in these errors was international and domestic stakeholders' superficial understanding of the NCA, particularly the interim arrangements, which increased the likelihood that development approaches would undermine the NCA agreement. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census was especially controversial due to ongoing conflicts across the country, intercommunal violence in Rakhine, and generalized distrust of the government. Underlying tensions persisted over citizenship rights and the arbitrary system of religious and ethnic categories, established by past military leaders, that the census applied. Technical support for the census was provided by a UN agency that initially paid insufficient attention to conflict sensitivity and risk management. According to its own evaluation office:

> Despite several warning signs, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) support underestimated the sensitivity of the question on ethnicity given the country's political context… The generalized view is that UNFPA could have done more to understand the local context and sociopolitical implications of the technicalities of the census.[114]

"We have to consider the peace process as a series of initiatives, actions, and contributions over time that may not always be an actual failure, despite the initial impression. It is just part of that process, building on the last and all the previous contributions undertaken before 2011."

(Interview with donor peace specialist, April 13, 2023)

Equal treatment in the NCA process. Donor engagement in the NCA process itself was sometimes insensitive. Some EAO leaders felt that foreign aid exaggerated existing power asymmetries, as comparatively high levels of support to government reinforced their ability to determine the way the process unfolded.[115] A history of political marginalization of ethnic areas and their exclusion from the benefits of development have been fundamental drivers of the conflict in Myanmar. While foreign agencies need to respect government sovereignty universally and recognize the primacy of the central government at the national level, a failure to balance these obligations against the legacy of unequal relations may have further alienated EAOs and reduced the chances of a sustainable agreement.

Box 10. *Problems with Supporting State-led Development Plans*

One illustration of failure to recognize existing conflict dynamics and respond appropriately is provided by JICA, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, which supported regional development planning. In 2013, JICA produced a detailed initial proposal, the *Preparatory Survey for the Integrated Regional Development for Ethnic Minorities in the South-East Myanmar*. The survey was conducted with the intention of preparing the conditions for the settlement and return of refugees and displaced families to Kayin and Mon States. JICA's main engagement was with government counterparts, following standard donor practice in other contexts.

The Karen Peace Support Network, comprising 28 civil society organizations, found that the proposed activities were "premature and flawed, potentially exacerbating conflict in the region."[116] Their critique of the JICA study pointed to assumptions that are disputed by local people themselves, notably the belief that rapid development progress would encourage refugees to return. Analysis suggested instead that exploitation of natural resources and disrespect for land rights by the military authorities over the course of the 60-year conflict were more critical factors. By working primarily with central and state governments and offering limited space for consultation with local communities or civil leaders, JICA risked reinforcing central government policies and aggravating existing tensions.

Finding 8. Avoiding compartmentalized thinking

Aid programs often operate in separate silos—isolated projects that fulfil their stated reporting and financial requirements without linking horizontally. This problem is especially acute in conflict environments, where it sometimes seems that donors and the UN operate on separate tracks through their development, humanitarian, and conflict response mechanisms. Ensuring coherence across these fields (the "triple nexus") is difficult to achieve in practice.

These challenges are partly a product of the results-oriented funding mechanisms that characterize foreign aid, which work better in a relatively stable environment—for example, when a signed peace agreement is already in place. Projects and their management tools can be developed when there is a well-defined structure to "hang" the funding on, but they are not well suited to complex, unpredictable political processes due to their lack of flexibility or responsiveness to rapid changes in direction and needs (see box 11 on "projectization" and "timescapes.")

The constraints and consequences of inflexible planning mechanisms and annual budget cycles were significant in Myanmar. For example, donors noted that the Joint Peace Fund (JPF), which became the main conduit of support for the NCA process, had based projections for its activities, negotiations, and dialogue on experience with the Thein Sein administration, which ended in 2015. Continued progress at the same pace was unrealized, and budgets were left unspent, due to the mismatch between expected and actual progress.[117] Some positive experiences also emerged. For example, the European Union and others were able to provide essential early support for the Myanmar Peace Centre, a crucial peace institution led by a former minister of the President's Office, Aung Min. Other donors were also able to deploy flexible funds at some critical moments.

"The donor community was very good at ignoring inconvenient truths!"

(Interview with a donor, April 7, 2023).

Donors established shared funding mechanisms to support the peace process, such as the JPF. In theory this kind of joint approach would increase coordination, maximize efficiencies, pool knowledge and expertise, and make it possible to assume risks without exposing single agencies. While the JPF was successful in bringing together an impressive 11 separate donors, many donors continued to support bilateral initiatives outside the shared fund, potentially reducing the value of the shared approach and in practice adding to, rather than reducing, a complex and overlapping array of funding mechanisms and projects.[118] Rather than increasing levels of risk tolerance, shared multi-donor mechanisms can end up being constrained by the lowest appetite for risk across contributors.[119] Furthermore, risk assessment often looks solely at the initiative in question rather than considering the risk and opportunity costs of *not* intervening. In this regard, EAO leaders noted that international support had enabled them to participate in the NCA process in a more significant way by providing funds which these groups might otherwise have generated in more predatory ways.

Observers close to high-level mediation initiatives also criticized poor coordination, one respondent noting that "all these efforts, particularly informal dialogues, were not sufficiently joined together, nor did they link with the Chinese envoy."[120]

Compartmentalized thinking also hindered peace support in other ways. One strong example mentioned during interviews was the lack of investment in building public awareness of the peace process, especially among the Bamar majority. Information campaigns to build support for dialogue are a common component of foreign assistance in similar settings, and such measures might have established a stronger political foundation for the peace process at the national level. Yet, peace support in this field was minimal.[121]

The effects of compartmentalized aid approaches were seen elsewhere, too. Aid agencies tended to pigeonhole Kachin State as a humanitarian zone due to their ongoing support for displaced communities. A more holistic analysis of a complex situation, involving peace overtures as well as ongoing armed clashes, could have enabled agencies to pursue aspects of the "triple nexus" by integrating humanitarian, development, and peace actions in protracted crises.[122]

The most striking example of thinking and working in silos involved responses to the acute crisis affecting Rakhine State and its separation from the NCA process. Rakhine State endures a combination of tensions. First, relationships with the central government are complex and contested, as in other ethnic areas of Myanmar. Second, the acute mistrust and polarized attitudes surrounding the treatment of Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in Rakhine State generates a related yet separate source of violence and injustice. The Myanmar military wanted to ensure that Rakhine State, and the conditions endured by Rohingya in particular, were considered separately from other parts of Myanmar, and Western donors were largely

Box 11. *Limitations of "Projectization" and "Timescapes"*

Rigid project mechanisms can constrain the effectiveness of peacebuilding work in sensitive environments. Their "results-orientation" (described by a donor as "extreme" in the case of Myanmar), rigid time-related budget imperatives, and inflexible deadlines ("timescapes") all create barriers. This "projectization" does offer some advantages for financial management and a superficial level of accountability. However, the assumption that progress will be linear through a sequence of clear milestones can clash with the unpredictable, relational dimensions such as trust and confidence-building that underpin successful peacebuilding. These often require a more roundabout, iterative process.

For example, livelihood programs in conflict-affected Shan State, where it takes years to cultivate contacts, trust, and appropriate ways of working, were forced to deliver results in an unreasonably short time to satisfy aid-system requirements.[123] Similarly, the requirement to rigidly define activities in grant proposals, and the onerous bureaucratic rules for making subsequent changes, make it difficult to respond effectively to fluid political processes. Staff working on a project in northern Shan State missed a potentially valuable opportunity to convene human rights discussions with key EAO leaders when it emerged that donor regulations would not permit deviation from a scheduled series of training events. [124]

discouraged from working there except for carefully controlled humanitarian assistance.[125] By regarding Rakhine State as a separate entity and passing over acute subnational tensions, donors were able to work in a complex environment and maintain their relationship with the government. The problems associated with this compartmentalization became more obvious as the Arakan Army gained territory and then as violent displacement of Rohingya into Bangladesh led to international accusations of military-led genocide. Donor peacebuilding programs in Rakhine State were conducted outside the framework of the NCA process and tended in many cases to prioritize humanitarian aid and local social cohesion initiatives with limited links to the wider political reality.[126]

Box 12. Positive Contributions of Foreign Aid for Peacebuilding in Myanmar

Interviewees were asked to identify positive contributions they felt that foreign aid has made to peacebuilding in Myanmar. The examples here reflect individual and collective opinions from ethnic leaders, peacebuilders, civil society organizations, analysts, and donors.

- **Civil society capacity.** The growth of institutional knowledge and capacity among CSOs over 10 years was deemed strong by respondents in almost every sphere and sector and within specific interest groups. An ethnic leader remarked, “This was a success of the JPF on women, youth, and issues of the environment—it is very encouraging.” Kann Lett, and others such as the Paung Sie Facility, contributed significantly to the development of civil society and youth.
- **Women’s inclusion and networks.** The peace process adopted new norms for women’s equality and inclusion, and even if some groups did not live up to these ideals, the principles were established. Predictable funding for women’s organizations led to stronger networks and cross-fertilization among them. The result, prior to the coup, was better advocacy to government and EAOs and greater influence for the Civil Society Forum for Peace, an official peace process mechanism. It also helped organizational and strategic development, important underpinnings for the future. Some respondents noted that, while not all women’s groups are active politically, due to social and cultural barriers, there has been tremendous progress and a rise of new voices on issues like gender-based violence.
- **Negotiators.** Although some thought more could have been done, empowered negotiators have emerged in some EAOs, well able to prepare for negotiations, work in teams, and respond to different negotiation scenarios. As a result, young leadership in these EAOs has grown in confidence and wisdom. Immediately prior to the coup, the JPF final evaluation team noted that there had been “improved and more mature relationships between all negotiating stakeholders, as evidenced by shifts in their interactions with each other. Moving from simply stating positions on issues, to sharing and discussing issues and options outside the formal realm.”
- **EAO capacity.** EAOs before the coup improved their grasp of key issues in the political dialogue framework, such as federalism and fiscal federalism. Some EAOs have understood and adopted the language of peace and democracy, helping to foster a more democratic culture. For example, Kachin communities increasingly hold their leaders to account, and Karen groups, which already practiced a certain degree of democracy, have moved further in this regard. Respondents stated that EAOs with a legitimate constituency in their communities now need to live up to their rhetoric, providing services and a social contract, supporting progress in improved governance and responsiveness.
- **Relationships and communications.** Support helped foster stronger relationships and communications among many EAOs, both signatories and non-signatories. The evidence of this progress, not always visible during the NCA process, was the development of the National Unity Government and National Unity Consultative Council following the 2021 military coup. Despite all the problems, they are still coming together and trying to support each other.

Conclusion

This section offers succinct lessons on future international support for a just resolution of the conflicts that have affected areas of Myanmar over many decades. The findings are also relevant at the national level in Myanmar and to conflict mitigation in other countries. Overall, the impact of international peace support from 2010 to 2020 was multifaceted given the diversity of international engagement in Myanmar, the complex nature of the country's conflicts, and the many factors at play.

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement of 2015 and other attempts to resolve conflict reduced levels of violence in some areas and built understanding of the steps needed to achieve sustainable peace. But expectations were ultimately not met as the peace process stalled and violence persisted even before the military takeover of 2021 abruptly ended Myanmar's reform period. With hindsight, it is evident that donors made errors or miscalculations during this period, and they typically held unrealistic expectations over the pace and depth of change. Overall, however, the lack of common ground between conflict parties and the actions of key domestic actors were the main reasons leading to the NCA's failure to reduce conflict, rather than weak or inappropriate foreign assistance.

While international diplomatic and foreign aid support for peacebuilding was significant, with over USD 500 million spent on peacebuilding between 2012 and 2020, it was a small fraction of overall aid to Myanmar and it alone was insufficient to shift the overall incentives of the Myanmar military or EAOs. The true impact of foreign peace support comes from the details of specific initiatives rather than the collective effect of financial transfers. The array of projects, programs, advice and technical support undoubtedly had major impacts in specific fields, and the legacies of many support initiatives are likely to persist as experiences and knowledge that can be brought to bear in future.

Enthusiasm over the reforms in Myanmar hindered recognition of ongoing, structural problems. The strong support for Myanmar's political and economic reforms among Western and other democratic countries meant that major entrenched issues were overlooked. Myanmar became a global success story, seen as a rare foreign policy win for those promoting democracy. These conditions created incentives to back reforms and to present a positive story, yet the overall reform process did not fundamentally address the deep-rooted national-level challenges facing the country. Western aid officials and analysts were far more surprised by the military coup of February 2021 than many people from Myanmar, illustrating the persistent disconnect between development donors and military leadership.

Although many individuals and some agencies had a strong understanding of the peace process, donors often saw conflict in ethnic communities as an adjunct to a wider program of national reforms. This view was compounded by a like-minded echo chamber, resulting at times in trade-offs between national reforms and the peace process. For example, there was tension among Western embassies between the need to keep democratic reforms on track by holding elections in 2015 and the recognition that postponing them could have given the peace process a better chance of taking hold. Following the elections, strong foreign support for the new government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and a perceived need to strengthen diplomatic relationships now that the country was seen as democratic, made it hard for donors to constructively criticize her flawed approach to the peace process. This dynamic also made it harder for donor representatives to respond to the positions of leaders of ethnic armed and civil organizations, as support for the central government directly opposed ethnic aspirations for greater regional autonomy.

Indeed, donors often failed to adequately consider the 'problem statement' of a given intervention. Did they really know which problem they were trying to target? Were their programs and funding approaches conducive to fixing the actual problem? Poorly defined strategies led to technical and depoliticized interventions that were unable to tackle the actual roots of the issue. For example, gender equality measures that fail to consider the roots of inequality in patriarchal systems are unlikely to succeed.

Western donors were overly optimistic about the NCA's ability to deliver a peace agreement. Their programs remained heavily concentrated in southeastern areas of the country where the NCA had generated ground-level improvements. By contrast, the long history of ceasefires in Myanmar and deep mistrust of the military led most ethnic leaders and commentators to remain cautious in demonstrating their support for the NCA. In practice, many of Myanmar's larger EAOs, as well as a range of Border Guard Forces and militia, were not involved in the NCA and the military pursued a different agenda in the northern regions and in Rakhine State.

Myanmar's context of structural constraints, poorly aligned interests, and institutional barriers created massive challenges. Rather than generating momentum for peace, the transition to a more democratic government in 2015 added further complications as peace process mechanisms were changed or undermined. The military used the NCA as a tool for supporting its incremental efforts to 'win by process' rather than as a fundamental

basis for a new direction, and civil oversight of the armed forces remained absent.

Finally, Western donors involved in peacebuilding did not take regional powers sufficiently into account. While key foreign support for the NCA came from Western countries along with Japan, China played a dominant role in engagement with northern EAOs as well as maintaining closer relations with the military. The strong support offered by Western countries led to concerns in the Chinese government that it would threaten their own position. Other neighbors of Myanmar including India and Thailand were also only marginally involved in the peace process. Looking ahead, regional powers and Myanmar's neighbors are likely to be increasingly significant influences on conflict resolution.

Considering these major contextual challenges facing peace efforts in Myanmar at the time, several major points emerge from the research:

The national approach to peacebuilding had major limitations which foreign donors could have better anticipated. While a single agreement may have been a necessary part of the NCA's ability to garner broad support, the different contexts of Myanmar's conflicts and the diversity of actors required a more multifaceted approach. The challenges are so thorny—they are such 'wicked problems'—that a more nuanced and varied approach is probably needed. Ethnic leaders preferred to see greater recognition of diversity across Myanmar, recognizing that one size does not fit all and acknowledging the parallel governance systems present in some areas. Foreign support to dialogue and debate around future governance scenarios could have enabled greater inclusion of diversity and engagement from below in more effective ways.

Some donor programs were effective but others were not fit for purpose. Decision-making around program approaches, potential partnerships, and methods of engagement was not consistently based on strong contextual knowledge or representative consultation. As many foreign actors scaled up support and transitioned toward centralized delivery mechanisms, aid impacts were constrained by prescriptive and at times superficial goals, externally designed interventions, weak evidence and an over-reliance on foreign consultants, and a failure to match results with the need on the ground. Narrow, identifiable goals may help to demonstrate accountability, but they limit effectiveness unless adapted to fit the context of a fluctuating peace process. These constraints affected support for gender inclusion and equality as bold objectives in this field were reduced to superficial project outcomes such as quotas for female participants in meetings.

Development engagement in areas actively affected by conflict requires extra caution and foreign actors can usefully draw on established best practice to identify risks and devise appropriate solutions. Though many areas of Myanmar had seen significant reductions in violence and instability, the post-conflict mentalities adopted by many donors limited the scope to adapt programming, particularly as they sought to strengthen relations with the central state following the 2015 elections. Closing field offices, downgrading ties with cross-border organizations, and failure to consult comprehensively limited the understanding of governance and development realities in contested areas among national and international programming staff.

In rapidly changing contexts, maintaining flexibility and managing risk can enable more effective support. Local partners often faced huge management burdens to comply with donor requirements, and constructive partnerships were limited by the lack of downward accountability (donors and intermediaries principally answer to their own governments rather than the aid recipients). By offering a wider range of mechanisms suited to a complex political environment, and adopting flexible tools for different approaches, donors can offer more options and opportunities to local partners. Flexible funding mechanisms are critical for supporting key elements of fast-changing and varied peace processes. A willingness to accept some risk of failure and to navigate complex "political risks" or reputational damage rather than playing it safe also assists effective programming. Pooled funds that combine donor support can help to spread risks and deliver creative support including providing core support to smaller organizations or civic networks, such as feminist and women's rights groups. In Myanmar they were also associated with cumbersome procedures, long delays, and an inability to respond to changing circumstances as the national level peace process lost momentum.

Overcoming the deep roots of conflict requires contextually based, long-term and politically engaged support. The asymmetric nature of Myanmar's subnational conflicts challenges common donor approaches. Aid programs, including peace support, are typically agreed through diplomatic or working relationships between the donor and the recipient government. This is a major constraint when the recipient government is a conflict actor. In Myanmar, some EAO leaders felt that foreign aid exacerbated existing power asymmetries by backing state institutions without sufficient balance. Trust gaps between opposing groups, as well as between powerholders and the wider population, constrain the ability of any agreement to take hold. Foreign actors can address some of the constraints through politically astute programming and by supporting measures to build confidence or incrementally improve relationships.

Recommendations for International Development Agencies

These proposed measures are intended primarily for foreign aid providers and their partners seeking to support future peace efforts in Myanmar. The authors emphasize that these recommendations should inform interventions at an appropriate time in the future, recognizing that democratic leaders rejected dialogue with the country's military leaders following the military takeover of February 2021. Future peace initiatives will likely look very different from those tried in the past. However, even in a different context, lessons from the past remain important.

1. Take a long-term view and check expectations

- Recognize the constraints limiting rapid impacts of external support for peacebuilding and the risks of expecting progress prematurely. Be aware that domestic political changes and tensions, including elections, can undermine arrangements and trust in the absence of a broad consensus.
- Signaling rapid progression to a post-conflict situation can risk undermining fragile peace processes. Distinguish between a ceasefire agreement that aims to diminish violence and more comprehensive long-term steps. Donors should be prepared for uneven and unpredictable pathways towards peace.
- Peace processes in Myanmar need to address hugely varied conditions and interests. A national approach needs to enable locally defined responses, and it is likely that devolved approaches will be more effective.
- Incremental measures such as piloting development initiatives and shared monitoring or boundary commissions can be established to usefully generate momentum, build confidence, and maintain progress. Careful review of evidence on such initiatives will help to avoid repeating past mistakes.

2. Support trust-building and public confidence measures as soon as conditions allow

- Start early by supporting domestic capacities in conflict resolution, dialogue and consultation with government, ethnic organizations and civil society.
- In the event of progress towards a ceasefire, support initiatives focused on building trust and confidence, drawing on the experience of efforts undertaken in the run-up to the NCA.
- Support or encourage public opinion and public information programs. Despite low interest from conflict actors, government officials, and some donors in the past, building public understanding of and support for peace processes remains important and under-appreciated, both in conflict-affected areas and across the country.
- Invest in understanding the varied positions and perspectives of leaders within armed groups, and use the information to generate tailored and appropriate incentives for change. This may require finding and supporting trusted intermediaries or brokers able to bridge divides.

3. Enable mutual understanding and respond to conflicting interests of different actors

- Support collaboration between democratic leaders and ethnic leaders through formal platforms or informal spaces to avoid past fault-lines and grievances.
- Treat all conflict parties with equally high levels of respect. Non-state actors cannot always be offered full equivalence with states but their challenges need to be understood and their positions acknowledged.

4. Think more about how to work with neighboring countries

- Seek fields of common ground in supporting reconciliation with Myanmar's neighboring governments and regional powers including China, India, and Thailand. Consider entry points including tackling border-related concerns such as human trafficking, drugs, and transnational crime as well as cross-border humanitarian support.
- Consider closer engagement with ASEAN, including individual ASEAN member countries and the ASEAN Office of the Special Envoy, to maximize the impact of diplomatic engagement and ensure consistent messaging around agreed points such as humanitarian access.
- Seek incremental steps or specific opportunities to build wider international engagement such as external monitoring or advisory bodies.

5. Adapt national approaches

- Support inclusive political processes for reforms, especially plans for devolving authority or federalism. Ensure the representation of ethnic leaders at the national level and subnationally, and ensure that proposed reforms reflect the aspirations of ethnic communities.
- Review the impact of past national programs in conflict-affected areas and respond to findings. Doing so will avoid extending the negative track record of development such as new infrastructure or education expansion in conflict-affected areas.
- Consider how to engage appropriate partners for program delivery in ethnic areas without repeatedly defaulting to central government institutions or ethnic majority actors. Include groups that are relatively far from traditional centers of power such as religious, gender or sexual minorities.
- Find entry points to support reconciliation and longer-term social change through indirect approaches in sectors such as women's empowerment, education, and accountable governance. Be willing to work with groups that are not formally registered with the central government.

6. Ensure understanding of Myanmar's diversity

- Ensure staff diversity within aid agencies, projects and programs. Research findings show that the inclusion of staff from underrepresented communities and locations improves effectiveness in conflict-affected and minority areas.
- Encourage and support staff to recognize and respond to prejudice. Consider overall mission statements or guidance to reduce discriminatory attitudes. Implement appropriate recruitment practices to promote diversity and seek to support the capacity of staff or potential staff members from minority backgrounds.
- Consider supporting national level public education campaigns to address prejudice and build mutual understanding alongside reforms or peace processes. Investing in public buy-in for reconciliation and conflict resolution is key to the sustainability of any future peace agreement.

7. Deliver programming on Women, Peace, and Security that recognizes gendered power and inequality as a driver of violence

- Ensure that assessments including political economy and conflict analysis reflect gender among other considerations of power dynamics. Since the military takeover, shifting conceptions of masculinity provide opportunities to foster alternative conceptions of gender identities in Myanmar, including understanding men's roles in and experiences of gender-based violence.
- Structure WPS funding streams to fit the needs and characteristics of key actors involved in existing efforts. Funds must be flexible (to ensure that emerging opportunities can be grasped and momentum can be capitalized on), direct (local actors should be primary recipients where possible, based on appropriate administrative requirements) and core (to enable institutional and longer-term growth).
- Ensure that engagement on WPS is collaborative, coordinated, and strategic to avoid duplication or overburdening local actors. Quality engagement based on nuance and sensitivity is needed to avoid performative or superficial approaches, while widening reach beyond the pool of known and established actors.
- Generating and sharing evidence to learn from what has and has not worked is needed to support improvements in future funding decisions and strategic investment in WPS, with donors ensuring that resources and expertise are allocated to monitoring and evaluation of programs.

8. Carefully consider multi-donor pooled funds and coordination

- Large multi-donor funds are not suited to rapidly changing contexts or emerging reform processes which require greater flexibility. Donors must be willing to tolerate political risks and adapt approaches as needed.
- Given that realistic coordination mechanisms are required to minimize duplication and to maximize effectiveness, consider other ways to share knowledge or resources and allocate funds accordingly while maintaining necessary flexibility:
  - Thematic or issue-specific coordination involving smaller groups of donors with agreed levels of risk tolerance
  - Selection of a lead agency for specific sectors, fields, or subnational areas, potentially with discretion over pooled resources
  - Commitment to using improved systems for sharing information and informal coordination spaces

9. Build on what works and adapt approaches

- Base programs on evidence of what is effective including past evaluations from Myanmar, and be willing to back pilot programs as learning initiatives.
- Plan for longer inception periods and programs that have longer, multi-year timeframes. Incentivize reporting of failure and subsequent adaptation based on learning. Where possible, ensure that evaluation and learning resources are shared publicly to support other international interventions and demonstrate downstream accountability to local communities.
- In addition to high-level consultation and analysis, tools such as project safeguarding principles, guidelines, and reviewing processes can support informed approaches.
- Allow sufficient time and budget for in-depth consultation. Engage well-informed partners close to the ground when designing approaches. If it is not possible to take these steps, it is often better to postpone engagement.
- Support independent, locally driven research and analysis – particularly to inform broader potential programming. In cases, international research agencies or academic institutions can collaborate with national or local organizations. Enable local communities to participate in research, analysis, and evaluation.

10. Avoid a 'gold rush' of foreign aid

- Start small and build gradually to avoid the rush of competing international agencies and the associated administrative burden that is imposed on national partners.
- Focus on priority areas or sectors, especially those that are receiving less international assistance. Consider gap analyses to identify where the greatest need lies and avoid clustering around the most accessible conflict-affected areas or where existing ties have been strongest.
- Support partner capacity and quality assurance, including the institutional development of smaller or emerging organizations. Vital core funding can often be integrated into program budgets.
- While donor agencies often need to work through contracted agencies or grant recipients, avoid long chains of intermediaries and incentivize intermediaries to build on locally devised approaches.

11 Support flexible responses

- Back programming that can adapt to shifting circumstances and avoids the straitjacket of rigid project management. Specialist channels for rapid peace support (such as the US government's Office of Transition Initiatives) can reduce delays and administrative burdens on recipients through modalities such as fixed contract grants with programmatic milestones rather than itemized budgets.
- Pilot novel funding mechanisms that avoid donor-driven approaches. For example, innovation funds can respond to proposals from national organizations in broadly defined fields such as Women, Peace and Security. National advisors can participate alongside donors in fund governance structures, playing a key role in defining guidelines and in enabling adaptation over time in response to changed circumstances or new evidence.
- Implement alternative accountability procedures that offer reassurance without becoming constrictive. Promote downward accountability and transparency, especially for intermediary NGOs or institutions that provide funds to local organizations or communities yet remain answerable only to donor agencies.

Endnotes

1. Local or subnational conflicts in Myanmar are typically termed "ethnic" conflicts even though politically defined ethnic boundaries and identities are only one aspect of these conflicts.
2. Aung San Suu Kyi declined to attend the signing ceremony despite being invited to it. Democratic Voice of Burma (2015), "Suu Kyi Won't Witness Peace Accord," *Bangkok Post*, October 13.
3. For a selection of The Asia Foundation's past published studies see 'Peace & Conflict in Myanmar Discussion Paper Series' [accessed January 2024]."
4. External stakeholders consulted include: 7 EAO leaders; 7 advisors to NCA negotiators and officials of the Myanmar Peace Center; 10 diplomats and advisors from donor agencies and governments; 6 leaders from multilateral agencies, peace funds, and the United Nations; 5 civil society leaders; and 10 analysts and academics. For purposes of categorization, they have been grouped under their current or most recent roles. In addition to the listed numbers of respondents, other specialists and informants were informally consulted during the research process through discussions, group meetings, and online sources.
5. For an analysis of this terminology debate see Aung Kaung Myat (2022), "Sit-tat or tatmadaw? Debates on what to call the most powerful institution in Burma," Tea Circle Oxford website.
6. Detailed recent analyses of other aspects of peace processes in Myanmar include: Jacques Bertrand, Alexandre Pelletier, and Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2022), *Winning by Process: The State and Neutralization of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar* (Cornell University Press); and Martin Smith and Jason Gelbort (2023), *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control* (Transnational Institute).
7. ACLED (2022), *Myanmar Mid-Year Update*.
8. Estimated figures based on various sources. For an infographic, see Al Jazeera (2017), *Myanmar: Major ethnic groups and where they live*.
9. General Aung San, historical icon and father of National League for Democracy leader Aung San Su Kyi, negotiated the Panglong Agreement. Aung San Suu Kyi styled her government's peace conferences as '21st Century Panglong' events, in reference to the historic meeting.
10. See Matthew Walton (2013), "The 'Wages of Burman-ness:' Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43(1): 1–27.
11. For a comprehensive listing of the groups, including BGFs, etc., see Burma News International (2016), *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide* (BNI). Border Guard Forces and militias are armed groups integrated with and under the overall command of the Myanmar military. For more detail, refer to Tom Kramer (2020), "*'Neither war nor peace': Failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar's ethnic borderlands*," Journal of Peasant Studies, 48(2): 1–21.
12. This estimate includes standing reserves as well as active troops. The United Wa State Army is the armed wing of the United Wa State Party (Burma News International [BNI] n.d.). For more detail, refer to Bertil Lintner (2019), "The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process," (United States Institute of Peace).
13. See Thant Myint-U (2019), *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (W. W. Norton & Company).
14. See EBO Analysis Paper no. 2 (2011), *President Thein Sein's Inaugural Speech*.
15. Interview with a key NCA architect, October 13, 2023. Others noted that the positive joint-venture aspect between EAOs and the government was lost after the initial NCA negotiations were completed, as the government then took over the process, deciding unilaterally who to invite and who could participate. This undermined EAO trust in the government's commitment to peace.
16. The primary reference point for government and military negotiators was reportedly the 2008 constitution, while most of the NCA single-text document and roadmap was provided by the EAOs.
17. One close observer reflected that the EAOs felt the MPC was too government-oriented and politically biased, undermining its standing to facilitate the peace process. Interview with a peace adviser, May 3, 2023, and interview with an ethnic leader, March 1, 2023.
18. Interview with former MPC member, February 22, 2023. Nevertheless, some of the negotiators who were part of the MPC are now trusted to varying degrees due to their recent actions with respect to engaging with the Myanmar military.
19. Interview with an ethnic leader, March 7, 2023.
20. Other observers considered it a bureaucratic organization "being paid to do nothing." See Bertil Lintner's remarks in Saw Yan Naing (2014), "Peace Brokers Lack a Mandate: Burma Expert," *The Irrawaddy*, March 18. There were also accusations of mismanagement of funds. See "A new peace facilitating center set up," *SHAN*, February 18, 2016.
21. Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018), A/HRC/39/64. [Available in Burmese and audio in Rohingya].
22. Martin Smith and Jason Gelbort (2023), *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control* (Transnational Institute).

23. This table is compiled from various sources including Martin Smith and Jason Gelbort (2023), *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control* (Transnational Institute); Adam Burke et al. (2017), *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development* (The Asia Foundation); and Burma News International (2017), *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide*, (BNI). The list broadly reflects the situation in 2016, although two of the signatory groups listed did not sign until 2018 (NMSP and LDU). Thus, the table is more indicative than definitive.
24. Martin Smith and Jason Gelbort (2023), *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control* (Transnational Institute).
25. Initial work had been undertaken in 2019 by Search for Common Ground with support from the Joint Peace Fund on public understanding and participation in the peace process. See for example Search for Common Ground (2019), *Communicating for the Future: Building Confidence and Trust in the Peace Process*.
26. Lex Rieffel and James W. Fox (2013), *Too Much Too Soon? The Dilemma of Foreign Aid to Myanmar/Burma* (Nathan Associates). There is debate on whether transitions should be rapid, a form of "shock therapy," or slow and measured (page 31).
27. This impatience may have been due to augmenting factors such as staff turnover in aid agencies and diplomatic missions, and lower levels of Myanmar experience.
28. For example, Shan State is home to many different groups with overlapping territorial claims. See, for example, Irrawaddy (2021), "In Myanmar's Divided Shan State, a New Appeal for Unity; China Will Be Watching," *The Irrawaddy*, July 13; or International Crisis Group (2023), *Treading a Rocky Path: The Ta'ang Army Expands in Myanmar's Shan State* (ICG); or Dan Seng Lawn (2022), *Conflict and Development in the Myanmar-China Border Region* (XCEPT).
29. See, for example, Maung Maung Gyi (1983), *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism* (New York: Praeger).
30. The Union Peace Conferences, often attended by upwards of 1,000 people, were not always conducive events for finding practical solutions to the central issues.
31. It was also reported by more than one respondent that the military believed Aung Min was conceding too much to the EAOs. So, when the NLD was elected, the military saw an opportunity to regain the upper hand in negotiations.
32. See Kim Jolliffe (2016), *Ceasefires, Governance, and Development: The Karen National Union in Times of Change* (The Asia Foundation).
33. For example, Kachin State's Technical Advisory Team is a body made up of five KIA military members and ten civilians. See also Tom Kramer, Oliver Russell, and Martin Smith (2018), *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State* (Transnational Institute), pp. 64–65.
34. For a recent post-coup discussion of the diversity and political culture of EAOs, see Amara Thiha (2023), "It's Time To Rethink Myanmar's Ethnic Armed Organizations," *The Diplomat*, March 24.
35. For example, before agreeing to a ceasefire, one EAO engaged in illicit logging sought approval from the military, through informal channels, to continue this activity, and shared the proceeds with them.
36. Minister U Aung Min, speaking to Mizzima News following the KNU ceasefire, January 14, 2012, quoted in Adam Burke, et al. (2017), *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development*. (The Asia Foundation), p. 38.
37. The Asia Foundation (2021), *Why Does Conflict Persist in Myanmar's Northeastern Borderlands* [non-public]. Also refer to John Buchanan, Kevin Woods, Tom Kramer (2013), *Developing Disparity Regional Investment in Burma's Borderlands* (Transnational Institute).
38. Interview with independent political analyst, April 26, 2023.
39. Interview with an international peace practitioner, April 1, 2023.
40. The Rohingya are not acknowledged by the government to be one of the 135 'National Races' within Myanmar. This means that they are effectively excluded from Myanmar citizenship.
41. The NLD did include some important excluded groups in the UPCs, at least as observers, but the complexities of inclusion were not fully addressed during the NCA process. This remains a huge challenge for the future, given the ever-increasing complexity and proliferation of armed groups and stakeholders in the current context. However, the lesson from the NCA process is that a failure to adhere to the principle of inclusion, no matter how challenging it might be to implement, is a fundamental one.
42. The Asia Foundation (2021), *Why Does Conflict Persist in Myanmar's Northeastern Borderlands* [non-public].
43. For more detail, see *The Role of CSOs in the Myanmar Peace Process* [n.d.].
44. Research respondent, March 16, 2023.
45. The negotiations deadlocked around the issue of a unified military, and the military's insistence that ethnic groups agree never to secede from the Union. EAOs complained that the military was continuing its aggression (e.g., building roads in KNU territory) and blocking political activities mandated by the NCA, such as the Shan public consultations, which eventually led the KNU and the RCSS to suspend their NCA participation. The government was also under pressure to fulfill its election promises of constitutional change, but it was hamstrung by the military's parliamentary veto. Without sustained peace, the role of the military and the structure of the constitution were politically out of reach for parliament, and the NLD therefore shifted its strategy towards weakening the military's standing as security providers. The meeting was unable to resolve the issues at stake, but it did create a pathway for further discussions, which led, in 2020, to the "three-step process" that became central to negotiations

in 2019–2020. Although the military had not formally agreed, the government accepted the three-step process, which proposed a bottom-up procedure at local and state levels to transfer power to local and state authorities while negotiations continued. Drafting state and regional constitutions was included in the second phase, and security-sector reform in the last phase of the process. See Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2018), "Myanmar's Constitutional Reform Process: A pragmatic prioritization of process over substantive reform?" *ConstitutionNet*, June 5.

46. An example of this detail-orientation, cited within the Joint Peace Fund experience by Western donors, was the State Counselor's line-by-line scrutiny of small projects' budgets, including details such as per diems and specific individual salaries.
47. International Crisis Group (2016), *Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, ICG Briefing No.149/Asia (ICG).
48. Interview with an ethnic leader, March 7, 2023.
49. See Burma News International (2017), *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide 2016* (Chiang Mai: BNI).
50. Interview with an ethnic leader, March 7, 2023.
51. See, EPRP and MPSI (2015), "Ceasefire Liaison Offices' Observations on Roles and Functions; why they are important now for Myanmar's peace process and will continue to be so," p. 2.
52. Ashley South and Marie Lall (2018), "Power Dynamics of Language and Education Policy in Myanmar's Contested Transition," *Comparative Education Review*, 62(4): 77.
53. Lu Min Mang in Tamas Wells (2019), "Narratives of Donor Accountability in Support to Peace Processes: The Case of the Joint Peace Fund in Myanmar," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 15(1), August.
54. According to Banim and Ohn (2009) in the Final Evaluation of the Joint Monitoring Committee Support Platform Project, this was not because the inclusion of third-party observers is a global norm, but because of the asymmetry of power between state actors and nonstate actors and the need to build trust by bringing assurances and credibility to the commitment of the more powerful actors. See, for example, Barbara F. Walter (2009), "Bargaining Failures and Civil War," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12(1): 243–61. There were also provisions for bringing such observers in later if the parties agreed (op.cit., p.12) and the use of "trusted and well-respected Individuals" (civilians) as committee members and to provide a degree of independence.
55. Some considered the role hollow and for display only.
56. This was disputed by an experienced ceasefire advisor close to the JMC, who noted that it was closely modeled on the Nepal ceasefire mechanism involving Maoist guerrilla insurgents.
57. Interview with ceasefire advisor, June 20, 2023.
58. See, for example, Jacques Bertrand, Alexandre Pelletier, and Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2022), *Winning by Process, the State and Neutralization of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press). In addition, the Myanmar military reportedly used the JMC to advantage in conjunction with the legal system.
59. Ibid.
60. NCA, paras. 16–18.
61. See, EPRP and MPSI (2015), "Ceasefire Liaison Offices' Observations on Roles and Functions; why they are important now for Myanmar's peace process and will continue to be so," p. 2.
62. Ibid.
63. Interview with ethnic civil society leader, March 20, 2023.
64. EAOs reportedly welcomed the participation of CSOs on technical issues, but CSOs were keen to influence political decision-making as well.
65. Foreign aid provided by each of these donors is typically shaped by a complex and contradictory combination of bureaucratic procedures, technical advice, and political interests. While there is often great diversity both within and among aid agencies and their programs, certain patterns tend to emerge once information is analyzed and assessed.
66. OECD defines official development assistance as government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Loans and credits for military purposes are excluded. OECD (2023), "Net ODA" (indicator), https://doi.org/10.1787/33346549-en, accessed November 2023.
67. OECD data from Thomas Carr (2018), *Supporting the Transition: Understanding Aid to Myanmar Since 2011* (The Asia Foundation).
68. Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1997.
69. Twin oil and gas pipelines from China to a port development on the coast of Myanmar's Rakhine State were eventually completed, part of a long-term plan to improve access to the Indian Ocean. On China's interest in the Indian Ocean and Myanmar, see Bertil Lintner (2019), *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean* (London: Hurst).
70. For an analysis of earlier international aid to Myanmar, see David Steinberg (1992), "The Role of International Aid in Myanmar's Development," Contemporary Southeast Asia 13(4).
71. The Myanmar military takeover of Kokang in 2009, which led to a mass exodus of refugees into China, also set back Myanmar-China relations.
72. Adam Burke, et al. (2017), *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development* (The Asia Foundation), p. 45.
73. The full database is available at https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1 accessed January 2024.
74. Mary Anderson (1999), *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers).

75. Thania Paffenholz (2005), "Peace and Conflict Sensitivity in International Cooperation: An Introductory Overview," *International Politics and Society*, 4: 63–82.
76. OECD (2001), *Helping Prevent Violent Conflict: Part I: Helping Prevent Violent Conflict: Orientations for External Partners; Part II: Conflict, Peace, and Development Cooperation on the Threshold of the 21st Century, The DAC Guidelines*, (OECD).
77. OECD Creditor Reporting System.
78. From 2017 to 2022, Japan pledged approximately USD 380 million to develop Myanmar's border areas, and in late 2017 provided approximately USD 4.2 million to UNOPS to directly support the peace process.
79. China, not an OECD member, is not counted in this data.
80. The Nippon Foundation (2021), *Projects in Myanmar* (The Nippon Foundation Group).
81. Desmond Molloy (2019), *A Hybrid Asian Way to Do Peacebuilding: Sustained Incremental Trust Establishment and Support (SITES), Yohei Sasakawa, Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar and The Nippon Foundation in Myanmar, 2012–2019*, Working Paper (unpublished), Nippon Foundation.
82. Yuzuki Nagakoshi (2020), "Japan and Myanmar's Toxic Friendship," *The Diplomat*, January 15.
83. See Adam Burke et al. (2017), *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development* (The Asia Foundation), Ch 3. Also Matthew Zurstrassen (2020), *A Review of the Myanmar National Community Driven Development Project in Conflict-Affected Contexts* (World Bank).
84. See Dan Seng Lawn (2022), *Conflict and Development in the Myanmar-China Border Region* (XCEPT).
85. NCA clauses 9 and 25.
86. While the Nippon Foundation has six areas of support in Myanmar—peacebuilding, education, human resource development, agriculture, healthcare, and support for people with disabilities—this table represents only peacebuilding.
87. See, for example, Michael Pug (2005), "The Political Economy of Peacebuilding: A Critical Theory Perspective," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 10(2), Autumn/Winter: 23–42; and Oliver P. Richmond and Jason Franks (2009), *Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Statebuilding and Peacebuilding* (Edinburgh University Press).
88. See Teresa Almeida Cravo (2018), "Peacebuilding, Assumptions, Practices and Critiques," *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie—1st Quarter 2018*, for an articulation of key criticisms of the model.
89. See, for example, Donald L. Horowitz (2001), *Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Updated Edition With a New Preface* (California: University Press); Benjamin Reilly (2001), *Democracy in Divided Societies* (Cambridge: University Press); Matthijs Bogaards (1998), "The favourable factors for consociational democracy: A review," *European Journal of Political Research*, 33 (June): 475–496.; Rudy Andeweg (2000), "Consociational Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3 (June): 509–536; cited in Jacques Bertrand, Alexandre Pelletier, and Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2021), *Winning by Process: The State and Neutralization of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar* (Ithaca and London: Southeast Asia Program Publications).
90. For example, through the military-controlled hand of the General Administration Department under the Ministry of Home Affairs.
91. See World Bank (2018), *Pathways for Peace; Inclusive Approaches to preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank).
92. On asymmetry, see Liz Phillipson (2005), "Engaging Armed Groups: The Challenge of Asymmetries," *Accord*, 16 (May); C. R. Mitchell (1991), "Classifying Conflicts: Asymmetry and Resolution," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 518 (Nov.): 23–38.
93. For more detail, refer to Reflection 1 in paper 1 of this series, *The Context for Building Peace: Entrenched Challenges and Partial Reforms*.
94. Criticism tended to focus on governance issues, but later reports suggested that these aspects had improved. See Matthew Zurstrassen (2020), *A Review of the Myanmar National Community Driven Development Project in Conflict-Affected Contexts* (Washington DC: World Bank). See also Rachel Nadelman et al. (2019), *Citizen Engagement: An Independent Review of the World Bank's Commitments in Design and Practice in Myanmar* (Accountability Research Center).
95. Yun Sen (2016), "Aung San Suu Kyi's Visit to Beijing: Recalibrating Myanmar's China Policy," Transnational Institute website, August 16, (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute).
96. Zaw Zaw Htwe (2019), "China Gives $1 Million to Myanmar for Peace Process," *The Irrawaddy*, November. 8.
97. Prashanth Parameswaran (2015), "China Derailing Myanmar Peace Talks: Top Negotiator", *The Diplomat*, October. 9.
98. Yun Sen (2017), *China and Myanmar's Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace).
99. Information from multiple sources, including two interviews with specialists on China-Myanmar relations.
100. Interview with China analyst, May 30, 2023.
101. For example, the Peace Support Group visited the Chinese embassy regularly to discuss updates, and the Swiss reportedly engaged to some extent with the Arakan Army later.
102. Interview with a donor, March 7, 2023.
103. Lex Rieffel and James W. Fox (2013), *Too Much, Too Soon? The Dilemma of Foreign Aid to Myanmar/Burma* (Nathan Associates).
104. Under the JMC there were some limited areas of positive change, such as increased trust between protagonists on the ground and the resolution of lower-profile issues such as troop movements, abuse of civilians, etc.
105. For more detail, refer to the previous paper in this series, *The Context for Building Peace: Entrenched Challenges and Partial Reforms*.

106. The example given here was the issue of continued military roadbuilding in the Karen National Union (KNU) area of Kawkereik. A missed opportunity for raising this to the political level occurred when the Restoration Council of Shan State and KNU suspended their participation in the NCA. At that time, General Yah Pe was trying hard to get them back to the negotiating table. This was a potential occasion to spell out and identify key JMC issues and possible paths to resolution.
107. Interview with donor, February 24, 2023.
108. For example, a large amount of funding channeled through a CSO to support EAO participation in Union Peace Conferences and other dialogues and negotiations risked the organization being perceived by stakeholders, especially government, as an ally of EAOs. This practice also risked distorting the focus and energies of local CSOs due to the bureaucratic and administrative burdens required to manage international funds.
109. Women's representation among EAOs was higher than that of the NLD and the Myanmar military, see Åshild Kolås and Leitanthem Umakanta Meitei (2019), *Women in ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar: Numbers and narratives*, GPS Policy Brief no. 1 (Oslo: PRIO).
110. See for example Bill Davis and Kim Jolliffe (2016), *Achieving Health Equity in Contested Areas of Southeast Myanmar* (The Asia Foundation); and Kim Jolliffe and Emily Speers Mears (2016), *Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar's Ethnic Areas* (The Asia Foundation).
111. "Conflict Sensitivity is the ability of an organization to understand the context in which it operates, understand the interaction between that context and its intervention, and act upon this understanding in order to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts on the context." From CDA (2016), *Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Efforts* (CDA).
112. On denying inconvenient conflicts, see Martha Caddell and Helen Yanacopulos (2006), "Knowing but not knowing: conflict, development and denial," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 6(4): 557–579.
113. See for example Tom Kramer, Simon Richards, and Kyaw Nyunt Sein (2018), *Experiences and Lessons Learned from the 3MDG Strategy to Operate in Conflict Affected Areas, Final Report* (3MDG).
114. UNFPA Evaluation Office (2016), *Evaluation of UNFPA support to population and housing census data to inform decision-making and policy formulation 2005–2014, Myanmar Country Case Study* (UNFPA), p. 83. See also International Crisis Group (2014) *Counting the Costs: Myanmar's Problematic Census*, May, (ICG); and Mary P. Callahan (2017), "Distorted, Dangerous Data? 'Lumyo' in the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 32(2), pp. 452–478.
115. For example, EAO negotiators and advisors noted that at the beginning they did not even have access to simple office resources such as printers and photocopiers to prepare for talks, having to borrow from civil society friends.
116. Karen Peace Support Network (2014), *Critique of Japan International Cooperation Agency's Blueprint for Development in South-Eastern Burma (Myanmar) Full Report [Karen Language]* (Burma News International).
117. To give credit, the Joint Peace Fund did try to incorporate a fast, flexible element in its mechanism through the use of small grants not requiring a full approval process. However, these small grants were often the most politically sensitive, thus requiring a huge degree of discussion, and therefore time, at the board level anyway.
118. See Nordic Consulting Group (2018), *Mid-term Review of the Myanmar Joint Peace Fund*. Bilateral initiatives outside of common mechanisms can be complementary to those mechanisms and can respond to changing circumstances more rapidly than the bureaucracy of a large fund, but these additional channels require transparency. Positive occurrences did take place, for example, during the handover period from Peace Support Fund to the JPF, while mechanisms were being set up to prevent hiatuses in programs due to funding delays.
119. A good example of this dilemma was to be found in the JPF experience of trying to support the Kachin Technical Advisory Team—a body to advise the KIA, a key non-signatory of the NCA. It was eventually funded, but after an inordinately long process.
120. Interview with ethnic leader, February 28, 2023. In contrast, long-term advisors to EAOs were considered to be increasingly well coordinated with each other. See Nordic Consulting Group (2018), *Mid-term Review of the Myanmar Joint Peace Fund*, note 55. International mediation NGOs seeking improved coordination signed a global Statement of Intent of Complementarity for Independent Mediation Support Organizations, though performance in reality has varied.
121. Exceptions included several initiatives under the Kann Lett program and to a lesser extent the JPF.
122. Aid agencies did try the triple-nexus concept in Kachin State when focusing on "durable solutions" for displaced communities, but did less to pursue broader applications incorporating aspects of the NCA process and other efforts to broker peace.
123. Examples include NGO programs supported under multi-donor funds managed by UNOPS in Namtu and Lashio, northern Shan State.
124. Information from Director of NGO in northern Shan State interviewed by research team member in 2021.
125. See Martin Smith (2019), *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute).
126. More than one respondent noted that the social cohesion approach was inappropriate at the time, was way too late, and missed the significant political dimensions associated with the Arakan and their relationship to the center.