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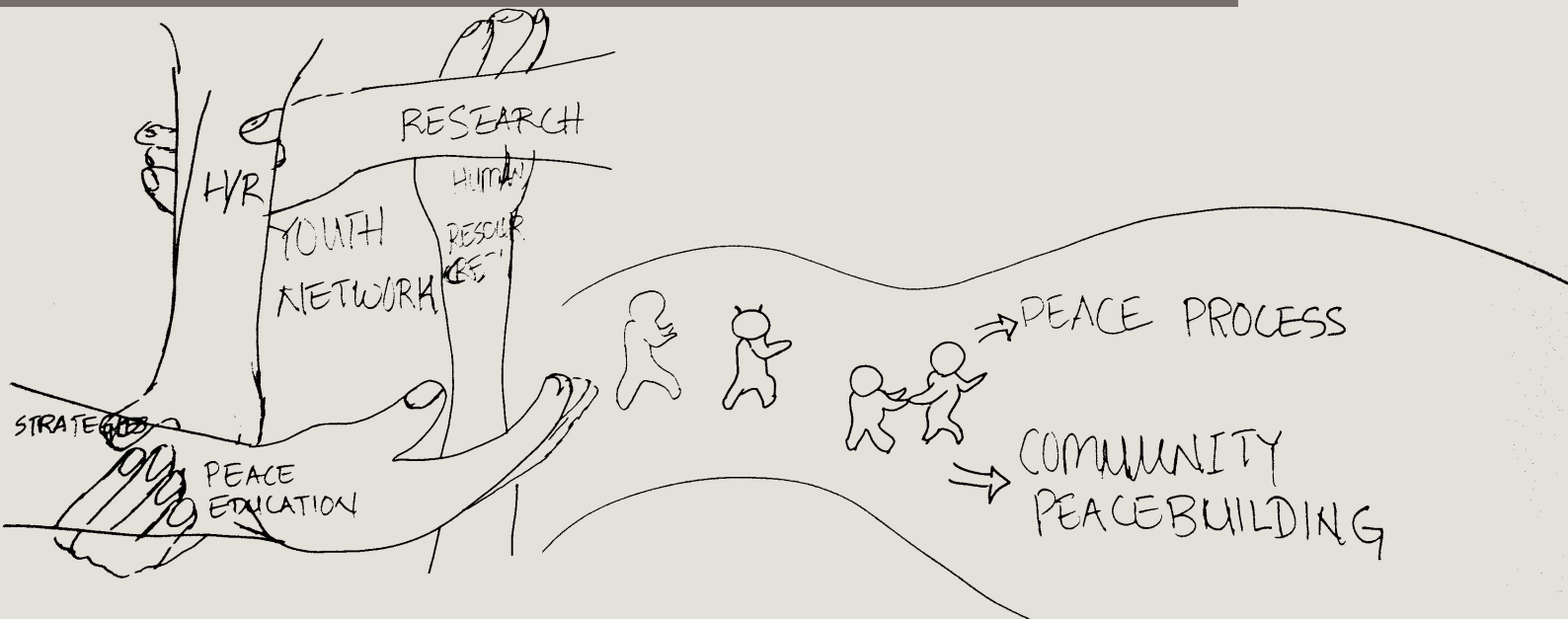
The Youth Space of Dialogue and Mediation in Myanmar

Irena Grizelj



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Images: Cover images are from a workshop with Myanmar's young peacebuilders, Yangon, December 2016
Top: *Myanmar's young peacebuilders in connection – a still from an interactive theatre exercise*
Bottom: *Components of youth peacebuilding in Myanmar – a sketch made by a participant*
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About this paper

This paper is part of a broader exploratory study on the youth space of dialogue and mediation. Young people's efforts in transforming conflict across the globe are abundant and are to some extent documented. In conflict research, however, there is a lack of reflection on the particularities of the youth approach and contribution to dialogue and mediation processes. In an attempt to offer some preliminary reflection, in 2016, Berghof Foundation and Finn Church Aid endeavoured to explore, through qualitative research, the youth space of dialogue and mediation – its characteristics, dynamics, dimensions, challenges and potential.

The study's conceptual framework embodies a broad understanding of dialogue and mediation, in contrast with the otherwise narrow understanding of 'official', high level dialogue and mediation employed by diplomats and international mediators as 'tools' for 'resolving' conflict. The study analyses socially embedded processes of everyday conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts by young people from the whole of society, and highlights those efforts that are dialogic and mediative – in terms of approaches and/or in creating the preconditions for further structured dialogue and mediation processes. Such efforts exemplify a quality of relational interaction among conflict stakeholders across various layers of society.

The broader study is informed by two field studies in Myanmar and Ukraine, along with reflections from a few other cases. The study situates itself within the broader follow-up of the recent United Nations Security Council Resolution (UN SCR 2250, December 2015) on youth, peace and security, which urges greater representation by young women and men in the prevention and resolution of violent conflict.

This paper, the paper on the Ukraine case study, and the broader exploratory study are available at the websites of Berghof Foundation **www.berghof–foundation.org** and Finn Church Aid **www.kirkonulkomaanapu.fi/en.**

About the author

Irena Grizelj is an independent researcher and policy analyst focused on youth engagement in peace processes, currently in the Myanmar context. Over the two years, through her research, Irena has independently convened and created trusted relationships with young people from across the different states and regions of Myanmar. She has gained in-depth knowledge of the Myanmar political, conflict, peace process and political dialogue context. Originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Irena holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Conflict Management from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University. She has forthcoming publications on this subject in the Journal of International Negotiations and with the Paung Sie Facility (formerly Peace Support Fund).

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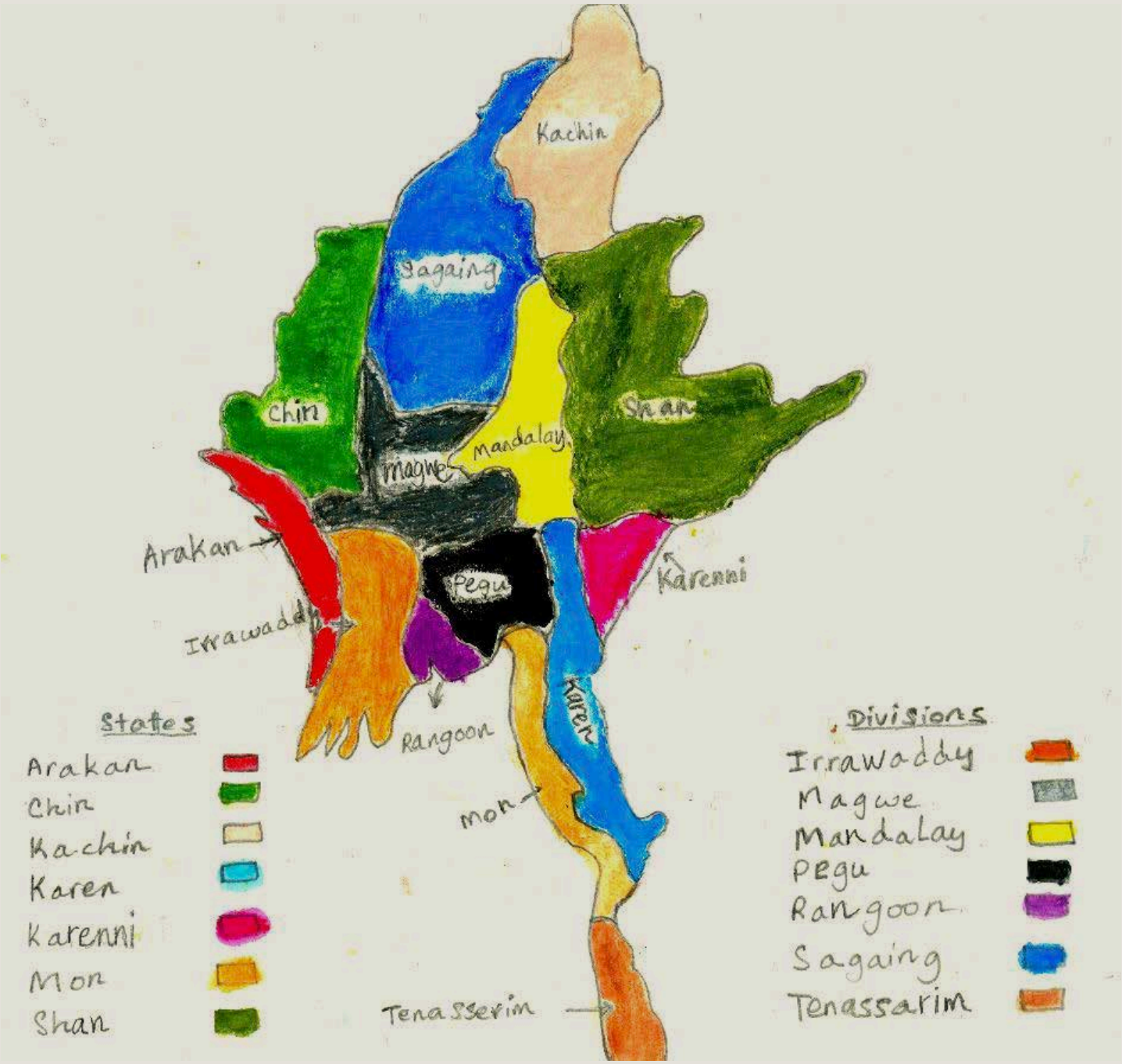
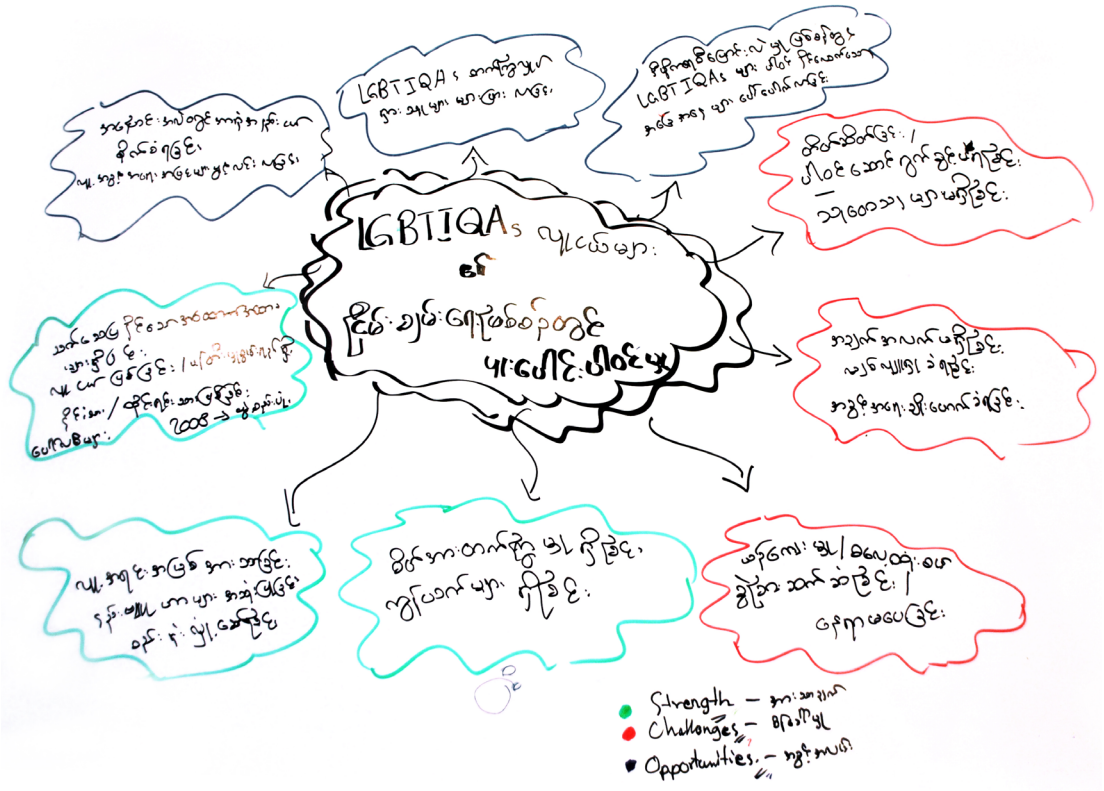
Disclaimer

The information and views set out in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Berghof Foundation or Finn Church Aid.



Map of Myanmar with its 14 States and Regions – drawn by Ta Kwe Say in the book 'Forced to Flee: Visual Stories by Refugee Youth from Burma' (www.burmavisionsforpeace.org)



LGBTIQA issues in peacebuilding in Myanmar – a visualisation by a transgender participant at the workshop with Myanmar's young peacebuilders, Yangon, December 2016

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1 Introduction

1.1 Youth in the Myanmar context

With the onset of Myanmar's political and democratic transition since 2010, following decades of rule by a military government, young people are experiencing multifaceted changes in their social, political, and cultural contexts. Myanmar's youth currently constitute more than a quarter of the population, with a national median age of 27 years,[1] and about 55% are under the age of 30, according to the recently released figures.[2] While presently no legal age definition of youth exists in Myanmar, youth are generally perceived to be people between 18 to 35 years of age[3]; this is above the current international definition, reflective of the social and cultural constructs that shape perceptions of youth.[4] Members of youth organisations, for example, tend to be under 35 years old[5] and membership for the Youth Congress of the National League for Democracy (NLD) – Myanmar's governing party – is reserved for 35 years old.[6]

Since the political transition began in 2010, the organisation of visible and labelled youth groups, youth networks, and youth forums has been on the rise. Prior to 2011, prevailing laws in Myanmar made it illegal for groups of more than five people to gather in public, creating a climate of fear that restricted political gatherings; those who defied the law risked being arrested. [7] That people in Myanmar today are able to gather openly to discuss politics is a noteworthy and important development, taken advantage of by Myanmar's civil society, especially its youth demographic.[8] For example, the first post-transition peace march was organised by young leaders in Yangon on the International Day of Peace in 2012.[9] Another prominent youth-led peace march took place from Yangon to Laiza in 2013.[10]

Today, Myanmar has a nascent, but strong presence of youth-led organisations and networks spanning all 14 states and regions of the country.[11] Several dozen youth organisations exist, which vary in size and scope, with initiatives and objectives including: representation of youth and ethnic interests in development and the peace process; intra- and inter-faith dialogue; civic and peace education; peer-to-peer capacity building and training events; organising and providing aid in disaster-affected regions; and organising peace demonstrations, protests and promotion of human rights. While some organisations exist only in name, many of them are active, with several dozen or hundreds of members and a number of core full-time staff. Many are not registered formally, partly due to the legal procedures, but nevertheless have an organisational structure. Young people often belong to more than one organisation or are affiliated with several networks. Some additionally pursue another venture for employment and/or are undertaking studies part- or full-time. Taken together, this denotes a wide-reaching, strong, and active youth cohort, whose potential to influence the peace process is momentous.

1.2 Why explore the youth space of dialogue and mediation in Myanmar?

Myanmar is highly diverse in terms of geography, culture, language, ethnicity, and religion. This diversity has time and again proved to shape the country's conflict landscape. Historically, young people in Myanmar have actively participated in political and democratic transitions and played key roles in building social cohesion and peace at the grass-roots level. Such efforts in peacebuilding, activism and mass protests have been notably evident over the last six decades: student and youth movements led to dramatic changes in state level power structures and influenced political developments. This includes independence from the British in 1948, the resignation of General Ne Win in 1988, and the sparking of the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007.[12] On the other hand, examples of young people creating space for dialogue and mediation are far more covert and nuanced. The role of youth in Myanmar's peace process, let alone specific efforts related to mediation and dialogue, however, has not been extensively studied, if at all.

Young people across the world, including Myanmar, have proven to be more open, willing, and able to work across dividing lines than the older generation. On December 9th 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted its first ever resolution on Youth, Peace and Security (UNSCR 2250), recognising the important role of young people in peacebuilding. It urges Member States, including Myanmar, to consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels, including direct involvement in peace processes. The resolution also notes that young women and men can be positive role models in preventing and countering violent extremism, and advocates for Member States to offer mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, in partnership with young people.

At present, broadly speaking, Myanmar is dealing with two major conflict contexts, which are perceived to be separate and unrelated: one with an ethnic dimension and the other with a religious dimension. The ethnic dimension has been manifested in the longstanding ethnic armed conflict between the state and non-state ethnic armed organisations (EAOs).

It by large affects the ethnic states on Myanmar's periphery and is encompassed within an ongoing formal national peace process. The religious dimension has been manifested in more recent years through interreligious tensions and violence, which has mainly affected western Rakhine state and central parts of Myanmar. Young women and men have been active, and in some cases successful, in creating spaces of dialogue to bridge divides in both of these conflict contexts. National reconciliation has furthermore been placed as a top priority by Myanmar's new government, highlighting the pertinence and complexity of the conflicts within Myanmar.

As the country moves forward with the peace process and the political transition, understanding how young people are creating space to make their voice heard, and recognising the unique approach of young people in dialogue and mediation, may provide insights on how to better support an already active youth cohort in its peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. This study was undertaken in an attempt to bring to light some of the trends and dynamics in this regard: to analyse the peacebuilding efforts of young people through the lenses of dialogue and mediation.

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1 See Department of Population (2014).
2 See Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population (2015).
3 A national Youth Policy is currently being developed in Myanmar, due to be finalised in late 2017, in which a legal definition will be stated; see Aung Kyaw Min (2016).
4 The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 states: "the term youth is defined [...] as persons of the age of 18–29 years old, and further noting the variations of definition of the term that may exist on the national and international levels" (UN–SC 2015, 1).
5 See, for example, Danmark (2013).
6 The limit is set to be lowered to 30 years old at the next NLD conference; see Swan Ye Htut (2016).
7 For a summary of these laws, see the International Center for Not–for–Profit Law (2011). A new law, The Right to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 15/2011), was passed in 2011 and amended in 2014. See Article 19 (2014) for a good overview and analysis.
8 The Peaceful Assembly Law still contains contentious clauses; young peace and human rights activists who organise peace rallies, protests, marches, and advocacy campaigns may face legal consequences.
9 See Ko Taik (2012).
10 See Lawi Weng and Zen Myat Lahpai (2013).
11 Myanmar is divided into seven ethnic states, which consist of a mixture of minority ethnic groups, and seven regions (formerly called divisions), which are largely inhabited by the Bamar/Burman ethnic group.
12 For further reading and an introduction to youth movements in Myanmar, see for example Taylor (2009). See also Grizelj (forthcoming) for a summary of these movements and their age–relevance.

1.3 Methodology

Research for this study was conducted in Myanmar from late August to early October 2016, with travel to several regions and states. Around 30 semi-structured qualitative interviews and discussions were conducted by the author in the regions Yangon and Mandalay, and in Kayah, Karen, and Mon States. Interviewees included local youth organisations, young activists and human rights defenders, ethnic youth leaders, faith-based youth leaders, international policy analysts, authorities from the formal peace process, national research institutes, international non-governmental organisations, elder mediators, and aspiring young politicians.[13] The author furthermore met with other ethnic and religious representatives in Yangon. While not all interviewees were able to reflect on the youth space of dialogue and mediation, each provided varied insights on the role and challenges of young people within the larger conflict and peacebuilding context. Some were already engaged in creating spaces for dialogue.

Exploring how young people have created and shaped spaces of dialogue and mediation taps into a wide array of social, political, and cultural challenges and opportunities facing young people in Myanmar. While further in-depth qualitative and quantitative research is certainly needed, this study attempts to analyse and highlight some of the key trends observed. With a lack of publications related to creation of the youth space for dialogue and mediation in Myanmar, the findings are predominantly based on the author's observations and reflect the diversity of opinions and perspectives expressed during this study.[14]

13 It should be noted that the findings may not apply to all youth groups across Myanmar, but only to the sample used for this study.

14 The study partly builds on a broader research on youth inclusion in Myanmar's peace process, which the author has been conducting since June 2015.

2 Characteristics and dynamics of the youth space

"We are very different from the older generation. The young are unique because we can celebrate diversity, but the other generation doesn't recognise us. If they saw us as mediators and facilitators, we could solve the problems."[15]

Myanmar exhibits several parallel but interconnected layers of peacebuilding structures, including the formal nationwide peace process and local community peace efforts. Young people are particularly active in creating space for dialogue at the community level: they are intuitive about realising what gets in the way of dialogue and peacebuilding within their communities, and are innovative in devising ways to build bridges between their communities. It was evident that a considerable part of youth peacebuilding efforts are dialogic and mediative in nature – either in terms of approaches, or in creating the preconditions for dialogue and mediation. However, these efforts, often quite unique and creative, usually go unnoticed and are not strategically harnessed by peace stakeholders.

Largely due to cultural norms of hierarchy between generations, young people have lacked a structured platform and the opportunity to have their voice heard by decision makers, comprising mainly of the elder generation – limiting their participation in higher-level peace processes. As such, young people are most active in fostering dialogue among their peers across dividing lines within and between their communities, and to some extent between their communities and political decision makers. Some young people also informally mediate conflicts at the community level, although they are not necessarily recognised as mediators.

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the youth space as it relates to Myanmar's conflict contexts with the ethnic and religious dimensions, and the various state and community level peacebuilding processes around them. It first analyses how young people create and shape this youth space to stimulate dialogue amongst each other, then between communities and leaders, and finally assesses the role of national and international non-state actors in supporting the creation of the youth space.

2.1 The microcosm of the youth space: Building a culture of dialogue

Young people across the various states and regions of Myanmar face different contexts and lived realities, amplifying the heterogeneous nature of the youth cohort. In exploring the youth space, however, consistent characteristics and dynamics emerge as to how young people seek to create dialogue and mediate. Young people approach politically and socially charged issues in nuanced

15 Young man working in a youth-led civil society organisation in Mandalay, which focuses on interfaith dialogue, October 2016.

similar ways – often through initiating youth forums and networks – creating a microcosm of space that promotes dialogue amongst one another. It is often youth groups who initially come together as a networked collective across existing conflict lines, and build mutual trust. The creation of these youth networks seems to stem from the motivation of young people to offer constructive avenues to reduce conflict among political parties, EAOs, and divided communities. In forming a trusted youth network, young people demonstrate that it is possible to overcome generational conflict or political disagreements and work towards a more peaceful future. While recognising that young people live interconnected with society at large, this section explores how young people initiate and first build a microcosm of space for themselves.

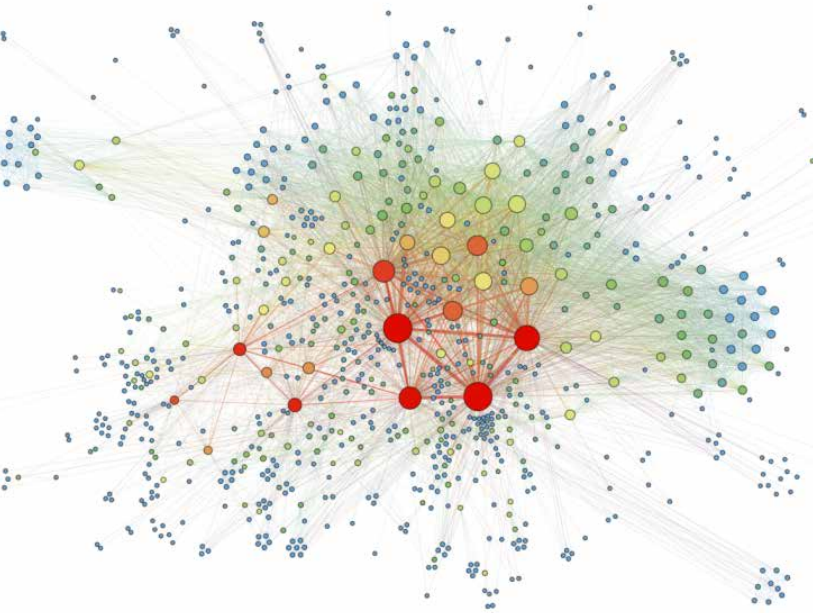
2.1.1 Fostering inter-ethnic relations to build national peace

Currently, at the national-level formal peace process, as highlighted by interviewees for this study, there is minimal space for young people to share their perspectives and apply their knowledge.[16] On the other hand, there was a strong consensus that the sustainability of the peace process depends on the engagement of young people, as the ultimate owners, implementers, and stakeholders of the peace process. Without formal structures available for youth engagement, young individuals and youth organisations in Myanmar have to be creative in manoeuvring their youth space to find alternative ways to foster dialogue, and influence higher-level peace structures.

Youth forums and conferences arranged by youth-led organisations are particularly prevalent today, and are dialogic in nature. Although informal relative to the peace process, but formalised within the youth culture, youth forums gather several dozen to several hundred young people – discussing key topics relevant to them, and may result in the formation of a collective youth voice on certain issues.[17] In regions or states inhabited by several different ethnic groups, youth forums have invited young people from diverse and different backgrounds. In this way, the scope of the youth space of dialogue stretches from within communities to across communities. Young people have organised forums and formed networks within their state or region, such as the Tai Youth Network, Kachin State Youth Network, and the Union of Karenni State Youth.
On a nationwide scale, a few youth-led forums have been initiated in an attempt to bring young people from across the country together. Key examples are the Myanmar Youth Forum (MYF), the first nationwide youth-led forum in 2012, and the recent Ethnic Youth Conference (EYC).
The EYC in July 2016 was the largest gathering of young people in the country's recent history, hosting more than 750 participants from eight majority and 18 minority ethnic groups.[18] One motivation behind the conference was to move past the conflict that had historically divided ethnic groups in Myanmar, and ask "How can we work together?"[19] It took several years to organise and bring the conference to fruition, and its merits were mentioned by the government during the formal Union Peace Conference in August 2016.[20]

These forums often lead to the formation of youth networks, which may be cohesive based on ethnic lines, geographic location, or particular issues. The MYF led to the development of the National Youth Congress (NYC), while the EYC resulted in the establishment of the National Ethnic Youth Alliance (NEYA). Both NYC and NEYA comprise of networks of youth organisations across the country. The youth networks tend to resemble a 'spider web' and function like a distributed network, whereby youth leaders at the centre are able to tap into larger remotely located youth networks. This enables a wide reach of interconnected youth, from urban to rural settings, across the country, although limited financial and transportation resources restrain the efficacy of these networks.

Youth leaders tend to be key in mobilising youth and community networks, and initiating spaces of dialogue. The election of youth leaders in youth organisations takes place "like a democracy".[21] Youth leaders often act as 'go-betweens' between



Visual representation of the interconnected youth space and distributed network created by youth organisations

© Martin Grandjean [CC licence]

youth and community members or senior leaders.[22] They are described as displaying 'natural' leadership qualities and are chosen by young people based on their commitment and perceptions of their leadership ability. In both central and periphery states and regions, youth leaders display high levels of empathy towards conflict-affected communities and violations of human rights, recognising that a new generation must be built on peace.

The convening of young people from different ethnic communities has increased the level of understanding and empathy among young people from the various conflict-affected states and regions of Myanmar, as they come to realise the similarities in their contexts.[23] The forums have thereby succeeded in enabling the encounter of multiple ethnicities, cultures, and languages that might otherwise be separated or isolated from one another – de facto creating opportunities for engaging dialogically for inter-community and inter-ethnic understanding.

2.1.2 Reconciling interfaith tensions through youth networks

Within the conflict with a religious dimension, since 2012, outbreaks of inter-communal violence have been fuelling tensions and corroding harmony and trust between religious groups, mainly Buddhists and Muslims. The violence first erupted in Rakhine state and has since spread to other parts of (mainly central) Myanmar. These incidents have triggered some young people, through a personal motivation, to prevent undue tension between communities that leads to religiously targeted violence. Particularly after 2014, several youth initiatives went underway to facilitate dialogue between different religious groups to 'understand the other side'.[24]

16 This was mentioned by interviewees from both the young and older generations.
17 These issues, such as natural resources, peace and human rights, drugs, and employment, are often relevant to the wider community.
18 See, for example, Thu Thu Aung and MacGregor (2016).
19 Interview with one of the youth conference organisers, September 2016.
20 See State Counsellor Office (2016) for the opening speech at the second Union Peace Conference (dubbed the '21st Century Panglong').
21 Interview with young Chin male during the Youth and Peace Forum, September 2016.
22 Within the context of Myanmar, "youth" and "senior" are used to differentiate between young and elder leaders.
23 Interview with a young Mon male leader, September 2016.
24 Interview with youth leaders from Catholic, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, October 2016. Within the religious community, the term youth tends to mean anyone under 40 years of age.

Leader of Mandalay Catholic Youth Commission, Mandalay

One of the most religiously diverse cities in Myanmar is Mandalay, which hosts Muslim mosques, Buddhist monasteries, Christian churches, and Hindu and Sikh temples. Within the faith-based youth cohort in Mandalay, the youth space exhibits efforts of stimulating interfaith understanding through constructive dialogue. In general, it is difficult for young people to directly approach and influence religious leaders and elders.[25] To circumvent this, faith-based young people have focused on interaction and trust-building among the – more approachable – younger generation to form interfaith youth networks. These interfaith networks, which were described as being based on establishing 'friendship', empower young people to reach out to each other's communities and build understanding of other faiths as a basis for preventing potentially violent incidents.

Within this conflict context, young people were perceived to be particularly malleable and open to influence by religious leaders, which is both a risk and an opportunity, depending on the approach of the religious leader. The risk is particularly associated with rural and uneducated youth, who were described as being more vulnerable to mobilisation by religious leaders against other religious groups. Education on, and awareness of, other faiths were recognised as key to addressing this vulnerability and inducing a constructive attitude among young people towards other religions. To this end, youth initiatives demonstrate creative approaches to foster and facilitate interfaith dialogue and education, including 'exposure and tolerance' trips to religious sites, music festivals promoting peace and religious freedom, and group excursions and sports activities for young people of different faiths.[26] The youth-led organisations that focus on interfaith dialogue in Mandalay commented that, once young people were aware of the common values among different religions, they become engaged in spreading this awareness through interfaith activities.

Young people also play a crucial role in preventing the spread of rumours, particularly through social media, which has had a significant role in fuelling tensions between religious groups: members of faith-based youth networks, "who are already friends", fact-check the rumours by connecting with one another on social media and mobile phones, and then spread 'corrected' information to their communities. In several instances in Mandalay, such prompt initiatives have been crucial in preventing rumours from causing outbreaks of violence.[27] Another youth organisation noted that a 'side-effect' of their community youth training sessions – through which they create space for dialogue – is the build–up of trust across young people from different religious communities. They get to "listen [to] and learn from one another", and this builds bridges between them.[28]

25 Interview with young male catholic leader, September 2016.
26 Such as those organised by The Seagull: Human Rights, Peace and Development Organisation in Mandalay.
27 Interview with the founder of The Seagull: Human Rights, Peace and Development Organisation, October 2016.
28 Interview with young male activist and founder of a youth–led organisation working on promoting social harmony, September 2016.

Interfaith education at Paung Daw Oo Monastic School, Mandalay

2.2 The youth sphere of influence: Convening and mobilising communities

In the midst of violent conflict, youth-initiated and youth-led organisations at the community level have also created spaces for community members to come together, build confidence among each other, resolve misunderstandings, and subdue tensions. This space often brings together community and state authorities, demonstrating young people's efforts to foster relationships between different stakeholders. In synthesising a collective community voice on key local concerns, young people have endeavoured to include local concerns in the formal peace process through advocacy with EAO leaders, political parties, and government authorities. In recognising that national reconciliation must involve the public in order to confront root causes of the conflict and address local grievances, young people in Myanmar have been key connectors of grassroots level peacebuilding to the national level peace process – in mobilising to raise the community voice to high level decision makers.

"We always stand with them."[29]

In August 2016, over 270 representatives from the Ta'ang community – including politicians, civil society organisations, monks, Members of Parliament, and community leaders – convened for three days to discuss key concerns and demands to be raised at the upcoming national Union Peace Conference (21st Century Panglong Conference). During the meeting, the most important issues were agreed upon and synthesised into a statement.

The meeting was organised by a central committee comprising young people, monks and representatives of Ta'ang Literature and Culture Association (TCLA), Ta'ang Students and Youth Union (TSYU), Ta'ang Women's Organisation (TWO) and political parties. However, it was mainly initiated by TWO and TSYU, the majority of whose members are young women and men. Comments for national newspapers were also provided mainly by youth leaders. This initiative strongly exemplifies youth groups' efforts to create space for dialogue within their community in the context of ethnic minorities' struggle for recognition and reconciliation.

The TSYO and TWO have also collaborated with young people from different ethnicities within their community and with other ethnic youth networks to organise workshops during critical times. For example, they were prompted by the recently elevated tension between Ta'ang and Shan ethnic groups to arrange a timely workshop for young people from both ethnic backgrounds to come together and discuss these issues within a youth space. Such workshops aim to stimulate dialogue and foster understanding between the groups, reduce hate and blame, increase trust, and minimise misperceptions.

At the community level, young people have acted as human rights advocates and messengers, sensitising community concerns to political parties and EAOs, and in some cases informally negotiating with EAOs the release of recruited civilians.[30] Some young leaders, particularly from ethnic states, have been called upon by the community to mediate in local disputes.[31] For example, a specific case is known where young people were called upon by the community to mediate between an international extractives and community members firm regarding an injury dispute.[32] Having built a reputation within the community, the young mediators were perceived as trusted leaders to resolve the issue; consequently certain companies have further engaged young people to mediate agreements between communities and corporations.

At the state level, young people have generally not been granted a formal role to negotiate or mediate. This space is predominantly seen as 'reserved' for the elder generation and senior leaders, while young people are often perceived by their elders as needing further experience, and greater maturity and composure. There are, however, a few examples where youth networks have created the space for non–confrontational encounter and engagement between actors involved in the protraction of the ethnic armed conflict. For example, the Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY) – a network of different youth groups in Kayah (formal government name for Karenni) State – has informally brought together several EAOs and political parties within their state, as highlighted in the following text box.

29 Young female member of Ta'ang Students and Youth Union (TSYU), speaking on their relationship with the community.

30 Interviews with female Ta'ang mediator and a male Shan youth leader, August and September, 2016.

31 See story "I am very interested in solving problems" on page 18.

32 Interview with the representative of an international non–governmental organisation working at the community level.

"It's simple: if they don't meet, they won't understand one another."[33]

Members of the Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY), Kayah State

Kayah State is home to six different ethnic groups. The Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY), created in 2006, brings together young people from these ethnicities, and different backgrounds and religions. It opened an office in the state capital, Loikaw, in 2012, which they call "a little common space in our state". UKSY is composed of members from several youth organisations, and the office is a home for more than 20 full-time young staff members from different backgrounds, religions, and ethnic groups. Although highly active in politics, UKSY is strictly independent of political partisanship. With seven different EAOs and three political parties active in Kayah State, UKSY has sought to build a new generation that is not divided. The belief is that to have national peace, there first needs to be cohesion and peace at the state level.

UKSY explained: "The older generation of armed group and political party leaders rarely met and spoke together; that's why they have misunderstandings". By bringing together and building trust between youth organisations and the youth wings of armed groups and of political parties, UKSY created a strong and interconnected youth network. They then worked to bring together the 'older generation' of leaders. Recognising a level of mistrust and lack of communication between senior leaders, UKSY approached this space informally, which is less confrontational than formal meetings. In their first attempt at mediation, they invited the different EAOs and political parties to a celebratory dinner; this was viewed as an entry point for them to meet, bond over common traditional cuisine, and increase mutual understanding. Over the years, UKSY has organised workshops and meetings – both formal and informal – that create space for the different parties, as well as young people, to meet. One unique method for dialogue utilised by UKSY is inviting different political and ethnic leaders from within the state to attend thematic workshops or community forums as panellists and speakers. This simultaneously provides a space for the leaders to listen to one another (which fosters understanding), as well as acts as a bridge through which the community can engage with decision makers. It is an opportunity for the different stakeholders within the state to express common concerns and search for common ground.

UKSY's activities have not been entirely without risk. Particularly prior to 2013, the government kept a close watch on potentially politically relevant activities; their close interactions with EAOs or ethnic political parties could have led to legal persecution. Nevertheless, UKSY persevered, and the impact of their initiative is evident in the fact that their state experiences significantly reduced violent armed conflict since 2012: "Now, they rarely fight, because we brought them together."

33 Male youth leader, Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY), September 2016.

There is additionally a difference in approach to engaging with politics and the peace process between periphery/ethnic and centrally-based youth. Traditionally, within rural communities, youth groups – which consisted of unmarried women and men – used to play key roles in mobilising the community, for example by raising funds for funeral services within an impoverished family, organising blood donations, or providing free education for children. This mobilising power had given the young people the legitimacy to raise their collective voice to make suggestions to community leaders on key issues, as well as oppose leaders' decisions.[34] However, with the advance of the ethnic armed conflict in the periphery states of Myanmar and lack of employment opportunities for young people within rural communities, many young women and men migrate for work across borders or to urban areas.[35] Today, fewer young people remain in rural communities to take on the traditional role of community mobilisation. Youth groups initiated within periphery states tend to work with their community leaders to build trust with the community, using less confrontational tactics to influence decision-making processes and move an agenda forward. For example, youth groups might research and present policy papers on critical issues facing the community or seek support to organise a youth network or event. Young people in urban and central Myanmar, in contrast, have given visibility to the youth space and made their voice heard through activism, demonstrations, and protests, through which they gain credibility as youth leaders.

To counteract the hierarchical structure that lies above them, young people have used their collective youth voice – channelled through youth forums or networks as described previously – which gives them strength in numbers, and enables young people to more effectively be heard by decision makers. Young people have also used forums and youth networks to link their youth space to decision-makers within the peace process. For example, several members of the EYC were subsequently invited as observers to the national Union Peace Conference.[36]

In working within the community decision making space, young people position themselves both as individuals and as youth groups, depending on the problem and context they are dealing with. The perception of youth among elder leaders may at first be sceptical, and several youth leaders have therefore described there being "a process" to gain trust and credibility of the both the community and elders in order be in a position where their voice is listened to. They must often prove their value first, for example, by working on community issues to build a reputation. Particularly in ethnic states, young people might position themselves within cultural and literature associations, or youth organisations related to preservation of ethnic identity, and may act as a wing of political parties or EAOs.

Some youth leaders working on interfaith dialogue also find ways to approach influential religious leaders, in an attempt to build bridges between leaders of different religious communities. Often through a long and persistent process of trust–building, these youth leaders have become intermediaries between religious leaders, and have sought to raise awareness and understanding of other faiths. One such youth leader believed that being young was perceived as less threatening by religious leaders, who may otherwise be under pressure to "have all the answers" for the community. He explained his approach: "To get to know the elders, I ask simple questions about their religion, which makes them curious about my

34 Interview with ethnic male mediator working at a national research institute.

35 A research conducted by ILO (2015) indicated that the age of potential migrants was generally between 18 and 24 (55%), with no gender difference. Most young migrants in Myanmar were unemployed (74%) or had not completed a high school education (69%).

36 See, for example, S.H.A.N. (2016).

religion as well. That is when I can start educating them on different religions, which they might not normally interact with". In working with religious leaders, youth leaders are also able to extend their reach to young people within different religious communities, and engage them in interfaith activities. Youth organisations and youth leaders, over time, form connections with key actors – including ethnic leaders, Members of Parliament, ministers, and government officials – opening opportunities to influence elder's views and attitudes.[37]

2.3 Nurturing the youth space: The role of national and international non-state actors

Recognising the nascent and evolving youth space in Myanmar, non-state actors, such as civil society, non-governmental organisations, and elder mediators, have provided key resources and support to bolster youth engagement in peacebuilding. In terms of engaging with young people to facilitate a 'youth space', one elder mediator explained his approach, which is based on gaining young people's trust to enable them to mediate. Listening to their concerns and letting young people feel there is no hidden agenda is vital to building trust, he explained: "Sometimes the young [people] want to talk to someone more senior than themselves, but some elders don't want to listen or talk to them... I listen to them."[38]

Several national and international non-governmental organisations in Myanmar also play a crucial role of nurturing the youth space of dialogue and mediation. Certain programmes run by these organisations seek to mobilise, educate, train, and empower young people to be leaders

"I aspire to be a mediator. Right now, I am just a facilitator of interreligious dialogue."

Male youth leader from the Mandalay Catholic Youth Commission (MCYC)

within their communities. The alumni of these programmes become part of a large dynamic network, which helps drive and sustain the youth space. For example, Action Aid runs a Fellowship Programme, which works at the grassroots level to train community-selected youth leaders to initiate and manage community development projects. It has been very successful in rural and ethnic regions of Myanmar. Nyein (Shalom) Foundation runs the Interfaith Youth Cooperative Action for Peace (IYCAP), which trains young people in interfaith dialogue and conflict transformation at the community level. The local organisation Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR), with international technical assistance, ran a three-year research project (2013 –2015) in Kachin state, which facilitated the establishment of a multi-ethnic Kachin State Youth Network (KSYN).[39] These programmes intertwine elements from peacebuilding, community development, mediation, and dialogue to encourage young people to initiate spaces that form bridges across conflict lines at community and state levels.

37 Recognising the sensitive Myanmar context, specific examples and references have been avoided to minimise potential harm to interviewees.

38 Interview with senior male activist and former informal mediator from Kachin, October 2016.

39 See RANIR (2016); and Gray and Burns (forthcoming).

Young mediator, Shan State

"I am very interested in solving problems"

Since childhood, Sai Oo, born in Northern Shan, has been interested in observing and understanding problems. He recalls his early attempts at mediating disputes in the playground between children fighting for the winning prize in traditional kite matches. Now 34 years old, although still very much perceived as 'young' by elders, Sai Oo has gained informal recognition as a 'natural' and mindful mediator, and is often called upon by the community to resolve disputes. He is extremely active in facilitating dialogue and trust-building among youth, based on his conviction that young people of Myanmar today will be able to end the decades of violent conflict. A key leader and contact for young people, he has successfully maintained a youth network that spans across Myanmar, and he was one of the co-founders and initiators of the Ethnic Youth Conference.

Having built credibility with the community and its leaders over several years, Sai Oo has been able to facilitate informal negotiations between the community and EAOs or government authorities, for example on humanitarian and security issues. When called to mediate a community dispute, Sai Oo first seeks to analyse the problem and identify the key actors. If he does not personally know the key people involved, he will try to find the key actor's friends "who can talk to the person". He highlights this important skill: "I can find out very quickly who the key people to the conflict are". When meeting with the parties to the dispute, he will listen to both sides of the argument, not judge, for "two or three hours, it doesn't matter how long". Reinforcing that trust is critical, he will always put the agreement in writing and share it with stakeholders for the purpose of verification and transparency.

With the outbreak of violent conflict between two EAOs in the region, Sai Oo mobilised his youth network and called upon several ethnic youth leaders to initiate 'Conflict Mitigation and Trust-building Workshops' between the two ethnic communities at risk. Through these workshops, they sought to build bridges and facilitate trust-building between the communities to prevent the escalation of conflict.

One key aspect of Sai Oo's strategy is that he utilises social media and news outlets in order to remain open and transparent with the community. Caring deeply about the ongoing conflict, Sai Oo often travels to displaced communities to assess the support needed, which further builds his trust and credibility in the community. Pictures that he posts in his Facebook page are often used by media outlets, and his factual statements, based on observations, are also quoted by the press.

What gives a young Sai Oo all this leverage and legitimacy? "I am good at relationship-building … I treat everyone as equal and don't discriminate". He takes care to be observant and to notice what conflict actors like and dislike. "Time, I think, is very important. When they are hungry, you see them getting angrier." He also expressed the emotional toll that his work can take: "Sometimes I cry when leaders break their promise [the agreement made]". When asked whether he decided himself to take on this role, he laughed, conceding, "Yes, I am very interested in solving problems… Step by step, we are getting there".

3 Challenges and barriers

Hierarchical social culture

One of the key challenges for youth is the hierarchical structure that characterises Myanmar society, whereby young people are not perceived as having a place in decision making. Young people interviewed for this study consistently expressed the difficulty they faced in making their voice heard by the elder generation. When navigating hierarchy, young individuals and youth groups often need to 'prove' their capacity and commitment to community development before earning the trust and attention of elders. This sometimes causes self-doubt and lack of confidence among young people, even those who have undergone extensive training and capacity building. When asked about the barriers for youth related to mediation specifically, phrases such as "youth in Myanmar get too excited", "youth are not mature and not ready" to facilitate or lead within the peace process, or "youth capacity is limited" were mentioned by elders working within the formal peace process. On the other hand, young people's potential to lead, their creativity in creating spaces for dialogue, and ability to mobilise the community were especially praised by both national and international stakeholders working within both conflict contexts.

Gender dynamics

For young women, cultural and religious traditions pose a further barrier to becoming leaders and having their voice heard in the community and national level. A stereotype pervades Myanmar that "women can't do what men can do in politics", and religious traditions reinforce this perception. Both young women and men were cognisant that young women need to be encouraged and given a space to voice their opinions, with few role models available for young women. Youth groups tend to have active female leaders or co-founders and more gender parity in their membership. Some youth organisations have constitutions that include the requirement for a minimum percentage of women to be in leadership roles. One youth organisation highlighted the effectiveness of its constitution in empowering young women, and how its gender conversation changed from "we need 30% women" to "we need 30% men!"[40]

Funding and resources

Funding for youth organisations or young individuals focused on peacebuilding is limited, and because many youth leaders wear multiple hats, belonging to several different organisations or networks, they are often pulled away from dialogue or facilitation roles into other areas of work where funding is more readily available, such as livelihoods, vocational training, or education. This is compounded by young people often having to divide their time between studying and working to earn an income. Furthermore, the funding structure of donors, who often seek to give larger grants, poses a barrier for organisations that only require small sums or core funding to sustain their activities, which donors are less likely to support. As a result, Myanmar's highly potential youth space remains largely unrecognised and unsupported by donors.

40 Interview with Ta'ang Students and Youth Organisation, September 2016.

Technical knowledge and capacity building

Peacebuilding, including mediation, are relatively new concepts and areas of work in Myanmar. The need for greater support in capacity building within this field was emphasised by both youth and elders interviewed. While young people defined some of their strengths as having the energy, flexibility, and time to work on peacebuilding, they also recognised their lack of exposure to education, theory, technical skill, and best practice around peacebuilding and mediation, and expressed a desire to develop their capacity in this field of work.

Personal risks

Working on interethnic and interfaith dialogue does not come without risk. Both faith-based and non-faith-based youth leaders talked about the threats they received when organising training and interfaith or interethnic dialogue.[41] For example, one young Buddhist human rights activist, and co-founder of a youth organisation promoting peace and tolerance, reflected on his experience of standing up for the Muslim community and working with Muslim leaders during the tensions of 2012, during which time an extremist Buddhist group threatened him personally.[42]

Entrenched conflict fissures

'Centre' versus 'periphery' is an issue that has remained entrenched in Myanmar, as many peripheral (ethnic and rural) states and regions of the country have remained isolated from the (urban) centre. This results from a complex mixture of the ruling tactics utilised under the British colonial administration, which is compounded by poor transportation infrastructure, and barriers to understanding – both in terms of language and communication channels – that geographically isolate many parts of Myanmar. Due to these barriers, youth groups from ethnic states or rural communities often receive less support, in terms of funding, resources, and opportunities to participate at youth conferences and trainings, than 'central' Yangon and Mandalay-based groups.
Reflections from both elder mediators and several youth leaders have further highlighted some of the divides that are unfolding among young people since the political transition. Regarding the 2010 and 2015 elections, comments included: "These elections have divided youth; politics has divided youth", underscoring the exploitation of, and influence over, youth by religious, political, ethnic, and corporate actors for their own interests.[43]

41 This experience was particularly emphasised within the Rakhine context.

42 Interview with Yangon–based human rights activist, October 2016. His resilience and human rights values were evident: "While I felt isolated and lost friends, I also found a network of like–minded people".

43 Interview with a male senior mediator and prominent activist from Kachin, August 2016.

4 Concluding observations: Common trends and approaches

"They want to set a new generation. The youth don't want to fight."[44]

It is clear that youth have both strengths and weaknesses in initiating and facilitating dialogue, as well as in attempting to mediate within the peace process. While young people are perceived as not having enough experience by the elder generation, they are simultaneously not provided with sufficient capacity development, nor the space to apply their knowledge and skills. Young people therefore take their own initiative to create the space of dialogue and support mediation of conflicts between conflict actors. They mainly work within their community on informal peace efforts, as mediators and facilitators of dialogue. Predominantly, young people seek to create dialogue within their own youth collective and across youth collectives, as well as to build state- and national-level youth networks. There are instances where youth networks have facilitated dialogue at the state level between conflict actors. There are also examples, albeit less frequently, where young leaders have been called to mediate or negotiate community level disputes, or on behalf of communities with state or corporate authorities. In terms of tensions between religious groups, several youth-led initiatives have sought to facilitate interfaith understanding and promote tolerance.

Young people particularly perceive themselves as having direct access to their community and an understanding of the effects of the conflict at the grassroots level, which they strive to communicate to decision makers, including stakeholders in the peace process. Without a structured and institutionalised platform to make their voice heard, young people's approach necessarily differs from that of the older generation: young people are known to use humour, music and art, social media, and especially empathy and a notion of 'standing with' their community and peers for counteracting violent conflict.

What seems to be unique about the youth space is the initiative that many youth leaders and organisations take to build bridges and trust with one another first, creating a strong network based on friendship. While the use of the internet and social media has increased exponentially since the political transition in 2010, and has supported online dialogue and sharing of information, one young leader interviewed commented that "we cannot build trust [only] through phones". The comment highlights the importance of face-to-face meetings in nurturing the youth space within an evolving conflict context. Indeed, one of the unique factors that seems to enable young people to approach authorities, including EAOs, is the youth-led networks, which provides a foundation of trust and entry points across conflict lines. This gives youth greater credibility and leverage in countering cultural hierarchy to work with community, religious, and political leaders. It also demonstrates to authorities the possibility of working together across conflict lines, and moving beyond historical grievances.

44 Female national staff from donor agency supporting the peace process.

5 Opportunities to expand the youth space

"Youth have the capacity, but no chance to apply themselves."[45]

There is much potential for the Myanmar government, local stakeholders, donors, and national and international organisations to provide better support for – and partner with – young people who are engaged in creating spaces of dialogue and facilitating trust across conflict lines. The network of youth organisations in Myanmar who are facilitating conflict transformation are evidently growing. However, mediation and dialogue facilitation as a profession has not yet taken off among young people in Myanmar, one reason being the absence of any (formal or informal) institutionalised form of skill and capacity building in this field. Although many young people's approach is indeed mediative, and they are cognisant of their potential to mediate, most did not perceive themselves to be meditators per se. As such, the aspiration to be a mediator was a common reflection by several of the young women and men interviewed for this study: they have a strong desire to learn the technical skills of mediation, to then be given the chance by senior leaders to mediate. In this light, youth groups and networks demonstrate their potential to promote dialogue, understanding, and trust-building both within the youth space and within society at large.

Greater needs-based funding and resources can be invested in technical skills and capacity development of young women and men in mediation and dialogue to strengthen existing youth-led efforts. Simultaneously, enabling opportunities and spaces for young women and men to apply their creative conflict resolution approaches within local and national peace structures need to be facilitated by current decision makers, particularly the government and EAOs. This would build the intergenerational perceived legitimacy of young people as key links to sustaining peace, and increase the confidence of young people to work across dividing lines in creating spaces of dialogue and mediation.

"Youth get excited when they face a challenge, but in this meeting [political dialogue], we need to listen and be calm. We observed their faces. If they are brave, we select them... It was not the right time for youth. But I observe that some young people are very mature. We [older generation] have experience, but we respect youth. So now, the young need the exposure, the practice and the experience."

Female negotiator on behalf of an EAO, reflecting on the selection of young mediators

45 Interview with a female ethnic senior negotiator, September 2016.

Older and younger generation of women leaders, Kayah State.

Youth empowerment and training programmes have been extremely useful – albeit in short supply – in facilitating and guiding young people to understand how to create, nurture, and utilise their space. Civil society and NGOs can expand these programmes, and empower young people to design strategies that extend dialogue and ideas into action and implementation. As trust is crucial for youth leaders and organisations, these programmes only work when they have the trust of young people themselves. As the manager of a well-established youth empowerment programme noted, "communities and youth can sense when international NGOs are working with self-interest". It is important, therefore, that such youth-focused INGO programmes are designed and developed in consultation and partnership with young people.

In considering national reconciliation, the number of young people that comprise EAOs and the military additionally cannot be ignored. Exploring the capacity of youth to bridge civil-military relations through dialogue and mediation could be an important mechanism for social reintegration.

When expanding the youth space of mediation and dialogue, recognition must be given to the different approaches of young people in peripheral and central areas of Myanmar, as well as between religious and ethnic contexts. Young people and their organisations have created complex, multi-layered networks across Myanmar; the role, approach, and positioning of these networks are often diligently analysed and adapted to the specific local contexts. Recognition of these differences can ensure more equal distribution of the support provided to the budding youth space, within which young people are attempting to mediate and facilitate dialogue on some of the most pressing conflict issues.

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