



Thet Naing Oo/Mandalay Catholic Youth Commission

STRENGTHENING LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE

Reducing Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar

JUNE 2016

Background

Since the 2012 outbreak of violence in Rakhine State, sectarian divisions have emerged as a significant fault line in Myanmar society, one that has been exploited for political gain and that risks undermining Myanmar's transition to a peaceful, inclusive society. While episodes of intercommunal violence across the country are the most visible signs of conflict, rising tensions are seen in the propagation of hate speech, socially sanctioned expressions of discrimination, increasing segregation of Muslim communities, and efforts to shut down Muslim businesses and inhibit minority religious practice. Civil society initiatives to promote a culture of tolerance and protect the rights of religious minorities act as a counterweight to social and political trends toward chauvinism and have the potential to reinforce the structural conditions for peaceful coexistence among Myanmar's diverse communities.

Approach

Funded by the Peace Support Fund, Mercy Corps' 15-month *Local Resilience for Peace (LRP)* program aimed to reduce intercommunal conflict in two at-risk areas, Mandalay and Taunggyi, by reinforcing existing capacities to prevent and respond to tensions. Implemented in partnership with local NGO Swe Tha Har, the program (1) strengthened the ability of 40 civil society, religious, and government leaders to respond proactively to communal tensions by resolving disputes, and (2) empowered seven civil society organizations to promote tolerance and reconciliation between diverse ethnic and religious communities. By building local networks of effective, diverse actors with an interest in promoting peaceful communities, the program sought to lay the foundations for locally-led monitoring and response to intercommunal violence.



Training diverse leaders to more effectively resolve disputes

Key Outputs – Objective 1

- 40 leaders trained in dispute resolution
- 4 dispute resolution trainings held
- 4 quarterly exchanges organized
- 9 bi-weekly learning meetings held

Using an interest-based negotiation framework adapted to Myanmar's context, Mercy Corps' dispute resolution capacity building approach combined classroom and experiential learning over the life of the program. At program start, an actor mapping was conducted to identify influential and respected leaders responsible for dispute

resolution, including ward administrators, religious leaders, and civil society leaders. Following a two-day foundation training in interest-based negotiation, the program team convened learning exchange meetings to share dispute resolution experiences, learn additional skills, and network with other leaders.

Impact

- **97% of participating leaders reported having changed the way they resolve conflicts.** Leaders credited newly honed skills with regard to clarifying parties' interests, applying systematic negotiation and mediation techniques, identifying root causes of conflict, and promoting open communication. According to one participant, *"The training has changed my perception and taught me to separate people from the problem."* Another participant commented, *"After the training, whenever I resolve conflict I explore the interests of the conflicting parties and can resolve conflict more systematically than before."*
- **Leaders were able to resolve disputes with increasing success and frequency.** The number of leaders involved in dispute resolution on a monthly or more frequent basis increased by 28% over the project period, while their success in resolving disputes increased by 29%.
- **Leaders' confidence in their dispute resolution skills increased over the program.** The proportion of leaders who rated their negotiation skills and conflict resolution efforts as above average increased by 19% over the program, while the proportion of leaders who rated their level of confidence as above average more than tripled over the project period. *"This methodology is valuable for those of us who are resolving a variety of conflicts, especially conflicts between individuals of different religions. After learning the methodology, I gained more confidence,"* one participant observed.



Metta Campaign

"[The quarterly exchange meeting] is really a great opportunity to meet with government actors and share our opinions. I hope to continue this relationship in the future so that we can support each other."

— Civil society leader from Taunggyi

Empowering civil society organizations to prevent intercommunal violence

Key Outputs – Objective 2

- 7 CSOs supported and mentored
- 8 CSO-led peace projects implemented
- 2 Project Cycle Management trainings held
- 2 diversity trainings held
- 2 participatory assessment trainings held
- 7 participatory assessments conducted by CSOs
- 2 regional reflection workshops organized
- 1 national learning event convened

Recognizing that social change is most effective when driven from within, Mercy Corps' civil society strengthening approach emphasized local ownership, built local capacities, and supported local initiatives to prevent and respond to intercommunal conflict. The program supported civil society organizations and activists to design and

implement activities that promote tolerance and reconciliation in divided communities. Key activities included training on conflict assessment, strategies for promoting tolerance and reconciliation, and project cycle management; small grants for implementing tolerance and reconciliation projects; and technical support throughout these projects. The program also reinforced networks of regional and national actors committed to peaceful co-existence between diverse ethnic and religious groups through cross-learning events.

Impact

- **LRP broadened civil space through providing a dedicated platform for intercommunal and interfaith peacebuilding.** Previously, most participating CSOs had only been familiar with development projects, and acknowledged LRP as trailblazing in terms of providing structured opportunities, resources, and technical support for peacebuilding activities. *“We are more confident and gained the trust of the elders,”* observed a CSO representative from Mandalay.
- **Linkages increased between individuals from different communities.** Several CSO and community members stated that the program allowed them to forge personal and professional relationships with actors from outside their own ethnic and religious communities. As a CSO representative from Taunggyi commented, *“Because of our project activities, collaboration and coordination in social activities between different religions are now better.”*
- **The program raised the national profile of participating CSOs in the conflict resolution and peacebuilding sector.** Several participating CSOs were able to secure international funding to continue their peacebuilding projects, while others have had their models replicated by or formed partnerships with government, NGOs, and other CSOs as a result of their increased visibility in the peacebuilding and conflict management sector nationally.



The Seagull

Lessons Learned

Selecting influential leaders committed to promoting tolerance remains a challenge

Local civil society and government leaders were selected as program participants based in part on their willingness to address intercommunal conflict in at-risk communities. Not all leaders are willing to actively promote tolerance and pluralism, however, particularly given the risks of visibly doing so. There will be trade-offs involved in targeting influential leaders with the authority to resolve disputes and effect change on the one hand, and inclusive leaders who are committed to a culture of tolerance on the other. Women's participation was particularly low due to cultural attitudes and power structures that prioritize male authority and may require dedicating programming in order to promote a meaningful role in conflict resolution.

Pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and values matter

Leaders' attitudes, beliefs, and values shaped their negotiation and mediation approaches, often in ways that compromised achievement of unbiased dispute resolution and in some instances may contribute to structural and cultural violence against minority groups. Leaders with the power to do so may impose desired solutions over finding a solution that is agreeable to all parties.

Communities may prioritize avoidance to prevent or mitigate intercommunal conflict

This privileges negative peace – the absence of violence – over the establishment of more durable positive peace. Trends include (1) prioritization of 'keeping the peace' over achieving justice or equality, (2) acceptance of methods that allow people to resolve disputes as soon as possible rather than in a mutually agreeable way, and (3) behavior intended to limit interaction between people of different faiths, including self-segregation, support for anti-miscegenation laws, or willingness to accept intolerant attitudes. As a leader from Mandalay noted, *"In practice, we apologize rather than negotiate."*

Adopting an inclusive approach may lead to perceptions of bias in some quarters

LRP was designed to work with multi-religious, multi-ethnic cohorts of leaders and CSOs. This raised suspicions of pro-Muslim bias among some stakeholders, which was perceived negatively. This highlights the challenge faced by all actors working to address intercommunal conflict in Myanmar of balancing an inclusive approach that empowers persecuted minority groups with the need for risk management.

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