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Critical Reflection

Following the KOFF roundtable on

Myanmar: Working in a Quickly Changing Environment

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Introduction

Not many countries can compare with the level of attention that Myanmar's transition process has received over the last years. External actors ranging from foreign Governments to INGOs, businesses and investors all claim a role for themselves in supporting this transition and firmly place the spotlight on Myanmar. But while there certainly are important roles to play for many actors, we are prompted to ask whether this is really the case for everyone? And, if they do have a role to play, what should it be? In this contribution, the effects of the current influx of various actors into Myanmar are critically analyzed, and problematic aspects of the 'gold rush' in Myanmar are discussed. It is argued that overall, actors active in Myanmar should reflect more comprehensively on the form of their engagement, their partner organizations, and their understanding of a quickly changing context if they want to live up to their often declared goal to 'support the transition'.

A complex context to navigate

As noted by many observers, Myanmar's current transition is not a process that is easy to grasp. In fact, what is often perceived as one transition process could be described as at least three distinct processes that are mutually linked and entangled in various ways: one transition from a military to a civilian government; another from

armed conflict with ethnic groups to peace; and finally a transition towards the economic opening of the country. Furthermore, this comes in combination with the outbreak of inter-communal violence, increased activity in terms of demonstrations, and incidents like the bombings in October affecting different parts of the country.

Notwithstanding the fact that no context in the world can be described as simple, Myanmar could be identified as a particularly complex environment to navigate for international actors. The sheer number of issues that are simultaneously ongoing constitute a major challenge both of coordination and coherent interpretation of change and developments. While all sorts of analysis are necessarily a simplification of such a complex, dynamically evolving context, it is argued here that how organizations and individuals make sense of their environment is crucial. Myanmar is abundant with different opinions, interpretations, and rumors around current trends, events and processes. But how these are interpreted, and which perspectives are taken into account, matters for how entry points are defined, how strategies are developed, and how priorities are set.

So far, this is common sense. But especially in a quickly evolving context like Myanmar, where plenty of opportunities to do something exist in every single moment, there is often not enough thorough reflection on this issue. If taking into account different perspectives and interpretations is sacrificed to the time constraints and urges to

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do something, quickly, there is a high risk of doing more harm than good. Standing in the international spotlight of business, donors, and INGOs, today's Myanmar is a situation in which organizations are particularly prone to producing quick fixes, unsustainable projects, and to sticking to an understanding of the context that is overtaken by events.

In the following, this risk will be illustrated with a focus on the current international cooperation in Myanmar. Furthermore, it will be argued that the procedures, standards and regulations of international cooperation can be more of a hindrance than a help in such a context.

A 'gold rush'?

Over the last two years, Myanmar has seen an impressive surge in international interest. Its transition from the former pariah-state and target of various sanctions towards the much acclaimed positive case where everybody would like to engage in a constructive way has taken place at a breathtaking pace. Naturally, this comes with an increasing number of international actors establishing a presence: businesses entering Asia's last 'emerging' market,[1] bilateral donors scaling up their budgets, UN agencies starting to operate under their full mandates, and international NGOs establishing a presence in the country. In their hand-luggage, all of these organizations bring along their procedures, international standards, and certain needs. Namely, they need qualified staff, partner organizations, and office space.

While some might interpret this as a field of new opportunities for Myanmar, there are clearly problematic tendencies to be flagged; tendencies which have the potential to jeopardize the potentially positive influence of these new actors.

A first point is that international actors compete for qualified staff – both with national

organizations, and among themselves. INGOs are paying higher salaries than local or national organizations can. As new actors in Myanmar, they have to recruit large numbers of qualified staff in an environment where this is not always possible due to limited availability. Experience in the development sector and higher educational background are favored, together with English speaking skills. The consequence is a 'brain drain', flowing first from local organizations to INGOs, and, in a subsequent step, from INGOs to bilateral donors, UN agencies or to the business sector. This has the potential to severely weaken the local and national civil society organizations, and is clearly at odds with the so-often declared goal to strengthen civil society.

Secondly, international actors compete for qualified partner organizations. As the typical setup of development cooperation has crystallized in a model where local partner organizations are involved, most international actors need local partner organizations for their operations.[2] While there clearly are a range of civil society organizations in Myanmar, the number of those organizations formalized and professionalized enough to end up on the partner shortlist of the typical INGO is limited. In the end, most international actors flock around a relatively small number of national civil society organizations. To borrow the term of a US economist[3], these organizations get "smothered by love" by international actors. They are literally swamped with requests to meet, to collaborate, to provide their expertise, and are urged to scale up their activities rapidly – and not necessarily in their strategic key areas. Having a horrific meeting schedule with international actors every day takes away the time to actually work, but the quick scale up of their activities according to donor requests may be even more problematic for national organizations. With the possibility of becoming active in a range of somehow related fields of development cooperation, peacebuilding, or humanitarian aid following donor's calls for

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[1] Although the effects of the economic transition would merit equal attention, this paper mostly focuses on the fields of development, humanitarian and peacebuilding. For a discussion of the business sector's role in Myanmar, see *Doing Business in Myanmar: Potential Challenges and Ways forward*, available at http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Media/Publications/Critical_Reflection_ab_2013/KOFF_Myanmar_RT_Critical_Reflections.pdf

[2] On the different forms that these partnerships can take in Myanmar, see *Progressing through Partnership*, available at http://lrcmyanmar.org/en/resources/progressing-through-partnerships
[3] The interview with Lex Rieffel can be found here: http://www.irrawaddy.org/interview/burma-making-progress-despite-smothered-love.html

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proposals, the danger increases that national organizations are stretching their capacities to implement more and more, but do not take the time to develop their own organization accordingly. Keeping a focus on what national organizations see as their strategic priorities becomes difficult, let alone ensuring that enough time is invested in the quality of their programming.

Third, the problem of keeping a strategic focus in these hectic times also applies to international NGOs setting up their presence in Myanmar. As the investments needed for registration, logistics and facilities are considerably higher in Myanmar than in other contexts, INGOs quickly have to start implementing projects to justify these investments. Although they are not following a profit-oriented market logic, INGOs do at least have to follow a logic of organizational survival. Most funding in international cooperation is project based, and only few INGOs have core funding available to sustain high investments to set up operations in a new context. Especially when these investments are not quickly met by incomes stemming from project based funds. The consequence is that newly operating INGOs in Myanmar have a high pressure to implement projects as soon as possible, further amplifying the risk of prioritizing speed over relevance, thorough analysis, and quality. The advancing specialization process in international cooperation adds another layer of complication here: If an INGO arrives that is specialized in, for example, de-mining, it is dependent on a political peace process which difficult to predict. Without the necessary political agreements in place, its specialism in de-mining is neither relevant nor implementable. As a consequence, the NGO has to find other activities or projects to justify its high investments in setting up a presence. While these projects may be more or less meaningful, the problem is that they are not implemented for their stated purpose. They stem from a logic of sustaining a presence until the peace process advances and de-mining becomes an option, which is typically not the best condition for relevant and sustainable programming.

All of these aspects of the current 'gold rush' in Myanmar bear a considerable risk of over stretching national actors, of neglecting good

practice in programming, and of encouraging unsustainable 'quick fix' solutions.

Capacity building and empty words

The points sketched out in the previous section are known by many actors in Myanmar. But while these points are acknowledged, astonishingly little is done to mitigate these negative effects of the influx of more and more international actors onto the stage. This is mostly due to the specific architecture of international cooperation, or, to put it more provocatively, the international aid industry.

While the problematic aspects of the project based funding structure have already been discussed above, the effects of more subtle procedures of the aid industry merit even more attention here: namely, the manifold procedures, regulations, and standards that have been put in place to professionalize and 'improve' programming.

More emphasis on transparency, value for money, and accountability has fundamentally re-structured programming in international cooperation in the recent past. Complex structures aiming at making projects more transparent, effective, and efficient have developed to demonstrate the integrity of INGOs and their practice. While the overall usefulness of these standards can be debated, one consequence is obvious: It demands a specific set of skills, knowledge, and organizational capacities to meet these standards.

While this is not problematic per se, it becomes problematic if the need to meet these standards is implemented to the detriment of other important things. When international actors in Myanmar speak about strengthening civil society and their partnership with national organizations, they unanimously emphasize capacity building. But what sort of capacity they mean is often lost in the over usage of 'capacity building'; a term that has become an empty word.

Is it 'capacity building' to strengthen civil society organizations to respond to challenges in the future in constructive ways, according to the needs, priorities, and strategies that they

identify? Or is it 'capacity building' to build skills in financial accountability procedures of a few individuals inside national organizations; to make them meet the standards of the next external audit?

While there are good reasons to do both, the emphasis in Myanmar seems to be the latter, and many efforts to build capacities aim at making national organizations able to comply with the standards of the aid industry. But if international actors really want to live up to their often-declared goal to contribute to transition processes in a positive and sustainable way, other questions should have greater priority: How to strengthen civil society organizations that will still exist when the gold rush is over, when funding levels drop? Which organizations to partner with, and how? How are they perceived by different actors and groups in Myanmar? How to make use of the strengths of national organizations (e.g., their knowledge of the context)? What about parts of civil society that are not formally organized, but play important roles? And, given all the emphasis on 'local ownership', how to make sure that initiatives of civil society are not marginalized by larger, more expensive interventions of international actors?

Conclusion: Alternatives?

Viewed from a certain distance, many of the phenomena discussed above are not new. Myanmar is not the first context that has seen a sudden influx of external actors with all its positive and negative consequences. But given that this larger influx is relatively recent, there are still possibilities to do things differently: the rules of the game are still negotiated, consequences are still reflected on and typical practice is not yet taken for granted. Structures of collaboration are still malleable, and not yet crystallized enough to become unchallengeable.

While becoming engaged in Myanmar is certainly challenging on different levels, it does not mean that there are no ways to avoid or mitigate the problems identified in this contribution. For instance, different small fund grants in Myanmar set a positive example because they aim to strengthen organizational capacities of smaller local or national organizations. Not that 'small' is

necessarily beautiful. But small grant funds provide an important opportunity for smaller organizations to start their own initiatives, gather experience and get support if needed, while they remain in the driving seat. Given that Myanmar is a quite dynamic, complex context to operate in, where a multitude of perspectives exist and none of them can claim to hold the 'best' solution, supporting a range of small initiatives might be the more appropriate approach, rather than opting for large development programs grounded in one specific interpretation of the situation – often determined by international actors. In the end, this approach can also be read as a way to embrace diversity, as opposed to building up strong monolithic blocks. In the current situation before the 2015 elections, this aspect certainly deserves a little more emphasis.

Another, more radical approach would be to consciously refrain from becoming engaged as an organization in Myanmar. Radical in the sense that it opposes many of the typical ways the 'aid industry' works; namely to be present where there are funds for projects. But many of the problems above may originate from the fact that every actor of international cooperation has to be present for the sake of being present – and not necessarily with a strategic vision of the added value of their engagement. If this is the case, then the strategic decision not to become engaged in such a context is legitimate, and should even be valorized.

But also opting for a middle way is conceivable. For instance, swisspeace has been experimenting with a 'light footprint' approach in Myanmar: Instead of establishing a presence or projects in Myanmar, swisspeace seconded experts in specific topics to a partner organization. These secondments happened on the request of the partner organization according to their priorities, and aimed to strengthen their initiatives in a tailored manner. While these approaches may not be a panacea, they still show that alternatives exist – and may be worth reflecting on when developing a strategy to engage with Myanmar.

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swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It carries out research on violent conflicts and their peaceful transformation. The Foundation aims to build up Swiss and international organizations' civilian peacebuilding capacities by providing trainings, space for networking and exchange of experiences. It also shapes political and academic discourses on peace policy issues at the national and international level through publications, workshops and conferences. swisspeace therefore promotes knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners. swisspeace was founded in 1988 as the Swiss Peace Foundation in order to promote independent peace research in Switzerland. Today the Foundation employs more than 40 staff members. Its most important donors are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the United Nations.

Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF)

The Center of Peacebuilding (KOFF) of the Swiss Peace Foundation swisspeace was founded in 2001 and is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and 45 Swiss non-governmental organizations. The center's objective is to strengthen Swiss actors' capacities in civilian peacebuilding by providing information, training and consultancy services. KOFF acts as a networking platform fostering policy dialogue and processes of common learning through roundtables and workshops.

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