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Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar

Risks and Opportunities for
International Assistance

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Executive Summary

Root causes and contemporary drivers of intercommunal violence

- Intercommunal conflict in Myanmar has complex historical roots. State policies and practices sought unity by promoting Buddhism and discriminating against alternative religious (and ethnic) identities. Buddhist nationalism is resurgent in a transition context characterised by instability, increased freedoms, rising economic and political stakes, and perceptions of external threats.
- Fear of Islamification and demographic besiegement provide powerful driving forces for the conflict. The ‘threat perception’ is invoked by regional examples and interpretations of Buddhist scripture that advocate for the defence of Buddhism. When taken to extremes, the threat perception provides the ideological justification for violence.
- Historical stratification in wealth and land ownership contributes to economic grievances. The 969 "buy Buddhist" campaign is in part a response to this. Resource development and economic factors are implicated in Buddhist-Muslim conflicts.
- Weak property rights and lack of access to justice has created a climate in which disagreements cannot be reliably settled via official means, leading people to take the law into their own hands. Since the lifting of strict authoritarian and militarised controls, the Myanmar Police Force has lacked the capacity and culture to respond to security threats rapidly, effectively, and impartially.

Polarised discourse and propagandising

- Events and issues in Rakhine State have been catalytic, deepening threat perceptions and providing a rich source of material for propagandising. Propaganda networks are highly effective in spreading anti-Islamic sentiment, especially when propagated by religious figures and friends, and are directly linked to the instigation of violence.
- The Myanmar and international (particularly Western) communities produce and respond to fundamentally different discourses about the conflict, creating a polarisation that limits opportunities for constructive, impartial voices and actions. The Myanmar narrative refrains from criticising Buddhists, and contributes to a climate of impunity and intolerance. The international narrative tends to be ignorant of the conflict’s causes, and employs a name and shame strategy that serves to reinforce threat perceptions and renders the perception that international actors are biased.

Factors and geographies of risk

- The study suggests a tentative profile of conflict risk factors, including 1) history of violence, 2) rural location, 3) predominantly Buddhist with significant Muslim minority, 4) 969 strongholds and areas of anti-Islamic propagandising, 5) disputed ownership of land and businesses, 6) high political stakes related to the census, elections, or peace process, and 7) absence or erosion of intercommunal linkages and networks for conflict management. More speculative are the theories that democratic opposition strongholds or areas of geostrategic economic importance are sites of instigation.
- Areas of particular risk include Mandalay, Yangon, and Bago Divisions, and Mon and areas of Kayin and Shan States. There may be high risk townships in Bago and Mandalay Divisions where additional support is needed, and Kayin and Mon State appear to be

relatively poorly served. More research and local consultation is required to verify whether there is local demand for support, and of what nature.

- Youth play an active role in peacebuilding efforts, particularly campaigning, but are also disproportionately implicated in acts of violence. Interviewees repeatedly commented that youth would not engage in such activities were they not sanctioned by others.
- The attitudinal and institutional change required to address the conflicts' root causes will take a long time. In the short term, a conflict management strategy is advisable, strengthening the capacity of communities to prevent violence when tensions arise.

International assistance carries risks

- Interventions that are perceived as biased towards Islamic communities can reinforce the perception that Buddhism is under threat, and that international actors don't understand. Constructive and legitimate actors risk being undermined or tarnished by association or competition with visibly international efforts in their communities.

Detailed local analysis, relationship building, and flexibility is needed

- Detailed local analysis and consultation is required to mitigate risks, determine local factors and actors involved in peace and conflict, and establish demand for (what type of) international assistance. Critically, local advice must trump organisational or thematic imperatives, and precede programme design or location selection.
- A high degree of flexibility is required to allow programmes to adapt to changing local dynamics. International partners should maintain low visibility.
- It is advisable to work through CBO networks, which provide necessary local knowledge and access. Capacity building is a useful means of building relationships and vetting. Using CBOs rather than listening to them has been one failing of efforts so far.

Strengthen networks of social cohesion and conflict management

- The non-religious dimensions of the conflict are often overlooked. Opportunities to build peace by fostering organisations, resources, or processes of joint social or economic value should be explored. Social and economic intercommunal linkages generate 'resilience factors', which bind communities and disincentivise conflict.
- Existing networks of conflict management, including religious leaders, local officials, and security forces, should be identified and capacitated to mobilise quickly to prevent escalation of rumour and threat. Civil society mobilisation has had a tangible effect in raising awareness, and needs to be extended into rural areas most at risk.
- National and international interfaith activities, particularly dialog, can be seen as ineffective, including accusations of "preaching to the choir" or being "all talk, no action". At a local level, interfaith networking and people to people interfaith peacebuilding approaches have proven to be much more beneficial.

Target the vulnerable majority and the influential minority

- Campaigns to promote tolerance and alternative narratives are a useful means of reaching the 'vulnerable majority'. These require means of distribution that can reach at risk rural populations, perhaps via television, radio, or materials distributed locally.
- Influential opinion leaders need to be engaged with. This applies particularly to Buddhist monks, who need to be considered carefully to ensure that their participation

in interfaith work is not “window-dressing” or providing them with legitimacy or donations that are then employed for counterproductive activities.

- Activities should target multiple levels of society. This includes promoting internal transformation of national staff, who may hold intolerant attitudes and/or be active in spreading dangerous material. Combining people to people, CBO and conflict management networking and capacity building activities, and targeted campaigning maximises impact. Activities should attempt to foster long term community change processes that aren’t reliant on ongoing funding.

Future research directions

- The study was limited by a short timeframe and a lack of field work outside of Yangon. In cases where definitive answers were not provided, the study revealed questions requiring further exploration, including dynamics in specific risk locations, the validity of accusations of national orchestration of violence, why some high-risk communities have resisted violence, how more opinion leaders can be encouraged to play constructive roles, and relationships of the conflict to the peace and electoral processes.

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Introduction

Intercommunal conflict is a highly visible, violent, and destructive force in contemporary Myanmar. It has blighted the country's attempted transition from authoritarianism to democratic rule, rendered parts of the country highly unstable, and raised significant concerns among international and local actors alike. A recent opinion poll of Myanmar people placed intercommunal conflict as the second-biggest problem facing the country today, behind unemployment¹. For the purposes of this study, intercommunal conflict refers to tensions and violence between Myanmar's Buddhist and Muslim communities.

This study was commissioned by Mercy Corps to support their planning in relation to potential activity to counter intercommunal violence. Its purpose was to 1) build on recent research to explore Buddhist/Muslim conflict dynamics *outside of Rakhine State* in greater depth, with a focus on the role of youth in both violence and peacebuilding; and 2) to inform potential programming options of international organisations in terms of possible locations and activities. This report details these findings and makes recommendations for international assistance, which includes noting the significant risks that international assistance on this issue carries.

The study was a rapid assessment undertaken over three weeks in April 2014. It draws upon approximately 20 publications that explore the causes and responses to intercommunal conflict in Myanmar, approximately 15 key informant interviews conducted in Yangon, one mapping workshop, and a validation workshop. The study is limited by its short timeframe, and the lack of field visits outside of Yangon. As a result it cannot be considered comprehensive, particularly with respect to local dynamics and actors in particular areas throughout the country. With this in mind, some findings are presented as tentative, and areas for further research are identified.

Root Causes of Intercommunal Conflict in Myanmar

Many parts of Myanmar are co-inhabited by people of different faiths. While Buddhism is undoubtedly the religion practised by the majority of Myanmar's faithful, the precise composition of the country's religious makeup is not known, in part because the figures have at times been the subject of manipulation. While those that identify as Muslim are officially recognised as 4% of the population, more realistic estimates exceed 10%². Muslims originally arrived in Myanmar as early as the 11th century, and more numerous as migrant labour and functionaries during British colonial rule. Muslims in Myanmar include those of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and mixed ancestry³.

Understanding the proliferation of violent conflict between Buddhist and Muslim communities in contemporary Myanmar is supported by a review of relevant social, economic, institutional, and political factors in the historical context.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT DENY OR DISCRIMINATE AGAINST NON-BUDDHIST IDENTITIES

Despite the diversity of the country's religious makeup, Buddhist philosophy and power structures have historically played a dominant role in Myanmar's social and political life. The centrality of Buddhism in governance was clear for example in the 'Burmanisation policy' of the socialist era,

¹ International Republican Institute, 2014.

² International Crisis Group, 2014. There are also significant and influential populations of Christians, especially from ethnic nationality populations, as well as smaller numbers of Sikhs, Hindu, and animists, among others.

³ Walton, 2013.

which sought to unify Myanmar's fractious populations upon a foundation of Burmese ethnicity and language, and the promotion of Buddhism as the state religion. This fostered the denial, marginalisation, or attempted assimilation of alternative ethnic and religious identities. This manifested for example in institutionalised discrimination against non-Burmans and non-Buddhists by state institutions, and the absence of teaching about non-Burman and non-Buddhist history, language, and culture in formal educational curricula⁴.

One consequence relevant to intercommunal conflict is the under-representation of Muslims and tendency for discrimination against them by state administrative and security structures. Various sources from incidents of intercommunal conflict since 2012 demonstrate failures by local officials and security forces in responding to threats to property and life equally, and in some cases direct involvement in violence against Muslims⁵.

Another consequence of Myanmar's Buddhist-centric history is widespread ignorance and misconception of the philosophy, practices, and goals of Myanmar's Islamic communities. Ignorance leaves communities vulnerable to dangerous messaging and rumour, which is rife in the transition period. Mosques and madrassas are viewed as places of suspicious activity, while Islamic practices pertaining to womens' roles and the treatment of animals are seen as antithetical to Buddhist teachings. One widely held misconception, for example, is that Islamic men pay Buddhist women to marry them, convert to Islam, and thus increase the Islamic population. Other popular misconceptions are numerous.

For their part, Myanmar's Islamic community is according to interviewees recognising the need for more transparency and openness in relation to Islamic practices and the activities of mosques and madrassas⁶. More broadly, greater awareness of other faiths and policies of non-discrimination need to be propagated to address misconception and division.

FEAR OF ISLAMIFICATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC BESIEGEMENT

Myanmar's intercommunal conflict is strongly linked to a widespread fear that Buddhism will be overtaken by Islam as the country's dominant religion. While religious demographics may discredit these fears, the belief that Buddhism is beset by larger, better organised, and well-endowed faiths is endemic⁷. So-called Buddhist nationalism has a long history, dating back at least as far as the movements that emerged to protect Buddhism from the incursions of colonialism, which have since rallied to protect the faith against a range of threats, including communism, Marxism, Christianity, and Islam⁸. Proponents of the belief that Buddhism will succumb to Islam in Myanmar often cite the regional example of Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as countries further afield such as Afghanistan, which are invoked as evidence of the need to defend Buddhism⁹. Direct links to conflict can be observed, for example in clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in central Myanmar in 2001 and calls from monks for retaliatory destruction of mosques after the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001¹⁰.

⁴ Walton, 2013.

⁵ Physicians for Human Rights, 2013.

⁶ Walton, 2013.

⁷ Kyaw San Wai, 2014.

⁸ Walton, 2013.

⁹ Prager and Tun, 2013.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, 2013.

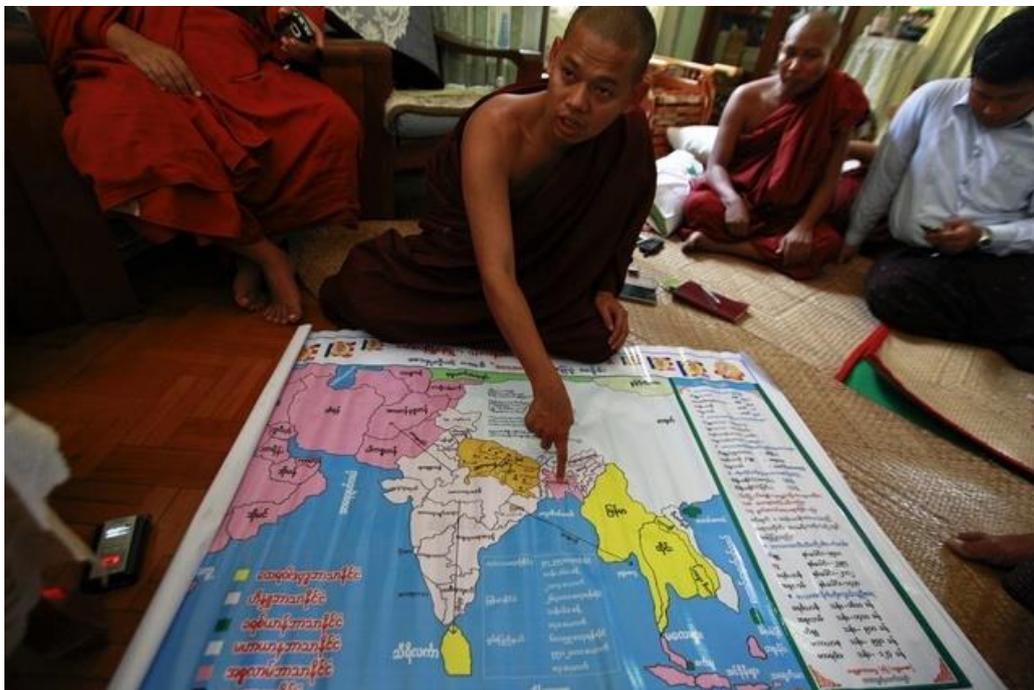


The threat perception is fuelled by the fear of conversion of Buddhist women, who in turn bear Muslim children, thus increasing their relative population size. It is believed that Buddhist women experience economic and social pressure to convert to Islam when they marry men of Muslim faith.

Proclamation by the DKBA imposing restrictions on Buddhist-Muslim relations. Photo: KHRG

Hence the current push for a marriage law that would restrict interfaith marriages¹¹. Similar restrictions against interfaith marriage are being pushed by some ethnic armed groups in non-government controlled areas¹². These decrees also include restrictions against Buddhists selling property to Muslims, buying from Islamic shops, or buying, building, or renting property for Muslims in their names.

Fear of demographic besiegement is not limited to Muslims. It is widely recognised that Myanmar is bordered by the heavily-populated and non-Buddhist China, India, and Bangladesh. Unchecked immigration from China since the 1980s is estimated to have resulted in 2 million illegal Chinese immigrants living in Myanmar, which is contributing towards tensions between Buddhist and Chinese cities in places such as Mandalay¹³.



Buddhist monk points to Bangladesh on a map of dominant religions by country. Photo: Reuters.

¹¹ Prager and Tun, 2013.

¹² Karen Human Rights Group, 2012.

¹³ Kyaw San Wai, 2014.

ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

Myanmar's Muslims have, or are perceived to have, disproportionate access to wealth and property. This is a source of grievance for Buddhist communities, who see it as unfair that they are excluded from wealth and opportunities relative to 'outsiders'. Some of this grievance dates to the colonial and post-colonial periods, when Indian money lenders – *Chettiars* – built their fortunes on the struggles of Burmese borrowers, including expropriating land when borrowers were unable to pay¹⁴. Despite the fact that *Chettiars* were mostly non-Muslim, their South Asian ancestry has largely been conflated with Islam, especially given that a disproportionate number of Muslims are businessmen, money changers, and shopkeepers today¹⁵. The economic grievance is compounded by perceptions that Muslims only take their business to Muslim-owned shops, as distinguished by the '786' designation. 786 symbolism sometimes signifies to Buddhists not only *halal* food, but also the desire for economic domination¹⁶. The Buddhist nationalist 969 movement is in part a 'buy Buddhist' response to this grievance.

WEAK RULE OF LAW AND LACK OF ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The absence of reliable justice processes for aggrieved individuals or communities for decades in Myanmar has created a climate in which people are inclined to take the law into their own hands. As a result, 'trigger' events that would be resolved peacefully in other contexts can spark large-scale violence. Decades of neglect, under-resourcing, and out-dated policies has also left a police force that is not yet trusted or capable of protecting its citizens indiscriminately. Like the other root causes of intercommunal conflict, weak rule of law has enabled conditions that allow largely latent intercommunal tensions to manifest in violence during the transition period.

Drivers of Conflict during the Transition Period

WEAKER SECURITY RESPONSES

Weak rule of law is often cited by the government as the primary cause of current intercommunal conflicts. Another common explanation is that the relaxation of authoritarian controls has 'lifted the lid' on otherwise latent intercommunal tensions. While these explanations downplay the influence of other factors, there is some truth in the argument. Prior to the transition period, the *Tatmadaw* played a prominent role in internal security. Chains of command and rules of engagement were relatively clear, allowing more rapid and effective suppression of intercommunal tensions.

The potential for intercommunal violence in the transition period is much heightened, bestowing on the police force increased security responsibilities that they are ill-equipped to fulfil. The Myanmar Police Force lacks the training, culture, equipment, and ethnic and religious representativeness to perform effective and impartial security functions¹⁷. There have also been damning accusations of failures to protect Muslims, or complicity in violence, particularly in Mekthila¹⁸. These failures, combined with flagrant discrimination against Muslims in resulting justice processes, contribute to a dangerous climate of impunity for perpetrators of violence.

¹⁴ Prager and Tun, 2013.

¹⁵ Prasse-Freeman, 2013.

¹⁶ Schissler, 2013.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, 2013.

¹⁸ Save the Children, 2013; Physicians for Human Rights, 2013.

There is evidence however of a recalibration and gradual improvement in the police's security response through events in Leptadaung, Mekthila, and Lashio, including more rapid responses and clearer rules of engagement¹⁹. Improvement is being served part by technical assistance in relation to conflict sensitivity and community policing methods, yet much improvement is needed before an effective security apparatus that respects human rights can be realised.

CATALYTIC EFFECT OF EVENTS AND ISSUES IN RAKHINE STATE

Events and issues in Rakhine State during the transition period have provided ideological justification for a rise in Buddhist nationalism, validating fears of Islamification, demographic besiegement, and the need to defend Buddhism from external threats. The potency of fears of religious takeover and demographic besiegement are evident in the fact that triggers of violence in Rakhine and elsewhere almost always begin with acts of sexual violence or attacks on religious figures.

Though government-supported verification procedures disprove that the majority of Rohingya Muslims are illegal and/or recent immigrants, the preponderance of Muslim communities in northern Rakhine is regularly used to justify the takeover threat. The fact that Rakhine State was once the home of the Mrauk-U Buddhist Kingdom serves as an especially potent symbol of threats to Buddhism elsewhere in Myanmar²⁰.

Contrary to the facts, Rohingya Muslims are often viewed as dominant perpetrators of violence and destruction. This belief is supported by permeation of the global 'war on terror' narratives, which associate Islam with organised, terrorist activity²¹. Despite scant evidence, the belief that Rohingya Muslims are externally funded, organised, and intent on takeover is widespread.

Despite the integration of the vast majority of Muslims into Myanmar society over generations, many with no connection to Rakhine State and/or Bangladesh have begun to be referred to as "Bengali" or faced threats to their lives and livelihoods. This has extended for example to (Chinese) Panthay Muslims and Kamam Muslims, who are increasingly viewed as legitimate targets²². Enmity of Rohingya Muslims is spreading, justifying much wider vilification of 'the other' throughout the country.

RESURGENCE OF BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

The Muslim threat discourse is promoted by an array of participants, which include and are strongly influenced by Buddhist monks. The 969 movement, of which U Wirathu is a highly visible leader, is the most well-known Buddhist nationalist movement and promotes boycotts of Muslim businesses in favour of "buying Buddhist"²³. Buddhist nationalist discourse also includes much deeper and dangerous messages, warning of Muslim conspiracies to take over the country and legitimising violence and state policies and practices of discrimination²⁴.

The current Buddhist nationalist movement is a projection of the deep, historical interdependence of Buddhism and the Myanmar state. In times of fragility and rising economic and political stakes, being responsive to Buddhist nationalist concerns legitimises the state by galvanizing a large proportion of citizens²⁵. It is possible that Buddhist nationalist forces are deliberately mobilised to serve the interests of some political actors, as many believe, but it is unlikely that this is official state

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, 2013.

²⁰ There is also a correlation between tensions and places of particular significance to Buddhism, including the former Burmese capitals at Mandalay and Bago, and the former Mon capital of Mawlymyine.

²¹ Gray and Dolan, 2014.

²² Prasse-Freeman, 2013.

²³ Walton, 2013.

²⁴ Hopkins, 2013.

²⁵ Hopkins, 2013.

policy with broad support. In any case, the numerous nationalist demonstrations and highly popular petitions²⁶, suggest that the government is at least in part captive to popular opinion.

ANTI-ISLAMIC PROPAGANDISING

Buddhist nationalism in the transition period has been accompanied by stark and virulent anti-Islamic propagandising. The Islamic threat discourse employs interpretations of Buddhist scripture that call for defence of the religion from external threats²⁷. Rakhine State provides a rich source of misinformation and material to promote activism (sometimes violent), intolerance, and discrimination against Muslims in relation to marriage, property ownership, and economic activity. Organised campaigns and the power of interpersonal communication serve to disseminate propaganda, often in the form of CDs, pamphlets, or Buddhist sermons delivered in person²⁸. Propaganda activities have been identified as a causal factor that has precipitated violence at several sites in central Myanmar since 2012, spreading throughout central Myanmar and into ethnic states²⁹.

Anti-Islamic discourse is also proliferating online. Online information can be disseminated relatively easily with fewer restrictions on dangerous content than other media formats, and much more widely once expected dramatic increases in internet access are realised. Internet penetration is expected to increase from 10% to 80% by 2016³⁰. In March 2014, U Wirathu had close to 30,000 Facebook followers on Facebook³¹ and anti-Islamic videos produced by Myanmar monks had received thousands of views on YouTube³². The expected explosion in internet users thus poses challenges, but will also provide opportunities to disrupt dangerous messaging, and promote alternative discourses of tolerant co-existence³³.

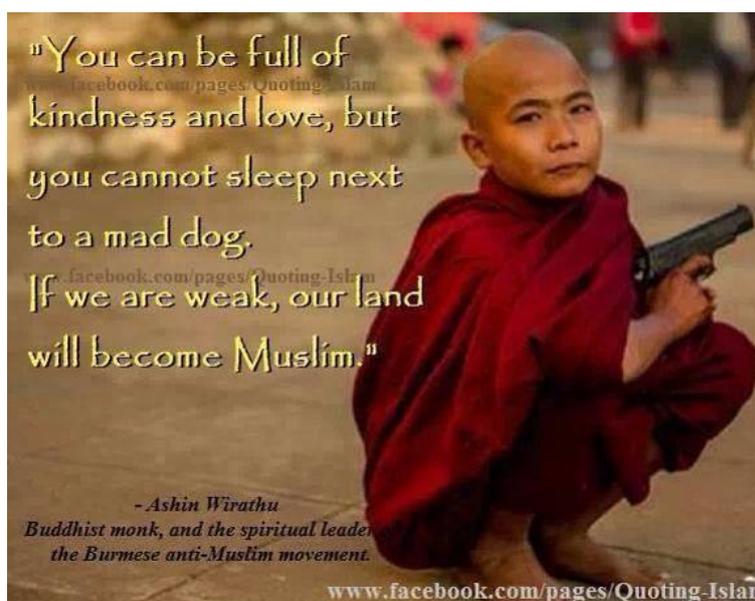


Photo from a Facebook page purporting to be Ashin Wirathu's. It has been shared 111 times and has more than 50 comments. It is important to note that it cannot be verified whether U Wirathu is aware of, or created this page. <https://www.facebook.com/Ashinwirathu>

²⁶ For example the estimated 4 million that signed a petition calling for the discriminatory marriage law.

²⁷ Walton, 2013.

²⁸ Schissler, 2014.

²⁹ Save the Children, 2013; ICG, 2013; KHRG, 2013.

³⁰ International Republication Institute, 2014; Schissler, 2014.

³¹ Schissler, 2014.

³² Gray and Dolan, 2014.

³³ Schissler, 2014; Gray and Dolan, 2014.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, RUMOUR, AND (MIS)TRUST

The relaxation of media censorship in Myanmar during the last two years is to a large extent very positive. One consequence of this opening is that there are now many more news outlets generating information in relation to subjects that were previously heavily controlled. It's not surprising then that Myanmar's journalists have not immediately adapted to the ethical and professional responsibilities that come with newfound freedoms to report on sensitive issues.

While improving professional and ethical standards and a degree of 'self-correction' of conflict insensitive reporting is evident during the last two years³⁴, there remain systematic patterns of reporting that reinforce conflict-inducing narratives and patterns of discrimination. Contrary to the facts, Buddhists are almost never portrayed as perpetrators of violence³⁵. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon are deeply engrained cultural norms that effectively prohibit criticism of Buddhism or Buddhist monks³⁶. Whether or not this is true, the implication is that there is a relative climate of impunity for Buddhist perpetrators of violence. This is highly dangerous when combined with Buddhist nationalist justifications for defence of Buddhism, especially when sanctioned by public officials and opinion leaders.

In Myanmar, Muslims have often been labelled as terrorists by mainstream news outlets, despite limited evidence to support such contentious and potentially dangerous assertions³⁷. While this has been accepted, labelling Buddhists as terrorists by *TIME* magazine was a source of huge provocation, which had the publication banned. Public figures have also been unscrupulous at times in their use of information, with public officials, political party representatives, and democratic opposition representatives irresponsibly reinforcing false narratives of Islamic terrorism and invasion³⁸. The justification for defence against the Islamic threat to the nation and an information culture of impunity for Buddhist perpetrators of violence is a dangerous combination.

Online and offline, word of mouth information (rumour) is a powerful source in shaping attitudes of Myanmar people and is rooted in its utility as a means of communicating without access to media in times of authoritarian control³⁹. Word of mouth has been demonstrated to be a highly trusted source of information, unlike the pronouncements of government⁴⁰. In the transition period, rumour has been directly linked to intercommunal tensions, often providing the pretext for acts of violence against other groups.

The use of internet, and particularly Facebook, contributes to affirmation and hardening of people's views. Facebook users follow "friends" who selectively share information, often based on news or rumours. The reader, prone to see much of the same, and much from people with a relatively similar worldview like themselves, will be more likely to believe that what is posted there is true. For example, a post about the dangers of sharia law in Malaysia, shared and liked by many of your 'friends' gains more validity, as opposed to just a random news article online. Similarly, a different community of friends might have a very different worldview, and groups could become more polarized over time.⁴¹

³⁴ Gray and Dolan, 2014.

³⁵ Internews, 2013.

³⁶ Walton, 2013.

³⁷ Hopkins, 2013.

³⁸ Hopkins, 2013.

³⁹ Schissler, 2014.

⁴⁰ Schissler, 2014.

⁴¹ Schissler, 2014

POLARISED DISCOURSES AND SIEGE MENTALITIES

Spaces for moderate voices and opportunities for constructive action to address the causes of intercommunal violence have been limited by the polarisation of narratives that explain the conflict. The dominant “local narrative” has been described already, including its ideological basis and means of propagation. This narrative influences actions in relation to the conflict, including those of state administrative and security forces, Buddhist nationalists, and sections of the public that engage in anti-Islamic mobilisation and acts of violence. It also influences Muslims, marginalised and vilified as they sometimes are, to engage in action, whether this be protest, conciliation, immigration, or withdrawal into their own communities.

As international access and scrutiny of Myanmar has increased over the last two years, an alternative discourse has arisen to explain intercommunal violence, with distinct ideological foundations, means of propagation, and resulting policies and practices towards the conflict. It is unfair to make a blanket judgement about all media outlets, political actors, and advocacy organisations, which are highly diverse in their goals, knowledge, and messaging, but some common patterns are evident.

As multiple commentators have noted, there is an observable tendency towards ignorance and/or simplification of the social, economic, political, and historical factors that influence the conflict⁴². In particular, the ‘international narrative’ often fails to recognise the historical roots of Buddhist nationalism, the historical interdependence of the institution of Buddhism and the Myanmar state, and most importantly, the reasons why Myanmar’s Buddhists feel under threat. The problem with ignoring or misunderstanding the sources of Buddhist ‘threat perception’ is that well-intentioned messaging and actions founded in the ‘international discourse’ tend to inadvertently feed escalation rather than resolution of the conflict.

International human rights standards provide the ideological foundation of (particularly Western) international commentary and activism. According to this framework, violators of human rights should be exposed and condemned as part of a ‘name and shame’ strategy⁴³. A well established and interdependent machinery of advocacy organisations, media outlets, and (predominantly Western) governments act in accordance with this strategy, exposing and condemning violations in media reporting, publications of advocacy organisations, and statements of condemnation from Western governments. This response is not inaccurate per se – human rights violations are clearly occurring on a large scale – but as a means to prevent them the strategy is counterproductive.

Messages and acts of condemnation from international actors increase the perception of threat and besiegement felt by Myanmar’s Buddhists, leading otherwise moderate or undecided citizens to align with the nationalist cause⁴⁴. The sensationalised reporting of U Wirathu as “the face of Buddhist Terror” by TIME magazine is the pre-eminent case in point. Shallow, sensationalised reporting is useful to sell information to an international audience that demands a simple narrative, but within the country, reporting like this serves only to increase U Wirathu’s status and legitimacy as a defender of Buddhism. The Buddhist nationalist movement has more support as a result of name and shame approaches. Ignoring the history and complexity of the problem, as well as cultural prohibitions against criticising the *Sangha*, serves as a further rallying cry to Myanmar’s Buddhists that the religion is under threat.

This effect is particularly pronounced in Rakhine State insofar as the grievances of Rakhine communities, some of which are entirely legitimate, are summarily ignored in international discourse. Like other ethnic nationalities, Rakhine people have been culturally and politically

⁴² Prager and Tun, 2013; Gray and Dolan, 2014; Kyaw San Wai, 2014.

⁴³ Kyaw San Wai, 2014.

⁴⁴ Kyaw San Wai, 2014.

marginalised within their country for decades. Adding to their grievance during the transition period is the perception that international actors only concern themselves with the plight of Rohingyas, who unlike Rakhine people are well networked internationally as an object of human rights advocacy. Like Myanmar's Buddhists more broadly, Rakhine people feel that their grievances are not considered or weighted equally relative to the community they are in conflict with⁴⁵. The international community thus becomes a part of the 'external threat'.

The further the conversations about intercommunal violence polarise, the less room there is for moderate voices or constructive measures. It's a process that breeds misunderstanding and extremism. Voices in the *Sangha* or broader community promoting tolerance and/or alternative narratives of coexistence have faced abuse and physical threats. International actors that defy the dominant international narrative are likely to be seen as condoning rights violations or as apologists for the regime.

If international actors continue to be seen as biased, their actions in support of conflict prevention or resolution will be viewed with scepticism, and opportunities for constructive engagement will remain limited. This has implications for international support to preventing intercommunal violence, as discussed later.

Space for government or democratic opposition actors to engage constructively in the conflict is similarly limited by this polarisation. While the international commentary often views acts of violence and policies of intolerance as legitimised or directed by an omnipotent, authoritarian state, the Myanmar government is not as powerful or directive as this view suggests. The continued success of the reform process requires the government to speak and act in ways that balance the interests of its domestic and international constituencies. If it responds to the will of the population, such as the estimated 4 million strong petition to restrict interfaith marriage, it will be seen as condoning (or promoting) human rights violations. If it instead conforms to the will of the international community, it will alienate the fragile domestic political support that the transition rests on. It's no coincidence that Aung San Suu Kyi, much vaunted human rights advocate, has been virtually silent on these issues.

International actions to promote constructive resolution of this conflict must find ways to bridge the narrative divide. Advocacy organisations are mandated to name and shame, but international media outlets are not, and can pay more attention to the historical roots of the conflict, the grievances of both sides, and the risks of pushing critical messages at actors that might appear to be part of the problem, but they are also part of the solution. Similarly, donors and international NGOs must find ways to work with the government on intercommunal violence, rather than only condemning it when something goes wrong.

MANIPULATION FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES

There is a commonly held view that recent bouts of intercommunal violence have been orchestrated by elites for political purposes. One common 'macro explanation' is of an organised campaign to induce instability, thus demonstrating the need to continue authoritarian, militarised governance⁴⁶. According to this view, townships with a preponderance of support for the democratic opposition are likely targets of instigation. Competition between political parties has been identified as a factor contributing to specific incidents of violence at a local level, in Mekthila for instance⁴⁷, though this study did not reveal evidence of a national political strategy to gain votes by fostering violence⁴⁸. A campaign of orchestrating violence is supported to an extent by observations that perpetrators of

⁴⁵ Prager and Tun, 2013.

⁴⁶ Hopkins, 2013.

⁴⁷ Save the Children, 2013.

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, 2013.

violence have been organised and brought in from outside affected communities, but according to the majority of accounts the perpetrators have been local⁴⁹.

Whether or not violence has been orchestrated, the consequences of the politicisation of this conflict should not be underestimated. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, predominantly Burman/Buddhist (and Rakhine) political parties will have a strong incentive to align with anti-Islamic sentiment, given its popular appeal. The release of census data scheduled for March/April 2015 is also likely to produce direct conflict risks, given that the results are likely to demonstrate a 2-3 fold increase in the official count of Muslims in the country⁵⁰.

MANIPULATION FOR ECONOMIC PURPOSES

It is also theorised that intercommunal violence is orchestrated to serve economic agendas. One example is that intercommunal tensions have served to distract communities' attention from the construction of the Shwe gas pipeline, which extends from Rakhine State through central Burma and into Northern Shan. While violence (both intercommunal and related to ethnic armed groups) has occurred along the pipeline route, the current study did not reveal direct evidence to support claims of national economic agendas that influence intercommunal violence.

Examples of economic agendas at a local level are more apparent. The last two years have brought new and increased business opportunities, which have sometimes heightened competition between communities and exacerbated economic grievances among those who feel that they are unfairly missing out. Commentators have traced direct links between economic exclusion and physical violence⁵¹. A variety of violent incidents since 2012 have been sparked by disputes or rumours concerning Buddhist customers and Muslim business owners, and there is a clear and reoccurring pattern of looting and destruction of Islamic businesses and properties⁵². Even more disturbing is the regular precision by which predominantly Muslim quarters have been destroyed, while neighbouring Buddhist quarters have been spared. In many cases Muslim land owners have not been able to return to their properties. According to a law that may enable this from the colonial period, ownership of municipal land that is damaged by fires becomes the property of the authorities⁵³.

Mekthila provides an example of the influence of land and economic factors on conflict. The city is long-impooverished but becoming wealthier as a trade route linking Yangon and Mandalay⁵⁴. Prior to the conflict, the relative dominance of Islamic communities in the lucrative cattle trade was identified as a factor promoting animosity⁵⁵. Tensions were also evident in relation to land and development issues. Both communities shared grievances regarding government infrastructure projects, town planning, and relocation/resettlement without proper consultation or compensation⁵⁶. Prior to the conflict, Buddhist and Muslim communities had outlined their concerns in a joint letter to the President's Office and relevant government ministries three times, but did not receive any response. Town officials and police forces observed and at times directed the methodological razing of property.

Patterns such as these suggest that finding means of addressing land issues fairly and transparently may reduce risks of conflict. The opportunity for economic activity to strengthen ties between communities, rather than reinforce division and grievance between them, should be explored.

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, 2014.

⁵¹ Sai Latt, 2013.

⁵² International Crisis Group, 2013; Save the Children, 2013; Physicians for Human Rights, 2013.

⁵³ International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁵⁴ Prasse-Freeman, 2013.

⁵⁵ Save the Children, 2013.

⁵⁶ Save the Children, 2013.

Resilience Factors and Conflict Mitigators

Addressing the root causes of conflict between Myanmar's Buddhist and Muslim communities might take generations. In the meantime, it is imperative to find means of making communities more resistant to dangerous messaging and tendencies to use violence. Better conflict management will be supported by strengthening civil society, government, and security responses that target current drivers of conflict. Better conflict management can also build on a range of existing conflict mitigators (resilience factors) that have demonstrated potential to de-escalate tensions, counter dangerous messaging, offer alternative religious discourses, and promote closer integration of communities.

NETWORKED, RESPONSIVE, AND INFLUENTIAL COMMUNITY LEADERS

Acts of violence towards people of other religious identities are not supported by the vast majority of Myanmar people. There are examples from almost every incidence of intercommunal violence over the last two years whereby community leaders, often religious figures, have tried successfully or not to thwart violence. Interviews for the currently study revealed situations in Mawlymyine, Mandalay, and Taunggyi where potential mob violence was averted in by rapid, joint responses by religious leaders and local officials to dangerous rumours and/or trigger-like events. There are numerous heroes from the violence that has taken place, from the Buddhist woman in Mekthila who sheltered more than a dozen Muslim women and children while their communities outside were devastated by violence and destruction⁵⁷, or the Buddhist monk U Withuta in Lashio who sheltered several hundred Muslims in his monastery despite the pleas of crowds of would be assailants outside⁵⁸. Sadly, interfaith actors who have sought to defuse tensions or Buddhist heroes who have sheltered Muslims have faced persecution from within their own communities, or had to flee for fear of safety⁵⁹.

These examples of community resilience to intercommunal violence demonstrate that there are fragile networks for conflict management that, despite physical and reputational risks to the individuals involved, are functioning to prevent violence in some instances.

SHARED EXPERIENCES, COMMON INTERESTS, AND INTERCOMMUNAL LINKAGES

Contrary to the narratives of religious extremists, Myanmar's Muslims and Buddhists have more in common than they do differences. For the most part they have lived similar lives characterised by poverty and denial of rights, and share similar aspirations for better lives. In Mekthila for instance, both communities had been forcefully relocated by the government in the early nineties, participated in each other's religious occasions, shared food during times of hardship, and worked together to lobby the government in relation to their concerns over the town development plan⁶⁰. Inter-marriage has been common. As in other locations, networks of economic interdependence grew stronger over decades, generating a mutual dependence that disincentivises acts that harm the other group's fortunes.

Because the communities have been located close to each other, public resources such as schools, markets, and public transportation are often common goods. In Meiktila, shared resources such as secular schools⁶¹ and businesses that served the interests of both communities⁶² were often spared,

⁵⁷ Save the Children, 2013.

⁵⁸ Seven Daily News, 2013.

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁶⁰ Save the Children, 2013.

⁶¹ International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁶² Save the Children, 2013.

while ‘exclusively Muslim’, properties were destroyed. In both examples, the reasons given by Buddhists for sparing these ‘Muslim’ properties is that the operators had good relationships and were seen as serving the interests of both communities.

There is danger in current processes that effectively weaken intercommunal linkages, such as the proposed marriage law or the ‘buy Buddhist’ messaging of the 969 movement. Conflicted communities and their respective religious institutions cannot afford to exclude others or isolate themselves inwardly in response to real and perceived threats. Myanmar’s Muslim community is in part recognising the need for greater transparency.

ATTITUDES OF NON-VIOLENCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

As outlined earlier, the ideological justification for Buddhist nationalism comes in part from an interpretation of scripture that promotes defence of Buddhism from external threats⁶³. According to Buddhist scholars, this interpretation is contrary to fundamental Buddhist principles of peace and compassion. Consistent with this view, actions that contravene the religion’s basic values pose a much greater threat to the faith than the presence of other religions⁶⁴. Thus far during the transition period the Buddhist nationalist interpretation has been dominant, though it is unlikely that their hardline interpretation is shared by the majority of Myanmar’s Buddhists.

Given the degree to which Buddhist monks can influence public opinion, it is imperative that interpretations of Buddhism are offered that denounce violence and insist that adherence to basic values of peace and compassion will be most effective in protecting Buddhism from decline in a time of transition. Given the sensitivity of this ‘internal matter’, efforts by outsiders to shift the dominant Buddhist narrative risk being ineffective or counterproductive.

IMPROVING GOVERNMENT AND SECURITY RESPONSES

Despite criticism of government and security responses, including allegations of being complicit in the violence in some instances, there are signs of improvement which can be built upon. The police have, for example, responded more quickly and effectively to the outbreak of violence in Lashio than they did in Meiktila, and have acted quickly in response to rumours and threats that could have escalated into conflict in Mandalay⁶⁵. The police are currently receiving training in conflict sensitivity and methods of community policing, and demonstrating a willingness to reform towards a more representative police force that acts without discrimination in respect of human rights. This should be encouraged, including at a local level where more trusted relationships need to be built between the police and actors on both sides of the conflict.

There are also examples of attention to conflict sensitivity by government departments. In Meiktila for example the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation provided relief to communities equally, avoiding perceptions of favouritism. The capacity of the government to be accountable, transparent and impartial in its support for conflict affected communities should be encouraged. One challenge for the international community is that a ‘50/50 approach’ might be the most conflict-sensitive support strategy, though it might at times contravene international humanitarian principles that determine support based on need only (rather than based on group membership).

CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILISATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Civil society organisations are playing an important and increasing role in fostering interfaith relationships and dialog, reconciling conflict-affected communities, countering hate speech and

⁶³ Walton, 2013. The specific principle is defence of the *Sasana* (the community of monks, nuns and Buddhist laypeople and the existence of Buddha’s teaching).

⁶⁴ Walton, 2013.

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, 2013.

proffering alternative narratives of tolerant co-existence. A diverse range of actors have formed or take action in response to intercommunal conflict, including interfaith networks (international, national, and local), CBO networks, youth and women’s organisations, monks’ associations, local and international NGOs, and advocacy organisations. Many of the approaches are to an extent experimental, given the novelty of intercommunal violence on this scale and the degree of freedom civil society organisations now have to operate. Recognising the approaches that are most effective and continuing to empower them in areas at risk of intercommunal violence should be a key focus of future support, as detailed in the recommendations.

Geographies of Risk and Existing Coverage

Intercommunal violence in Myanmar has followed a geographical pattern during the transition period, taking place to a large extent in clusters of townships at different times. The violence began in Rakhine State between July – October 2012, before surfacing in Mandalay Divisions (and to a much lesser extent Mon State) between 20 – 24 March 2013, quickly followed by outbreaks in Bago, Yangon, and Ayeyawaddy Divisions in following days⁶⁶. The number and frequency of violent incidents declined after March 2013, though incidents spread to other parts of the country including Shan and Kachin states (April 2013) and Saigang Division (August 2013). Violence also resurged in Rakhine State in Kanbalu township (October 2013) and in Daw Chee Yar Tan (January 2014).



Sites of intercommunal violence June 2012 - August 2013. Source: Physicians for Human Rights, 2013.

TENTATIVE PROFILE OF RISK FACTORS

The current assessment sought to determine the areas most at risk from intercommunal violence. Although a definitive analysis would have required more time, including field visits throughout the country, interviews pointed to a range of factors that may influence risk, including:

⁶⁶ Physicians for Human Rights, 2013.

- History of intercommunal violence in the last three decades
- Rural locations (lower education and interfaith awareness, slower security responses)
- Predominantly Buddhist areas with a significant Muslim minority⁶⁷
- 969 strongholds, or presence of anti-Islamic propagandising
- Disputed or unequal ownership of productive capacities (e.g. land and business) in the context of economic and infrastructure development
- High political stakes related to the electoral, census, or peace processes
- Absence or erosion of intercommunal linkages and networks for conflict management

More speculative, but worth exploring in further research are factors of:

- Proximity to locations of particular cultural significance to Buddhists
- Places indigenous to Burman rather than non-Burman Buddhists
- Democratic opposition strongholds
- Locations with economic and/or geostrategic significance

An assessment against these factors suggests five areas outside of Rakhine State with particular risk for intercommunal violence – Mandalay Division, Bago Division, Yangon Division, Shan State⁶⁸, and Mon/Karen States⁶⁹. More detailed research in these areas is recommended to validate these findings, determine specific at risk townships, and map the factors and actors that influence the local tendencies toward peace and conflict.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION ACTIVITIES

This study is limited in determining geographic coverage of activities aimed at preventing or resolving intercommunal conflicts by the aforementioned absence of field visits outside of Yangon. But perhaps more importantly, the findings may over-emphasise the role of local and international NGOs, while under-emphasising the existence and influence of community based organisations and local leaders (particularly religious leaders) that don't belong to organisations visible from a national point of view. Legitimate local processes need to be recognised and strengthened, not undermined, as discussed in the recommendations.

In assessing areas that may be under-served by conflict management or resolution procedures, it was noted during the assessment that mobilisation of civil society, higher education levels, more effective awareness raising, and more rapid and responsible security responses contribute to a reduced climate of risk in cities. These were cited as reasons why violence has not occurred in Mandalay, Yangon and Taunggyi for example, despite obvious threats. While there is value in having a programmatic presence in cities, for example to link with national interfaith efforts and networks, the areas that appear to require support to conflict management and resolution more urgently appear to be outside of large urban areas.

While not exhaustive, reference to available 'who is doing what and where' information⁷⁰ combined with a mapping exercise conducted during the assessment identified areas with relatively high and low levels of activity associated with managing or resolving intercommunal violence. Outside of the cities, and not surprisingly, activities to strengthen conflict management or resolution capacities have tended to migrate to areas where violence has already taken place relatively visibly. Several

⁶⁷ The risk might increase as the percentage of Muslims increases towards parity with Buddhists, or if Muslims are relatively recent migrants to the area, though further research is needed to confirm these possibilities.

⁶⁸ Further research is required to identify particular 'at-risk' areas, though there have been incidents (and there are active responses to address the conflict) in Taunggyi and Lashio Districts.

⁶⁹ Further research is required to verify particular at risk areas, though Hpa-an, Mawlymyine and Papun Districts have been singled out.

⁷⁰ The Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2014.

international and local NGOs have established programmes in Mandalay Division, particularly in Mekthila, while a range of local NGOs have existing and planned activities in Bago Division and Lashio District in partnership with local CBOs.

POTENTIAL GAPS IN GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Given the relatively high risk of intercommunal conflict in and the breadth of townships that have experienced violence **in Mandalay and Bago Divisions, it is worthwhile exploring demand for assistance to conflict management and resolution activities in specific townships not already adequately served.** As a first step, this requires consultation with respective authorities, interlocutors, and communities from these locations.

Mon and Kayin States⁷¹ were also identified as areas of high risk, despite their relative absence of violence over the last two years. The risk factors are there however, and could conceivably be exacerbated by economic development activities and the further politicisation of identity by the peace and electoral processes. Mawmyine in Mon State was the site of anti-Muslim riots in 1983 that led to several hundred refugees fleeing across the Thai border⁷². Kayin has been the site of anti-Islamic proclamations by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), and ethnic armed group founded by the monk U Thuzana⁷³. The DKBA, as well as local monks that may or may not be aligned with the group, have over the last two years instigated destruction of mosques, and made calls for boycotts on interfaith marriage and economic activity between Buddhists and Muslims⁷⁴. These areas are relatively poorly-served by activities to prevent intercommunal violence and may be areas requiring more attention. Rather than filling gaps, which is sometimes misconstrued as the absence of internationally supported activities, it might make sense to strengthen local initiatives that are already working in these areas. Again, **local consultation is required to determine whether there is demand, potential partners and specific locations** for conflict-sensitive assistance.

Types of Existing Activities

The approaches to the threat of intercommunal conflict in Myanmar comprise a variable set of activities implemented by local leaders, community based organisations, religious associations, local and international NGOs. A network approach is often employed, whereby a relatively large and well-resourced partner supports the activities of more locally-based and smaller community organisations or leaders. As many of these activities have emerged during the last two years as intercommunal violence has spread and space for civil society activity has become more open, there is a degree of uncertainty about what approaches will be most effective in the current context of risk and openness. In accordance, this study takes an ‘appreciative inquiry’ approach, attempting to recognise those efforts that have proven effective thus far.

YOUTH ROLES IN CONFLICT AND PEACE

Consistent with the assessment design, there is also some degree of focus on the roles that youth do and can play in conflict and peacebuilding. Literature review and interviews implicated youth in violence in many cases, but not all. Youth roles in inciting and participating in violence was linked by interviewees to low levels of education and respect for diversity, unemployment, and vulnerability to misinformation and manipulation.

⁷¹ Risk in Kayin State is pronounced in low land areas inhabited predominantly by Buddhists.

⁷² International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁷³ International Crisis Group, 2013.

⁷⁴ KHRG, 2012.

Importantly, cultural norms were pointed to by several interviewees that would restrict youth involvement in these activities if they were not condoned or directed by elders. This observation suggests some degree of manipulation of youth, whether organised or not, and deserves further research. In some instances, eyewitnesses attest that youths engaging in violence were 'bought in' from outside target villages for the purpose of inciting violence. Whether or not this is true, it appears that there is a high degree of youth susceptibility to misinformation and vulnerability to manipulation that needs to be addressed.

It's also worth noting that youth are more likely to use social media, which has implications both for the spreading of dangerous information and capacities for conflict resolution. The most visible tolerance and counter-messaging campaigns are led by youth organisations, including the Coexist⁷⁵ and *Panzagar* campaigns for example, the latter of which is discussed in more detail later.

In Yangon a loosely tied network of CBOs, NGOs/INGOs and individuals were identified as working on peacebuilding activities related to youth and interfaith issues. Their activities include interfaith seminars and youth forums, art and messaging campaigns, and bringing youth of different religions to other faith spaces. Many of these organisations are small and self-funded, while the somewhat larger organisations are receiving funding often from international donors. As the issue is gaining international attention more and more money is made available for interfaith and dialog activities. Local organisations express that they are interested to cooperate with international organisations, but they want to be true partners, not just implementers of international organisations' agendas.

An issue identified by the groups themselves is their relatively limited reach. Attending a variety of youth groups and seminars similar names and faces appear, and as one interviewee expressed "we are preaching to the choir". The "choir" are often relatively well educated youth engaged in CBOs already, that are particularly open to interfaith and diversity. The limitation of these groups rest in their inability to reach beyond their communities, to new, less educated groups outside of the large cities. This is not to say that these city-based initiatives are not important, but as they express themselves, their effectiveness would improve if they could reach outside of their already established and relatively moderate networks, to the villages and communities where levels of education and other resilience factors are lower.

TYPES OF PEACEBUILDING ACTIVITIES

1) Interfaith dialogs and awareness raising tours

A range of different seminar and dialog forums are taking place in Yangon and Mandalay on a regular basis⁷⁶. Many are 'interfaith' in their nature. Some initiatives target youth that volunteerly seek information and want to prevent intercommunal violence, others target trainers that have access to more vulnerable populations, some directly engage with the groups that could be potential victims or perpetrators of intercommunal violence, and some do all of the above.

Other initiatives aim to raise awareness between groups of different faith by organised visits to faith spaces. While Buddhism is well known in Myanmar, many Buddhists and Christian youths have not previously visited mosques, and many questions and suspicions around religious and cultural practices exist. One example of an organisation conducting such activities is the Smile foundation, which organize an "Interfaith Youth Tour" where youth from different faiths visit each other's religious spaces. These activities have taken place in Yangon, Mandalay, Bago, Taungyi and Mawlymyine, and will be followed by a second phase in the same locations. In each location about

⁷⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Myanmar-Coexist/131078153758555>

⁷⁶ Yangon and Mandalay were the cities most researched. These type of events might be taking place elsewhere as well.

20-30 persons from different religions are recruited. This is one way to target the perceived closedness of the mosques, which feeds misunderstandings and rumors.

The interviewees admit that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of these types of activities. The experience across the country has been that youth attracted to these events are already open minded and interested in interfaith exchange, and it has proven difficult to reach beyond that core group to populations most at risk for instigating or engaging in violence. As one interviewee expressed, “calling it interfaith may in fact be limiting as it attracts only those open to interfaith initiatives”.

Organized dialog forums with religious leaders exist both inside and outside of the country. Some of them are organized by local actors or the government, others by international actors outside of the country, as well as those supported by international NGOs inside the country. A distinction can be made between local and national dialogue forums. Many of the interviewees express that while national dialog forums have been established, they show few tangible results. Reasons given were that national dialogs can be “all talk and no action” or do not reach vulnerable populations outside cities. It was also mentioned that interfaith dialogs are sometimes acts of ‘window-dressing’ by interfaith actors that show a good face (especially to the international community), when in some cases their activities outside of these forums are counterproductive. Examples of monks that participate in interfaith forums while supporting anti-Islamic propagandising or discriminatory policy were demonstrated in Taunggyi, Yangon and Mandalay.

Local interfaith initiatives at potential sites of violence were viewed more favourably however. These initiatives can function to immediately solve tensions and dismantle false rumors. One NGO based in Mekthila expressed how bringing 30 religious leaders that had limited or no contact previously allowed these leaders to build trust and plan for the future in a way they had not been able to before. More research needs to be done in regards to whether they are effective or not, but it was clear that at least in Mekthila it was the first time these actors met together, and they were willing to do so at least 3 times with quite some tangible results in terms of planning for the future.

2) Online and offline campaigning and creative messaging

Responding to the current spread of hate speech online and offline, some organisations and individuals have promoted online and offline campaigns and creative messaging tactics to promote tolerance and diversity. Following the violence in Mekthila, Acted developed an advertising campaign together with a local advertising firm. Following focus groups and conversations they decided to develop a “non-threatening” campaign that focused on celebrating diversity. Posters and visuals were placed in areas of communal gathering – such as tea shops, where people themselves could start a conversation about these issues. The campaign received more than 15,000 likes on Facebook. The experience showed the importance of carefully developing a message together with local actors that was not perceived as threatening, and opened space for dialog. It was accompanied by DVDs distributed to youth in order to be discussed safely in their homes. The campaign did not carry the logo of any international organisation so to be perceived as more locally led. Conversations are now held with the local authorities about continuing the campaign under their auspices.

Though internet penetration remains very limited, particularly in rural areas, access will soon increase dramatically. So-called “love speech” campaigns include the *Panzagar* or “no dangerous speech” campaign, which attracted almost 10,000 Facebook followers in less than a month since its launch during the *Thinjan* festival 2014⁷⁷. The campaign combines several elements which may have been instrumental in its popularity, namely combining highly visible offline events with intensive online multimedia campaigning, associating with notable personalities, and employing a meaningful and memorable symbolism (yellow *Thinjan* flowers in followers’ mouths, to depict “love speech”).



Logo of the Panzagar Campaign. Source: [facebook.com/panzagar](https://www.facebook.com/panzagar)

Other, smaller scale examples include a recently organized pop up art space exhibition in Yangon by Smile, Paung Ku, and others. These examples are indicative of a wider range of campaigns and creative messaging activities that are being undertaken to promote tolerance and respect for diversity. It’s important to note that, even in combination, their reach and impact are likely to be very small compared to the messaging currently promoting intolerance, mistrust, and discrimination.

3) Capacity building

Some initiatives aim to build capacity of local organisations and individuals to work in their own communities and support them to develop initiatives that address the issues of intercommunal violence. The strength of these types of initiatives is that local organisations often are better equipped to understand the dynamics on the ground and take ownership of addressing the issues. There are a few different examples.

Following a mapping of community based organisations in Mekthila and Yangon one INGO identified 26 CBOs, 10 in Mekthila and 16 in Yangon, and provided them with training in organizational development and peacebuilding. This served as an entry point into these organisations and was followed by a micro grant competition where the 15 best initiatives were supported to carry out their activities, including concerts, camp distribution, and support to interfaith hospitals. Working closely with the CBOs allowed for a much more targeted and locally led approach in Mekthila. The experience to work with both Yangon and Mekthila based CBOs was positive insofar as it made the intervention in Mekthila appear politically less sensitive (a national approach), but was felt to dilute the message somewhat as resources and time had to be shared between Yangon and Mekthila.

Another type of initiative focuses on training trainers, or champions to work in their own communities. In theory this enables a wider group of persons to be trained, but follow up has sometime proved difficult and measuring the impact of this type of initiative can be challenging.

⁷⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/panzagar>

4) People to people initiatives

Another set of initiatives are those that target individuals from different groups and faiths, aiming to build or restore communication and friendship. Prior to the conflict Mekthila was perceived as quite a diverse town, with comparatively strong relationships (both business and friendships) between Muslims and Buddhists. A successful initiative following the violence was to pair young Buddhists and Muslims to do social activities together, such as going to the cinema, watching the SEA games etc. While initially very sensitive, this program was seen as effective by bringing people together that otherwise never would have had the chance to engage with each other. A second phase of this initiative will take place.

A similar, but less successful initiative (possibly due to its sensitivity) in Mekthila aimed at re-facilitating friendships between Buddhists and Muslims that were in IDP camps. Initially there was a lot of interest expressed from friends that wanted to participate and an event was organized for 168 people. However, the authorities were uncomfortable with this initiative, possibly because of its size and visibility, which led extremists to mobilize against the initiative.

Recommendations for International Assistance

RECOGNISE THE RISKS

The dramatic escalation of intercommunal violence has coincided with unprecedented international presence, funding, scrutiny, and access in Myanmar. International actors, particularly donors and international NGOs, are politically and economically invested in Myanmar, and cannot be seen to stand idly by in the face of violence, violations of human rights, and threats to the country's wider reform processes. This creates strong incentives for international funding and implementation of activities to support management and resolution of intercommunal conflict.

International support carries significant risks however. International actors are often perceived, including by powerful political, religious, and institutional forces, to be biased towards Muslim communities and ignorant of the concerns and grievances of Buddhist communities. International interventions that are perceived to marginalise Buddhist concerns and actors or favour Islamic communities risk reinforcing the perception that Buddhist (nationalist) values, institutions, and populations are under threat. In doing so, ***international interventions that are perceived as biased can serve to reinforce rather than dispel ideological justifications for conflict.***

Secondly, there is a risk that ***constructive local actors and activities might be tarnished or undermined by being associated with international actors.*** Many leaders on both sides of the conflict who are or have tried to play constructive roles have been severely criticised, have been threatened with violence, or have had to flee. Many more local and national Myanmar actors who could otherwise have played a constructive role have remained silent because of the threat this poses to their interests and wellbeing. The local actors and networks that are functioning effectively to manage or resolve conflict are therefore inherently fragile. The delicate balance they hold could be affected through association with international actors that are seen to be biased. There are locally led campaigns for diversity and 'love' speech, for example, that have been tarnished as they have been perceived as either supported by international donors – often from Muslim countries – or on the other hand seen as a government initiative. Alternatively, international efforts to establish new conflict management or resolution mechanisms, especially at local levels, risk undermining existing networks, which might be functioning quite well despite being 'under the radar'.

UNDERSTAND, RESPECT, AND RESPOND FLEXIBLY TO LOCAL DYNAMICS

Much of the risk can be mitigated through thorough and genuine consultation and analysis of local dynamics. The Do No Harm and similar analytical framework has been used to good effect to explore the potential benefits and risks of interventions aimed at addressing intercommunal violence in Mekthila⁷⁸, in Rakhine State⁷⁹, and elsewhere. A wealth of guidance is available to support such analyses, and there is a growing cohort of Myanmar nationals from various organisations who have been trained in these and similar analytical techniques⁸⁰.

Local advice with respect to intended programming must be privileged above organisational or programmatic imperatives, which may require adapting or attenuating proposed activities that risk doing harm. It is critical to base programming decisions on what local actors are demanding, rather than the model, package of activities, or thematic focus areas that the implementing organisation is geared up to provide. In addition to traditional consultation, conflict analysis, and needs assessment

⁷⁸ Save the Children, 2013; Collaborative Development Associates, 1993-2013.

<http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/content/key-readings-0>

⁷⁹ Roos, 2013.

⁸⁰ For example, those trained in Do No Harm by the Centre for Development Education.

www.facebook.com/CDEC.Myanmar

processes, some organisations have experimented with soliciting conflict resolution proposals from local CBOs in order to assess the demand for different types of local activity⁸¹.

Thorough local analysis and consultation should be undertaken before interventions are designed.

This poses challenges for implementers, who are often subject to strong corporate pressures and short timelines to turn around funding proposals, and as such may be compelled to specify locations and activities before they've had sufficient opportunity for local analyses. This dilemma calls for ***flexibility by donors and implementing organisations in response to local dynamics***, who should recognise that interventions might need to change (in terms of location or activity) before or during implementation.

Employing local staff with a wealth of knowledge and possibly already respected by local actors is important for successful programming. However, organisations should seek to do so without causing a 'brain drain' from local organisations. Cooperating with local partners and sharing staff might be one way to deal with this dilemma.

Perceptions of bias or ignorance might recommend ***a less visible or 'hands off' role for international implementing organisations***. This gives initiatives more credibility and reduces risks that initiatives might be seen as biased. This idea was validated by international NGOs already working on these issues, who had found benefit in keeping a low profile, and increasing challenges as their visibility increased. As soon as initiatives became more public and received more attention, the programs became more difficult to operate and CBO partners received increased threats and intimidation from extremist elements in the community. The dilemma that reaching more people also induces criticism and threats might be reconciled by having respected figures 'front' the activities. Continuous dialog with the CBOs, employing staff with local knowledge, and carefully considering the messaging and publicity of events can also help.

International NGOs seemed to benefit from being lone operators in a specific location, since they could then more carefully send the 'right' messages to the population – as compared to Rakhine where more or less all international NGOs are seen as favouring the Muslim population.

CONSIDER NETWORK OR CONSORTIUM APPROACHES

Developing (or connecting to) inclusive local networks supports stronger local governance of programmes, greater legitimacy, and conflict sensitivity. Local and international NGOs have tended to partner with existing CBO networks to deliver interventions or new target areas, which provide ***important local knowledge and implementation capacity that can be bolstered by training, technical assistance, and funding***. Networks tend to be effective when they have a high degree of access and/or influence over stakeholders that are important to peace and conflict. Because of the risk that network members may have disingenuous interests in peacebuilding, ***vetting is required***. This has been achieved, for example, via training programmes for local actors that serve both to assess their motivations and build capacity of potential partners, which tends to vary considerably⁸². It is also important that local actors are seen and listened to as true partners, compared to just being implementers.

Giving local organisations a stronger role in project (and financial) governance might challenge traditional accountability requirements. This also calls for flexibility from international partners with respect to accountability mechanisms, and a degree of trust in the capacity of local actors to be accountable to the intended outcomes, even if activities and must adapt to local dynamics along the way.

⁸¹ Acted, 2014.

⁸² Acted, 2014.

SUPPORT (AND DON'T UNDERMINE) EXISTING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS

The most effective conflict management mechanisms in areas at risk of violence are local networks of religious leaders, local officials, and security personnel who can respond to violence or threats of violence rapidly. These networks vary in composition and strength in different locations. Some have been activated or strengthened in response to the threat of ICV, while in some cases the relationships between actors has been damaged. Local analysis and consultation prior to program design should seek to **identify these networks and find ways to strengthen or repair them**, as long as associating with them won't in any way undermine their effectiveness.

Efforts to support these networks to function more effectively might include material support, political cover, and capacity building in conflict management and resolution, or relationship-building activities with additional network members, including civil society, local officials and security representatives. In Mekthila this approach has been used to develop a network of religious leaders to good effect.

WORK AT MULTIPLE LEVELS LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY

It is important to recognise that the attitudes that underlie intercommunal conflict are present throughout society, including in the local individuals that work for international organisations and local partners. Changing these attitudes should include efforts to **promote personal transformation processes**. One international NGO recommended that continuous dialog take place within and between international NGOs and partners to acknowledge different views and raise awareness within the management team of views held by their staff. Care should also be taken to ensure that local staff, who have relatively high internet access within their communities, are not involved in accessing or spreading dangerous material. Others recommended the need for tackling the issue by bringing staff on exposure trips to other countries in the region (e.g. Cambodia) that open up new perspectives, opportunities for internal dialog, and personal transformation.

Outside of the organisation, it is useful to **form partnerships at multiple levels of the community**. It was expressed by one organisation that their ability to work across different levels with individuals (people to people approaches), with CBOs (capacity building), with religious leaders (dialog forums), and through messaging/campaigning had enabled them to reach a much larger set of people, and to be more likely to actually make a positive impact. Moreover, some organisations working in politically more sensitive areas expressed the advantage of also working in Yangon which enabled the initiative to be perceived as politically less sensitive. Engaging with national networks also enables information sharing and learning between different locations.

Beyond CBO and civil society networks, it is important to **recognise the role of security forces and local officials** and include them in activities and networks when appropriate. These partners can be useful to provide local political cover for activities, to strengthen conflict management networks, or for information sharing and coordination in relation to potential threats and conflict resolution activities. Providing training to local officials and police on topics such as conflict sensitivity will also be beneficial, and there appears to be a high degree of interest from the police in particular for support on such topics. Local officials and police may not be trusted however, so it is important to consult with other local partners before sharing information or involving them in activities.

It is important to also **engage with mid-level leaders**. Some commentators found that mid-level leaders (such as community leaders, or the second or third person in command of a religious organisation) were often excluded from meetings and dialog forums. This was seen as a lost opportunity, because they are often people with access to relatively large community networks, and at times they might be opportunist, gaining the most from the outbreak of violence, economically or otherwise.

CHANGING ATTITUDES: TARGET THE VULNERABLE MAJORITY AND THE INFLUENTIAL MINORITY

This assessment has indicated that a large section of the population is vulnerable to misinformation and instigations of violence. Youth in particular are identified as the instruments which commonly enact the aggressive sentiment of others. These observations demonstrate the ***need for widespread, long-term attitude change, and the promotion of alternative discourses and countering dangerous information in the short term.***

Awareness raising activities (such as public seminars, online and offline campaigning, and civil society mobilisation) have been effective in urban areas in dampening conflict risks. These activities have limited reach into smaller cities, towns, and villages however, where the risks of conflict appear to be higher. ***Activities that counter misinformation and promote tolerance need to recognise the means by which most people receive their information.*** A recent nationwide study found that 35% of citizens get daily information from the radio, followed by friends and family (26%), TV (23%), newspapers and journals (10%), village heads (2%), and the internet (1%)⁸³. It is also important to consider which sources are trusted more. Government and security forces are less likely to be trusted than religious leaders for example⁸⁴.

These observations demonstrate why Buddhist nationalist movements, through combining trusted sources with effective distribution networks outside of urban areas, have been so effective in influencing and organising populations. Media initiatives that support conflict management and resolution via television and radio have great potential, and are already being implemented to some degree⁸⁵. At a local level, ***awareness raising and tolerance campaigns should be designed for maximum reach***, as in the poster and DVD campaign in Mekthila.

To change attitudes and counter misinformation is useful to also ***engage the participation of influential and trusted opinion leaders***. As far as youth violence is concerned, for example, the target of campaigning needs to include those that condone or instigate violence (i.e. elders) as well as those that enact it (i.e. youth). Evaluations have shown that the impact of some measures to address intercommunal violence have been limited by not engaging monks, in particular⁸⁶.

Buddhist monks can be very influential shapers of public opinion, but play both positive and negative roles. Sometimes monks have intervened to counter rumours⁸⁷, sometimes have refrained from speaking out for fear of backlash, while in other circumstances they are at the vanguard in propagating misinformation. Attitudes towards these issues are clearly divided within the Sangha. Given the exalted position of monks within Myanmar society, it is imperative that means are found to ***protect and empower moderate voices and interpretations of Buddhism***, and bring them into tolerance campaigns and local conflict resolution activities where possible⁸⁸.

Designing strategies to target the vulnerable minority and influential minority is well served by conducting participatory community processes. A useful tool is the “more people, key people” framework from the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project⁸⁹.

⁸³ International Republican Institute, 2014.

⁸⁴ Schissler, 2014.

⁸⁵ Gray and Dolan, 2014.

⁸⁶ Save the Children, 2014.

⁸⁷ Mawlymyine and Taunggyi were cited by interviewees as two examples.

⁸⁸ Walton, 2013.

⁸⁹ Collaborative Development Associates, 2004.

http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/sites/default/files/Reflecting_on_Peace_Practice.pdf

	More People	Key People
Individual / Personal Level	Who? What? How?	
Socio-Political Level		Who? What? How?

REPAIR, BUILD, AND STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INTERCOMMUNAL LINKAGES

The religious dimension of intercommunal violence in Myanmar is the most visible, and has attracted the most responses intended to prevent violence and promote peace. International support to conflict management, recovery, and resolution via non-religious avenues makes sense for several reasons however. ***The religious dimension to the problem should not be ignored, but it is also perhaps not the area where international support will be most effective***, considering perceptions of bias and limitations on understanding, access, and influence over religious institutions. Furthermore, economic grievances and disputes over development projects and land ownership provide important drivers of conflict, but are not likely to be well addressed through a religious lens.

Recent opinion polling demonstrate that income, unemployment, education, healthcare, and infrastructure are overwhelmingly the issues which concern ordinary people the most⁹⁰. Shared experiences and aspirations regarding employment, infrastructure, and livelihoods have also been demonstrated as factors that bind diverse communities and make them resistant to violence. Accordingly, social and economic resources that benefit communities on both sides of the conflict have been spared during times of violence⁹¹.

Conflict resolution is supported by the repair, establishment, or strengthening of symbols, organisations, or processes of joint economic and social value. Intercommunal approaches to service provision (e.g. humanitarian relief, health, and education), shared governance, infrastructure and natural resource management, or joint livelihoods and employment generation activities for example could leverage the shared concerns and interests of people to develop better linked communities that resist violence. This study did not reveal any examples of such approaches in Myanmar, but in other contexts international partners have supported the formation of local cooperatives to govern and implement joint processes, funded joint health and education development projects, or seed-funded joint livelihood and employment generation activities. Again, what is relevant in particular local contexts begins with a participatory appraisal of local dynamics, actors, concerns, and aspirations.

⁹⁰ International Republican Institute, 2014.

⁹¹ Save the Children, 2013.

FOSTER SUSTAINABLE CHANGE PROCESSES

Interviewees suggested that weaknesses of a 'programme approach' included a tendency to foster activities which were too short term or reliant on funding to have a prolonged, sustainable impact on the underlying causes of conflict. It was observed, for example, that youth might participate in campaigns or dialog events, but fall back into old attitudes of intolerance and distrust of other groups when these activities end. The lesson is that ***interventions should seek to activate and empower sustainable capacities for local conflict management and resolution, rather than foster programmes that are reliant on ongoing funding.*** This is a difficult challenge, but has been achieved for example in the provision of youth leadership training, which have fostered youth groups (including faith-based groups) that are engaged in countering intercommunal conflict without dependence on external funding⁹². Another example is the tolerance campaign initiated in Mekthila by one international NGO, and passed on to government as it reached a scale that required broader ownership and management.

⁹² Spirit in Education Movement, 2014.

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