

Testing Ceasefires, Building Trust

Myanmar Peace Support Initiative
Operational Review

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Testing Ceasefires, Building Trust: Myanmar Peace Support Initiative Operational Review

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

ALP	Arakan Liberation Party	MNLA	Mon National Liberation Army
BGF	Border Guard Force	MPC	Myanmar Peace Center
CBO	Community based organisation	MPSI	Myanmar Peace Support Initiative
CDA	Chin Development Agency	NCA	National Ceasefire Accord
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People	NCCT	National Ceasefire Coordination Team
CNF	Chin National Front	NCSN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
CPB	Communist Party of Burma	NDAA-ESS	National Democratic Alliance Army- Eastern Shan State
CPCS	Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation	NIS	Nordic International Support Foundation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent/ Buddhist Army	NMSP	New Mon State Party
EAGs	Ethnic armed groups	NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
EBO	Euro-Burma Office	NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
EPRP	Ethnic Peace Resource Project	PDSG	Peace Donor Support Group
EU	European Union	PNLO	Pa-oh National Liberation Organisation
Fafo	Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies	RCSS	Restoration Council Shan State
IDPs	Internally displaced persons	SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
ILO	International Labour Organisation	SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
INGO	International non-governmental organisation	SSA-N	Shan State Army North
JPNA	Joint Peacebuilding Needs Assessment	SSA-S	Shan State Army South
KIA	Kachin Independence Army	SSPP	Shan State Progressive Party
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation	USDP	Union State and Development Party
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army	UN	United Nations
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party	UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
KNU	Karen National Union	UWSA	United Wa State Army
MNEC	Mon National Education Committee		



Executive summary

In his inaugural speech in March 2011, President Thein Sein declared a political and economic reform agenda based on the fundamental rights of citizens. Apart from beginning a process of reconciliation with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the release of hundreds of political prisoners, he made the peace process with armed ethnic groups (EAGs) a top priority during his first year. Minister U Aung Min was appointed chief negotiator and began a series of negotiations with the EAGs. By April 2012, ceasefires had been signed with all the major groups except the Kachin.

At the beginning of 2012, President Thein Sein requested the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs to help mobilise international support for the peace process. In positively responding to this request the Norwegian government took a considerable political risk that no other international actor was able or willing to take at this time. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided that Norway would launch a light and flexible initiative that would test the sincerity of all parties to the agreements being made. To this end Norway engaged Charles Petrie, the former UN Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative in Myanmar from 2003 until December 2007, when he was declared *persona non grata* by the Myanmar government. His being allowed back by the government sent a signal of political change and willingness to re-engage with the international community.

The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) resulted from these decisions and was always envisaged as a short-term mechanism to provide support to the ceasefires and the broader peace process until other structures could take over. It was neither a donor nor an implementer but a means to create links between parties that previously either were in direct conflict or simply had little access to each other.

An underlying principle of MPSI was to be responsive to the situation on the ground. Its consultants did not propose projects themselves but rather assisted EAGs in their formulation and development. Though often small in size, the projects were all in politically strategic locations, designed to test the commitment of all parties to the ceasefires and to the safe opening of access

to previously unreachable communities. The first pilot project was in Kyauk Kyi, one of the so-called “black areas” where the state had not had control for a long time, if ever, and where external actors had hardly any access. The location was suggested by the Karen National Union and agreed upon by the Myanmar government and army. The project provided a platform for an unprecedented degree of engagement and communication between different stakeholders and was considered a breakthrough by all sides.

As the peace process slowly moved forward, MPSI recognised the need to become involved in longer-term support, including state-level consultations, building the capacity of ethnic actors to engage with the peace process, and finding ways to make voices from the ground heard by those in power - be they government or donors. Some of its consultants also came to fulfil a substantial role as the secretariat for the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG), which had been requested by President Thein Sein in mid-2012. Last but not least, it fulfilled an important role of analysis of key issues for the peace process.

The key strength of MPSI has been in the deep knowledge of Myanmar held by core members of the team, and the trust and relationships built over the many years they have worked in the country, combined with the status and access that was brought by Charles Petrie. This basic strength of personnel was combined with a flexible mode of operation that encouraged creativity and allowed MPSI to take political and operational risks. In this it had some important successes, using its influence to create links and make breakthroughs on the ground. It also had two vital partnerships: that of the Nordic International Support Foundation (which administered the MPSI), and that of Norwegian People’s Aid (to which Norway had given a budget specifically to implement MPSI related projects). Without these it could not have functioned.

MPSI also had several weaknesses. Its strategy for growth was sometimes unclear and it lacked operational management, especially as it began to grow. This was most evident in the failure to appoint a permanent coordinator in Yangon until 2013. It also failed to develop a clear

communications and outreach strategy and did not adequately share either its purpose or its analysis. Lastly, it proved a challenge to get other donors more consistently involved, which resulted in difficulties in securing funding for projects. Inevitably, working at a time of change and with a government that few people were yet prepared to trust, MPSI attracted criticism, especially from organisations based along the border with Thailand. Some of this could have been avoided with a better communications strategy, but some was an unavoidable part of operating in a highly contested situation.

These issues notwithstanding, the conclusion of the review is that MPSI was clearly the right initiative at the right time. Its extreme flexibility and the knowledge and access its core team brought enabled it to open access to closed areas and to build trust between previously warring parties. The task of support, however, is not over. While MPSI, as a temporary and very loosely structured initiative, needs to phase out it is important that the functions it has performed are not lost. The peace process remains fragile and is by no means irreversible. Although the situation with the military has improved and many groups report a feeling of greater confidence, trust in the Myanmar army remains a problem, and some areas are still seeing active conflict. Any failure to initiate ceasefire monitoring or to begin substantial political talks would raise serious questions about the future of the peace process. New risks are also arising. Inter-communal violence has the potential to destabilise the country. The census in March/April 2014 will inevitably be a cause of tension given the relationship between political rights and issues of ethnic and religious identity. Pre-electoral dynamics will be a further source of tension, shifting the discourse from one of consensus seeking to one of competition, and the results of the elections (due in late 2015) may well make the cause of peace in ethnic areas harder to advance. Not surprisingly, ethnic leaders and the government feel the best chance of peace is now.

The Government of Myanmar aims to sign the National Ceasefire Accord by April - although the final text is not yet agreed - and then begin an inclusive political dialogue. While this is unlikely to be completed in the time remaining before election campaigns start, it is vital that it reaches a point where the movement towards peace will be hard to reverse. The dialogue will trigger the need

for international support for all parties and this support will have to be given in a situation where the UN is still not a trusted actor, and thus the usual coordination mechanisms will be missing. The current fragmented nature of the approach to conflict in Myanmar is also a problem, and donors need an over-arching framework that brings these into a comprehensive strategy based on the fundamental rights of all the country's citizens. In this, a successor of MPSI could play a valuable part.

Recommendations for continued support to the Myanmar peace process

There is a need to develop a clear strategy for the transition of MPSI into other mechanisms and to have a communications plan around this. Plans should be made for the next two years, after which a new political situation will require another review of support mechanisms.

PDSG Secretariat

- Establish a clear sense of ownership of the secretariat by the PDSG itself, and a shared vision of its purpose and roles, before funding a large secretariat. Care should be taken to ensure that the secretariat does not usurp what should be the role of the government and Myanmar Peace Center.
- Roles of the future secretariat potentially include:
 - Support to the PDSG in its political, financial and technical coordination of donor support.
 - Consideration of analysis, lessons learned and insights from existing projects and programmes and how these should inform future donor funding.
 - Exploring a model for setting up a joint fund to create more certainty that projects identified get financial support.
 - Working groups to look at particular issues, as with the current coordination of support to liaison offices. An up-coming issue could be technical and financial support to the political dialogue.

Responsibility for continued support to projects

- The immediate priority is to ensure funding for existing project commitments. If necessary,

Norway should be prepared to be funder of the last resort.

- A plan needs to be developed for support to the liaison offices and the Ethnic Peace Resource Project.
- There is the need to develop and resource a plan for the 'roll out' of projects to support the peace process. In this, some form of multi donor mechanism should be considered.
- Finally, support will be needed for some time for ethnic communities that are part of pilot areas to enable them to continue to engage with international actors.

Preserving independent analysis capacity

- Some form of 'think tank' would be the best way to maintain the independent analysis provided by the MPSI. The exact model for this should be explored through a feasibility study, enabling a range of opinions to be canvassed, the most appropriate structure and mandate to be decided, and the beginnings of partnerships explored.
- Such a body should be a local institution – in the sense that it would be based in Yangon and accountable to Myanmar-based actors.
- It could start off small with just a few full time staff, a small number of core advisers and a small budget to commission research and related activities.
- It is important, given the contested nature of the environment, that it develops a strong communications strategy and has an outreach and partnerships policy.

Recommendations for future efforts to support the early stages of a peace process

- The lesson from MPSI is that bringing together in-depth country expertise, relationships of trust with key actors, and individuals who have political access - both to donors and government - is vital. Without this it will not be possible to gain traction.
- A good delivery mechanism is critical - in this respect the partnership with NPA and NIS was a crucial element of the MPSI and a similar arrangement should be part of any future initiative.
- While an initial short timeframe makes sense in the early months, when the team is testing

whether anything is even possible, working on three to six month commitments is counter-productive. A two-year timeframe would be more realistic.

- The overall idea of an initiative that is light and flexible is fundamentally right, but some structure is required. It is important to quickly get a full time focal point in-country and for that person to have responsibility for the operational management of the programme.
- If projects are to be part of the overall strategy, the team needs sufficient expertise to take this forward and funding mechanisms need to be put in place for both immediate needs and longer term programme development. A multi donor mechanism is unlikely to be useful at the beginning as it takes too long to set up but would probably be needed longer-term.
- In any contested situation a clear communications strategy, and the means to implement it, is vital.
- It is important to develop partnerships on as many levels as possible. This is time consuming, but without it resistance is likely to be generated.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Operational Review of MPSI

In early 2012, the Government of Myanmar requested the Government of Norway to help mobilise international support for the emerging peace process in Myanmar. This request came as a result of an early and active Norwegian political engagement to support the overall transition process, exemplified in several official visits to Myanmar from spring 2010 onwards, including five high level visits during the first 12 months after the new government took office. In response, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) set up the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) as a mechanism to test the ceasefires and to identify practical ways for the international community to build trust and confidence in the peace process. While it was accepted that there was a need to start political dialogue - and for the overall peace process to be consolidated and sustained - it was also seen as important that quick support was provided to conflict-affected communities in order to demonstrate the reality of a national-level reform process and to create new positive dynamics at the local level.

Since its inception MPSI set out to function as a flexible peace support mechanism, intended to identify and fill immediate gaps. A guiding principle was that it should be temporary and the initiative was constructed to phase out, with the technical support functions and projects being handed over to emerging donor structures and longer-term funding instruments. It was also planned that a review would take place at an appropriate time. This was intended to enable reflection on the relative worth of the initiative as fit for purpose, to extract lessons to inform existing and future initiatives in Myanmar, and to see what learning could be drawn from the experience of MPSI for other conflict-affected areas.

1.2 Objectives

The focus of the review was on learning lessons and disseminating the experience of MPSI and its activities as a whole. The aim was to assess the functioning of the process, not the outcomes

of the individual projects MPSI had supported; and to do this within a clear understanding of the political context of the Myanmar peace process and how various stakeholders, including Norway, had related to this.

1.3 Scope

The review considered the entire geographic area of MPSI's work. In keeping with the terms of reference for the assignment, it examined the key areas of relevance, timeliness, responsiveness and negotiating access, as well as MPSI's coordination mechanisms and transition strategy. Recognising that the political context has been constantly evolving, the report starts by mapping the changes in the peace process to date, in order to be able to reflect on how MPSI has adapted to them. It then looks at MPSI's activities, achievements and strength and weaknesses. The report also considers what is needed in the future if gaps are not to be created by the phasing out of MPSI in its current form and its transition into other mechanisms. Finally, it draws out lessons for Norway and other donors should they seek to undertake similar initiatives in other countries on the brink of a potential peace process.

1.4 A note on terminology

Terminology in reference to Burma/Myanmar is highly contested and its usage is often confusing. In this report, the present day state is referred to by its official name "Myanmar", but if referred to historically the term "Burma" is used. The term "Burman" refers to the people who make up the majority ethnic group in the country and who speak "Burmese" as their mother tongue. The term "ethnic actors" is used when referring to a range of non-Burmese speaking people, including ethnic armed groups (EAGs), communities, traditional leadership, ethnic administrations, and civil society organisations (CSOs) based on ethnic identity.

1.5 Acknowledgements

The review team would like to thank the whole MPSI team for the openness with which they approached this review. Without their willingness

to share the exercise would have been much less rich and informative. Special thanks go to Ashley South and Alan Smith for their commitment to setting up meetings for us with key leaders in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. We were privileged to have such access to people and this would not have been possible without their support. Thanks also go to Norway, both the NMFA in Oslo and its embassies in Bangkok and Yangon, for participation and support, and especially to the Nordic International Support Foundation (NIS) for excellent administration. Finally, although many of them might never read this report, we would like to thank all those whom we interviewed for sharing with us so generously their time and their experiences. We hope that this review makes a small contribution to taking forward the peace processes in Myanmar, and thus justifies the time spent with us.

2. Methodology

The methodology for the operational review was throughout qualitative and participatory in nature and designed to produce a document that would be useful, both for the NMFA and for other donors and peace actors in Myanmar and beyond. As a matter of principle it was respectful of political and cultural sensitivities, of the risk of raising expectations, and of possible visitor and interview fatigue in the field. Wherever possible it built on already generated information.

The review included the following elements:

A desk review of MPSI internal documentation, reviews and policy reports on the political process, selected academic readings, and INGO evaluations and reviews from implementing partners served as initial learning and helped to inform the key questions for interviews and focus group discussions. The Asia Foundation's report "Contested Corners" sets some of the findings of this review in a wider context.¹

In-depth interviews were the main empirical method of the review. Initial key informant interviews were held with Charles Petrie and the MPSI core consultants in order to establish a shared understanding of the trajectory of the peace process and to ensure that the review team were aware of any sensitivities in conducting the review. Prioritisation for other interviews was made jointly between the review team and MPSI. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that all key areas were covered and to enable interviewees to raise issues that were important to them and that might have otherwise been overlooked. Most interviews were undertaken by both members of the review team together in order to establish a shared understanding and to benefit from their different backgrounds. In addition, a workshop was organised with the full MPSI team at the beginning of the review. This helped form an understanding of the context and development of MPSI from the perspective of those most closely involved; it also served as an introduction to the MPSI team.

The NMFA was a key informant for the review, both in Oslo and in Bangkok and Yangon. A broad range of interviews was also held with donors - both inside and outside the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG) - and with experts from other international organisations, as well as with the Myanmar Peace Center. Interviews were likewise held with a substantive number of representatives of ethnic armed groups (EAGs) and CSOs at a variety of locations (in Yangon, Tanintharyi Region, Mon State, Mae Sot and Chiang Mai). The review team was also fortunate to have a meeting with Minister U Aung Min in Nay Pyi Taw.

In total, interviews were undertaken with 47 individuals plus the MPSI team. Mostly these lasted between one and two hours and usually they were with individual interviewees, although sometimes two or three people were present. The review team was largely unable to organise meetings with state or regional governments, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) and the Pyidungsau Hluttaw (bi-cameral parliament) due to the short timeframe. The absence of these meetings is also a reflection of the experience of MPSI. In the interest of confidentiality, a list of interviews is not attached to this report but has been shared with the NMFA and NIS.

It was planned that the individual interviews would be supplemented by a small number of focus group discussions to generate an exchange of ideas. It was clear, however, that this would depend on the relevance and availability of interlocutors and on whether group discussions were the most appropriate way to gain information and insights. In the end, focus group discussions were held only in a village in a pilot area (including a women-only group), with liaison offices and with civil society organisations during the field visit.

An extended field visit was undertaken to ensure the review was grounded in the realities of Myanmar and to capture the perspectives of those who have been most directly involved in MPSI, as local partners or as beneficiaries. Criteria for the choice of field sites were developed for discussion with NIS and MPSI staff, in conjunction with whom the final decision was made. The field trip included a visit to the pilot project area in Dawei-Palaw (Tanintharyi Region), the KNU liaison office and

¹ Thomas Parks, Nat Colletta, Ben Oppenheim: *The Contested Corners of Asia: Subnational Conflict and International Development Assistance*, The Asia Foundation 2013.

a State Government Minister in Dawei, the NMSP liaison office in Ye, and civil society groups and NMSP cadres in Mawlamyine (Mon State). The rationale for this choice was that the interlocutors were involved in a broad range of MPSI-related activities and thus enabled the best overall understanding of MPSI work, given logistical constraints and the limited time available. The review team also went to Thailand (Mae Sot and Chiang Mai) to meet EAG leaders and some of those border-based organisations that had been most vocal in their criticism of MPSI. This was explicitly encouraged by the NMFA.

The team shared their preliminary findings and analysis at a validation workshop on the last day of their visit to Myanmar. This tested the reviewers' understanding of MPSI and enabled a discussion of recommendations. The workshop was held in two parts. The morning consisted of a presentation and discussion of what was achieved and not achieved, of MPSI's strengths and weaknesses, and of the perceptions of different external actors. The afternoon was used to share an assessment of future risks to the peace process, which formed the context for the discussion of recommendations from the review that followed. Lastly, the evaluators facilitated a discussion among the MPSI team about next steps. All MPSI consultants, two NIS representatives from Oslo and one representative from the Norwegian Embassy in Yangon participated in the workshop.

The report of the review is a shared product of both consultants, each of whom took the lead on particular sections. It was finalised after feedback from the NMFA and NIS. It is intended that the report will be shared at an event in Oslo and with a selected audience in Yangon.

3. Context: the new peace processes

3.1 Historical roots of conflict

Myanmar's complex web of conflicts dates back to pre-colonial times and some of its roots can be found in colonial history and the forging of the country's independence. Its majority population, the Burman people, started to arrive from the north around the 9th century, occupying the central Ayeyawaddy plains and causing the Mon to migrate southeast. During the course of their history, the Burmans have built kingdoms and led waves of expansion that were often met by resistance on the side of the Shan, the Mon, and the Thai to their east. Apart from the Thai empires, the other ethnic groups in the region did not develop as centralised and as expansive seats of power and degrees of political organisation as did the Burmans. In the northern parts and hilly borderlands, ethnic groups always had some kind of exchange and trade relations with the centralised kingdoms but they at all times resisted colonisation - a systematic trait shared across mainland Southeast Asia. Today's Shan State in Myanmar, home to a variety of smaller ethnic groups, is a mirror of the ethnic heterogeneity that was long typical for the region. The arrival of externally validated scriptural orthodoxies and religious practices after the expansion of Theravada-style Buddhism among the Burmans, the Mon and others adds further complexity to the landscape of identities. Islam arrived through different routes - including mainland India, China and other parts of Southeast Asia - but in its early days mainly from across the Bay of Bengal, whence it came to stay before the Burmans established their dominance over Arakan. Christian missionaries - Anglican, Protestant, Catholic, but most influentially Baptist - came in the wake of European colonial encounters and found reception mainly in those hill areas and borderlands where central Burma had no reach. As in many other localities in Southeast Asia, Chinese settlers have been arriving as merchants to urban centres for centuries. During the British colonial administration, hundreds of thousands of Indians of different caste, geographical origin and religious domination followed the call for a new labour market and economic opportunities.

None of these brief descriptions can do justice to any of the mentioned groups and to the pre-colonial and colonial history of Myanmar. However, this brief glance sheds light on the fluidity of cultural and political identities in the region prior to the establishment of a modern nation state. The idea of nationalism has transformed all these groups to different degrees and with different outcomes; but the territory that is the Union of the Republic of Myanmar today has never been unified or even administered as a unit - neither prior to 4 January 1948 nor since. Thus in trying to understand ethnic claims and grievances and the contemporary dynamics of peace and conflict in Myanmar today it is important to realise that there never was an "imagined community" of Burma/Myanmar. Contemporary politics have to be seen in this light.

3.2 Long-standing conflict and early ceasefires

Myanmar has been marred by civil war, ethno-nationalist conflict and outbreaks of inter-communal and inter-religious violence since colonial times. On the eve of independence, General Aung San famously assembled representatives of the Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen in Panglong to discuss the future of a multi-ethnic state independent from Great Britain. The agreement from this conference assured the signatories of autonomy in the future. The Karen, close to the British administration, had a vision of a state of their own and did not actively participate. The Mon and the Arakanese were not invited. Hardly any of the participants shared the same political goal, and many later developed a sense of betrayal. Yet while the Panglong Agreement of February 1947 was never truly implemented, it remained a blueprint for inter-ethnic negotiation on national level.

With the breakdown of the first democratic government of Burma under Prime Minister U Nu and the start of the military regime under General Ne Win in 1962, many of the long-standing ethnic armed groups started to fight against the Tatmadaw - the Burmese army. Some of this armed strife stayed as low-intensity conflict and non-state actors were able to establish systems

of administration in areas beyond state control. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which took over power from Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSP) after public pro-democracy protests in 1988 and which was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, signed ceasefire agreements with remaining groups of the defeated Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which had long been fighting against the Tatmadaw. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) were among the successors of the CPB. These early ceasefires established relatively safe territories for armed groups but did not start a political dialogue about the root causes of conflict. In 1994, the government signed a ceasefire with the powerful Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)/Kachin Independence Army (KIA). In 1995, it signed a similar agreement with the New Mon State Party (NMSP)/Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA). The Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP)/Karenni Army (KA) only had a short-lived ceasefire in 1995 but other smaller groups accepted agreements. In 2009, the SPDC regime proposed the foundation of a Border Guard Force programme, which foresaw the transformation of EAGs into small battalions under control of the Union government. The supreme command over the battalions was to be vested in the authority of the Tatmadaw. Some smaller groups accepted this proposal but the programme was opposed by the major EAGs that had already signed ceasefires, the UWSA and the KIO/KIA. As a reaction, the Union Election Commission prevented the registration of major Kachin political parties and of independent candidates for elections in 2010.

3.3 A new government - a new peace approach?

In 2003, the military government declared a 7-step-roadmap to "disciplined democracy," although without giving a specific timeframe. Major steps on this roadmap were the drafting and acceptance by a referendum of a new constitution, general elections and the inauguration of a nominally civilian government. The referendum for the constitution was held in May 2008, followed by general elections on 7 November 2010. Both events were allegedly marred with fraud. The military-proxy Union State and Development Party (USDP) was declared the overall winner of the ballot. On 30 March 2011, the SPDC was officially

dissolved with the inauguration of the newly elected government under President Thein Sein. In his inaugural speech, he acknowledged "the hell of untold miseries" suffered in decades of armed conflict, and declared a surprising political and economic reform agenda based on fundamental rights of citizens. Apart from beginning a process of reconciliation with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the release of hundreds of political prisoners, President Thein Sein made the peace process with the EAGs a top priority during his first year. After a government reshuffle that moved efficient reformers closer to the President's Office, former Railway Minister U Aung Min was appointed chief negotiator for the peace talks. Following the agreement/ reconfirmation of three ceasefires in late 2011, the period January to April 2012 saw ceasefires signed with the majority of the EAGs, including with the Chin National Front (CNF), the Karen National Union (KNU), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), two factions of the Shan State Army (SSA), and the Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP).² The KNU ceasefire, preceded by a historic visit of KNU leaders to Yangon after more than sixty years, ended the longest-standing civil war in the world.

The breaking of the 17-year-old ceasefire with the KIO/KIA in June 2011 has, however, undermined the new government's credibility with respect to the peace process, not least because the Tatmadaw's advances in Kachin State and northern Shan State saw some of the fiercest fighting in the country's history, including air strikes. President Thein Sein's directives to cease fighting were not always obeyed and he did not appear to be in full command of the army. An intervention by China brought the conflicting parties back to the negotiating table, with talks

² The ceasefire agreements were signed in the following order: United Wa State Party (UWSA): 6 September 2011; National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA-ESS): 7 September 2011; Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA-5): 3 November 2011; Chin National Front (CNF): 6 January 2012; Karen National Union (KNU): 12 January 2012; Shan State Army (SSA)/Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS): 16 January 2012; Shan State Army (SSA)/Shan State Progress Party (SSPP): 28 January 2012; New Mon State Party (NMSP): 1 February 2012; Karen National Union (KNU)/Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Peace Council: 7 February 2012; Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP): 7 March 2012; Arakan Liberation Party (ALP): 5 April 2012; National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K): 9 April 2012; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO): 26 August 2012 (Source: Burma News International (BNI): Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process. A Reference Guide, Chiang Mai 2013, 43).

observed by China, the UN, and - for some of the talks - by the UK and the USA. A path-breaking agreement for the cessation of hostilities was signed on 30 May 2013.

3.4 Perspectives for political dialogue

The debate about a national conference in the spirit of the historical Panglong conference has accompanied the individual ceasefire negotiations. Two years later Panglong no longer seems to serve as a model, it is rather a new process that is being developed. After long debates about sequencing, there seems to be agreement for a National Ceasefire Accord (NCA) to be signed in 2014 that will include the principles (although not the detailed framework) for a political dialogue to follow. The breakthrough for this came at a meeting in Laiza in December 2013 with the formation of the National Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) based in Chiang Mai. The NCCT is led by a representative of the NMSP, the KIO and the KNU and represents most ceasefire groups (but not UWSA and SSA/RCSS).

The process has not been undisputed. The ceasefire negotiations have for some time been ad hoc, largely bilateral, informal and secretive. The discussion of a national ceasefire is helpful as it is structuring the process and it gives ethnic actors the prospect of discussions with other power holders in its aftermath, namely the Tatmadaw and the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the bi-cameral parliament at the Union level). Positions between and within EAGs have often been conflicted, and continue to be so. The KNU, for example, experienced intense internal conflicts in 2012. Kachin and Shan actors are not convinced about the impending signing of a national accord and argue that the ceasefire process and political dialogue should take place in parallel. Meanwhile, for many observers of Myanmar politics, and for many Burmans, the peace process is not a priority as it mainly takes place in the margins of the state.

The government's approach to peace has at times been questioned by other leading figures of the nation, such as the Speaker of Parliament, Thura Shwe Mann, who also challenges the President on occasions, positioning himself for candidacy in 2015. EAGs have only slowly been building the trust to engage in a new peace

building process, and despite believing in the intentions of the President and U Aung Min often feel that they do not understand their real concerns. The government's approach to peace is based on ideas of economic development and service delivery to areas hitherto beyond state control. This has also become apparent in the approach of the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) headed by U Aung Min, which is mandated to provide the necessary technical support to the ceasefire talks. The MPC, founded in late 2012 with financial support from the European Union, is largely perceived as being dominated by ethnic Burmans and as being a government proxy. The EAGs need guarantees for the political dialogue to come and assurance that the upcoming NCA will be different from previous ceasefires.

4. MPSI: telling the story

4.1 A Norwegian initiative

“This opening is the biggest opportunity for peace in Myanmar’s history.”

Norwegian Diplomat

In the beginning of 2012, President Thein Sein requested the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs to help mobilise international support for the peace process in Myanmar. While many other Western governments had suspended their relations with the country for years and were still sceptical about a re-engagement at this time, the Government of Norway (although in line with EU sanctions) had been in contact with the military leadership. At the same time, Norway was a known supporter of opposition advocacy groups in Thailand and exile media in Oslo. Against this background, and recognising the intentions of President Thein Sein’s reforms and the importance of the ceasefires, Norway decided to positively respond to Myanmar’s request. By doing so it took a considerable political risk that no other international actor was able or willing to take at this time.

The NMFA decided that Norway would launch a light and flexible mechanism to support the peace process at this early stage. The initiative was to be temporary, with the aim of handing over to longer-term support instruments if the peace process moved forward. To this end Norway engaged Charles Petrie, the former UN Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative in Myanmar from 2003 until December 2007, when he was declared persona non grata by the Myanmar government for his alleged support to the Saffron Revolution. That he was allowed back by the government to build confidence with non-state armed actors sent a signal of political change and willingness to re-engage with the international community.

After the decision to launch the initiative, numerous consultations were held between Norway and other donors and a concept paper was prepared. Initially known simply as the Norwegian initiative, it quickly changed its name to the Myanmar Peace

Support Initiative to emphasise the Myanmar ownership of peace support and to allow it to be seen as a multi-donor effort. Key to MPSI was the idea of a tailor-made instrument that would test the ceasefires and help to create initial trust between the government and EAGs. In a situation of great political uncertainty and without any guarantees of success - but with a commitment expressed by President Thein Sein and U Aung Min and an initial willingness of EAGs to consider this pledge - the project set out to build trust and bring together stakeholders in a way that never happened before. Charles Petrie brought on board a small number of key experts who had been working in and on Myanmar for more than two decades. They brought the in-depth knowledge of the context and trusted relations with EAGs that were to prove crucial to the initiative. At this stage, however, MPSI was very much a “journey without maps”, with no clarity as to what challenges and political developments lay ahead or what interventions might prove useful.

4.2 MPSI philosophy, working modalities and funding

“We were not supporting projects, but trying to find a way into the conflict.”

MPSI consultant

MPSI is unusual in that it is neither a donor nor an implementing agency but a mechanism to create links between different actors that previously were either in direct conflict or simply had little access to each other. It was designed as a deliberately political programme in support of the newly emerging peace process: in essence, Norway “sub-contracted” a small component of its foreign policy to MPSI. Exactly what it would do was unclear, but what was certain was that MPSI should help to establish links between the government and EAGs, who hitherto had been outlawed as terrorists by the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1908. These groups had either previously had no place at the negotiations table at all or had such deep distrust in the

government from earlier failed agreements that they needed assistance to be brought in again.

A core principle behind MPSI was to be responsive to the situation on the ground. The consultants therefore did not propose projects themselves but rather assisted EAGs in the formulation of ideas, which were then developed into concept notes and eventually into full project proposals. One of the MPSI consultants described the process of getting proposals as “searching for them, identifying them”. The initial criteria were that an idea had to be proposed by the armed group; had to have agreement in principle from the government; should provide space for multi-stakeholder dialogue, including with communities; should provide practical support to agreed elements of ceasefire implementation; and should build trust in the ceasefires through meeting the needs of the conflict affected communities and opening up humanitarian access to these areas. As MPSI progressed it became clear that the issue of access was less about humanitarian space but rather the access to markets and government services for communities that had previously been cut-off; and likewise the ability of NGOs and other actors based in government controlled Myanmar to access previously unreachable areas. MPSI projects followed a conflict-sensitive approach and adhered to the principle of “do no harm”. The initiative was administratively supported from Oslo by NIS.

From the beginning, focus has been on the MPSI functioning as a highly responsive, flexible and light mechanism. With its emphasis on being temporary, it never had an office in Myanmar and most people working for it did so as part-time consultants. It was only in April 2013 that MPSI started to have a permanent coordinator for its activities, who at the same time served as part-time secretariat for the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG). Based on its short-term nature and consciously avoiding institutionalisation, planning was agreed on a three-to-six month basis only. The frequent references to its imminent closure were, however, found by many outside the organisation to be destabilising and they were unsure of the value of developing a partnership with something that was going to disappear.

In parallel to setting up MPSI, Norway had made funds available to Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) - which was already experienced in working

in Myanmar - specifically to support MPSI identified projects. Given the limited number of implementing partners and difficulties in obtaining quick funding, this relationship became essential to the functioning of MPSI. Some consideration was given to the creation of a formalised multi-donor funding mechanism or “peace fund”, but it was felt that this would take too long to set up, and it was also thought by some to be too soon for such a move.

Half a year after the foundation of MPSI, the government of Myanmar asked for the formation of a Peace Donor Support Group under Norway’s leadership. Initial pledges amounted to millions of dollars of peace support for Myanmar but little of this has yet been realised, and Norway funded or part funded the majority of MPSI projects between 2012 and 2014. Other donors were brought on board as well - notably, Finland, Denmark, Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the European Union - but not on as large a scale as Norway and MPSI had hoped at the outset. Significant gaps sometimes occurred between MPSI receiving a request to support a project and donors mobilising funds. At times this was due to donor funding modalities, at other times it was due to a lack of expertise or resources in MPSI. Frustration was also experienced in trying to scale-up assistance beyond relatively small-scale pilot projects.

After its first year, and responding to criticism during this time, MPSI conducted a thorough “lessons learned” exercise. One of the key findings from this was that MPSI should have moved more quickly to develop and implement a communications strategy. Other lessons were drawn from the pilot projects and from the experience of trying to obtain funding for MPSI initiated projects. Following this exercise, personnel numbers increased and new areas of work were taken up, including the development of an outreach strategy. The direction of MPSI’s growth in 2013, however, does not appear to have always been either clear or strategic.

4.3 MPSI activities

While it was envisaged that MPSI would cover the entirety of the ceasefire areas in Myanmar, levels of conflict differ greatly across the country. People in Rakhine and Chin State have not suffered from insurgencies and counter-attacks in the same way

as people in other areas, while Kachin State saw active fighting during the greater part of MPSI's lifetime. In Shan State, the number of actors and divisions within the state made work difficult and slow to develop. Lastly, the existing experience and relationships brought to MPSI by the key experts were mainly, although not exclusively, grounded in the southeast of Myanmar. In total, MPSI has engaged with the Karen National Union, the New Mon State Party, the Arakan Liberation Party, the Chin National Front, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Restoration Council of the Shan State and the United Nationalities Federal Council.

4.3.1 Pilot projects in “black areas”

“Everything that was done created symbolic changes in people’s lives.”

Coordinator of MPSI partner organisation

The earliest intervention of MPSI was the support to pilot projects in so-called “black areas” - areas where the state had not had control for a long time, if ever, and where other external actors such as humanitarian agencies had hardly any access.³ The first of these areas was Kyauk Kyi (Ker Der village tract) in eastern Bago Region, a location suggested by the Karen National Union (KNU) and agreed upon by the Myanmar government and army. The objectives of the project worked on two levels: the first was to enable safe return for IDPs, the second was to support the over-arching peace process between the government and the KNU by creating traction on the ground.⁴ The project provided a platform for an unprecedented degree of engagement and communication between different stakeholders that led to initial trust building between them. Quite remarkably, the government allowed the Thailand-based “Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People” (CIDKP), established by the KNU, to implement a project on Myanmar territory without being registered. CIDKP itself

³ Detailed information about these and all other MPSI projects can be found in the MPSI lessons learned documents and individual project documentation. Here, selected and summarized project descriptions are used only to provide insights for the operational review.

⁴ MPSI project documentation: Lessons from MPSI's work supporting the peace process in Myanmar.

was supported by NPA, and Australia provided the initial funding. The project site was visited by high-level representatives of the Myanmar and Norwegian governments and was considered a breakthrough by all sides. “Everything that was done created symbolic changes in people’s lives”, according to a manager of one of the implementing organisations. Consultations were extensive, yet despite this a number of organisations (mostly Thailand-based) argued that some groups and individuals were left out and that the choices made over Kyauk Kyi created jealousy in surrounding villages.

Following the initial success of Kyauk Kyi, the KNU requested a second Karen pilot project between Dawei and Palaw in Tanintharyi Region. This was funded by Finland and Norway, with technical assistance again provided by the NPA. Unlike Kyauk Kyi, however, a consortium of community based organisations (CBOs) served as the local implementing partner, adding an additional dimension of relationship building. In early 2013, implementation started also for a pilot project in southern Mon State, in the Kroeng Batoi area. Here, IDPs had already returned prior to the renewal of the NMSP ceasefire but the location for the pilot was strategic as it sat astride the borders between NMSP, KNU and Myanmar government controlled territory. MPSI supported the formation of a consortium of nine local and cross-border organisations as the implementing organisation and their interaction has strengthened the communication between different NMSP departments and civil society. The initial phase of this project was funded by Norway, with technical support provided by NPA and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

A fourth area was selected for a pilot project following spontaneous return of IDPs to Shadaw in Kayah State. MPSI was asked by a local CBO for support and established contact with Finland as a donor, but the project has not yet started. Initial discussions for a pilot project in an area controlled by the Democratic Karen Benevolent/Buddhist Army (DKBA) were also held in late 2013, but no further steps have been taken. In the original pilot areas of Kyauk Kyi, Dawei-Palaw and Kroeng Batoi expansion to further villages is foreseen but this currently lacks funding.

The MPSI pilot project activities were also linked to a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

programme with the Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population to provide villagers with Citizen Scrutiny Cards (ID cards). MPSI has provided support in mobilising funding for this work and has helped NRC to gain access to conflict affected areas. The ID cards enable people to travel freely and gain access to markets and to government services, and thus contribute towards building their trust in the peace process. MPSI has facilitated contacts between NRC and ethnic armed groups to mitigate the risk that the provision of ID cards is perceived as mere government penetration of EAG controlled areas.

In its later phase, MPSI has started a pilot listening exercise in selected ethnic areas, including Kyauk Kyi and Kroeng Batoi, to document the changes in people's lives since the ceasefires. There is an idea that the listening exercise could also be used as a monitoring and evaluation tool. The initial experience of this listening exercise was shared as part of outreach activities to CSOs and INGOs in Yangon. The outreach also serves the purpose of informing audiences in central Myanmar, including ethnic minorities in Yangon, about the work of MPSI in ceasefire zones. These activities have not yet been explored to their full potential.

4.3.2 State-level conferences and consultation processes

“The most important element of us all getting together is that it is possible.”

NMSP leader

After the pilot projects, the second cluster of MPSI-supported activities consisted of EAG led consultation processes and state level conferences. The first of these was a broad based consultation process by the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in Mon State and adjacent areas in Karen State and Tanintharyi Region, held from June 2012 to July 2013 with funding from Norway and the Netherlands and technical support by NPA. The NMSP had conducted annual community consultations before but felt the need to expand these to deepen their understanding of Mon concerns about the peace process and political transition, and to develop better relations with communities, religious leaders and Mon CBOs. The NMSP liaison offices (see below) were crucial for the organisation of the consultations

exercise. The consultations allowed the NMSP to learn about community concerns as much as informing communities about developments in the peace process. The major worries expressed were increasing problems with drug trafficking and abuse, land disputes and land grabbing, the presence of landmines, a desire for Mon political parties to merge, and interest in gaining a better understanding of political debates, for example about constitutional reform and federalism. The consultations fostered relations between liaison offices, CBOs and communities and resulted in several awareness raising and capacity building workshops. The most visible outcome of the NMSP consultations process was the Mon State Conference. Another outcome was a non-technical survey of landmines in eight villages in Ye township which commenced in late 2013. This is implemented by NPA, which with support from MPSI secured the first memorandum of understanding with the Myanmar government for mine action in Mon State.

Unlike the NMSP, the Chin National Front (CNF) has hardly any control over geographical areas in Chin State, and had not conducted community consultations prior to contacts with MPSI. The Chin Consultation Process, which started in April 2013 (together with IT support for Chin schools, both funded by Denmark with additional support coming from Norway), implements a provision of the Chin ceasefire agreement signed on 6 January 2012. The consultations were a response to the government's claim that the CNF only spoke for themselves and not for their constituents. The results were presented at the Chin State Conference. An extension of the first round of consultations is planned for Chin communities living outside Chin State.

Similar to the CNF, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) agreed in ceasefire negotiations with the government to hold community consultations and awareness training on the topics of human rights and democracy in Kayah State. Starting from September 2012, these were funded by Norway and supported by NPA. The KNPP consultations process included discussions on community-based ceasefire monitoring; and in its second phase it established local human rights monitoring teams and committees. Initially, community members were afraid to express their concerns in public, but they grew more confident during the process. Similar

to the role of CBOs in the NMSP consultations, the KNPP used local monitoring teams rather than former combatants or party cadres to conduct the consultation sessions. The process itself thus contributed to building relationships between the KNPP and other elements of society, including between Thailand-based and Myanmar-based organisations. Overall, villagers reported that they could work and travel without fear after the ceasefire. Following a request from the communities, the KNPP also agreed to reduce its taxes by 50% and a controversial dam and hydro-plant and cement factory project were suspended after KNPP shared the consultation results with the government.

The CNF and NMSP consultation results were presented and discussed at state-level conferences in Chin and Mon States in the second half of 2013. The first such conference, however, had been held in Lashio in March 2013 as the “Trust Building for Peace Conference” for Shan and Kayah States. This was followed by a second conference in Taunggyi in September. A larger-scale consultations process similar to those of NMSP, CNF and KNPP has not yet been initiated due to the complex mix of different ethnic groups, various non-state armed actors, and competing political parties in Shan State. MPSI was, however, approached by the Restoration Council of the Shan State (RCSS) to support basic media training. This project started in the second half of 2013 with funding from Norway and support from NIS. The aim was to collect and disseminate reliable information in Shan communities. Ideas were also expressed for a Kayin State Conference. This was preceded by MPSI facilitated information-sharing workshops in Karen districts in the first half of 2013 and workshops for the KNU in Bago Region and Mae Sot in late 2013. While MPSI provided substantial input to these workshops, its role in the larger state-level conferences was limited to securing funding. The conferences brought together a great number of political parties, EAGs and other actors in a way that hitherto was not possible. As one NMSP organiser explained it, “the greatest achievement of the conference was the fact that it could take place”. At a workshop facilitated by MPSI and the Cambodia based Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) in Chiang Mai in September 2013, the NMSP, CNF and KNPP had the opportunity to share their experiences

of community consultations with each other and with representatives of several other EAGs.

4.3.3 Supporting long-term peace building efforts

MPSI has also helped develop peace-building measures that go beyond early response, and has tried to secure funding for these. Most notable of these are the support to ceasefire liaison offices, the establishment of the Ethnic Peace Resource Project (EPRP), a proposal for a Chin Development Agency (CDA) and the Mon Education Project.

The ceasefire liaison offices are staffed by representatives of the EAGs and are meant to liaise between the Tatmadaw and the respective EAG, as well as between the EAGs and the population. The number and location of liaison offices derive from provisions in the ceasefire agreements, and their performance and roles vary depending on different skills and local needs. The NMSP liaison offices tend to be more experienced as they date back to the ceasefire of the 1990s. The liaison office in Ye (Mon State), for example, has become a meeting place for training and workshops as well as a place for villagers to report their concerns about security deterioration, land grabbing and drug trafficking. In several instances, including in the Kyauk Kyi pilot project area, the liaison offices have already proved crucial in diffusing tensions between armed actors before violence could erupt, and there is potential for them to play a role in ceasefire monitoring in the future. However, exactly to whom liaison offices report is not always clear, and how effectively they will be able to respond to requests from communities depends on their further development and on capacity building being provided. Norway gives financial support to the liaison offices through the Euro-Burma Office (EBO), while MPSI, through its role as PDSG Secretariat (see next section), chairs regular coordination meetings for different liaison office partners, including the EBO, MPC, ILO, CPCS and EPRP. Funding for liaison offices for 2014 was not secured at the time of writing.

The Ethnic Peace Resource Project, launched in April 2013 with initial funding from Norway, was set up to provide relevant information and capacity building to enable leaders and members of EAGs to actively participate in the peace process. Four areas of work stand out: the development of a web-based resource platform and a linked series of workshops; the provision of internet

connections and relevant training for a selected number of liaison offices; providing resources to liaison offices to help communities to stay informed about the peace process; and a gender component to achieve greater representation of women, as well as meeting women's needs in the peace process. The latter component is funded by Switzerland. At its inception, it was planned that EPRP would take over some of MPSI's roles after the latter's transition to a new phase of peace support.

Building on strong personal relationships with the NMSP, MPSI supported the Mon Education Project in 2013. Based on community consultations, the first phase of the project focussed on the further development of an education policy and curriculum, with funding from Norway, technical assistance from NPA and additional input from the Shalom Foundation. This project takes up the important question of mother-tongue education and builds on the long-standing experience of the NMSP's education department, the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). Its systematic linkage between local Mon education and government schools and the way in which it integrates with the national curriculum has the potential to serve as a model for other ethnic states. However, despite considerable efforts by both MPSI and Australia, as the potential donor, an agreement for longer-term funding was not reached.

Following the ceasefire agreement, negotiations between the CNF and the government brought about the idea for a Chin Development Agency (CDA), which will involve the Union and state government, Chin civil society, political parties and the CNF, with support from the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies (Fafo). The emphasis on development, rather than on post-conflict trust-building or issues of safe return, is due to the fact that armed conflict has been limited and is confined to small areas in border zones, while at the same time Chin State is the poorest of all ethnic states in Myanmar. Although approved by the State Minister, the project is on hold until the Joint Peacebuilding Needs Assessment is launched.

Upon request of the government, MPSI has also provided support to the Joint Peacebuilding Needs Assessment (JPNA). This arose out of Minister U Aung Min's wish to unlock donor

funding in support of the peace process. Building on previous experience of post-conflict needs assessments, and designed with technical input from the United Nations, the World Bank and Fafo, the JPNA is chaired by the Myanmar Peace Center. Recognising that considerable data already existed on Myanmar, it started with a desktop review of existing documentation.⁵ This will inform the JPNA proper. In the knowledge that it would shape the nature of much of the donor assistance to ceasefire areas, MPSI became involved in an attempt to make it more responsive to the needs of ethnic communities. Although the JPNA has a central committee on which ethnic leadership is not represented, each state level assessment will have a degree of autonomy, with ethnic leaders fully involved in the process. Currently the JPNA is on hold, as in order not to run ahead of the political process it is waiting for the NCA to be signed.

4.4 Roles played by MPSI

As noted earlier, at the beginning no one quite knew what MPSI would do. Over time, however, it became possible to discern a number of key areas of work, all of which need consideration as MPSI transitions to longer-term support mechanisms.

Opening access and testing the ceasefires

This was at the core of the MPSI's work, especially in the first year, and has largely been carried out through the pilot projects. While the pilot projects were small, they were all in politically significant areas and they enabled not only MPSI itself but also other organisations, such as NPA, to reach communities that had previously been inaccessible. They tested commitment on both sides to the ceasefires that had been signed, enabled communities to move out of the jungle and to begin to live normal lives. This initial need to test the ceasefires has largely passed, but trust remains fragile in many areas, communities are still very vulnerable and work with them needs to continue.

Support to ethnic actors

Beyond the pilot projects lies the broader task of building the capacity of ethnic actors to be part of the peace process. These are the groups that

⁵ Desktop Review of Needs and Gaps in Conflict-Affected Parts of Myanmar, April 2013.

currently have the least resources at their disposal to support engagement, be they financial (for example for travel and holding meetings with their constituencies) or technical (in terms of knowledge of how a formal peace process works). Because confidence in the current process is still uncertain, it remains important that those advising them are people they know and trust. MPSI provides this advice both on an informal basis, for example discussing strategy in advance of key meetings, and in a more structured way through the EPRP. Some of this role is shared with other actors.

Creating links and building trust

Since the start of the MPSI a core task has been to build links between parties that previously either were in direct conflict or simply had little access to each other. Minister U Aung Min explained this as: “Peace building is essentially talking to your enemy. At first it is difficult even to meet your enemy. MPSI played an important role here.” From the other side, EAG leaders spoke of how “We have been fighting for more than 60 years; it is very difficult to believe in the government.” Ethnic communities and their leaders were also cut off from each other. Finally, leaders from the EAGs and other ethnic actors had previously been unable to access donors and INGOs operating in the country, and facilitating these links was important. Donor funding, however, is complex and difficult for outsiders to understand and ethnic actors will need continuing support as the peace process moves forward, new needs arise and new programmes of work develop.

Making voices heard

One of the roles of MPSI has been to bring voices from the ground to the attention of those with power, be it government or donors. Due to long-standing relationships of trust, the team has had access to a richness of information on facts, feelings and interpretations. Much more could be done to share this and to develop understanding amongst donors and government of the situation in ethnic communities and of people’s hopes and fears for the future. As the peace process progresses and new challenges arise there will be a continuing need to ensure voices from the grassroots are heard.

Analysis of key issues

The analytical capacity of MPSI has been appreciated by a range of actors. It has enabled

critical issues to be raised and prevailing orthodoxies to be challenged. A vital element of MPSI’s analysis is that it has been independent of any stakeholder group.

Support to PDSG

With Norway chairing the PDSG and the UN little involved in the peace process, some of the MPSI consultants have been fulfilling the role of secretariat for the PDSG. This encompasses both administrative support and a broader role of giving advice to donors on issues related to the peace process. There is, however, a degree of confusion as to where MPSI ends and where the PDSG secretariat begins. MPSI documentation shows the secretariat as essentially having taken over all the roles formerly held by the MPSI. Some of these functions (for example support to small-scale projects and consultations in ceasefire areas) do not usually belong to the work of a secretariat and do not correspond to many PDSG members view of its role.

4.5 Reflections on the experience of MPSI

4.5.1 Strengths and achievements

The key strength of MPSI has been in the combination of the deep knowledge of Myanmar held by core members of the team, and the trusted relationships they have built, plus the status and access that was brought by Charles Petrie. This basic strength of personnel was combined with a flexible mode of operation that encouraged creativity and allowed people to take political and programmatic risks. As MPSI grew, it also drew to itself a highly motivated and committed group of people. Projects were developed with care and through long discussion with local actors, and as a result were highly context sensitive and locally owned. Basic ground rules ensured that the civilian population was always consulted.

In terms of specific achievements, the pilot projects tested the ceasefires, showing that it was possible for people to move out of the jungle and return home safely (Kyauk Kyi and Dawei-Palaw) or to operate safely across territory controlled by a number of different parties (Kroeng Batoi). The support of Minister U Aung Min gave protection to partners and a degree of confidence that no harm would come to those returning. As a result, MPSI was able to open access for partner INGOs

to work in areas controlled by EAGs, to which they had previously been denied access by the government. In the process it built links between EAGs, INGOs, government and donors and was slowly able to build trust - albeit sometimes very tentative - on a number of levels. Villagers talked, for example, of how for the first time in decades they did not flee when they saw the army. This has important implications for the future, for as one interviewee noted: "Solidifying the ceasefires [is] key to transitional arrangements."

As the peace process progressed, support to broad-based consultation processes also became an important element of MPSI's work. For EAGs, this was the first time they were able to consult widely with the public and to engage constructively with other stakeholders in the community. It gave new opportunities to get together, to foster ties between themselves, political parties and civil society organisations, and to forge links between organisations on both sides of the international border. For many of them the most important outcome of the consultations that MPSI and other organisations supported was that they could for the first time meet openly and discuss issues, with each other and with the government. It was a critical part of building links between EAGs and their constituencies, and of opening a path to civilian challenge of the actions of armed actors. MPSI was not the only actor here but it was key to identifying early on how important such processes were, and to bringing different actors together to make them happen.

MPSI also tried to test the extent to which the government was prepared to meet ethnic demands on longer-term policy issues, particularly in relation to the charged - but very important - issue of mother-tongue education. While not successful in securing funding for a multi-year Mon education project, MPSI did help raise the profile of an issue of cultural identity that will be crucial to long-term peace. Similarly, it made important interventions to donors on issues, such as the census, that could have serious implications for the peace negotiations (even though this was felt by some to be outside its remit) and it raised important challenges to the JPNA process that were taken on board by the wider JPNA team.

Support to the longer-term peace process was provided through MPSI's work with EAGs, and the most important achievement here has been

enabling the EAGs to begin feeling confident in their ability to be a stakeholder in the ceasefire discussions and the forthcoming political dialogue. As one senior EAG leader explained: "Before we were fighting a long time with the government, we did not have much experience of the outside world. Now we are talking with the government, but the government is very powerful and so it is important for us to have friends who can help us."

4.5.2 Internal weaknesses

Although MPSI certainly had strategic vision, it lacked operational management. While the experience and seniority that Charles Petrie brought was essential to the success of the initiative, it came with a price: he also had other commitments and could only be in Myanmar part-time. This led to an inherent weakness in the management of MPSI that should have been recognised and compensated for in the way it was structured. In particular the lack of a consistent focal point or coordinator in country until April 2013 was a problem. Externally people often simply did not know who to go to when they wanted to get in touch with MPSI; internally it led to a lack of follow-up and cohesion.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that everyone was on a consultancy contract, and almost everyone was part time. This led to blurred boundaries: when was someone acting as MPSI and when in a different capacity? It also made it difficult to decide what were MPSI's achievements, as opposed to those of individual consultants who operated under many hats but on essentially the same issues. It also resulted in MPSI sometimes being blamed for the actions of individuals - even when the individuals concerned had been very clear they were acting in their own capacity. For those outside of MPSI, the problem was compounded by a significant degree of confusion regarding the roles of Norway and the MPSI, the MPSI and the PDSG Secretariat, and Norway and the PDSG.

Some of the decisions on structure and management were due to lack of long-term funding commitments; others were a matter of choice - a deliberate (and valid) wish not to reproduce structures that tie up resources in offices and maintaining staff rather than supporting the country in question. The almost complete lack of structure worked well for the initial small team

of highly experienced consultants but it was less successful as the MPSI grew and took on new people, many of whom were younger and less experienced. While all of them said MPSI had been an enriching experience for them personally, many said they could have been used more effectively if they had had some management. Those for whom it worked best were those who were in essence paired with one of the core team.

The lack of operational management also led to a lack of systematic follow up on initiatives. The lessons learned exercise conducted at the end of the first year identified a number of issues, but the follow through on these was not consistent and the strategy behind the growth of MPSI was not always clear. Posts were added to MPSI as an answer to problems, but individuals came without terms of reference and were left to essentially “work it out”. There was also no transparent recruitment process, which resulted in a situation where those outside the organisation felt “there were more staff, but you didn’t know where they had come from or why”. This is not a criticism of individuals, who mostly brought many skills and much dedication, but of the fact that MPSI’s internal processes did not make the shift from what was needed at the beginning to what is required as an organisation grows.

4.5.3 Lack of a clear communications strategy

Perhaps the biggest problem for MPSI was the lack of a clear and comprehensive communications strategy. This came as a criticism even from those who were overall very positive about the initiative. In a project that is so sensitive and working in such politically contested territory, it is vital to work out from the beginning how you want to communicate and with whom. This is not just about dealing with the media, although that is part of it, nor is it just an outreach strategy. Rather, it is about deciding from the beginning how high a profile to have, how to manage criticism and, crucially in a project that is unusual and innovative, how to ensure it is understood. It was evident from interviews for this review that many people simply did not understand MPSI and often identified it only with the pilot projects. In part the problem can be explained by lack of resources - the team was small and it was busy - but it also seems not to have been prioritised.

With the lack of a communication strategy also came the lack of consistent communication about MPSI’s experiences and lessons learned from working with EAGs and in the “black areas”. In the words of a donor representative, “the opportunity of a feedback loop was not taken”. Although consultants shared lessons individually and informally, this was not done consistently and strategically and this contributed to the achievements of MPSI being little understood by others.

4.5.4 Missed opportunities and the struggle for funding

While MPSI achieved a great deal in a short time, opportunities were sometimes missed because it was not able to follow through on initiatives. This was in part simply due to the fact that it was a very small team with huge demands on it. The difficulties in securing funding for projects, however, were due to more than just this. Although some donors did respond to MPSI identified projects, notably Denmark in relation to Chin State, Finland to Tanintharyi Region and Kayah State, and Australia to the pilot project in Kyauk Kyi, the lack of any clear funding framework made it almost impossible to obtain the resources to scale up to any significant degree and to secure funding for follow-up projects. The failure to get funding for the Mon education programme also points to the complexities of getting multi-year donor commitments at a time when the supporting policy framework is not yet agreed. With the peace process has come a shift in donor funding modalities away from cross-border work towards more sustainable approaches, and at such a time of change securing long-term funding is difficult. It also illustrates the difficulties in obtaining substantial funding for programmes that do not fit into standard approaches of working with INGOs or governments. Greater expertise in the early phase of MPSI in proposal writing and in the broader field of donor policy could have helped steer the team through some of these difficulties; a clearer funding framework might also have avoided much time being spent on ultimately unsuccessful applications. That said, a programme that is trying to push boundaries will inevitably test the limits of what is possible under funding mechanisms that have not been designed for such situations.

4.5.5 Criticism of MPSI

At a time of unprecedented change it was almost inevitable that MPSI would attract criticism. In this, Thailand-based advocacy groups were among the most vocal. In part this was due to a deep mistrust of the new government and its peace process, and with that a belief that any agency supporting this was wrong. It was felt to be “too soon” to be risking all that had been struggled for. On some occasions MPSI was accused of causing divisions between ethnic actors. But to blame MPSI for these divisions is giving too much agency to the initiative, far more likely is that divisions were caused by the peace process itself and the differing opinions on how to react to it. Such struggles are common to all situations where groups that have long been at war have to react to the possibility of a peace that is almost inevitably less than they would have hoped for. MPSI also attracted criticism for not consulting properly with border-based organisations, which felt that their contributions were no longer recognised despite years of advocacy. Both the MPSI team and Norway, however, believe they consulted widely. A clearer communications strategy could have helped avoid some of these problems, but in a highly contested situation it is clear that whatever MPSI did it would have attracted some criticism.

5. Conclusions and challenges

“Norway has helped from the beginning, it is asked to continue its support, to see the end of an over 60-year-long conflict.”

Minister U Aung Min

5.1 MPSI - the right initiative

The most important conclusion of this review is that fundamentally MPSI was the right initiative at the right time. The model of pairing seniority and political access with relationships of trust with ethnic actors and a deep knowledge and understanding of the country was the essential element that enabled MPSI to gain traction, using its influence to create links and to make breakthroughs on the ground. As the representative of an MPSI partner organisation said: “It created the political room where things that were impossible became possible”. It was also a very light mechanism that could move quickly and did not use large resources on itself. For all that some problems emerged as it developed – some inherent in trying to work at the very early stages of a peace process in a highly uncertain situation, some that might have been avoided – the fact that Norway took the political risk of supporting the reformers in the government and engaging with the emerging peace process in this way was crucial.

5.2 More needs to be done

The peace process in Myanmar, however, remains fragile and at this stage is by no means irreversible. Although the situation with the military has improved and many ethnic groups report a feeling of greater confidence, trust in the Tatmadaw still remains a problem and some areas are still seeing active conflict. Communities have seen lives changed by the ceasefires, but after so many years of war levels of trust remain understandably low. New problems will also occur as their land opens to the outside world. Meanwhile, progress towards signing an NCA has been slow and failure to initiate ceasefire

monitoring or to begin substantial political talks would raise serious questions about the future of the peace process.

The challenge is therefore how to continue supporting the process and building trust. This is made more complex by the fact that the task of forging peace between the government and the ethnic groups lies within a broader context of societal conflict and the need for national reconciliation. Inter-communal violence, first in Rakhine State but then spreading to other areas of Myanmar, has the potential to destabilise the country. The census will cause tension both when it takes place, as it will increase anxieties around the issues of ethnicity, and when its results are announced – which is worrying close to elections. Elections themselves, due in 2015, will be another source of tension, shifting the discourse from one of consensus seeking to one of competition. Its results may also make the cause of peace for ethnic groups harder to advance. If the outcome is a predominantly Burman party with a large majority it is unlikely to have peace in the periphery high on its agenda. A leader coming from a civilian background will also find it harder to keep the co-operation of the military than a government composed of former generals. Not surprisingly, both the government and ethnic leaders feel their best chance of peace is now. While the political dialogue will not be completed in the short amount of time remaining before electoral campaigning starts, it is vital that it reaches a point where the movement towards lasting peace will be hard to reverse.

The agreement on the detailed framework for the political dialogue, which should happen once the NCA is signed, will trigger the need for international support. The dialogue process will include not only the government and the ethnic armed groups but also the political parties, none of which have done anything like this before. All will need support and the chief negotiator, U Aung Min, is clearly asking for international help. This support will need to be given in a situation without an external mediator and where the UN is still not a trusted actor, and thus the usual coordination mechanism will be missing.

5.3 A better framework for funding is needed

Funding for projects has been a source of frustration throughout - to MPSI and donors alike. There has been a tension between Norway's wish to extend ownership of the MPSI and getting project funds flowing quickly: the funds that Norway set aside for NPA to fund MPSI initiated projects were in general the fastest way of getting funding, although a few other donors managed to process small grants quite quickly. The idea that projects are identified and then donors found to fund them has also been shown to have limitations. Although the mechanism of MPSI identifying projects was appreciated by smaller donors, such as Finland or Denmark, the ability to scale up this way of working is limited. Bigger donors usually do not engage with small-scale individual projects as it is too labour intensive and they tend to form their own frameworks for intervention rather than responding to needs identified by others. Thus the model for funding projects needed to shift as the peace process progressed and MPSI's work gained traction. The most effective way of doing this is likely to be some form of shared mechanism - a pooled fund or multi-donor trust fund - with a clear framework for funding decisions.⁶ Such a framework should be informed by MPSI's experience to date and by its practice of wide consultations. Donor instruments will still remain subject to various restrictions, but such a mechanism will give more predictability to the system and give a higher chance of projects being funded. The current system of a bottom up approach, although excellent at generating a sense of ownership, results in many projects not being funded and much disappointment.

5.4 Gaps should not be created

The premise that other structures would take over from MPSI was optimistic and has only been partly met. While Norway has been rightly praised for taking a risk in supporting the MPSI, it is not only Norway that has taken risks but also the reformists in the government, the ethnic armed groups and communities. It is important, therefore, that commitment is maintained and gaps are not created in the transition from MPSI

⁶ Multi-donor mechanisms already exist in Myanmar for livelihoods (LIFT), education (MEC) and health but not for peace support.

to longer-term means of support. In the words of Minister U Aung Min: "Norway has helped from the beginning, it is asked to continue its support to see the end of the 60-year-long conflict." Funding is needed for technical assistance to the various ethnic actors so that they can play their role in the peace process; continued support is needed for communities in the pilot project areas; and the capacity to generate independent analysis on the peace process and its interaction with the broader political dynamics of the country needs to be maintained.

5.5 Fragmented nature of approach to conflict

The fragmented nature of the approach to conflict in Myanmar - which regards peace in the ethnic areas, the inter-communal violence, and potential election related violence as separate issues - risks both creating problems and missing opportunities. Many donors are driven by the reform agenda - the push for democracy delivered by the ballot box - not the peace agenda. This is risky. The ethnic areas have seen ceasefires before and unless the current agreements are followed by political change they are likely to see conflict again. For the EAGs the core issue is not one of development but one of a central state trying to dominate regions and communities. The state has no legitimacy in the ethnic areas not because it does not deliver services but because it is not seen as respecting the rights of the people to determine their own development, and to be accorded a degree of autonomy in managing their affairs. Without a proper framework, economic development far from being a solution risks being a source of further problems, for example giving rise to land confiscations and displacement. Service delivery, meanwhile, risks being seen as yet another form of state control, enabling the state to penetrate areas where previously it had no access.

Myanmar is not a failed - or even a fragile - state. The issue is not one of state building but one of renegotiating relationships between the centre and the marginalised areas. This is not a lens through which donors are used to looking at conflict-affected countries. There is, however, a strong need to calibrate aid to the transition, balancing the wish for peace dividends with respect for the fears of ethnic groups that the government is seeking to dominate them. This requires the

ability to listen to voices from the ground, not just those of armed groups (who may have their own interests) but also of communities. MPSI has been good at understanding the complexity of the situation and has the ability to get these issues heard. With a framework for political dialogue not yet agreed, and with all the complexities of elections to come, it is in many ways too soon to be closing MPSI; but it is also recognised that such a loose structure can only be temporary. What is therefore important is to capture the key functions by other means - and to retain the skills and experience that make them possible.

5.6 Key partnerships

In the course of its work the MPSI created a number of effective partnerships but two of these - those with NPA and NIS - were different in that they were embedded into the overall structure of MPSI and were crucial to its ability to operate. NIS managed contracts and funding for the overall running of the programme, with a small budget for activities such as workshops, consultations and assessments, while NPA was given a grant by Norway specifically to enable it to fund the MPSI initiated projects. These two partnerships were central to MPSI's functioning and enabled it to move quickly and flexibly once needs were identified.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for continued support to the Myanmar peace process

There is a need to develop a clear strategy for the transition of MPSI into other mechanisms and to have a communications plan for this. Funding commitments should be made until mid-2016, when a new political situation will likely require a review of support needs. The strategy should include:

6.1.1 PDSG Secretariat

The first step should be to establish a clear sense of ownership of the secretariat by the PDSG itself and a shared vision of its purpose and roles. Currently there is no agreement on this, and not all members even agree that a secretariat is needed. If a secretariat is established in advance of this process it is likely to remain the sole responsibility of the donors funding it and to be subject to accusations of being set up to serve their interests. An independently facilitated discussion at the PDSG working group level might be the best way to move forward on this. Care should also be taken to ensure that the secretariat does not usurp what should be the role of the government or the MPC.

Roles of the future secretariat potentially include:

- Support to the PDSG in its coordination of donor engagement - political, financial and technical.
- Consideration of analysis, lessons learned and insights from existing projects.
- Exploring a model for setting up a joint fund for peace support projects.
- Supporting working groups to look at particular issues, as with the current coordination of support to liaison offices. An up-coming issue could be technical and financial support to the political dialogue.

6.1.2 Responsibility for continued support to projects

The immediate priority is to ensure funding for pilot project commitments, including remaining phase I and phase II projects. While funding from a range of donors would be ideal, Norway should

be prepared to be funder of the last resort in order to ensure that commitments are met - unless there are technical reasons why projects suggested are not fundable.

A plan needs to be developed for funding the liaison offices and the EPRP. It is important to recognise that this will need to start not just from the perceived needs of the ethnic groups (which are justifiably large) but also from a realistic assessment of what donors are likely to support over the next two years. If it were resourced properly, the EPRP could be the base for some of the support and technical assistance the MPSI has been providing for the EAGs.

There is also a need to develop and resource a plan for the scaling up of projects to support the peace process. The framework and initial funding envelope for this needs to be agreed with key donors in advance, so expectations are not raised and then not met. It is recommended to look at some form of multi-donor mechanism, with clear guidelines for the type of projects and the order of funding commitment it will consider. While this might to some extent limit flexibility, good design could minimise this, and any loss in this direction would be compensated for by greater reliability of funding. This might be a function of the PDSG secretariat.

Finally, ethnic groups will continue needing support to produce project proposals and communities need continued information about the developments in the peace process. This could be undertaken by other Norwegian organisations, particularly NIS and NPA, but roles and resource requirements need to be clarified in relation to the overall roll out of projects and the future PDSG secretariat.

6.1.3 Preserving independent analysis capacity

This function should not morph into the PDSG, as this by definition is not independent. Consideration should instead be given to setting up a small independent unit. The exact model for this should be explored through a feasibility study, which would enable a range of opinions to be canvassed, the most appropriate structure

and mandate decided, and the beginnings of partnerships explored. This could also be a vehicle for seeking support from a wider range of donors. Such a unit could either be attached to an existing institution, if available or planned, or more likely be set up with an independent management board drawn from a range of stakeholders, both national and international. This would give ownership and independence to the unit. It should be a local institution - in the sense that it would be based in Yangon

Tasks of such a unit potentially include:

- Undertake regular analysis of the peace process.
- Commission research on particular issues, for example land expropriation, attitudes to mother tongue education, financing administrations in ethnic areas.
- Disseminating research relevant to the peace process, either its own or that of others, through regular seminars and other events.
- Holding round tables to promote discussions of key issues related to the peace process.
- Making voices from the ground heard, e.g. listening projects/oral testimony.
- Monitoring efforts to push the boundaries on funding for projects that support the peace process, and linking this to international work on aid effectiveness.
- Evaluating overall impact - positive or negative - of international assistance on the peace process.
- Giving support to the overall political dialogue process; this might include undertaking discrete pieces of work or to helping to mobilise the necessary support from others.
- A degree of flexibility should be built in to enable trusted advisers to continue giving support to ethnic actors; this would in turn have wider benefit, as it would feed into the analysis being produced.
- The feasibility study would determine the roles and proposed staffing but such an institution could start off with a small number of full time staff, a limited number of core advisers, and a small budget to commission research. Given the contested nature of the environment, it would be important that it develops a strong communications strategy and has an outreach and partnerships policy.

6.2 Recommendations for future efforts to support the early stages of a peace process

While recognising the unique elements of the Myanmar context, there are lessons that can be drawn from MPSI on how to give support in situations where an uncertain peace process is beginning to emerge from protracted and complex conflicts, with an inevitable lack of trust on all sides. The essential elements are summarised as follows:

Expertise, trust and access

Bringing together in-depth country expertise, relationships of trust with key actors, and individuals who have political access - both to donors and government - is vital. Without this mix of skills and expertise it will not be possible to gain traction. This has to be the starting point for constructing any future initiative.

Sensitivity to context

Extreme sensitivity to context and to the fears and the pressures on the different parties is essential. This means it is important not to push too fast. Any donor embarking on such a project needs to be patient, to be consistent in support and to understand the need for flexibility.

Delivery mechanisms

An initiative needs a delivery mechanism; the partnership with NPA and NIS was a crucial element of MPSI and a similar arrangement should be part of any future initiative. Such a mechanism needs to be able to both deliver projects on the ground - if these are envisaged as part of confidence building - and to support the team of people working on the initiative.

Timeframes

While an initial short timeframe makes sense in the very early months, when the team is testing whether anything is even possible, working for any length of time on three to six month commitments is counter-productive. It unnecessarily limits who can work on such a programme and brings an uncertainty that is troubling to partners and limits their engagement. A two-year timeframe would be more realistic in terms of achieving anything in what will inevitably be a challenging situation.

Management

Recognising that the seniority that brings access might only be obtainable on a part-time basis, it is important to balance this with arrangements that ensure the initiative has basic management in place and that external bodies (be they donors, NGOs, government, or civil society) know who to contact for information. Once it is ascertained that there is a viable strategy to be developed, moves should be quickly made to put in place a coordinator - ideally on a two-year contract.

Project funding

If the development of projects is to be part of the overall strategy, then it is important to ensure that the initiative has sufficient expertise to take this forward. If funding needs are likely to be significant, this will require not only the technical ability to write proposals, but also familiarity with donor policy. Knowledge of multi-donor mechanisms is important; while these are unlikely to be a good mechanism in the early stages because of the time they take to set up, they could well be the best means of ensuring longer term funding support. They should be kept as simple as possible.

Communications

A clear communications strategy is vital in any politically contested situation. A professional input should be sought at the beginning to help the team to develop this, although its implementation will not necessarily need a full time communications person. Norway, or any other donor, as the funder and political backer of the initiative, should be part of this strategy because its own communications will affect the way the initiative is perceived.

Partnerships

It will be important to develop partnerships on as many levels as possible. This is time consuming, but without it resistance is likely to be generated. Consideration should be given to what opposition is likely to be encountered and how best to overcome this.

Flexibility

Notwithstanding the need to put basic management in place and have sufficient resources to carry out key functions, the overall idea of an initiative that is flexible, light on its feet, and does not consume large resources looking after itself is fundamentally

right. In trying to address some of the weaknesses of the MPSI structure it is important to keep this in mind and to find the correct balance.

About the Authors

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