

Oppression and Opportunity: Prospects for the Democratic Role of Civil Society Organisations in Post-Coup Myanmar

October, 2022



Independent
Research
Network

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Executive Summary

1. The military oppression of political opposition in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup has been a catastrophic blow to decades of growth in the civil society sector and years of critical locally initiated engagement with communities and government. Civil society organisations (CSO) and networks have however demonstrated their creativity and resilience in continuing crucial humanitarian work, alongside resistance to the military regime and ongoing democracy building work.
2. More than eighteen months on from coup, as the country is at a critical juncture, this report contributes to knowledge of Myanmar's CSO sector in three key ways. First, as the brutal struggle against military rule extends, this report illustrates that the grinding, extreme challenges that many civil society actors face every day are having a cumulative effect on individuals, organisations and the wider civil society 'ecosystem'. Second, the report highlights that there are key emerging opportunities for CSOs to play a democratizing role in the country - working on research and documentation, advocacy with EAOs and NUG/NUCC, regional political structures such as consultative councils, or on grassroots governance mechanisms. Finally, the report gives tangible feedback to international agencies about their support to civil society and provides recommendations for building the capacity of international agencies to adapt to the context. Crucially, as the post-coup instability and regime oppression extends beyond 18 months, civil society actors are hoping for solidarity from international agencies - supporting CSO sovereignty and empowerment - rather than the perceived attitude of self-preservation and risk aversion.

Background of CSOs in Myanmar

3. The current crisis for local organisations and networks first needs to be understood through the lens of Myanmar's modern history, the challenges and growth of civil society, and the waxing and waning of international support. Burma/Myanmar has a uniquely dense associational life, with high levels of charitable giving and volunteerism when compared to other countries. Ceasefires between the military regime and armed groups in the 1990s allowed a new set of CSOs to emerge, especially in ethnic minority areas. The 2007 protests, and then the humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, sparked the emergence of many new networks and organisations -including those in exile - and also greater international recognition of the growth of civil society in Myanmar.
4. From 2011, liberalisation under the Thein Sein government further expanded the opportunities for Myanmar's CSOs, with greater freedoms of movement and freedom of speech. Local organisations could take more assertive stances in their engagement with government policy, which began to expand their scope of work to engage, for example in policy on land rights, gender equality, and economic reforms. These reforms also reduced some previous tensions

between CSOs, and many exile groups (who had been critical of organisations based inside the country) began to move their offices to Yangon or other major cities. Many local and international actors hoped that a NLD victory in the 2015 elections would further increase freedoms and opportunities for civil society organizations and networks in Myanmar. Yet some organisations found that they had less space to operate, less access to government officials, and faced increased scrutiny on their operations when compared with the preceding years. Toward the end of the NLD period, COVID-19 related restrictions also hampered the activity of CSOs.

Changes to the post-coup operating environment for CSOs

5. All participants in this study expressed grief about the political context since the coup and fears for civil society actors. Fear is a daily reality that has seemingly only increased over the past 12 months. Those operating in SAC-controlled areas reflected on the daily scrutiny they faced from authorities, for example through being questioned at checkpoints, having phones and computers searched, and even having a camera installed in an organization's office. Many CSO leaders had also been forced to leave the country over the last 12 months. While these challenges have been well documented in previous studies, the ongoing extreme climate of fear faced by civil society actors, and the cumulative effect of this over 18 months, needs to be more widely acknowledged by international actors.
6. While such bleak assessments were common there was also an emphasis from participants on the diversity within the country and between different organisations. Some areas such as Mon and Rakhine reportedly had lower levels of restrictions, while Yangon and areas of conflict in Sagaing and Magway were more highly restricted. For local organisations operating in areas of SAC control, registration (or lack of registration) and financial transactions continue to cause practical challenges to operations. An emerging problem for many CSOs is the rise in corruption, with local groups being forced to make informal payments to local authorities (or to EAOs) in order to implement activities. Restrictions to travel over the last 12 months have also negatively impacted on relationships to local communities, where online interactions are insufficient to maintain connection. In combination these challenges made it difficult for local groups to plan for the long term and to even maintain momentum in their work. Finally, the protracted conflict and restrictions have weakened the CSO 'ecosystem' in Myanmar with lower levels of communication and trust between organisations and, therefore, weakened learning, accountability and sharing of information within the sector.

The shifting democratic role of civil society organisations

7. There is an acute feeling of loss for many CSO members and leaders who were engaged, before the coup, in community support, advocacy and policy and legal reforms across the country across a full array of sectors from budget

transparency to disability rights. Almost all these advocacy and policy processes have been lost. There is a coalescing in thinking amongst civil society leaders around the objective of removing the current military leadership from power and building a new federal democracy. This entails a profound shift in the goals of many civil society groups. Prior to the coup, most CSOs engaged in democracy or policy-related activities were working with an assumption that change would occur in the parameters of the 2008 Constitution. The scope of democratic engagement by CSOs since the coup is now far broader, encompassing an almost complete rebuilding of the country's institutions. Another shift in thinking amongst civil society actors is related to the role of violence. Within the framework of revolution and resistance to military rule some Myanmar participants saw a valid continuity between CSO-led resistance activities and violent opposition by People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs).

8. While on one hand, the goal of removing the military from leadership and building of a new democracy is widely shared, there are also deep divisions among civil society groups about the strategy toward this end – some groups are pragmatically registering with SAC and continuing activities as they are able, while other groups are advocating for complete non-engagement with the regime. Amidst these challenges, shifts and tensions, CSOs have demonstrated resilience and creativity in continuing democracy related activities and engaging in new spaces - through research and monitoring activities, engagement with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and the National Unity Government (NUG), EAOs and regional level structures, and in supporting grassroots level participatory governance activities.

International support to civil society organisations and networks

9. International support to Myanmar civil society groups has played a mixed role since the coup. On one hand, some international agencies have been able to continue their funding and engagement with CSOs during this crucial period and have successfully adapted their processes in an extremely challenging operating environment. Amidst these challenges, there are three persistent local organisation criticisms of international agencies - relating to lack of flexibility and contextual understanding, a perceived attitude of self-preservation since the coup, and disempowering approaches to partnership. To support Myanmar civil society in this period, there are crucial changes that can be made in the sector related to flexibility and a focus on local organisation sovereignty and empowerment.

Introduction

The 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar has profoundly changed the landscape for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Myanmar. Before the coup there had been two decades of steady growth in the number, scale, capability, diversity and influence of CSOs in Myanmar. International donor attention on 'civil society' had waxed and waned over that period based on interpretations of political shifts in the country, but many CSOs received international support and - partly because of this support - there was increasing formalisation and professionalisation of the sector. During this period CSOs had also developed increasingly sophisticated policy analysis and advocacy capabilities in a variety of sectors from natural resource extraction to land rights, housing, and agriculture.

The military crackdown on political opposition in the country since February 2021 was a catastrophic blow to decades of growth in the civil society sector and years of critical locally initiated engagement with communities and government. This crackdown led many organisations to close, shift to being based outside the country, or drastically transform their operations. Meanwhile hundreds of CSO members were arrested by the junta (Liu 2021). There was almost no 'business as usual' for Myanmar CSOs over the last 18 months. A number of studies through 2021 (Pandita 2021, CGG 2021, Protect 2021, Liu 2021) showed the extraordinary challenges that CSOs face in areas of registration, funding, and safety and security, and illustrated the diversity of experiences of CSOs in different areas of the country under SAC, EAO or other control.

Also well documented in the last 18 months are the creative ways that CSOs adapted and emerged under the new restrictions in the operating environment - through reforming as new organisations, going 'underground', shifting to humanitarian activities, or focusing energy to support political opposition (CGG 2021). In many cases, there was a shift away from formal organisational structures to working through more fluid, unregistered or unnamed networks and coalitions. Many leaders of CSOs are afraid of monitoring by the regime and were forced to shift to low profile roles, or relocated to areas of perceived safety. Taken together, these changes since February 2021 were a profound blow to the burgeoning role of CSOs in Myanmar's democratic transition.

More than eighteen months on from coup, this report contributes to knowledge of Myanmar civil society organisation sector in three key ways. First, as the struggle against military rule extends to more than 18 months, this report illustrates **the ongoing, grinding, everyday fears that many civil society actors face**, even those based outside of SAC-controlled areas. While the restrictions on CSOs by the regime were well documented in previous studies, the cumulative effect of these extreme conditions on individuals, organisations, and on trust and connections in the broader civil society 'ecosystem', needs to be more widely recognised.

Second, the report highlights that **there are emerging opportunities for CSOs to play a democratizing role in the country** - working on research and documentation, advocacy with EAOs, NUG/NUCC and regional political structures such as the consultative councils, or on grassroots governance mechanisms, such as through

increasing participation in community decision-making. While many international agencies have pivoted toward supporting humanitarian programs in the post-coup context, this report emphasises valuable opportunities for supporting CSO activities that will contribute to a much-needed long-term democratic foundation for the country.

Finally, the report gives tangible **feedback to international agencies about their support to civil society** and provides recommendations for building the capacity of international agencies to adapt to the context. Crucially, as the post-coup instability and regime oppression extends to more than 18 months, civil society actors are hoping for solidarity from international agencies, rather than an attitude of self-preservation and risk aversion.

In defining the scope of this report on CSOs in Myanmar – and especially their democratic role – it is also crucial to define the notion of ‘civil society organisations’. A significant shift in the landscape of opposition to the military leadership has been the role of People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) (IRN 2022), Spring Revolution political mobilisation, and new institutions such as the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) (IRN 2022). Increasingly there is a blurring between these forms of opposition and what have traditionally been seen as ‘civil society’ organisations and networks that are engaged in service delivery, advocacy, or other civic activities. Some individuals who, prior to the coup, were leading or engaged with CSOs are now deeply embedded in other parts of the opposition through revolutionary activities, armed struggles, and in institutions such as the NUCC. Other individuals are simultaneously engaged with local humanitarian or advocacy networks and actively raising funds for other forms of opposition to the military.

This research did not set out to directly address forms of opposition by armed groups, the ongoing role of political parties, EAOs or any other groups vying for state power – topics which are well covered in other studies (IRN 2022). ‘Civil society’ organisations and networks were considered in this study to be acting politically, especially in non-violent opposition to the regime (and supporting institutions such as the NUCC) but were not themselves seeking to take or hold state power. We acknowledge, however, that while the research was guided by this distinction, in Myanmar’s post-coup context – where there is mass societal resistance to a military regime – such definitional lines are less easily drawn.

This report draws on interviews in August 2022 with twenty Myanmar civil society leaders and six international aid actors. The research involved some organisations that maintain large staff structures and offices, and implement large scale programs. Other Myanmar participants were involved in networks or groups with no registration, a more fluid organisational structure and no office. The research included organisations operating in SAC-controlled areas, those in EAO-controlled areas, and those based outside the country. As there was a significant disruption to the pre-coup configuration of CSOs, the study also considered new formulations of networks and organisations that are emerging in areas of both military and other control.

Section 1.

Background: Trends in civil society development pre-coup

The history of CSOs in Myanmar is instructive in understanding the post-coup context in Myanmar. Historic resilience, tensions, and growth in the CSO sector in Myanmar are playing out in new forms in the current crisis. The current engagement of international agencies in supporting CSOs is also set against a longer backdrop of international partnerships over the last two decades - support which is considered by many CSO leaders to have brought mixed impacts.

There is a long history in Burma/Myanmar of dense associational life, at the local level through religious and social organisations, and at a broader level through nation-wide associations. This has led to high levels of charitable giving, volunteerism, and community service – the annual World Giving Index consistently places Myanmar as one of the world’s most ‘generous’ nations (World Giving Index). Scholars also highlight a prominent valuing of ‘self-reliance’ in Myanmar culture which then cultivates community and national level organising. Through different periods of rule - colonial, parliamentary and military authoritarian governments - this associational life has persisted and adapted. In Myanmar’s modern history, the 1990s ceasefires between EAOs and the Tatmadaw paved the way for growth in CSOs in some areas of the country. Kachin state, for example, became an active site of CSO expansion after the 1994 ceasefire. Large development organisations (such as Metta) and peace organisations (such as Shalom) formed in the late 1990s, along with an intricate array of church networks and development programs. Meanwhile, Burmese groups in exile also formed new CSOs and networks to facilitate advocacy and cross border aid.

This period of CSO growth and expansion during the rule of Than Shwe was also a time of some division between CSOs (Kramer 2012). On one hand, many exile or activist organisations insisted that ‘genuine’ civil society could not exist inside Myanmar and that the active local organisations operating inside the country were legitimising or cooperating with the Than Shwe regime. In 1997, academic David Steinberg prominently argued that under Than Shwe’s Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), civil society in Myanmar was ‘dead’, or rather had been ‘murdered’ (Steinberg 1997). On the other hand, many organisations with offices and activities in regime-controlled areas felt that they could engage with communities, deliver humanitarian and development programs, and expand civic space with a sufficient level of independence from the authorities. This tension permeated the environment of local organisation activity and international support from the 1990s until the early 2010s (Kramer 2011).

During the Than Shwe regime two key upheavals contributed to the growth of CSOs and networks. The Saffron Revolution in 2007 sparked a significant increase in networking and mobilization of advocacy groups both inside and outside the country. Cyclone Nargis in 2008 catalysed a profound growth in the scale and scope of civil society groups as pre-existing and newly formed groups responded to the devastating impact of the cyclone. Government restrictions on international agencies meant that local organisations played a lead role in humanitarian efforts, especially in the early weeks after the cyclone. Both of these trends – of greater networking and political engagement, and expanded role in humanitarian responses – continued over the following decade as the country began a political transition.

From 2011, liberalisation under the Thein Sein government further expanded

the opportunities for Myanmar's CSOs, with greater freedom of movement and freedom of speech. One CSO leader said that CSOs were 'booming' during the Thein Sein administration (KII17). There were greater freedoms but also 'the military-backed civilian government wanted to get their legitimacy and credibility via working closely with the civil society... CSOs played a huge role in advocating a wide range of issues, and policies' (KII17). Local organisations could take more assertive stances in their engagement with government policy and began to expand the scope of work to engage, for example in policymaking on land rights, gender equality, and economic reforms. At the time, platforms such as EITI (Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative) and FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) initiatives also facilitated new opportunities for policy dialogue between CSOs and government. These reforms meanwhile brought a reduction in the longstanding tensions between exile groups, and those local organisations who had been based in Yangon or other major cities (Decobert and Wells 2019). Exile groups began to move their operations to Yangon or other areas under government control, especially as security fears decreased and advocacy activities could expand.

Many local and international actors hoped that a NLD victory in the 2015 elections would further increase freedoms and opportunities for CSOs and networks in Myanmar. Civil society organization leaders reflect however that the influence of the NLD played a mixed role for local groups. In some areas, the gains made during the Thein Sein regime – for example in CSO advocacy to parliament on range of issues including environment, budget transparency, women's and LGBTI rights – could continue or broaden. Many CSOs found, however, that they had less space to operate, less access to government officials, and faced increased scrutiny on their operations than they had during the preceding years. Toward the end of the NLD period, the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted heavily on the role of civil society groups. On one hand, COVID related restrictions presented practical challenges for operations, forcing much activity and communication to shift online. Further, due to the health impact of COVID and deepening of poverty, there was increased pressure to expand CSO operations with vulnerable communities.

Along with their role in criticising government policy, CSOs also played a role in legitimising the actions of governments through the USDP and NLD periods. As one CSO leader described, 'We are aware that different governments use CSOs by forming their pro-CSOs to support their political agenda' (KII17). Both governments provided access for groups that aligned with their agendas, while marginalizing groups that were more oppositional. This led to efforts within the sector to define the role of CSOs more carefully. The CSO leader went on to outline the process of developing a CSO charter for Myanmar:

Based on these lessons learn, around 2020, like-minded, principled and value oriented CSOs came together and prepared a CSO Charter for Myanmar that outlines the role, position, norms, values, principles, and standpoint of genuine CSOs in the country to shape the democratic transformation of the country. For us, the CSOs should not be pro-government or to stand one-sidedly on a single political agenda' (KII17).

As the space for operation expanded in the decades before the coup, new questions

were raised about what role CSOs should play vis-a-vis the Myanmar government.

International support for civil society organisations

International support to Myanmar CSOs has played a varied role over the last two decades. It first needs to be recognised that, in global and regional terms, Myanmar has had historically low levels of foreign aid. In the early 2000s per capita ODA commitments to Myanmar were below USD\$100 million from all sources. This rose after the large international humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Yet, in 2010, ODA per capita to Myanmar was still only \$7 – which was the lowest level of aid in Southeast Asia (Asia Foundation 2016). In comparison Cambodia (at \$72 per capita) and Laos (at \$93 per capita) received more than ten times Myanmar’s aid per capita. As the transition continued under the Thein Sein administration, ODA rose rapidly and by 2015 aid commitments per capita in Myanmar had risen to \$63. Only a fraction of this aid went to local civil society groups over this time, but there are many positive examples of international aid programs facilitating growth in the scale and scope of the CSO sector in Myanmar.

During the period of NLD government, donors and international agencies also incentivized the formal registration of CSOs by tying registration to funding opportunities. This dovetailed with the NLD’s own efforts to formalise and scrutinise the sector. These incentives to register during the NLD government have since presented problems for local groups. As one organisation leader explained, ‘before the coup happened, some organizations tried to get registration with an expectation of better direct funding access from the donors...But after the coup happened, they are being scrutinized by SAC more closely and they can’t do much right now’ (KII13).

As will be discussed later in this report, international support to civil society groups in Myanmar has, and continues to be, criticized for having systems poorly adapted to local circumstances, for setting their own agenda, for favouring international NGOs and agencies over local groups, and for disempowering local groups through subcontracting processes. Despite these criticisms and limitations, there are also many examples where international aid agencies played a positive role in enhancing the democratic role of civil society groups. As the next section describes however, the operating context for CSOs in Myanmar became immeasurably more difficult since the 2021 coup.

Section 2.

Changes to the post-coup operating environment for CSOs

The February 2021 military coup was a profound blow to the political and economic hopes of most Myanmar citizens and CSOs. On virtually any measure, the coup and subsequent crackdown and violence had a disastrous impact on the country. Details of the crackdown in the immediate period coup and the rebuilding of an ‘architecture of oppression’ (Protect 2021, IRN 2022) in Myanmar were well documented in other studies after the coup. However, the cumulative effect of these extreme conditions over the last 18 months - on individuals, organisations, and on trust and connections in the broader civil society ‘ecosystem’ - needs to be more widely recognised.

All participants in this study expressed grief about the political context and fears for civil society actors. ‘Living with fear is back’, said one civil society leader (KII7). He went on to say that:

if SAC continues to govern the county, Myanmar will become like China and North Korea. The whole country is in fear and every day we are in threatened and don’t have a free mind anymore. We have to struggle and take risks to rebuild our country supporting each other. If not, we will never escape from fear (KII7)

While such bleak assessments were common there was also an emphasis from participants on the diversity within the country and between different organisations (see diagram 1 below). Much of the attention in this section is on the challenges for those operating, either overtly (registered) or covertly (unregistered), in SAC controlled areas, but CSOs and networks in other areas – EAO controlled areas or in neighbouring countries (e.g., Thailand)- also continue to face significant risks.

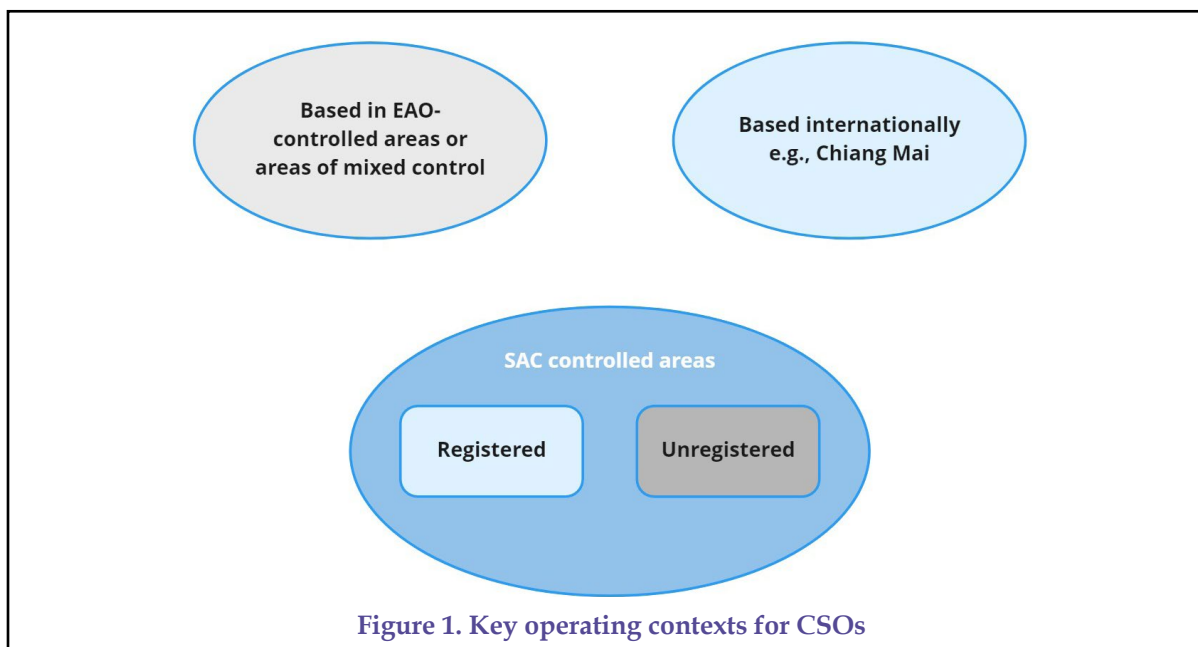


Figure 1. Key operating contexts for CSOs

A climate of fear: personal safety and security

While individual risks and challenges related to the regime’s crackdown and restrictions have been well documented in many other studies, it was such a prominent

theme within this research – and in the lived experience of participants – that we emphasise these experiences here. Fear is a daily reality that has seemingly only increased over the past 12 months. People can be punished for even being perceived to be involved with anti-regime activities.

All participants operating in SAC controlled areas reflected on the daily risks they faced to their security, and we include several first-hand quotes here to illuminate this climate of fear.

‘The office of one of our network organizations was raided by the security forces’, recalled one CSO network leader, ‘they wanted to arrest the accountant but as they didn’t find him, they arrested his brother, who was released after paying money to the police forces...staying inside the country means that people are at risk of getting arrest by any means at any time’ (KII13).

The leader of a women’s empowerment CSO network said that ‘every day is unpredictable and check points are everywhere. They check phones by surprise. We have to be cautious every day for our phones, computers and other things’ (KII6). One of the village level community organisers involved in their program had recently been arrested (KII16). Another CSO leader working for a registered development organisation described how authorities scrutinised the organisation’s documents and activities many times, including financial transactions (KII24). In another registered NGO, authorities installed a CCTV camera in an organisation office and posted someone at the entrance to monitor who came into and out of the office (KII24). Finally, another participant described how they were questioned by military officials when their organisation was conducting training:

I had to go to their military base and needed to explain every detail of the activity. They are worried that our activities include the promotion of political awareness...I had to sign the agreement letter stating that we will not do these activities in our initiatives. (KII8)

Given these extreme daily risks many CSO leaders, especially those previously engaged in advocacy or research activities, moved from SAC controlled areas to EAO or PDF controlled areas, or to outside of Myanmar. One Myanmar CSO member working with other local partners on advocacy activities said, ‘about 80% of our former partners before the coup are now in Thailand’ (KII4). At times, this meant that many CSO leaders moved out of the country, but staff and organizational activities continue to operate in SAC controlled areas. In other words, where ‘the head moves out, but the body is left in the country’ (KII4).

These risks for individuals and organisations became more acute following legal changes by the regime since the coup. These legal changes have been well described in other studies (HRW 2021). Yet, participants in this study particularly noted the use of Section 505A of the Penal Code and the criminalisation of anyone making comments that ‘cause fear’ or spread ‘false news’, including on social media. Similarly, the use of Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure on emergency powers was seen as a means to target opposition groups. One CSO network leader said, ‘we’ve lost everything and have gone back to the original situation, like before the 88 Revolution – no freedom of speech, no rule of law, and abuse of human rights. They

are above the law. We have to implement in a risky and threatening situation’ (KII6).

The risks are clearly highest for those organisations operating in SAC-controlled areas and in central Myanmar, however there is variation across the country. Rakhine and Mon state were considered by some participants to have had more operational space for CSOs through to the middle of 2022. In Rakhine state for example, CSOs could meet in hotels and discuss politics openly at that time, activities which would not be possible in Yangon or other central areas. In Mon state, CSOs could also meet in hotels and continue to conduct research and monitoring activities. In these areas, one international analyst (KII22) explained, the current political contests were seen by some local ethnic minority CSOs to be a clash between SAC and the NLD, a conflict that did not directly concern them. This less restrictive context for operations contrast with Magway and Sagaing, or in Yangon, which participants saw as far more restricted. In areas of greater conflict between the regime and PDFs, the operating environment for CSOs was more restricted. Greater detail on various levels of regime control around the country – and therefore the complex patchwork of different operating contexts for CSOs – is included in other recent studies (SAC-M 2022).

Several participants also highlighted however that there are risks for CSO members wherever they are. The situation in Mon and Rakhine is in flux, while having a short period of greater openness, this may now have reverted to greater restrictions. Some participants also perceived that there were risks in EAO-controlled areas. One CSO leader suggested that, ‘I see some negative trends among some ethnic armed groups too...currently excising similar approaches such as suppressing local CSOs who are vocal against their administration (KII17). Further, with links between SAC and the Thai government some CSO leaders working on advocacy activities are concerned that they could be deported from Thailand. One CSO network leader said, ‘as long as people are operating their democratic program in nearby countries, there is always a risk for them to be arrested or to be deported back to Myanmar’ (KII6).

Many of these findings about the climate of fear in which individual civil society actors operate are similar to those from studies from the early months after the coup. There is however a need for international actors to further acknowledge the cumulative effects of this extreme context on civil society partners over more than 18 months. In the recommendations section we discuss the importance, for international agencies, of an approach of solidarity.

‘Struggling every day’: Challenges to organisational operations

These personal security risks, and other changes since the coup, had a profound impact on activities for many local groups, especially those engaged in democracy related activities. Some of these – related to funding and registration – were well documented in previous studies (Pandita 2021, CGG 2021) but there are others, such as the rising issue of corruption, restricted travel, and inability to plan, which received less attention.

Fund disbursement and financial transactions continue to pose a serious challenge to the operations of CSOs (IRN 2022) who have registered with SAC. For registered groups, monitoring of bank transactions by regime authorities and the necessary use of personal bank accounts present new risks. One participant described how

'the SAC recently announced that the banks would take photos and collect detailed personal information about anyone who withdraws or transfers money in the country. It poses a high risk for us to transfer money to our partners' (KII14). The problem of banking was also made more acute by the SAC's manipulated exchange rate which leaves local organisations with less funding than they might have anticipated (KII5). Many CSOs turned to using hundi or other transactions systems. Many groups who continue to operate have also found it challenging to maintain pre-coup levels of funding and many lost connections to previous international partners. A CSO network leader said, 'reduction of funding availability is a big challenge for us because we don't know the funding opportunities anymore' (KII25). These challenges with funding may become even more complex with possible new Financial Action Taskforce measures.

Meanwhile, for those operating in SAC-controlled areas, registration, or lack of registration, remains a significant challenge as they deal with authorities. As the period of uncertainty has continued after the coup, many CSOs who were unregistered in SAC-controlled areas were forced to cease their activities. One CSO leader reflected on this challenge saying that 'we decided to adapt the strategy as an organization and individuals to run low profile and not continue to implement some of the activities...we don't engage or participate in any events, ceremonies or other events. Especially, we decided not to engage with SAC' (KII20). For all CSOs operating in most SAC-controlled areas, daily operations, including meetings, are particularly challenging. In some cases, CSO members take action to minimise attention on their movements. 'Now we need to bring our children and wives or family members to mitigate the security risk at the checkpoints on the way to meeting places. The security forces tend to scrutinize less on family visits rather than men's visits' (KII15). The leader of another CSO warned that, 'we planned to deliver rice to the community but as soon as we drove our truck, the SAC forces tried to arrest us, and we needed to run immediately' (KII19).

Dealing with local corruption is also an increasingly common barrier reported by members of local organisations. One CSO member said, 'we went to the field to conduct research for mining. We had to pay both SAC and EAOs to access the areas. Corruption is the worst, and it is everywhere' (KII18). Another CSO network leader said, 'though we fully understand it is unethical, we have no other option but to use tip money at the gate when we travel, and fake documents for some of the operations, to get the permission to pass some area' (KII6). This new barrier of corruption is also a cost borne by CSOs themselves. As the period of instability continues, local level regime corruption will be a significant barrier to CSO operations.

Local organisations were also heavily restricted in their ability to travel to communities, especially in regional areas (KII25). As these limitations on travel continue, this presented challenges to CSOs ongoing connection to communities that they have worked in. While efforts were made in many cases to use online platforms to continue CSO communication with local communities, this has limitations. One CSO network member focusing on land issues reflected on this challenge:

'The nature of our work also requires regular physical contact and networking at the community level, to effectively mobilize the

community and to act upon some issues. Some people say that such mobilizations and connections can happen also via online platforms, but it has significant impact on effectiveness of the interventions and on mobilization power of the initiatives.’ (KII13)

A women’s organisation leader similarly said that using online modes of engagement with communities was insufficient to maintain viable relationships (KII16). Protracted restrictions and personal livelihood challenges also made it hard for CSO leaders and organisation members to continue in their activities. One CSO leader described how ‘insiders are struggling every day and coping every day with a variety of issues created by SAC such as banking crises, fuel crisis, electricity cuts, internet issues, digital security issues, etc. so people gradually have limited time to be involved in politics on a day-to-day basis. This is one of the SAC’s strategies’ (KII4). With so many additional barriers to basic organisational operations, CSOs are hampered in their responses and impact.

CSOs have operated for 18 months after the coup in a context of protracted instability, and many participants reported that they still have little ability to make plans. ‘We can’t plan for the long term at the moment’, said one CSO network leader, ‘we only plan for the short term how to survive and continue against the SAC’ (KII5). Similarly, another CSO leader operating in SAC controlled areas said, ‘I am not sure how we can maintain such momentum while the military is continuously suppressing the people and using very violent means daily’ (KII4). With a seemingly endless period of heightened risk and conflict, many participants felt that momentum was challenging to maintain, particularly for those attempting to operate in SAC controlled areas.

In the post-coup context however, where many organisations closed or ceased activities, new organisations and network configurations also emerged both inside and outside the country. A CSO leader reflected that one positive shift is the ‘appearance of Gen Z and young people, who didn’t come from the CSO sector and who didn’t have much interest in politics before, but now they are leading the public movements in highly innovative and brave ways’ (KII4). Some new and progressive voices emerged amongst civil society actors since the coup.

The breakdown of the CSO ‘ecosystem’

Beyond individual and organisational challenges, it is crucial for international actors to recognise that Myanmar’s protracted crisis and instability had an impact on the broader ‘ecosystem’ for civil society actors and their international supported. As communication between groups was suppressed, previous systems of mutual trust, accountability and learning have been lost. One CSO leader reflected that ‘the ecosystem of the Myanmar civil society organizations that existed prior to the coup...is completely interrupted right now’ (KII3).

In particular, many participants reported a breakdown of pre-existing communication channels and networks. A local advocacy NGO leader said that, ‘trust is the big issue among CSOs, sometimes we don’t trust each other for safety and security and do not openly communicate like before. That is why we lost connection between us’ (KII18). A CSO network leader said that the numbers of

organisations engaged in their network has continued to fall in the time after the coup (KII13). This is also apparent in civil society networks outside the country. An advocacy network leader based outside the country said civil society actors 'have less confidence in engaging with different groups on the ground. When they don't know somebody, meeting with them always alerts security concerns' (KII23). The changing of organisation and network names, the cessation of activities and the departure of trusted leaders and colleagues as they are arrested or move to other parts of the country, all contributed to this breakdown of the ecosystem.

For many international organisations, this situation also presented challenges to making partnerships and engaging in planning. An international agency advisor reflected that 'people are very concerned...if they are going to do something that might have some risks, they don't want people to know about that. Even [with] one's partners who would normally share everything...they are very cautious about doing that.' (KII 15). International agencies and networks are also often disconnected from channels of communication to CSOs, key local leaders and other sources of information about community needs.

While some key civil society networks remain in supporting the revolution, and humanitarian activities, many participants pointed toward a loss of communication and trust between CSOs, which had a detrimental effect on the impact of the sector. One activist reflected that prior to the coup this ecosystem had been beneficial, 'where CSOs maintained their credibility, accountability, mutual learning, mentoring, and networking through informal check-and-balance between each other' (KII4). The weakening of the CSO ecosystem and CSO relationships with international agencies since the coup was in many ways an understandable response to the personal security risks faced by many. Yet it also had a negative effect on the growth and role of CSOs in Myanmar. The sector demonstrated its resilience, yet it is now incredibly challenging to foster key values and mutually supportive networks of organisations. We return in the recommendations section to discuss how international agencies may be able to respond to the breakdown of this ecosystem.

Section 3.

Opportunities for the democratic role of CSOs

In this section we describe recent shifts in the democratic role of CSOs in Myanmar and emerging opportunities for local groups to continue to contribute toward democratization even amidst the extreme challenges of the operating environment. Where many international agencies have pivoted significantly toward humanitarian programs since the coup, this study illustrates that there are increasing opportunities to support civil society actors to engage in valuable democratizing work - on research and documentation, advocacy with EAOs and NUG/NUCC or regional consultative councils such as Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC), or on grassroots governance mechanisms - that will have long term impact.

It is first important to acknowledge the acute feeling of loss that many CSO members and leaders - who were involved in democracy related activities - experienced since the coup. Many were deeply engaged in community support, advocacy and policy and legal reforms across the country across a full array of sectors from budget transparency to disability rights. Many working in CSOs developed deep knowledge of these sectors and cultivated relationships with government departments and parliamentarians at national and subnational level. Almost all these advocacy and policy processes were lost. CSOs are unable to engage with the military regime through policy advocacy as it would likely bring personal risks. Further, most civil society actors are also unwilling to engage with the regime due to its almost complete lack of public legitimacy (and public stigma and shaming of any organisations interacting with the regime).

The regime's brutal leadership and the almost complete cessation of meaningful civil society engagement in policy and governance is disheartening as the country deteriorates socially and economically. One local organisation member said, 'everything that we have done [before the coup] has gone down to minus level' (KII7). Meanwhile, a Myanmar CSO actor supporting local partners on mining monitoring activities said 'even though there are increasing issues related to land grabbing, and gold mining since the coup happened, there is no space ... for them to advocate to the SAC as before' (KII4).

Within this context, the overwhelming goal for most participants in this study was removal of military leadership. As one CSO member described 'the first step of our mission is to terminate the military dictatorship... We will involve and participate in any [revolutionary activities] such as demonstration, mobilization the community and engagement with parallel state institution to bring back the democracy' (KII5). Another participant passionately described their new goal: 'We never give up; we will bring back what we lost... We have to end this regime. I am also preparing to be ready for the future to rebuild our country' (KII18).

Despite the everyday challenges of communication and trust and the breakdown in civil society ecosystem, the revolution against the military was also seen more broadly to be an opportunity for unity at a national level, especially between different ethnic groups. One CSO member (KII4) described this potential for unity in opposition to the military:

The situation is really bad but on the other hand, this is also a very great moment, when people throughout the country are highly aware of the political, and actively mobilizing and coming together against

the military dictatorship, including between the Bamar majority and ethnic minority groups...The bad things that happened in the ethnic areas before are now spreading to the Bama communities too. So there was an improvement in shared understanding, which led to a more cohesive movement...to fight against the dictatorship.

The NUG's public apology to the Rohingya and other ethnic communities, along with wider direct experience of military oppression through bamar heartland areas, have facilitated broader commitment toward federalism and ethnic inclusion. The disastrous impact of the military coup has catalysed new potential for unity between ethnic groups in Myanmar. The combination of these factors means that now is, as one CSO leader said, a 'most crucial opportunity' (KII17). Another CSO leader said that the revolution was a 'mass community movement', and was in some ways dissolving the boundaries between communities and different CSOs. 'Organizational names don't matter', he said, 'we are becoming more like part of the community and shaping the movements together with them' (KII14).

This overarching goal of ending military rule and establishing a new federal democracy is a profound shift from pre-coup expectations of CSOs engaged in democracy related activities, where many assumed that they would be advocating for change within the parameters of the 2008 Constitution. The 2008 Constitution is now 'dead', as one international donor representative described (KII21), meaning that the scope of democratic engagement by CSOs is now far broader, encompassing an almost complete rebuilding of the country's institutions.

Several civil society leaders who were participants in this research also saw resistance to the regime as a revolution requiring both non-violent and violent means. After the violent military response to peaceful public opposition in the months after the coup, many civil society actors have recalibrated their perspective on the use of violence. 'We remain in Myanmar and make an effort to bring back democracy. And this will be the ending of the dictatorship', said one CSO network leader, 'We understand that armed revolution is not the best solution. But we have no option, and we have to choose this way to stop them' (KII5). An international analyst reflected that 'after the coup the discussion was that a lot of CSOs have become PDFs, or a lot of people are raising funds for PDFs so a lot of this debate about non-violent means has really shifted... the reality is for many Burmese people, is that [shift to armed revolution] is not a problem' (KII22). Within the framework of revolution and resisting military rule many Myanmar participants saw a valid continuity between CSO-led resistance activities and violent opposition by PDFs and EAOs. This was in contrast to several international agency representatives, who were less willing to see the continuity between violent and non-violent means and were concerned about 'violence being a slippery slope' (KII11).

Finally, within this widely shared vision of end of military rule, several participants perceived tension between local civil society groups over the most effective strategy with regards to engaging the SAC. There are echoes from the 1990s and 2000s, with some CSOs taking a pragmatic approach, registering with the SAC, and continuing to implement humanitarian activities within the country. Registration was perceived by some participants to be the only way to continue to implement humanitarian activities with their program communities - in some cases NGOs had a decade's

long relationship with these communities and felt unable to cease or scale down activities. However, a civil society activist explained how ‘there is contestation about whether you should engage with the regime authorities at various levels and some might take a more pragmatic view, others might take a more hard-line view’ (KII11). The so-called ‘hard line’ groups advocate for a complete absence of engagement with the SAC. The stakes are therefore high for civil society actors, with severe security risks from the regime side, but also fear of ‘naming and shaming’ by opposition groups for engagement. The activist went on to say: ‘if individuals are seen to give legitimacy [to SAC] at the local level and PDFs groups don’t see that this is appropriate, then your life is at risk’ (KII11). As in the 1990s and 2000s, a tension - about levels of engagement with the regime - permeates the civil society organisation sector.

Emerging spaces for democratizing activities

Amidst these challenges, shifts and tensions, CSOs demonstrated resilience and creativity in continuing democracy related activities and engaging in new spaces. In this section we highlight the role of CSOs in research and monitoring activities, engagement with the NUCC/NUG and EAOs, and in supporting grassroots level governance activities.

One key area of CSO democracy related activity is in ongoing research and monitoring in a variety of areas, often related to an organisation’s pre-coup interest. For example, one CSO leader described the work of a legal aid CSO in keeping legal records on activists who were arrested by the regime. Another participant highlighted how local organisations are monitoring new investment projects that are done in collaboration with SAC, such as through the ‘black money campaign’ (KII14). Civil society groups in Mon and Shan states are tracking natural resource use in their area, including mining activities and logging. This research and documentation was considered by many participants to be important even if direct policy engagement with SAC was not possible. ‘There is nothing much we can do’, said one CSO leader, ‘we can only watch and monitor the situation’ (KII8). As noted above however, such research and monitoring activities are extremely sensitive. Often this means that CSOs are more reliant on local community members for information and data, as opposed to directly travelling for field research. When collecting information from remote and unsafe areas, research data is sometimes saved on memory sticks which are then carried to safe places where information can be uploaded. Reports from these findings are then sent through trusted channels to other CSOs, the NUG and to international agencies and funders.

Other CSOs have also focused on working with NUCC/NUG on policy development. For example, a LGBTIQ+ advocacy group have shifted their policy lobbying since the coup to be directed at the NUG (KII23). A group of CSOs working on natural resource management met with members of the NUG to present a policy research briefing. Legal aid groups are presenting information to NUG about political prisoners. The NUCC also has a CSO group where local organisation research findings are discussed. One CSO leader reflected that ‘the appearance of legitimate political actors such as NUG and NUCC is...great. Credible CSOs are now shaping NUCC, which is a strong political steering mechanism for the democratic government’ (KII17). This engagement is also facilitated by members of the NUG

who previously worked for CSOs. Some participants however, reflected that CSOs had difficulties in engaging with NUG, or even in understanding what the NUG was doing. A member of a women's empowerment network said that one member of the NUG, who they had previously had close relationships with, was now uncontactable (KII16). This dynamics of this specific relationship between CSOs and NUG/NUCC would be a valuable focus of future research (KII17).

Other participants meanwhile pointed toward the potential for CSOs to engage with EAOs. At one level it is necessary for CSOs to communicate with EAOs when they are conducting humanitarian activities in EAO controlled areas, or if organisations are assisting people to flee from the country through border areas. At another level of engagement, some CSOs based in ethnic areas are cooperating with EAOs on policy and governance processes. A Karen environmental advocacy organisation for example works with the KNU on environmental and natural resource issues. A Myanmar civil society adviser meanwhile described how CSOs were able to support the development of a judiciary mechanism in an ethnic-controlled area and other CSOs were working with an EAO to shape their land policy and agriculture policy (KII4). Some participants suggested that EAOs had become increasingly open to input from local CSOs in their decision making and policymaking, which was seen to be a significant contrast to ten or twenty years ago (KII22). Improving the governance responsiveness of EAOs (and PDFs) is a key opportunity for CSO engagement in the current context.

Other participants in this study pointed toward the potential for working with grassroots level governance activities. Some community or village level administrators have been involved in CSO programs for decades and have extended experience with participatory decision-making processes. Local agencies in some cases have been able to continue support to local community leadership in areas of mixed control. As noted earlier, different regions are considered to have varying levels of opportunity for civil society activity. A CSO leader (KII17) noted that there are opportunities particularly in Sagaing, Chin and Karenni, where new local administrations are being established in PDF controlled areas. Meanwhile, in some SAC areas, grassroots CSO engagement with local community leaders toward participatory and inclusive decision making has been able to continue.

While the staff and office had to move outside the country, one women's organisation continues to support local community organisers who are facilitating women's involvement in village decision making. A legal aid organisation gives awareness trainings to community members about land rights and gender-based violence. Civil society groups also continued to work at community level on noncontroversial topics such as grassroots inclusion of people with disabilities. One CSO leader explained how they were 'trying to continue to support the groups who are engaging with people with disabilities, giving them prominence and confidence to engage with their communities' (KII11). In some SAC controlled areas however, these activities are still associated with risk. One women's organisation working on gender-based violence had previously used local survivor stories to promote awareness. They suggested however that even these grassroots activities are now not possible.

As described in the first section, the contextual and operating constraints for CSOs

are deeply challenging, yet some local groups are responding with creativity and resilience. Whether through research and monitoring, engaging with NUCC/NUH and EAOs, focussing on grassroots governance, or supporting revolutionary opposition, CSOs are finding new spaces to engage in democracy and advocacy related activities. There are parallels between this democratic role of civil society groups in the current protracted period of restrictions and those during the period of the Than Shwe regime in the 2000s. CSOs are able to support 'democratisation from below' (South) - in building grassroots participation and knowledge - and strengthen the opposition to the military regime through research and advocacy activities. A key difference between those periods however is the current level of mass popular and political opposition to the regime. The Thein Sein administration oversaw a military-initiated reform process in the 2010s, with this transition eventually incorporating the non-violent political engagement of CSOs and political parties, most notably the NLD in the 2012 by elections. A military led transition in the coming years - based around the foundation of the 2008 constitution - appears to be impossible in the current context due to the extreme polarisation caused by the coup and subsequent brutal crackdowns on activists and civil society groups.

Section 4.

International support to civil society organisations and networks

Along with its impact on Myanmar CSOs, the coup was also a major shock to donors (especially those traditional donors in the OECD Development Assistance Committee) and international aid actors in Myanmar. Despite ongoing instability and humanitarian challenges in recent years - through the Rohingya crisis and ongoing civil war in various areas of the country - the delivery of aid in Myanmar had broadly stabilised through the transition period of the Thein Sein administration and the NLD government. After the coup, rapid readjustments were made to cease programs which were directly engaging with government and international agencies 'pivoted' to find new objectives for their programs, particularly in response to new humanitarian crises.

This study revealed a diversity of perspectives on this 'pivot' made by international agencies and their support to Myanmar civil society organisations and networks since the coup. Some participants gave positive reflections on post-coup adaptations and support while others were deeply critical of international agencies for their approach and partnership practices. In some cases, participants showed frustration with the lack of progress on longstanding issues of international support to civil society groups - issues (such as the lack of core funding and empowering partnership models) that had been identified well before the coup. There were also nuanced reflections about diversity within the international aid system, and recognised differences between practices of bilateral donors and those of international NGOs or UN agencies.

On the positive side, several participants reflected on the flexibility that they saw in international agencies in their support to local groups since the coup. In a practical sense, one CSO participant observed that the burden of administration had been reduced and 'they lessened reporting requirements, branding, and marking requirements for events and functions, and mandatory three quotations mechanism' (KII3). A CSO network leader based in Thailand said that 'donors are flexible and support the safety of the partner organizations' (KII6), while another said that they had flexibility in diverting funds from their pre-coup planned activities toward post-coup humanitarian support (KII22). Bilateral donor representatives also said that they attempted to reduce burdens on local organisations. Our international partners 'gave [CSOs] space, they supported them to take time to engage with their community. Giving that space was really important especially in that post coup period', said one donor representative (KII11).

In the midst of these efforts to 'pivot' within the new post-coup Myanmar context, international agency representatives reflected that they faced numerous challenges, such as in communication, registration, and in financial transactions. In a broad sense, several international actors also reflected that in the unstable and complex context of Myanmar they have limited agency in influencing the countries' conflicts - 'there are so few levers that we think the international community has. And that is depressing right?' (KII11) reflected one donor representative. International agencies too need to navigate the tensions within civil society over strategic approaches, and dilemmas such as registration. Amidst these challenges there were three persistent criticisms of international agencies relating to lack of flexibility and contextual understanding, a perceived attitude of self-preservation since the coup, and disempowering approaches to partnership.

Lack of flexibility and contextual understanding

As noted above, and in line with recommendations from previous studies (CGG 2021) of CSOs in Myanmar, some international agencies were able to respond to the post-coup context with greater flexibility. Other international agencies however were strongly criticised for rigidity and lack of understanding of the post-coup context. One CSO network leader was frustrated with this lack of flexibility and explained that:

‘some donors who have worked with them for 4-5-6 years are still rigid with their policy; some even asked the question of why the group doesn’t have association registration. The group had been established about 28 years ago but had no association registration, they have been working with donors based on reputation, and the trust built with them. In this new landscape after the coup, they met with new donors...They have been asked why they needed to relocate the staff when they have security issues.’ (KII16)

In a context of severe restrictions and risks for civil society actors, some international agencies were still asking about registration of CSOs with SAC. CSO leaders therefore complained that ‘some of the international staff and donors don’t understand the local context and respect the local CSOs...they don’t understand the local politics and situation’. (KII22). Similarly, a long-term international analyst said that ‘there is not enough knowledge of the country, not enough knowledge of CSOs, and not enough trust with people, if you work on this, it is all based on trust’ (KII20). After the profound changes in the operating context following the coup, some international agencies were perceived to not have the flexibility required to operate effectively in the Myanmar context.

International agencies and self-preservation

One of the strongest criticisms directed at international NGOs and United Nation’s agencies however was a perception that their overriding concern was for organisational self-preservation rather than the interests of Myanmar’s civil society or public. This reflection was given by some local CSO leaders and by international analysts. One CSO leader reflected that, ‘a disappointing thing is that [international NGOs] are more focusing on their survival’. An international analyst similarly argued that rather than primarily seeking new means of supporting local organisations, international NGOs and UN agencies became ‘internally focused on “how do we protect ourselves from the risks that we are facing at this time?”’ (KII02).

This focus on organisational self-preservation was considered by several participants to be problematic for two reasons. First, by focussing on their own survival, international NGOs were also undermining opportunities for local organisations. ‘They give priority to their survival, survival of their offices, continuing to pay the salary to themselves and to their staff. To support them they have to receive the projects. And to receive projects, they compete with the locals’, said one CSO leader (KII24). Another CSO network member similarly reflected that a focus on self-preservation limits the opportunities for local groups. ‘We wish the

donor organizations and international NGOs that, instead of struggling among themselves... they should provide more support to many local CSOs ...who are capable and genuinely doing tireless work for their local area' (KII8). The high salary and cost of living payments made to staff of international agencies (particularly expatriate staff) in this context was a particular point of criticism. In a context where many local groups are facing extreme risks, and challenges to the survival of their organisation, the perception that international agencies were more concerned about their own preservation was frustrating for some CSO leaders.

Second, by focusing primarily on their own survival, international agencies were potentially causing harm. An ethnic CSO leader said 'I feel like these agencies are paying more attention to their own projects.... I am aware that some organizations are extending their MoUs and Registrations for their organizational survival under SAC administration' (KII8). Other CSO participants said that by continuing with registration, international agencies can be 'indirectly providing support to SAC's administration' (KII4) through the SAC benefitting from money transfer exchange rates and from receiving income tax. This 'fuel's the SAC's survival mechanism' (KII4), she concluded. An advocacy organisation leader meanwhile said that international NGOs - even if they do preserve their programs - are limited in what they can achieve. 'If they do preserve their own activities under SAC', he continued, 'can they really do much? ...I wonder how many beneficial outcomes they can receive by [registering and extending MoUs with SAC] and how much they can be beneficial to the community they served' (KII8).

In defence of international agencies, some donor representatives highlighted that they faced a dilemma where their permission to operate could easily be terminated, and if that happened, it could be a worse outcome for local organisations if they lost funding opportunities completely. The presence of SAC-registered international agencies can also create operational space for local groups - who could operate in an underground way and still receive support from international actors. A donor representative explained that there can also be less restrictions on local organisations, 'if you have multiple interlocutors between [local groups] and the regime' (KII21). Complete non-engagement from Western aid actors could also, he suggested, create a situation where other countries have greater influence: 'On the other side of the coin. Russia and China and India, they are all fine at showing up and handing cheques to Naypyidaw and [CSOs] get nothing from that' (KII21). Despite these attempts to defend the role of international agencies, many CSOs were deeply critical of international agencies' perceived emphasis on self-preservation.

Disempowering CSOs through subcontracting

Another key criticism was that the common method of partnership between international agencies and local groups was disempowering for civil society organisations. A CSO leader argued that:

'the current partnership model adopted by the UN and INGOs is a 'tick-the-box', where the local CSOs and partners are treated as their ...sub-contractors who are implementing partners... Some organizations just add 'localization' or 'partnership' flavor for better

funding accessibility from potential donors. I feel this model is just like the colonization model from the international actors'. KII17

A key part of a disempowering approach to partnership was seen to be through lack of cooperation with CSOs in design of programs. One international analyst complained that 'people talk about localization but it is never the case. The plans are made ahead and then they go to CSOs' (KII22). Similarly, 'capacity building' was seen by some participants to be more to help with compliance than the actual effectiveness of CSO programs - 'capacity building' with the primary intention of making processes easier for the international partner. A CSO leader said:

Our criticism is that the capacity building is just to comply with their project needs. They teach us about financial management so that they don't have any trouble when the report goes to the donor... More for their compliance, more for their safety and security and for their risk management. It is not for us, not a long-term investment. It is 'capacity to comply'. (KII24)

He then contrasted this with the local CSO focussed need for 'capacity to grow' (KII24) which focusses more on soft skills such as leadership rather than processes to comply with international agency regulations.

It should also be noted that these have been a longstanding criticism of international agency partnering with local organisations in Myanmar, which was seen to exacerbated in the response to the coup. Overall, the role of international agencies was seen by participants in varied ways, from CSO leaders who were broadly positive of international support to those who were deeply critical. The next section turns to recommendations for international agencies seeking to support civil society organisations in Myanmar.

Section 5.

Recommendations for international organisations

Ongoing international support to civil society organisations is crucial

From all participants in this study there was an assumption that in this critical juncture in the country's history, CSOs need to be supported from international agencies as much as possible. There has been overwhelming growth in CSO capacity and scope over the last two decades. Without international support, those structures and skills and approaches would not be completely lost - Myanmar civil society actors have clearly demonstrated their resilience and commitment to building democracy in the country. However, international organisations were seen by many participants to play a facilitating role as CSOs navigate the immense uncertainty and restrictions of the current environment. There is a need to 'keep alive what is there. Try to preserve as much as possible of structures, organisations, individuals, etc so they can continue.' (KII22).

...Including in democracy building roles

There has been a significant pivot since the coup toward international support of humanitarian programs. Meanwhile much of the pre-coup democratic work of CSOs - in areas of direct advocacy to government or broader governance work - could no longer be supported by international agencies. This report reveals however that as new research, advocacy and governance opportunities emerge for local organisations, international agencies can scale up their support to these activities. CSOs demonstrated resilience and creativity in continuing democracy related activities and engaging in new spaces - through research and monitoring activities, engagement with the NUCC/NUG and EAOs, and in supporting grassroots level governance activities.

Support to the civil society 'ecosystem' is also essential

Along with support to individual CSOs, there is also need to respond to the breakdown of the CSO 'ecosystem' - which was crucial in building trust, mutual learning and accountability amongst CSOs before the coup. The complexity of the operating environment means that simple responses - such as establishing a new communication platform for CSOs - are not possible. However, international agencies should take opportunities to resource partner CSOs to interact with each other in safe ways to build trust. This may only be possible in small numbers in the current context. But as the post-coup period of instability continues, international agencies will need to increasingly invest in supporting civil society networks, which can maintain and rebuild the 'ecosystem'.

Increase levels of flexibility in funding support and reporting

Previous studies (even those before the coup) recommended greater flexibility from international agencies in their support to CSOs in Myanmar (for example see CGG 2021). Participants in this study strongly reiterated this point. This related to very practical functions such as money transfers and reporting. International agencies could also go further in allowing flexible spending on necessary equipment (especially for cyber security), different forms of receipts for spending, and buffering

exchange rate issues or other contingencies. Reporting for international agencies could also be streamlined and individualised for local organisations. One informant gave the example of reporting through scheduled Signal calls, where CSO staff can safely relate key outcomes and plans to international agency staff, who can then complete their own reporting requirements. This kind of flexibility – and shifting of administrative burden to international agencies – can allow local groups to maintain momentum in the face of extreme challenges in the operating environment. This recommendation of the need for international agency flexibility is by no means new, but due to a lack of change in operating processes, CSO leaders continue to identify this as a key barrier to their effective operations.

Focus more on the sovereignty of civil society organisations

A common refrain from CSO participants was for partnership approaches with international agencies that foster local organisation sovereignty – where agencies have decision making power in defining their own visions, objectives and activities. CSO leaders were often concerned with partnership power dynamics as well as practical issues. ‘Instead of being colonized by international actors’, one organisation leader said, ‘CSOs should have their sovereignty, and they should defend it’ (KII17). Particularly in this extreme post-coup operating context, there needs to be greater consideration of the power dynamics in local-international partnerships. In a practical sense this relates to how decisions are made about programming. CSOs should, for example, have opportunities to help define donor or international NGO program priorities and visions rather than being given opportunities to apply for funding as subcontractors for externally defined objectives. International NGOs could also provide more opportunities for feedback about partnership quality – for example local groups could be given the opportunity to evaluate their international partner and rate the experience of the partnership with commitment from the donor that this will not undermine their future funding opportunities.

Focus more on the empowerment of local organisations

The empowerment of CSOs themselves also needs to be central to all partnerships during these times of extreme challenges to the sector. One CSO participant said that international agencies ‘need to ensure that every CSO support window... includes a capacity building component which facilitates the CSOs to reflect on themselves, and identify their niche and develop a vision, mission, and programming that are completely in line with their intrinsic values and norm’ (KII3). Civil society organisations can also be empowered through international agencies committing to core funding which provides scope to develop the organization beyond moving from project to project. One international analyst said, ‘give the money to them and the core funding to operate...and help them to deliver this’ (KII22).

Another catalyst for empowerment – and one suggested by several participants – is through greater proportions of aid funding channelled through large local intermediary organisations, rather than through international organisations. A CSO leader said that large local organisations are far better placed (than international NGOs or UN agencies) to support the civil society sector in Myanmar due to better

contextual knowledge and greater efficiency of operations (KII14). ‘International intermediaries...are very expensive and have high overhead costs’, he argued, ‘if the intermediaries can be strong and respectable national NGOs ...it will be highly efficient’ (KII4). There are complex administrative barriers to such changes – which were highlighted by several donor representatives¹ - but positive steps have been taken in the past in Myanmar, for example through LIFT’s leadership development support or the development of the Paung Ku initiative in the 2000’s, which demonstrate that progress is possible.

Identify and support ‘internal champions’ within international agencies

Finally, recommendations in research studies often point to necessary changes in organisational processes or approaches, this study also highlighted the importance of individuals. Along with potential changes to systems in international agencies, becoming more effective in support to CSOs requires what one CSO leader described as ‘internal champions’. Bureaucratic systems and organizational inertia in large international agencies present significant challenges to flexible and context appropriate support to CSOs. One CSO leader pointed to the importance of individuals in donors, INGOs and UN agencies who could be ‘internal champions...who are bold enough and courageous enough to challenge...to expand the space’ (KII24). Without such champions, he suggested, the status quo would usually prevail (KII24).

The bravery and commitment of civil society actors in Myanmar since the coup has been extraordinary. As described in this report, they are pursuing an ambitious agenda of change to build a new federal democracy in Myanmar. It is not surprising therefore that CSO leaders are hopeful for individuals in international agencies who can also demonstrate bravery and commitment to support changing partnerships approaches. The ambition of shifting Western aid agency bureaucracy to be more effective seems mild compared to what we expect of Myanmar’s civil society leaders in rebuilding the country.

International NGOs were also seen by some participants to play a potential role as ‘champions’ for change. They could usefully direct their advocacy efforts toward their own country’s aid agencies to improve aid systems and make them more fit for purpose for Myanmar. A local CSO leader said the ‘roles of the international CSOs should also be advocating the relevant and influential policymakers from the donor country to ensure that their aid money is reaching the most appropriate group of beneficiaries and areas via relevant programs ... to allow more flexibility for CSO programs’ (KII4). Bilateral donors can also be a catalyst for change in this area by including requirements such as core funding, flexible reporting, and support for organisational development as necessary components of grants to CSOs if funds are channeled through intermediaries such as UN agencies or international NGOs.

Civil society organisations in Myanmar are operating in an incredibly hostile environment, and at the same time their leaders articulate ambitious visions for their country. Shifting aid systems to better empower local organisations in Myanmar is a valuable agenda for international actors, but that will require a set of individuals who are able to shift the status quo.

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