Updates from the Border:
Humanitarian Operations after the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreements in Burma/Myanmar

Yung Au
July, 2018
Updates from the Border:
Humanitarian Operations after the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreements in Burma/Myanmar

Table of Contents

1. Summary ................................................................................................................................. 2
2. Introduction............................................................................................................................. 3
3. Asymmetric Progress: Some Peace is more Peaceful than Others .......................................... 5
4. The Thai-Burma Border and Legally Ambiguous Humanitarian Groups.................................. 6
5. Cases on the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border ............................................................................... 11
   i. The Legal Limbo: The Persisting Illicit/Unrecognised Status of Humanitarian Operations .......... 12
   ii. “Veil of Peace”: The Shift from Humanitarian Relief to Peace and Development .................. 13
   iii. The “Return, Return, Return” Mentality: Leaving the Borderlands ................................... 14
   iv. Positives Changes ............................................................................................................... 15
6. How Much has Changed Before and After 2015? .................................................................. 16
7. Conclusion and Future Directions.......................................................................................... 18
8. References ............................................................................................................................... 21
1. Summary

This paper is a snapshot update on the humanitarian operations at the Thai-Burma border after the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreements (NCA) and National League of Democracy (NLD) elections. The instigation of what the international community sees as a beginning of a peace-process and a civilian government has had diverse consequences, where changes impacting the borderlands are particularly different to changes within the country. Taking a glimpse at cases in Mae Sot in the Tak province of Thailand, the report explores the current situation of actors and communities beyond the humanitarian mainstream. In particular, what are the consequences of the shifting international priorities at the borders? Who are left out as a result? What does it mean to be operating legally ambiguously after 2015?

During conversations with various humanitarian providers in a short trip to the border town of Mae Sot and its surrounding area, three recurrent problems were particularly salient. Firstly, after 2015, it has become increasingly difficult for the various border organisations to persist in an unrecognised and even illicit status. Secondly, international perceptions view the peace processes as progressing and reaching a lot further than it has in reality, and this has had the effect of concealing problems at the peripherals. Thirdly, the pressure for repatriation from the borderlands and for development inside the country has come at the cost of direct and immediate humanitarian relief at the borders. The direction of international attention and funding is then increasingly moving exclusively into the centre of the country, into development, and only for government approved operations. These changes affect some groups more, where certain communities are effectively prioritised over others. In particular, organisations that provide material provisions such as healthcare, those that work in rebel territory, those perceived to be affiliated with ethnic armed groups, and groups that allow the use of arms in dangerous territories are among the most controversial. Unfortunately, these are also often the groups that provide the most urgent services to communities in the most troubled and inaccessible areas.

Different pressures have mounted up at the borderland then, where the socio-political changes within the country are threatening even the most resilient humanitarian groups that have survived years and even decades of conflict. More attention is thus still very much needed on the peripherals of the country and of the consequences of the asymmetric changes since 2015, which are not necessarily all that positive or obvious.
2. Introduction

In Burma/Myanmar’s protracted civil war, the edges of the country have been at the forefront of much conflict, displacement, as well as clandestine humanitarian operations (Décobert, 2015). However, in 2015, the initiation of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and the election of the National League of Democracy (NLD) into office raised new hopes, both in the country and internationally (Thuzar, 2015).

Almost three years have passed since then – and coincidentally, the publication of Anne Décobert’s (2015) detailed ethnographic study of the humanitarian struggle on the Thai-Burma border. Conducting the main part of her fieldwork from 2009 to 2011 she examined how the socio-political changes of that time affected the underground humanitarian networks that emerged in the borderlands. Here, groups struggled for legitimacy particularly after the 2011 reforms led by Thein Sein’s government. With the further dramatic changes since then, what is the situation like now? And how has it affected the borderlands?

On the one hand, the NCA and elections have been touted as ground-breaking progress, especially in the context of Tatmadaw’s historically uncompromising stance (Aung Naing Oo, 2015). On the other hand, these processes are also characterized by some as being uneven and even disingenuous (Kuppuswamy, 2015), where the NCA is frequently prefixed by the adjective ‘fragile’. The road forward was always going to be rocky, with the post-colonial conflict spanning over five decades and involving over a dozen major armed actors, in a country with over a hundred ethnic groups (Smith, 1991; Oxford Burma Alliance, n.d.). However, it is important to take stock of the current situation to better understand what has improved and what pressingly needs our attention. This is particularly so at the borderlands where many marginalized communities and civil society actors have divergent experiences of these processes compared to the official and cultural capitals of Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw, and Mandalay.

In attempt to help highlight some of the asymmetric developments, this paper aims to give a brief update on the situation at the Thai-Burmese border. While it is not a comprehensive or conclusive review, it hopes to provide a snapshot of the ongoing transition as experienced by communities and networks located at the peripherals of the country and of the mainstream aid discourse. The report will focus specifically on groups in and around the district of Mae Sot, a place known as a hub of humanitarian aid (see figure 1). Here, a series of discussions were conducted in a short trip in early 2018 with various humanitarian actors.

---

1 Burma and Myanmar will be used interchangeably in this article
In these borderlands, many humanitarian groups worked ‘illicitly’ throughout the civil war to provide vital help to vulnerable populations, and many still do today (Oh, 2016). Many still operate in areas with ongoing conflict and remote places where government services do not reach. By existing in this legal grey area, these groups have to negotiate not only a complicated relationship with the Burmese government but also with the Thai government, local authorities and indigenous communities at both sides of the border, as well as international groups and governments.

In examining several cases of non-governmental organizations (NGO) and civil society organizations (CSO), the paper firstly looks at the border realities and the less obvious changes after the NCA and NLD elections. Secondly, there is a need for more attention on what South, Perhult, and Carstensen (2010) calls “non-system actors” (11) which are groups operating beyond the security and humanitarian mainstream. This is particularly so in situations where international actors still have limited access. Likewise, Décobert (2015) argued that "studies of aid have typically paid relatively little attention to the complex and often invisible webs of donors, NGOs, local organizations and other socio-political military actors which can develop in a cross-

Figure 1: Map of cities and refugee camps along the eastern border (TBC, 2018). Mae Sot is highlighted (http://www.theborderconsortium.org/media/106211/2018-04-apr-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf)
border and extra-legal context, yet it is frequently at the margins of sovereignty and state definition of legality that some of the political and ethical dilemmas of humanitarianism become most pertinent” (4).

While the scope of this report is limited, it nevertheless aims to give a glimpse of some of the current realities and encourage discourse in this direction. In examining beyond the centre of the country and in examining activities beyond the legally recognized, we can pay better attention to marginalized communities and networks. Having a broader understanding of the positive and negative effects of ongoing changes can help identify the most pressing issues and inform future directions and prioritisations.

3. Asymmetric Progress: Some Peace is more Peaceful than Others

In October 2015, the NCA was signed by eight armed groups and in the next month, NLD took office in a historic election - “it was victory for the ages” reported one newspaper (Southeast Asia Globe, 2016). However, different parts of the country experienced these ‘victories’ in divergent ways. For example, the Burma Campaign UK (2015) estimated that 10 million people including displaced people, ethnic minorities, and nuns were unable to vote due to problems from registration issues to alleged security troubles. Likewise, Human Rights Foundation of Monland (2015) reports the cancellation of polling centres in relatively stable villages across South-eastern Burma. So despite it being a ‘nationwide’ victory, many were excluded. Similarly, there was controversy surrounding which group was offered the NCA and which were not, for reasons including that certain armed groups were formed too recently\(^2\) or were not considered combatants\(^3\) (Euro-Burma Office, 2015).

As of now, ten EAOs are signatories to the NCA, with the latest groups being the New Mon State Party and Lahu Democratic Union (Nyan Hlaing Lynn, 2018). Joining in early 2018, they became the first groups to sign the NCA under the NLD government. A third group was meant to also sign, however, the Arakan National Council dropped out due to disagreements (ibid). These kinds of ‘two

---

\(^2\) This includes the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA). Euro-Burma Office (2015) reports that the government explains that these groups were formed after the peace processes which began four years ago and “including them will encourage a proliferation of more groups” (2)

\(^3\) This includes the Wa National Organisation (WNO), the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) and the Arakan National Council (ANC). Euro-Burma Office (2015) reports that the government believes these groups “do not have significant armies and are not combatants” (2), however they will be given opportunities to join later on. LDU signed the ceasefires in February 2018.
step forwards, one step back’ developments remind us that progress is not linear and hints at the difficulty of these processes.

The actual level of stability after 2015 also differs widely. While certain types of conflict in certain areas have decreased, some have remained the same or even grown. There are many issues with collecting reliable conflict data in the country, and thus quantifying the actual changes over time (Mathieson, 2017). Nevertheless, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project estimates that while events such as riots and protests\(^4\) have declined since the elections compared to the few years prior, reported clashes\(^5\) between state and non-state actors have actually increased after 2015. These skirmishes includes both actors who are signatories to the NCA and those who are not (ACLED, n.d.). Likewise reported remote violence\(^6\) increased after the NCA, with notable peaks last year and this year (ibid). Violent incidences are also distributed unevenly with much of the reported events from 2011 to 2016 located in the regions next to borders including the Karen, Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine State. The latter three have continued to be hotspots of such activities after 2016 (ibid).

Finally, despite ongoing conflict and the many caught in these cross-fires (Human Rights Watch, 2017), a large shift in international priorities occurred since Thein Sein government’s reforms and even more so after the NCA and the 2015 elections (Burma Link, 2017). Resources will always be limited and priorities mean certain sacrifices have to be made. However, these sacrifices are particularly felt at the borderlands (ibid; Décobert, 2015). These uneven realities are nothing new and are widely reported at the group level, yet they are easily overlooked, especially in a rush to claim Burma as ‘post-conflict’ (Aung and Aung, 2017). What are the current asymmetric developments then, in the Thai-Burmese borders?

4. The Thai-Burma Border and Legally Ambiguous Humanitarian Groups

The divergent centre-peripheral experiences and contested sovereignties in the Thai-Burma borderlands have long been documented. In pre-colonial times, polities of the region “were organized as constellations of city-states whose power diminished as it radiated out from their political centres, leaving gaps between spheres of authority” (Campbell, 2018; 21). These bordering states were never able to effectively assert control at the ground level in what eventually became the Thai-Burma borderlands have long been documented. In pre-colonial times, polities of the region “were organized as constellations of city-states whose power diminished as it radiated out from their political centres, leaving gaps between spheres of authority” (Campbell, 2018; 21). These bordering states were never able to effectively assert control at the ground level in what eventually became the Thai-Burma

---

\(^4\) Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) defines riots as violent demonstrations, and protests as non-violent demonstrations (see: https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ACLED-Definitions-of-Political-Violence-and-Protest_FINAL.pdf)

\(^5\) ACLED defines this as violent clashes between at least two armed groups

\(^6\) ACLED defines remote violence as events where an explosion, bomb or other weapon was used to engage in conflict, and did not require the physical presence of the perpetrator
border. During this time, instead of a drawn border, the mountainous ridges home to mostly ethnic Karens became a buffer zone between these kingdoms (ibid).

When the Mae Sot District in Thailand was established in 1898, the borderline followed the natural demarcation of the Moei River with Myawaddy on the opposite side (ibid). Here, Mae Sot remained a sleepy outpost up until the early post-World War II years when the town and its mountainous surroundings became an “insurgent backwater” (ibid; 21) where a range of armed groups maintained strategic bases away from the hotspots of conflict. During the 1970s, development in the region kicked off when the Thai government mounted increasing campaigns against the Communist Party of Thailand. This included infrastructure projects that helped mobility and surveillance in the region. These roadways that opened Mae Sot as a hub for migration and trade were thus originally built as counterinsurgency infrastructure (ibid).

Further shaping Mae Sot was the changing humanitarian landscape, particularly in 1980s (Oh, 2016). The series of insurgency and counter-insurgencies in the Karen state which started in 1949 was particularly intensified by the scorched earth policy of the military in 1980s (ibid). This drove 10,000 refugees into the Tak province which Mae Sot is in, marking the beginning of the influx of refugees across the border (TBC, n.d.). The 1980s also saw the 8888 uprising where the military crackdown pushed a large exodus of politicized students into eastern Burma and some across to Thailand (ibid; Campbell, 2018). Thus emerging from the lack of effective institutions and a growing, pressing need for various services, an extensive “underground system of alternative, mobile healthcare, education and social support networks” (Oh, 2016; 172) emerged. This, in addition to the prompt arrival of NGOs and international funds drawn to the situation, created a “specific humanitarian culture” (ibid; 174) visible today.

Thus a variety of legally-ambiguous activities came to fill a governance and humanitarian void in this region and a range of registered and unregistered entities still operate today. The current residents hail from a mixture of ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and legal statuses (ibid). Many settlements are intricately organized while others are more ad-hoc. Likewise, many border movements are still being done by long-tail boats ferrying between unofficial landings scattered on the river, right beside the official border-crossing on the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge established in 1997 (Campbell, 2018). See figure 2, 3, and 4.
Figure 2: A make-shift raft crossing the Moei River

Figure 3: Guard takes a rest under the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge
Finally, an incredible assortment of formal and informal humanitarian operations can be found here today. A sample of actors include: those working more toward healthcare and first-line responders like Mae Tao Clinic\textsuperscript{7}, Free Burma Rangers\textsuperscript{8}, the Backpack Health Worker Team\textsuperscript{9}, and the Karen

\textsuperscript{7} www.maetaoclinic.org
Department of Health and Welfare; those focusing on displacement issues like The Border Consortium, Burma Link, Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, and Burma Border Projects; those with a focus women’s issue like groups in the Women’s League of Burma; those working on students, exile, and youth issues such as Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, Karen Student Network Group, and Youth Connect Foundation; those with an environmental orientation like the Karen Environment and Social Action Network; and those working on human rights like Karen Human Rights Group. This is only a rough sketch of some focuses and groups where many other entities, with different overlaps and focuses, exist.

So how has the impressive array of operations conducted on the Thai-Burma border managed to navigate the various authorities after 2015? While operating illicitly throughout the war, many had recognition from international entities and governments. Has this changed since the installation of a civilian government? What do ambiguous statuses mean after the NCA and NLD election?

8 www.freeburmarangers.org/
9 www.backpackteam.org
10 www.kdhw.org/
11 www.theborderconsortium.org/
12 www.burmalink.org/
13 www.burma-projects.org/
14 www.womenofburma.org/wlbmembers/
15 www.aappb.org/
16 www.facebook.com/ksngktl/
17 www.youthconnectthailand.org/
18 www.kesan.asia/
19 www.khrg.org/
5. Cases on the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border

A series of conversations were conducted on a short trip the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border with several CSOs and NGOs as well as independent affiliates, for whom we are most grateful to for sharing their insights. Unfortunately, due to limitation, it was only possible to talk with a handful of actors at the border and the scope of this report is limited by this. Nevertheless, the individuals and groups that were conversed with all worked roughly under the umbrella of humanitarian assistance for people from Burma, which are broadly, projects concerned with human welfare. The groups varied in terms of organizational focus which included healthcare, education, political prisoners, refugees, and migrant support. They also varied in terms of logistical mechanisms where some operated on more official channels while others were more overtly underground. Some worked in more stable areas while others traversed to conflict and remote places on foot to deliver vital services. These diverse subjects are however, only a small sample of the range of activities here. Participants have been kept anonymous for this report under the request of several informants.
During the discussions, it is evident groups have to negotiate many dimensions in their day-to-day activities. Three particular areas of negotiation repeatedly came up and were related to recurrent problems across groups:

i. The Legal Limbo: The Persisting Illicit/Unrecognised Status of Humanitarian Operations

Many humanitarian operations were conducted illicitly before the ceasefires and many continue to do so. Despite changes within the country, border groups still have to navigate a complicated legal and legitimacy status with relation to the Burmese government and military, Thai government, EAOs, international community, village leaders, and of course, the local communities. These struggles for recognition have persisted for decades and are becoming a bigger barrier now that international donors are moving towards more legally recognized operations after 2015. After the NCA and the instalment of a civilian government, many foreign governments and international entities now shy away from the more “complicated groups” as one informant put it. Those forced to work clandestinely after the NCA found that they were at a large disadvantage compared to their counterparts who are able to become “more legal”.

The vital services these groups provide often helps relieve the burden off the state and its public facilities, including neighbouring hospitals. Despite this, many groups do not receive official acknowledgement, support or protection from the state. Nevertheless, tacit approval or “under-the-table arrangements” of these legally ambiguous humanitarian operations can still be found on both the Burmese and Thailand side. For example, some groups have produced unofficial identification documents and birth certificates in attempt to give recognition to stateless people and newborn babies. These are sometimes accepted at border controls and by Thai authorities where it offers limited protection and higher chances of an official turning a blind eye. One explained that “when displaced people give birth here, we can work with local Thai authorities to recognize the birth – meaning you get a birth certificate. But this is just acknowledging the baby is born in Thailand, not its citizenship. [However, this is more than what we have in Burma]. Nothing of this is recognized in Burma. It is a human right to be recognized, to have registration, to have an identity. [So it is not perfect] but at least they are officially not stateless – which is a big step towards later in life. To access education and insurance…” Another mentioned that “on the Thai side, you can also talk with the village head; you can get a stay permit for that village. It doesn’t mean you can go everywhere but somehow you can deal with local authority. A kind of permission. If you want to go to another district you need another permission.” Arrangement with the Thai authority was something groups made possible over time, along with local legal partners and establishing working relationships with various authorities. These are however, not as easy on the Burmese side.
In particular, some groups emphasize that the centralized nature of Myanmar’s processes makes it more difficult to work together. Decisions often have to be made at Nay Pyi Taw where working together becomes a much longer and more bureaucratic process. The Thai side has a de-centralized aspect that has allowed important flexibility. This includes allowing groups to have working relationships with village and district leaders. For instance, the Mae Tao Clinic, which has provided free medical assistance to those in need since 1988, has a standard referral operation set up with the Mae Sot Hospital. However, there is no standard referral process for within Burma, such as with the Myawaddy Hospital where these discussions are still in process. “Mae Sot can make decentralized decisions and have power to decide what is best for their distinct but we are not sure this is the same in Burma.”

Furthermore, despite how the Burmese Ministry of Health and Sport (MoHS) identifies ‘ethnic health organizations’ as essential for its goal to achieve universal healthcare in 2020 (MoHS, 2015), many groups here report a lack of a relationship to this branch of government. One group stated “it is our opinion that the MoHS supports a centralized-deconcentration health system which is not compatible with the decentralized health model advocated by the [ethnic health organizations].” Another group said “real cooperation is a really slow process…[which again is due to how MoHS is centralized]. In Thailand we can talk to the Tak office or the Mae Sot district health office and make decisions, sometimes. But with the MoHs, even here in Myawaddy, just across the river, decisions have to be taken to Nay Pyi Daw.” The 2020 deadline is looming ahead but relationships vital to MoHS’ plan still appear to be work in progress.

So how do groups plan to navigate this legal ambiguity in the coming years? The response varied. Some stated their readiness to work towards a federalized system once the government takes this seriously, others had less hope that this would happen any time in the near future. One group said they were able to grow and even opened an office inland but most others had no intention of seeking official approval from Burma, or even leaving the borders where they feel their services are most necessary. Instead, they sought official recognition with Thailand or expressed that they will continue working with district-level authorities and EAOs.

**ii. “Veil of Peace”: The Shift from Humanitarian Relief to Peace and Development**

Many groups also voiced concern about how the appearance of peace had the effect of hiding much of the ongoing conflict. Many of the groups here mentioned how there is a misalignment between the international community’s perception of the progress of peace and those at the ground level. One
group said “it seems to us that foreign governments consider Burma to be in post-conflict situation as opposed to a conflict period. The ethnic people in Kachin, Arakan, Southern Chin, Northern Shan, and Northern Karen States do not see themselves in a post-conflict period. There are more patients in need in the conflict areas”. Likewise, another remarked that “conflict has increased in Kachin state by far. [For example], this week there’s been air-strikes in Kachin state. Last week there were air-strikes in the Chin state. They attacked this week in the Karen state, and more fighting in southern Karen state. Probably every two weeks there are skirmishes in Shan state. I think the situation has gotten better [but only] for some people in Burma, in some places.”

It appears “international donors have started to withdraw support from the borders due to this veil of peace.” Instead of providing funds to humanitarian relief to conflict and borders, there is a shift to fund peace projects and developmental aid within the country. One discussant lamented that it is perhaps a natural shift if real peace was being achieved, however this is currently not the case and this shift is being done “at the expense of people at the borders”.

Another said “the thing is, there are so many international crises at the moment. You know, if you look at Syria and the conflict there, [the deadly attacks in Congo], the problems in Uganda – there are so many hotspots and displaced people. The international community [does not know where to fixate its attention].” So while the group is still trying to have open dialogues with the international community, they are also moving towards regional organizations like ASEAN where their challenges can hopefully garner more attention and understanding. Others are looking to partners within Burma and CSOs, in hopes of being less reliant on international funding, especially from foreign governments which had previously been key supporters in this region.

iii. The “Return, Return, Return” Mentality: Leaving the Borderlands

Related to this perception of ‘post-conflict’ Myanmar, is the international focus turning away from the border and towards the inland – as well as the rush to return displaced people back in the country. Burma Link (2016a) reported that there is a particular “optimism of the international community and [infectious] idea that those displaced will soon begin to move back to Burma [and] the main change that has occurred as a result of the reforms has been a significant reduction in aid and funding.” (para. 12).

This has many different implications for the myriad of actors at the border. For groups with no wish to ‘return’ when needs are still unmet and displaced people remain, this has meant downsizing
activities. For certain health providers, this has meant cuts in non-immediate programs such as personnel training and non-emergency treatments which they have said “will inevitably produce problems in the long-term”. For other health organisations, this has meant letting those too terminally ill go - where such desperate choices obviously takes its toll on both the communities and providers. For refugee camps, one interviewee cited that many basic services had to be cut. “This incessant talk of ‘return, return, return’ [to Burma]’ has created a severe sense of anxiety in the camps. Accordingly, significant increases in self-harm and ‘anti-social behaviour has been seen within the camp populations, [including] suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, unsustainable loaning and gambling, theft, school drop-outs, [youth gangs], under-age pregnancy and marriage, sex work”. As of April 2018, the Border Consortium reports that 58,749 refugees remain in Tak region’s three main refugee camps, where even more reside in unofficial settlements and in the camps of neighbouring districts - so these are far from small issues (TBC, 2018).

So while there may be new opportunities to work inside Burma, “many groups are concerned that donors are pushing for groups and displaced people into the country before they feel it is safe to operate there” (Burma Link, 2016a; para. 13). Some noted that Yangon has been particularly saturated with NGOs however as one informant said “they cannot solve everything from such a faraway place, just like how we cannot solve issues in centre of Burma from the borderlands”.

Furthermore, groups had to weigh out what a compromise would mean. Withdrawal would mean to relinquish the base of support built over the years and the flexibility Thailand affords, and groups would have to make significant compromises to their projects. This may include “self-censoring [and], at times forcing the organizations to compromise the very core values and goals that the organization was founded on in the first place” (Burma Link, 2016a; para. 13). Indeed, some were wary that moving inland would mean having to change so much so that their group would not be recognizable any more. Other groups have confirmed they have no intentions of migrating inwards when significant and pressing needs are still unmet here.

iv. Positives Changes

It is also important to take stock of the positive changes. Reported improvements include the start of actual dialogue. One informant said “it is easy to be pessimistic about the peace process. Many of my colleagues are also exhausted and discouraged by the lack of progress in recent months. However, it is good to remember that the Government of Myanmar and the Tatmadaw have never before agreed to try to solve Myanmar's problems through peaceful means... With the NCA, they agreed to try to
find a solution through dialogue. They further agreed that the solution is democracy and federalism. This is what the ethnic people have been saying since 1947. Whether or not things are going the right way, is another matter.” He reminds that progress needs to be looked at in context. Others, however, were less optimistic.

One had said: “there is more freedom than there used to be to go places and see things and write things. [So, sure] there’s more freedom. The government is less likely to arrest you for a political crime, so that’s an improvement. And there’s not the same amount of forced labour as there were before. There are eight [main] ceasefires actors and they’re not fighting them generally. That’s an improvement. But the negative thing starts with the [government and the power the military has]. That’s a big problem. In that sense it’s been zero change. Also in a way, it subterfuges in a way … [where those] who don’t know or don’t want to know [the situation] can say ‘well the democracy in Burma is getting better so let’s help them’. Let’s go make money. It’s all good now. It’s changed now.” Indeed, many seem to talk about “some positive social and political changes that make it a more liberal and open society. More free. Especially in Yangon or Mandalay. You can see it is a different life there – but this doesn’t reach here.”

A select few groups saw new opportunities to work with CSO within the country. Furthermore, there has been more development in public facilities in certain areas but it is still not enough nor does it target minorities and vulnerable people. For example, while there are increased facilities in state hospitals on both sides of the border, many cannot afford these and still need to travel all the way to Mae Tao Clinic. Developments are also particularly slow at the more rural and hard-to-reach areas. For many groups here, improvements appeared “piecemeal” compared to the mounting barriers at the border.

6. How Much has Changed Before and After 2015?

So although changes are definitely occurring, they are not necessarily positive nor are they particularly obvious, especially from within the country. One element of this includes how while the Myanmar/Burma debate may no longer be a looming sentiment in day-to-day life in Yangon, it still is relevant at the border. This dispute which was especially polarised during the 2010 elections, ranged from what Metro (2011) called the ‘Myanmarites’ on one end, to ‘Burmaphiles’ on the other. The latter describes a position sympathetic to the ‘Free Burma’ movement, advocating for sanctions against the regime, democratic changes, and commitment to human rights (ibid) - however, to critics, these orientations were seen as idealistic and uncompromising with authorities. The Myanmarites
instead focuses on the centre rather than the peripherals and advocates a more pragmatic approach involving engaging with the regime (ibid). So while the Burmaphiles position is particularly linked to the experiences of the displaced and the repressed, many of whom fled to places like the Thai-border, the world platform started to shift towards this Myanmarites orientation in 2010 (Décobert, 2015) and perhaps, even more rapidly so after 2015. There is then a drift in international support to:

1. The centre of the country rather than in the borders
2. Development and peace-process activities channelled through government rather than direct aid to civil society humanitarian efforts in conflict areas
3. Those who are legal recognized by the state rather than those operating more ambiguously

Groups are compelled to face a dilemma of cooperation – compromise to become legal and move within the country, or do not compromise and stay outside the humanitarian mainstream. These pose different difficulties for the various entities where certain groups have had more successes with the state.

One informant had said “some of the exiled border-based groups have already been able to secure recognition/tolerance from the Burmese government as part of the ‘political democratization’ process which has been ongoing since the Thein Sein [government]. Others, such as those seen as being affiliated with [EAOs] or the refugee populations fall under the peace process and their recognition is part of these yet unresolved negotiations. Of course, all groups have differing networks within influential circles which they can utilize to different degrees of success towards seeking recognition…” Another suggested that “working with political prisoners in a context where many of the current government officials also used to be political prisoners themselves has seen more successful dialogue”.

Another informant distinguished between advocacy groups and groups that provide material provisions, where there is a greater government distrust of the latter. This is especially so when the latter is perceived to be affiliated with EAOs where provisions of material support to armed groups is a particularly alarming red flag for the military. The former however, “have been able to leverage space with the authorities [largely] due to their non-affiliation to EAOs”.

Other organizational focuses that appear especially contentious includes healthcare. Many echoed Décobert’s (2015) sentiments that health provisions have long been tied to contested rule, where social service initiatives in conflict areas by the government have been used as a strategy of pacifying contested territories in the past. Expanding further, Jolliffe (2014) argues that because ethnic conflicts
here are fought primarily over claims to governance, the drivers of conflict relate to legitimacy and power over populations – which makes “providing social services an uncharacteristically politically-sensitive issue [here]” (5). So while many healthcare groups here are in the best position to meet the needs of their communities after years of provisions and relationships being built, they are still struggling to find common ground where social provisions are still seen as a threat to the state rather than supplementary.

Finally, humanitarian groups which allow the use of arms to protect themselves in dangerous terrains, groups working in rebel held territory, and groups perceived to be affiliated in any way with an EAO are also particularly controversial in the eyes of the state and for international entities who will not step on the government’s toes. Unfortunately, they are also often the only groups that risk their lives to provide direct assistance to communities most affected by conflicts and in the most troubled, inaccessible areas.

Those not sanctioned by the state suffer a different sort of setback post-2015, especially when compared to their state-approved counterparts. Apart from the ongoing conflict and air-strikes, all but one group here asserts the biggest problem after the NCA/NLD elections are the receding support from international donors. “The biggest challenge is to help people who are under attack in Burma – to directly help them. Instead of doing that, most big organizations go through the government,” and the government of course has certain priorities.

Different difficulties have mounted up where while these humanitarian groups have found creative and resilient ways to carry on during the decades of the civil war, many are now facing serious threats from this financial choke-hold. Décobert’s (2015) insights from before the ceasefires are thus still relevant – groups along the border continue to experience their relevance and legitimacy being increasingly challenged, particularly by international donors who are withdrawing their priorities from the struggles along the margins. These changes are affecting the even the largest and most respected entities here, where diverse groups here are facing an increasing risk of “losing their claim to the label of humanitarian” (Décobert, 2015; 263).

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

This report highlights some issues of the current transitory period which is complex and pressingly needs more critical assessment. This time of uncertainty since 2015 has placed a lot of pressure at the border which is at least in part due to the international perception of the peace processes going a lot
smoother and having a more extensive reach than it actually has. As the borderlands continue to experience a different sort of change, more scrutiny is still needed on questions such as: what exactly are the uneven realities of the peace processes? And who are international community overlooking?

While the current report is not an extensive review, it provides a glimpse into the diverse socio-political consequences since 2015. For more comprehensive reviews of the region, refer to the reports by CSOs at the borders including health reports by the Mae Tao Clinic\(^{20}\) and Backpack Health Worker Team\(^{21}\); field reports by the Free Burma Rangers\(^{22}\) and Karen Human Rights Group\(^{23}\); and coverages of the situation and displacement at the border by the Border Consortium\(^{24}\) and Burma link\(^{25}\). Nevertheless, in this short report, it is clear that in a rush to perceive Myanmar as post-conflict, there is a hasty prioritisation from international actors to support humanitarian aid done through formal rather than informal channels, within the country rather than at the borders, and with a focus for repatriation rather than direct relief of those affected by conflict. The prospect of peace and a working relationship with the government is compelling but there should be a more careful consideration on who exactly are being left out when only supporting state-approved organisations.

Policy and international actors need to take care where there is a risk that increasingly, only these state sanctioned operations are getting support and protection - something that holds more weight after the NCA and after what the international community views as the start of peace-processes and a civilian government.

During this ambiguous time, it is important not to neglect the actors and vulnerable populations who are beyond the humanitarian mainstream. It is evident these border actors fill an important governance void and have persisted throughout the height of conflict and in volatile conditions, where they have best adapted to the needs of the people there. What gaps would these groups leave behind if they cease to exist? Finally, there should be a more real focus on how state and non-state service provisions can be reconciled. As seen, there are already ways that these unrecognised groups have under-the-table sort of agreements - how can we expand beyond these?

Development and peace within the country needs to be done without leaving communities at the border and conflict areas behind in the dust. This is by no means an easy balance but definitely something that requires careful reflection, where it is important to remember the key roles unrecognised CSOs and NGOs played before 2015 and the role it still plays today. Only when there

\(^{20}\) www.maetaoclinic.org/publications/annual-reports/
\(^{21}\) www.backpackteam.org/?cat=7
\(^{22}\) www.freeburmarangers.org/category/reports/
\(^{23}\) www.khrg.org/reports
\(^{24}\) www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/
\(^{25}\) www.burmalink.org/about-us/burma-link-publications/
is better engagement with the margins and a serious acknowledgement of the uneven realities, can real inclusiveness and sustainable progress be possible.
8. References


The Border Consortium (n.d.). “Brief History of the Border”. Retrieved from:
