

Community Recommendations for Peacebuilding in Kachin State

Since 2011, thousands have been killed and more than one hundred thousand have lost their livelihoods due to armed conflict between Ethnic Armed Organisations and the Tatmadaw in Kachin and Shan States. Until peace is secured in these geostrategically important areas, Myanmar's democratic gains will be limited, and the country's full economic and human potential will not be realised.

Conflict-affected communities usually have few opportunities to share their experience of war. This is a wasted opportunity, as directly affected communities have deep knowledge of the issues, can offer unique insights, and among all stakeholders have the strongest desire to address the many problems war brings.

The following findings and recommendations result from two years of action research by conflict-affected communities in Kachin State. The process was supported with funding and training by Columbia University, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and implemented by the Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR).

The action research covered three topics - 1) Internally Displaced Person (IDP) return and Mine Risk Education (MRE), 2) IDP and host community relations – youth peacebuilding, and 3) reducing harm from drugs. Research provided the basis for the implementation of community-led peacebuilding activities in non-government controlled areas of Kachin State in 2015, including:

1. Mine Risk Education (MRE) for the first time in Laiza to approximately 1,000 people,
2. Drug awareness raising in schools and IDP camps for almost 7000 people,
3. A range of activities to reduce tensions between IDPs and host communities, and
4. Four dialog forums to raise awareness on the peace process and support the development of a youth action plan for peacebuilding.

The communities involved in this research call on all parties to begin an inclusive process of political dialog to bring sustainable solutions to the war, and offer the following specific findings and recommendations.

Return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Mine Risk Education (MRE)

People displaced by conflict in Kachin and Shan States face serious risks of death and injury due to landmines and unexploded ordinance (UXOs). Myanmar ranks third worst in the world for deaths from landmines and UXOs, and has no active clearance programs. Due to intensive landmine and ordinance use in Kachin and Shan since 2011, return of IDPs to their places of origin is not safe. IDPs conduct short return visits however, for example to recover possessions or to check on crops or livestock, and become regular victims of injury or death because of these threats.

IDP camps near Laiza, headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organisations (KIO), are located close to areas that have been fired on by artillery or aerial bombardment. This poses an UXO threat to civilians when they leave camps to travel, collect firewood, or tend crops or livestock. The threat is compounded by the need of IDPs to venture further from camps over time to forage, or tend crops and livestock. The risk is higher for children, who lack risk awareness and more likely to be attracted to UXOs.

Based on these findings, local organisations have implemented Mine Risk Education (MRE) in non-government controlled areas of Kachin State in order to reduce harm from landmines and UXOs, with support from international non-government organisations (INGOs).

INGO access to these areas is limited, and they often lack the local knowledge and relationships required to be conflict sensitive. To achieve MRE in non-government controlled areas to international standards, solutions are needed that respect the agency of local organisations. This has been achieved in Laiza by INGO

training of Kachin mine risk educators in Mytikina, who then conduct their own awareness raising in non-government controlled areas.

To reduce the harm from landmines and UXOs, communities involved in this work call upon the Myanmar Government, the KIO, the United Nations, INGOs, and civil society organisations to collaborate in order to:

1. Extend MRE to the entire IDP population in Laiza (18,000) and other IDP camps in non-government controlled areas of Kachin and Shan States (approximately 50,000), focusing on the most vulnerable.
2. Mark signs in the mine fields. Government, KIO, UN, INGO and humanitarian agencies should provide financial and technical assistance.
3. Support expanded MRE to international standards through capacity building to local organisations, respecting their agency and legitimacy to provide MRE in non-government controlled areas themselves.
4. Initiate land mine clearance, in areas where this is possible, according to international best practices.
5. Institute international and national laws and conventions regarding land mines and UXOs, and hold conflict parties accountable to these provisions.
6. Enforce an immediate ban on children under the age of 18 using or making explosives (including for non-military purposes), and codify these in law.

Reducing Harm from Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is in the words of one participant in this process “a weapon that kills our people silently”. War creates insecurity and war economies that enable the problem to grow. Kachin communities commonly feel that drug problems are part of a wider strategy to weaken them, a perception that is fuelled by the multiple roles that Myanmar security and state officials play in the drug trade, and perception that the Myanmar Government is doing little to address the crisis.

When drug use was closely examined by community researchers, a complex set of causal factors were revealed, including relatively profitable poppy cultivation, war economies (especially by militias), impunity from prosecution, loss of livelihoods, absence of harm reduction programs, the role of schools and IDP camps in spreading drug use, discrimination against users, lack of danger awareness, and family breakdown.

Multiple, simultaneous interventions are required to tackle different ‘parts’ of the drug problem. Simply eradicating poppies or punishing drug users will be ineffective if other causes remain untreated. These interventions must be implemented across borders. ‘Zero-tolerance’ efforts in KIO areas have failed when drug procurement or production remains easy in China, or in government or militia-controlled areas. This requires coordinated efforts by multiple stakeholders, including the Myanmar and Chinese governments, the KIO, local civil society organisations, international organisations, and affected communities.

The communities involved in this study further recommend:

1. Improved law enforcement, by implementing existing law impartially, harmonising enforcement between government and non-government controlled areas, and reducing drug availability in prisons. Any new laws and regulations imposed should receive public endorsement.
2. Prohibiting the sale of drugs and other health risk items in schools, adding topics on drug risks and harm reduction in curriculums, checks on drugs, and awareness sessions in schools three times a year.
3. The Myanmar government should participate more proactively in eradication and harm reduction.
4. The use of drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol in public places should be prohibited.
5. The church should encourage its congregation to refrain from poppy cultivation and discrimination against former drug users.
6. Drug awareness raising in IDP camps should be extended, conducted more regularly, and coordinated through the establishment of dedicated awareness raising committees.
7. Further research is needed on attitude change requirements to limit drug production, use and harm.

IDP and Host Community Relations – Youth Peacebuilding

The population of Laiza, located in a small area between the Chinese border and the Tatmadaw's frontline military positions, increased approximately 20% with the influx of more than 18,000 IDPs since 2011. The requirement of IDPs for additional land and resources can strain relationships with local communities, especially as funding and assistance for humanitarian support has reduced over time. These tensions can be a source of intimidation and violence between communities.

Youth are especially likely to become involved in violence, both locally and in relation to the war between the Tatmadaw and Ethnic Armed Organisations. Since the resumption of armed conflict in 2011, opportunities for the constructive action by youth in non-government controlled areas of Kachin has been limited. Those educated in non-state schools are now not allowed to attend government universities. Less educated youth lack livelihood opportunities, and become vulnerable for recruitment to armed forces. Those that have experienced the war directly have internalized the violence. Drugs and alcohol provide a remedy to boredom and trauma in the short term, but tend to compound problems over time. Young male IDPs feel marginalised from humanitarian assistance, which they feel is mostly targeted towards women, children and the elderly, despite the unique vulnerabilities experienced by young men.

To transform tensions between IDPs and host communities, and find more constructive opportunities for Kachin youth, communities in this action research initiated a range activities to strengthen social cohesion and increase opportunities for youth participation. These included a series of dialog forums, culminating in an action plan for youth-led peacebuilding. Recommendations arising from these activities include:

1. LNGOs, INGOs, KIO, and CSOs should provide capacity building programs and participation opportunities for youth.
2. Humanitarian assistance programs should respond to the unique vulnerabilities of young males.
3. The Myanmar government should allow youth educated in non-state schools to matriculate to government universities.
4. The KIO and its partners should establish additional tertiary education capacity in non-government controlled areas.
5. The international community, civil society organisations, the Myanmar Army, and ethnic armed organisations should increase efforts to limit recruitment of youth into armed forces.
6. Additional employment opportunities are needed for educated youth by both the KIO and government, ensuring that measures are enforced to eliminate discrimination against ethnic nationalities.
7. INGOs and international donors should support the Kachin National Youth Network's (KNYN) action plan for youth-led peacebuilding.
8. Both the government and KIO must develop policies and mechanisms to manage land disputes related to forced displacement.

This action research process was implemented by the Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR). Comments or questions related to the work and recommendations should be directed in Burmese or Jinghpaw to ranircoordination@yahoo.com or in English to askadapt@gmail.com.