

Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR)

Laiza, Kachin State



COMMUNITY-LED PEACEBUILDING IN KACHIN STATE: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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Acronyms

CSO – Civil Society Organisation
IDP – Internally Displaced Person
INGO – International Non-government Organisation
LNGO – Local Non-government Organisation
KIO – Kachin Independence Organisation
MRE – Mine Risk Education
SAR – Systemic Action Research
UXO – Unexploded Ordinance

Acknowledgements

The success of this process is built on the energy and commitment of local communities affected by conflict in Kachin and Shan States. They are those that primarily suffer the burden of a war that is not of their making, but rarely are they given space to voice their experiences, which so often contain lessons that can guide us towards more effective means of transforming conflict. It is their energy and determination to improve the lives of their people that has driven this process. Their efforts were ably guided by four young facilitators who expertly moulded community energy into constructive local peacebuilding actions. Our deepest gratitude rests with one key member of our team, a social entrepreneur par none. Our thoughts reside with all remaining prisoners of conscience in Myanmar and their families. This process would not have been possible without the generous support of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the United States Agency for International Development, and Myanmar’s Peace Support Fund (PSF).

Summary

The war between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Myanmar Army has, as of June 2016, seen regular conflict for five years¹. The country's peace process is yet to deliver a sustainable cessation of hostilities, nor address the root causes of the war.

The impact of the war is experienced most by local populations in conflict-affected areas, yet there is little opportunity for them to voice their concerns and aspirations, let alone participate in processes that can prevent conflict or limit harm in their areas. Their needs are desperate and compounded by the difficulty for international organisations to access or effectively provide assistance to non-government controlled areas. Access issues aside, international actors will be challenged to design and lead effective peacebuilding interventions in conflict-affected areas as they rarely have the required 'on the ground' contextual awareness and relationships to ensure that peacebuilding interventions are context relevant, conflict sensitive, and impactful.

These factors speak to the need for locally-led peacebuilding interventions in conflict affected areas. This paper presents findings and recommendations from a two and a half year programme of local peacebuilding based on Systemic Action Research (SAR) methodology, whereby communities conduct their own analyses of the systemic causality of conflict and development challenges in their areas. Based on this analysis, communities design and implement locally-led peacebuilding interventions, which in this process have focused on three topics 1) Internally Displaced Person (IDP) return, 2) IDP and host community relations, and 3) drug abuse. In 2015, the process has focussed on Laiza, headquarters to the KIO and home to more than 18,000 IDPs out of a total population of approximately 100,000.

The impacts of this process have been remarkable. In 2015 alone, the process has generated:

1. Mine Risk Education (MRE) and associated awareness raising for the first time in Myanmar's most conflict affected area to approximately 1,000 people.
2. Awareness raising on drug abuse and harm reduction for almost 7000 people.
3. A series of relationship building activities and campaigns supporting social cohesion and violence reduction between IDPs and host communities that have involved hundreds directly, and positively impacted the behaviour of thousands indirectly.
4. The initiation of dialog forums (four so far) in multiple locations, which are supporting the emergence of sub-national dialog in Kachin State, and have framed an action plan for state-wide and locally-led peacebuilding activities for the next two years.
5. An additional 50% of the 2015 investment from USAID has been secured from other donors interested in expanding this process, in kind contributions from the KIO and local community, and technical assistance from INGOs that could otherwise not operate in these areas.

These achievements are the results of an iterative learning process in a highly dynamic and fragile environment. This process has emphasised the interconnected nature of peace and development challenges, and calls on donors and implementing organisations to support more systemic, cross sectoral analyses. International assistance to these areas will be more effective if we are flexible enough to allow effective peacebuilding interventions to emerge, rather than falsely assuming they can be pre-designed in complex, data poor environments.

The recommendations pertaining to each thematic topic should also be seen, in the spirit of learning associated with this process, as points for further enquiry rather than definitive solutions in themselves.

¹ The KIO is a political organisation that administers the parts of Kachin State still under its control. Its armed wing is the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

The Kachin conflict amidst Myanmar's reforms

Kachin state, sandwiched at the foothills of the Himalaya's in Myanmar's remote north, borders China and India and is home to approximately 1.7 million people (UNFPA, 2014). As with much of Myanmar's borderlands, Kachin State has been the site of armed conflict between Myanmar's military government and armed ethno-nationalist groups for much of the past five decades. This conflict has been especially deadly since 2011, when a seventeen-year ceasefire between the government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) broke down. More than one hundred thousand people have been displaced, two thirds of which are located in non-government controlled areas that are largely inaccessible to international humanitarian assistance providers.

Conflict and its side effects have deepened the interconnected development and security challenges experienced by people living in Myanmar's north and east. Militarisation limits freedom of movement. Incidents of rape, arbitrary detention, harassment, gender-based violence and other rights abuses have been well-documented. The first census in 30 years, part of a broader surge of 'development normalisation' in Myanmar, could not be held in large parts of Kachin State due to insecurity. Many residents were denied the possibility to vote in the country's first democratic elections in 25 years for the same reason. Thousands have lost their lands and livelihoods. The drug problem, which is linked to the second highest opium cultivation rates in the world, is stunting the progress of a generation. Education and livelihood opportunities are being limited. Armed conflict is a weekly occurrence in those pockets of the state that are still actively contested (including in neighbouring northern Shan State) and as of June 2016 the conflict shows little sign of abating, despite an active peace process.

This tragedy is occurring amidst the most remarkable political, economic and social transformation in the country's history. The transitional government of ex-military President Thein Sein that was inaugurated in 2010 embarked on an ambitious program of reforms during their term, which culminated in the election of a genuinely civilian government in November 2015. Benefits to much of the population during this period was considerable, allowing new freedoms of expression for the public and civil society, enabling a lively parliament and considerable legislative reform, improvements in infrastructure and services, and a reformed macro-economic environment for investment and growth. This development has evolved according to the plan laid down by Myanmar's former military leaders, whose interests have largely not been threatened by a democratic transition process that was designed not to cross any of the red lines concerning their preponderance of economic and military power and associated geostrategic control.

The latter has influenced the evolution of Myanmar's concurrent peace process. This procedure, which began with bilateral ceasefire agreements that merged into a nationwide ceasefire process with more than a dozen armed groups, had by April 2015 won the agreement of less than half of Myanmar's ethno-nationalist armed groups to a nationwide ceasefire, and established a framework for long term political dialog and reconciliation. Notably absent from this agreement was the Kachin Independence Organisation, one of Myanmar's most powerful rebel groups and whose loyal constituency is based in the area of this study, which is one of several groups who have experienced regular armed conflict since 2011.

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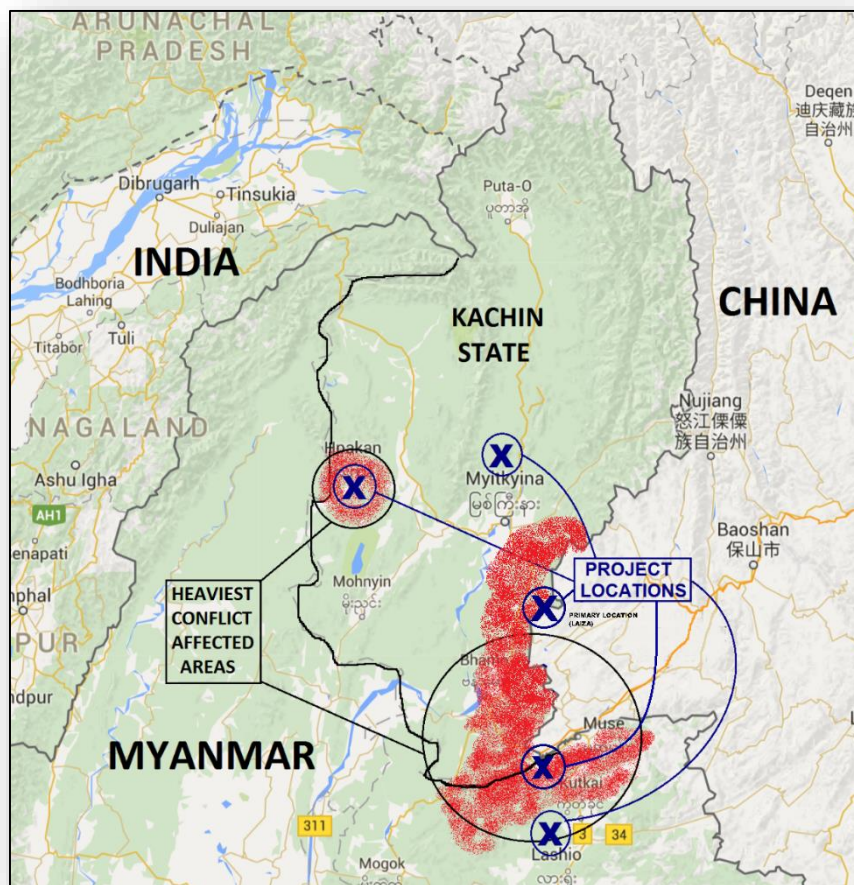
The significance of local peacebuilding in this context

The ability of communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) to mobilise for peace and development in Kachin State is very limited, even though restrictions have eased in areas of the country not still affected by armed violence. Access to many areas of Kachin State is complicated or impossible due to militarisation, insecurity and regular conflict. Community and CSO representatives risk detention and harassment. Against these odds, this research project has supported the mobilisation of Kachin communities towards peacebuilding efforts at high levels in a time of war.

Alternative forms of international assistance to the areas of this study have been extremely limited, which stems from official access denials into so called 'black areas'. International support has typically been provided via local proxies and is largely limited to humanitarian assistance. Interventions such as mine action, mine risk education, local dialog opportunities, ceasefire monitoring, and trauma healing are not provided at the significant levels needed. This process has expanded the scale and scope of international access to these areas and allowed for a range of novel local peacebuilding interventions.

Nationwide, there has historically been limited space for public or CSO participation in the formal peace process. Current and previous ceasefire processes have been elite driven and top down. Partly due to this work, there has been a shift in these patterns in Kachin State, illustrated by increased opportunities for public participation in informal peace process forums, and evidence that peace process stakeholders are becoming more responsive and supportive of local peacebuilding interventions.

Map of project locations



Project rationale

1. Sub national dialog is emerging in Myanmar, which will articulate local peace concerns and aspirations as part of a nationwide peace architecture. Myanmar will have about a dozen sub national dialog processes, each with unique stakeholders with contrasting social, political and economic questions. These dialogs needs to be informed by uniquely local perspectives, which can and should be supported by locally based researchers.
2. Community owned and led peacebuilding activities tend to encourage wider participation, improved conflict sensitivity due to better understanding of local conditions, more comprehensive assessment of needs and possible interventions, and more legitimacy than external interventions, which together tends to attracts additional participation, technical assistance, and resources from International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs), donors, local authorities and communities themselves. Locally led, participatory processes have a gravitational pull that increases participation and impact over time, without necessarily requiring substantial additional investment.
3. International experience points out that peace agreements are more durable when public and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) participation is ensured.

Systemic Action Research (SAR) methodology

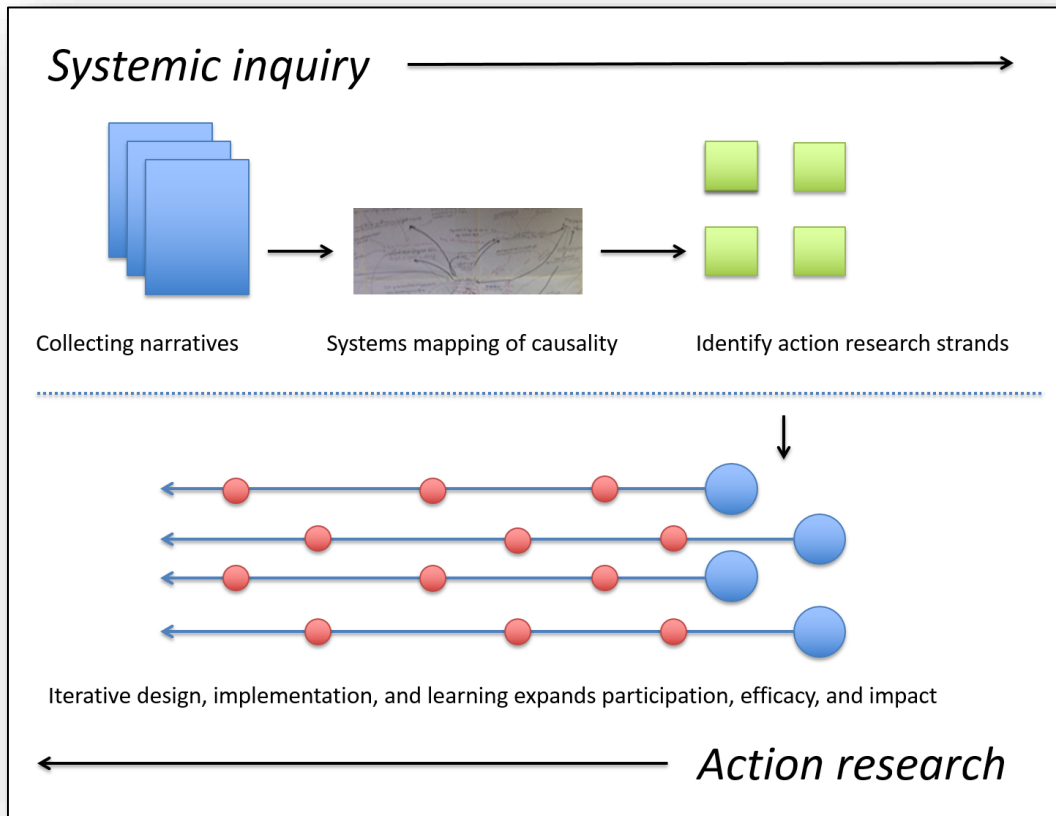
Systemic Action Research (SAR) is a methodology pioneered by Danny Burns at the Institute for Development Studies (Burns, 2015). The methodology differs from traditional participatory action research processes insofar as it, through a process called systemic inquiry, leads participants to explore in detail the myriad factors that influence peace and development conditions in their context. The inquiry process articulates the interconnected chains of causality that give rise to the challenges that communities experience, and through a more holistic understanding of the causal landscape in which these challenges are nested, offers novel opportunities to not just ‘fix a problem’, but transform the underlying structural dynamics that give rise to these problems.

A more complete synopsis of SAR methodology can be found in (Burns, 2015), who summarises the approach as:

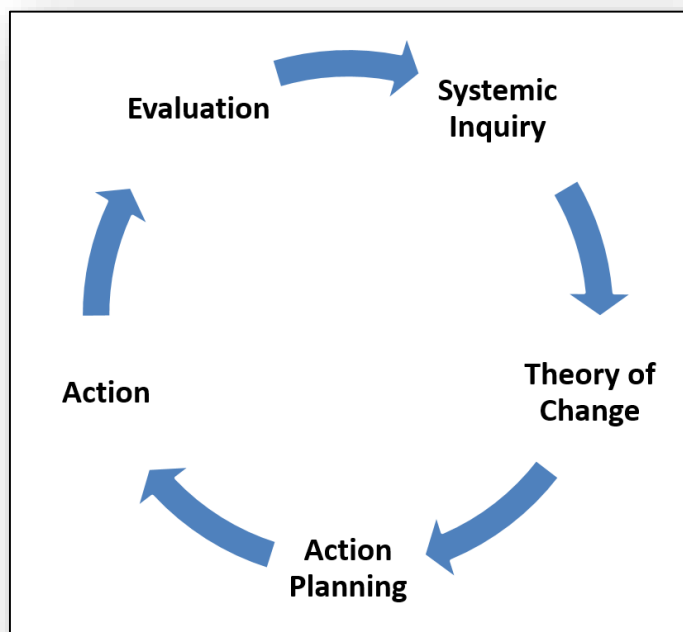
“a structured learning and research process which allows participants to engage with complex systems. SAR brings multiple actors together to intervene in causal chains that lead to downward spirals and negative outcomes for people and communities and to sow seeds that might lead to upward spirals. Theories of change are generated and tested in the field. This creates a highly adaptive iterative learning process.” Pg. 101

A comprehensive description of the SAR methodology implemented during process is provided in Appendix 1. The following diagrams briefly illustrate the methodology’s essential characteristics.

The SAR process: towards effective local peacebuilding for communities in conflict



The Systemic Action Research (SAR) cycle



Findings and recommendations

Reducing Harm from Drug Abuse

Drug abuse, particularly of opium, is highly prevalent in conflict affected areas of Kachin and northern Shan States. It is, in the words of participants, a weapon that kills our people silently. The research process, including systemic inquiry and wider community consultation meetings, revealed widespread misconceptions about the complex causes of the ‘drug problem’ and a clear need for extensive awareness raising on the causes, related harms, and prevention measures for drug abuse.

The systemic inquiry revealed a complex set of interconnected factors that induce drug problems, including to poppy cultivation, lack of educational and employment opportunities (especially for youth), trauma associated with the war, discrimination against drugs users, and family breakdown just to name a few. The reasoning associated with the causes of the ‘drug problem’ were often simplified, one common narrative being that the destruction of Kachin communities wrought by drug addiction is an attempt by outsiders to weaken or eliminate Kachin people.

Systemic analysis of the dynamics of drug related issues revealed examples of non-linear causality. Attempts to reduce drug abuse via poppy cultivation lead to increased militarisation in areas controlled by drug for example. Punitive approaches to reducing drug use, detailed below, were at times counter-productive due to the prevalence of drugs and other substances of abuse in prison.

Fixes that fail: counter-productive impacts of incarcerating drug addicts (in some but not all prisons)



Family breakdown and discrimination by communities towards individuals were identified as both a cause and a consequence of drug abuse, creating a reinforcing loop whereby the addicted individuals attempting to get clean are trying to do so in an environment that contains strong incentives for relapse. There are also geographical dynamics to the drug problem that highlight the need for coordinated interventions. Effective actions to reduce drug abuse in this project’s locality were seen as limited by

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the relative ease at which young people could gain access to drugs in government controlled areas of Kachin State or across the border in neighbouring China. Similarly, drug eradication efforts in one area were seen as futile when production can easily be moved to areas where there are limited or no eradication efforts.

Schools were identified as particularly problematic locations for perpetuating the drug problem, due to relative ease of access, peer pressure, and high rates of relapse for recovering addicts due to exposure to current drug users. IDP camps were also identified as areas with relatively high risks for drug and alcohol abuse, given the trauma experienced by IDPs, boredom, and lack of livelihood opportunities.

The research process highlighted the need for simultaneous, and sometimes counter-intuitive interventions in multiple geographies (hubs like schools or IDP camps, or cross border activities), as well as at multiple points in the aetiology of the 'drug problem'. Activities that have been or are under implementation as a result of this research include:

1. Advocating for the alteration of the KIO's drug policy to focus more on harm reduction rather than punitive measures.
2. Educational forums and multimedia campaigns to IDP and non-IDP communities that reached almost 7000 participants.
3. Prohibitions by the KIO against drug, alcohol and cigarette sales in IDP camps.
4. Speech, illustration, and essay competitions in local schools related to anti-drug messaging, and
5. An anti-drug concert and comedy series with anti-drug messaging in IDP camps.

Recommendations for further action include:

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.

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

Questions of IDP return or repatriation are fraught with political sensitivities and civilian protection risks in Myanmar. Especially in Kachin and northern Shan States, where low to medium intensity conflict has been a weekly occurrence for four and a half years, solutions to IDP issues depend on the progress of a peace process that has proceeded at a glacial pace, at least from the perspective of IDPs who after four and a half years are understandably eager to return to their homes and livelihoods.

Militarisation of civilian areas and the use of landmines and ordinance during this period has been intensive however, meaning that even if opportunities for IDP return to places of origin were soon settled, it would not be safe in many locations due to the presence of landmines, unexploded ordinance (UXO), or because places of origin remain militarised by conflict stakeholders.

These risks do not prevent IDPs from conducting 'reconnaissance' to their places of origin, for example to recover possessions that may not have been destroyed or looted, or to check on their crops or

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livestock. The (mostly) men that conduct these reconnaissance missions have unfortunately fallen victim to the risks of unmarked anti-personnel mines and UXO, resulting in high rates of injury, disability, and death.

The IDP camps that are close to the KIO's Laiza headquarters are within range of Myanmar army artillery positions, which have fired into and around Laiza several times since 2013. Ordnance from airborne assets of the Myanmar Army have also dropped ordnance around Laiza on several occasions. Together, this poses a UXO threat to civilians, for example when they collect firewood, or tend crops or livestock in the areas around Laiza.

Several factors combine here that increase the risk of harm from UXO in Laiza's surrounds. Alternative livelihood opportunities for IDPs are limited. Permission to enter China to seek work is severely restricted, meaning that IDPs largely must seek work in the Laiza area. Most IDPs are rural farmers and lack the skills and opportunities to develop alternative livelihoods. Combined with the increasing food requirements (and firewood for cooking) that an increased population needs, and reductions in international humanitarian assistance as donor's seek 'durable solutions' to a war that has no fixed end point, IDPs are venturing further and further from IDP camps in order to cultivate the resources they need to survive. In addition to the increased tension with host communities that expanded IDP foraging and cultivation brings, the ever expanded geography in which these people move brings ever more opportunities of harm from UXOs. Tragically, this risk is most pronounced for children, who are less aware of these risks and more likely to be attracted by novel, shiny objects they encounter when playing, foraging, or travelling between villages.

Again, these findings underscore the value of understanding issues systemically. Viewing the challenges of IDP return through a narrow lens, as simply a challenge for humanitarian assistance for example, ignores the political realities, livelihood considerations, migration and displacement patterns, civilian protection risks, conflict dynamics, and psychosocial trauma factors that influence the feasibility and safety of IDP return and/or repatriation. If we do not seek solutions based upon more holistic, iterative, and inter-disciplinary analysis and coordination, across fields of practice, we risk funding and implementing 'fixes' that are ineffective or induce systemic ripple effects that inadvertently cause harm.

These findings also informed the action research activities implemented by participants in this process, which primarily involved the initiation and expansion of Mine Risk Education (MRE) for vulnerable communities in Laiza and surrounding communities. There was strong desire among communities for extensive mine risk education, particularly for the most vulnerable (IDPs and children). Local humanitarian assistance providers felt that MRE should be conducted to international standard, but this is complicated by the denial of access for most iNGOs and mistrust of their activities in conflict-affected areas.

The participants in this process managed to achieve conflict-sensitive solutions on MRE that were more respectful of the agency and authority of local organisations in non-government controlled areas. This approach was based on training of local trainers in MRE by an iNGO in government controlled areas. Those trained then conducted MRE in non-government controlled areas (Laiza and surrounding communities) to a total target population of 1,000. With the support of the KIO, it is hoped to extend the target population to 8,000 people – two thirds of the total IDP population in and around Laiza – which would be a huge achievement for a population that had previously had very little or no exposure to MRE during five years of war.

A range of further recommendations were revealed during the implementation of these activities. It's important to note that some can be implemented relatively easily, while some will depend on a genuine ceasefire between the Myanmar Army and the KIO.

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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 (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 the provision of MRE to international standard, using 'compromise solutions' that build the capacity of local organisations 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.

IDP and Host Community Relations – Youth Peacebuilding

The population of Laiza increased approximately 20% with the influx of more than 18,000 IDPs since 2011. Population density has increased in this small area which is sandwiched between the Chinese border and the 'no man's land' that separates local communities from the Myanmar Army military.

Tensions between IDPs and host communities stem in part from this increase in population, which has necessitated additional land for housing and infrastructure, cultivation and grazing, firewood collection and other foraging, etc. Forced displacement does not allow IDPs to bring much resources with them, land least of all. When land is in short supply, particularly arable land, it must be gifted by the local people or its productive capacity shared amongst an ever growing and desperate population. Tensions over land use between IDPs and host communities are thus difficult to avoid, particularly given the inextricable relationship between land use and livelihoods in primarily farming communities. Despite the dependent relationships between IDP and host communities, the communities remained highly isolated from each other, with relative paucity of interpersonal relationships, joint networks, or cooperative activities.

Why focus activities on youth?

The research revealed that youth are particularly likely to engage in conflict between host and local communities, evidence which was embodied in several community accounts of violence between IDP and non-IDP youth. Since the resumption of the war, Kachin youth educated in non-state schools have been unable to attend government universities, denying them an opportunity for further education. Comparatively, they lack the skills and experience to gain employment in the local community or constructive opportunities to expend their energy, and feel that they face employment discrimination for some positions, in the Myanmar government for example. They are especially vulnerable for recruitment to armed forces on both sides of the conflict, and like all IDPs, have experienced severe psychosocial trauma, even more so for those mostly young males that have experienced active combat duty since the war's resumption. Drugs and alcohol are a readily available 'remedy' for trauma and boredom, yet tends to compound problems and can inflame communal tensions. The political process to end the war is not clear or communicated often to communities, compounding anxiety that a living situation that seems untenable for many will continue. Young male IDPs in particular report feeling marginalised by humanitarian assistance, which they feel is disproportionately targeted towards women, children and the elderly. While they may be the most vulnerable from a protection perspective, for example, young males experience different pressures in terms of lack of livelihood opportunities and tendencies towards violence. These factors undermine social cohesion, and induce scenarios in which tensions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can escalate into conflict, particularly among youth.

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The activities fostered by this action research process in Laiza focussed on building cooperation, understanding and a sense of shared fellowship between IDPs and host communities. This included both the establishment of formal coordination and dispute resolution structures, as well as a range of informal activities designed to strengthen social cohesion.

These activities included two youth joint IDP-host community forums attended by approximately one hundred youth each time, multiple integrated sports and fellowship events that were attended by hundreds, prohibition of alcohol sales in IDP camps, the establishment of formal liaison mechanisms between host communities and IDP authorities, and tolerance campaigns via posters and local radio that promoted unity among IDP and host communities that reached thousands indirectly.

To transform tensions between IDPs and host communities, and find more constructive opportunities for Kachin youth, communities 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 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.

Community Forums and Dialog Opportunities

This process built momentum towards effective peacebuilding outcomes by securing the participation of people with multiple vantage points 'in the system' as it relates to a set of issues. This means bringing together people in positions of power (which we often do) with people who are the victims or beneficiaries of change processes, in a way that equalises power and recognises that all stakeholders and perspectives offer equally valid perspectives on the 'problem' and solution' (which we rarely do).

When communities feel empowered to design and implement solutions to the challenges that afflict them, participation grows exponentially. The energy generated by the process in Laiza built over time, to a point where community meetings turned into dialog forums that were attended by hundreds. These took place in multiple locations on at least four occasions, and evolved into a facilitated and representative process whereby (particularly youth) could learn about the peace process, engage in dialog, and design activities to address the peace and development challenges that afflict them.

The last of these forums lead to the establishment of the Kachin National Youth Network (KNYN), which comprises delegates from 16 townships in Kachin and Shan States and has established an action plan for a significant geographic expansion and deepening of peacebuilding activity. The opening of such opportunities for sub-national dialog and action, at a time when Myanmar's national dialog process is soon to begin, provides hitherto unseen opportunities for local communities to voice their aspirations for sustainable peace, as well as inform decision-makers with peacebuilding evidence and options.