

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – THE MYANMAR PEACE SUPPORT INITIATIVE

### The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI)

- The MPSI was launched in March 2012, following a request from the Government of Myanmar to the Government of Norway to lead international support to the peace process. MPSI was never intended to be a mediation initiative, but rather designed to come in just behind the political momentum of the peace process, helping to support ceasefire agreements reached by the Government and Ethnic Armed Groups. Enabling this role to be played by an international actor was a first for Myanmar, reflecting the new opportunity for peace between national actors. It was also quite a unique arrangement in comparison to other peace-making processes internationally.
- This report brings together research conducted in the last year, including an MPSI 'Reflections' report produced in early 2013, an independent review of MPSI undertaken in 2014, and is informed by field trips, discussions with peace process stakeholders, the insights of MPSI staff, meetings and workshops with Government and Ethnic Armed Groups, community meetings and project reporting. The report seeks to reflect on those two years of support, and suggest ways to frame and improve international support to the peace process and aid into conflict-affected areas.
- In the last two years MPSI has facilitated projects that built trust and confidence in - and tested - the ceasefires, disseminated lessons learned from these experiences, and sought to strengthen the local and international coordination of assistance to the peace process. In doing so MPSI engaged with the Government, Myanmar Army, Ethnic Armed Groups, political parties, civil society actors and communities, as well as international partners, to provide concrete support to the ceasefires and emerging peace process.
- MPSI associated projects have been undertaken across five ethnic States (Chin, Shan, Mon, Karen and Kayah) and two Regions (Bago and Tanintharyi). Projects have been delivered in partnership with seven Ethnic Armed Groups, thirteen local partners (four of which are consortia), and nine international partners. Flexible and responsive funding was received from Norway, Finland, The Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the European Union and Australia.
- From the outset, the intention had been for the MPSI to provide temporary support to the emergence and consolidation of peace, in the absence of appropriate, longer-term structures and while more sustainable international peace support responses were mobilised. In line with its stated purpose of being a temporary structure, MPSI aspired for its work to be continued by local actors, national and international Non-governmental organisations and other entities including sector donor funding instruments, such as the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG).
- There have been many contextual, political and structural challenges for MPSI in carrying out its role. These have included tensions in the peace process itself, especially delays in starting necessary political dialogue; managing the expectations of key stakeholders; developing MPSI's own working processes (without creating an '*institutionalised*' structure); limitations in capacity and knowledge (especially regarding best practice to enable community agency and empowerment); and maintaining a flexible, adaptive, responsive strategy (i.e. working without a 'blue print') while implementation was already underway.
- The following paper seeks to set out lessons, reflections and insights on the work of MPSI. It is composed of a background section, a section on lessons learned during two years of MPSI's work, and a section examining application of the New Deal Framework<sup>1</sup> to the Myanmar context. It has four

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<sup>1</sup> The New Deal entailed a change to the way the international community works in fragile states. It 'proposes key peace-building and state-building goals, focuses on new ways of engaging with a focus on country-led processes and identifies commitments to build mutual trust and achieve better results in fragile states.' Ref - <http://www.pbsdialogue.org> and <http://www.newdeal4peace.org>

annexes: i) overview of MPSI-supported projects; ii) list of considerations for organisations when planning and implementing projects in conflict-affected areas; iii) interview responses resulting from MPSI's listening project conducted over the last quarter of 2013; and iv) independent review of the MPSI: Executive Summary.

### **The Peace Process**

The peace process, which emerged in Myanmar in late 2011, represents the best opportunity in many decades to address issues that have structured armed conflict in the country since independence. The agreement of ceasefires is a historically important achievement of peace-making. The peace process emerged as a Government-led initiative, under the leadership of President U Thein Sein, and his chief peace envoy, Minister U Aung Min supported by the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC). Although questions remain regarding the Government's ability to deliver on the ceasefire agreements negotiated with Ethnic Armed Groups, most stakeholders acknowledge the vision, leadership and commitment of the President and his team.

Two years of MPSI's work and experience have informed an analysis that includes the following:

- Over the past year, Ethnic Armed Groups have been increasingly pro-active and creative in their relationships with the Government during negotiations to achieve a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Although tensions and difficulties still exist, Ethnic Armed Groups have demonstrated commitment to the peace process, and an eagerness to begin a necessary political dialogue process that will attempt to negotiate solutions to underlying causes of Myanmar's post-independence civil war.
- The leaders of the Ethnic Armed Groups, and other ethnic stakeholders in Myanmar, acknowledge and expect that the political dialogue process will take some time in order to reach acceptable outcomes. As such the 2015 elections are seen as creating a temporary interruption in a process that will go on until perhaps 2020.
- The ceasefires and emerging peace process are helping to transform the lives of civilians affected by decades of armed conflict. Displaced people are beginning to return to previous settlements and attempting to rebuild their lives. In many communities, livelihoods have improved as a result of villagers' better access to their fields and a reduction in predatory taxation. Through a series of 'listening project' exercises conducted by MPSI, it has become evident that villagers greatly appreciate these changes, although they worry whether the ceasefires can be maintained and the peace process sustained.
- It has been repeatedly observed mainly by civil society organisations that women are under-represented in the peace process, or rather in the ceasefire process so far. MPSI has seen its task as only to encourage the groups directly involved in the ceasefire process to consult widely and to take steps to ensure that women's issues are heard and that those designing the future political dialogue, ensure that women are effectively represented in the process. Through the Ethnic Peace Resources project, MPSI has attempted to identify and address obstacles to the stronger representation of women from ethnic communities and organisations in the peace process.
- The peace process in Myanmar is unique in many ways, and not least because of the limited role of the international community. Negotiations are undertaken directly between the Government and Ethnic Armed Groups, with no significant external mediation and with only limited international facilitation.
- The current state of economic and political development of the country could be dramatically altered with the rise of communal violence of religious dimensions. Communal violence in Rakhine State and elsewhere during the post-2011 transition period in Myanmar has distinct causes from Myanmar's long-running ethno-political conflicts and is not a subject to (or of) the peace process, though they share some features and linkages.

### Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations are not a novel prescription in the history of efforts to make aid policy and practice more conflict-sensitive – much has been written on how to effect greater conflict sensitivity in the delivery of aid. What is hoped is useful – and novel for the Myanmar context – is that these recommendations are grounded in two years of intensive pilot project and the consultative work of MPSI and result from sincere reflection on what can be improved upon and what needs better resourcing and effort.

These recommendations are offered in the spirit of a contribution to on-going efforts to improve the appropriateness and effectiveness of support to the peace process in Myanmar.

1. **Understand, and act in accordance with, context.** When seeking to provide support in conflict-affected areas, interventions need to be better designed and delivered in accordance with the context. State-society relationships will be politically negotiated in the course of the peace process, including the shape of local administration and where competence and responsibility for service delivery lie; requiring less emphasis on 'technical fixes' and more emphasis on flexible approaches to aid that fit with the peace process.
  - International donors and diplomats need to better reflect their understanding of the historical and present complexities in Myanmar in their strategies for support to Myanmar and the peace process.
  - Those working in conflict-affected areas need to understand, and better respond to local political cultures and local perceptions, and the dynamics of peace and conflict at the sites of their work.
  - Specifically, consideration needs to be given to how best to provide support to the social service providers in the areas under control of Ethnic Armed Groups to allow them to continue to deliver services in the interim period of political dialogue.
2. **Consultations need to be meaningful and need to be properly resourced.** International assistance can create opportunities to support trust-building, creating 'space' for dialogue as well as meeting the physical, social and economic needs of communities. On-going consultation with Government, Ethnic Armed Groups (and, importantly, their sectoral departments) and all key local stakeholders needs to be properly invested in – and account taken of the time and resources programmes need – if they are to realise the opportunities for trust-building. Most importantly however, meaningful consultation prior to the design and delivery of any interventions needs to take place, and explicit consent to operate should be sought in those consultations. Consultation needs to include where, how, if and what kind of interventions are assessed and agreed as needing to take place.
3. **Remain flexible.** Being operationally flexible means adapting to changing circumstances in the peace process, adapting to the outcome of stakeholder consultations, *and* committing long enough to see success in programmes of support. Building-in flexible approaches means programmes will be able to respond quickly at key political moments, to fill spaces while other structures are negotiated, and to evolve and remain important for the period of the peace process.
4. **Recognise local capacity and build the capacity of local actors to articulate their needs and concerns.** The contexts of conflict-affected communities are unique, with different local histories, experiences and aspirations – and different needs. A contribution to peace will be more sustainable if locally driven and owned. Programmes of support should be based on a sound appreciation and recognition of local experiences of conflict and existing local capacities. The programmes should include measures to

increase local capacity, to maximise their resilience, their coping strategies and ways out of crisis, and at the same time have safeguards to mitigate the risks of by-passing or over-whelming local actors.

5. **Broaden engagement and inclusiveness in the peace process.** The voices of conflict-affected communities – and women - have been largely absent from what might be described as more of an *elite-led, top-down discourse* around the peace process.
  - Among the voices of conflict-affected communities there is widespread anxiety that the Government and Ethnic Armed Groups may fail to reach a political settlement and the peace process may yet break down. At the stage where agreeing ceasefires transforms into the initiation of political dialogue, it will be essential to include far broader stakeholders, including wider civil society and political actors, and indeed all citizens of Myanmar. This will be a considerable logistical and political task that will require significant financial and political support, including funding support from donors.
  - There remains further work to be done in bolstering efforts on women being better represented and engaged in the peace process. In increasing inclusion, there remains a need to find innovative and compelling ways to support and strengthen the role of women in the peace process and win recognition and salience of key issues of importance to women. Support needs to be designed with this need in mind.
  
6. **Agree on simple and practical co-ordination and flexible funding mechanisms.**
  - Partners should agree on simple, practical and light-footed co-ordination mechanisms – these mechanisms will allow political and conflict analyses to be shared, to assist a common understanding of issues and concerns and to help achieve greater coherence and sharing of strategic goals.
  - Donors should establish responsive, and where feasible and appropriate, common funding mechanisms - funding mechanisms should have the flexibility to adjust to the capacity constraints and risks involved in working as directly as possible with Ethnic Armed Groups' structures and community organisations. Using the platforms for sharing information, it is imperative these mechanisms are demand driven.
  
7. **Encourage an inclusive process for a national peacebuilding plan.** A national peacebuilding plan is needed, critically one that is developed with and owned jointly by Government, Ethnic Armed Groups, political stakeholders, civil society and communities. The process for the development of a national plan is as important as its outcome. Donors need to recognise the key differences between sector plans and approaches and 'a peacebuilding plan'.