IN TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

In Search of Political Stability and Peace in Myanmar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study provides a synopsis of the context of the conflict in Myanmar and highlights the obstacles that hinder the emergence of a peaceful resolution in the country. It also details how In Transformation Initiative (ITI) has been engaged in the Myanmar peace project. The overall purpose of the analysis is to document the lessons learnt from ITI's perspective. These will further strengthen the ITI model in peacebuilding and be shared with the peace-building community in order to facilitate continuous reflection on the efficacy of various models, strategies and tools in conflict management.

The history of Myanmar is dominated by military rule and incessant armed conflict based on ethnic groupings. With up to 17 armed ethnic groups, efforts to have all parties sign a national ceasefire agreement remain daunting. On the political front, after decades of military rule the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the elections in 1990. However, the military nullified the results and extended its rule. After boycotting the elections in 2010, the NLD participated in and won the 2015 national elections. The military-backed political party conceded defeat. While the NLD is the majority party in Parliament and effectively runs the government, the military remains influential, with control over the strategic ministries of defence, police, border control and immigration.

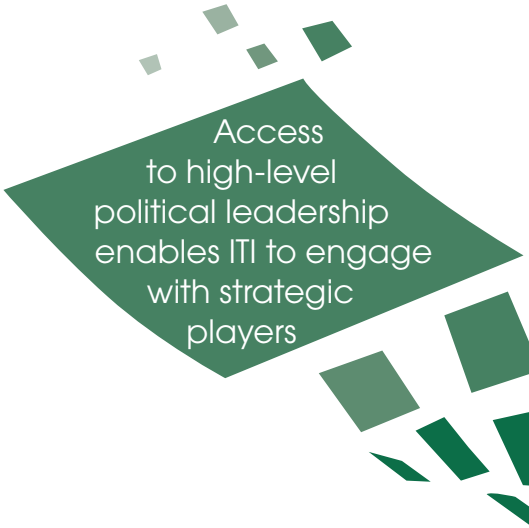
The NLD-led government has made some progress in facilitating a national ceasefire agreement, but not all the armed groups have signed it. Despite a series of national peace conferences (Panlong), peace remains elusive. In October 2017 the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) launched attacks on police and border posts in northern Rakhine State, which caused the military to respond with a campaign of community-targeted violence. This campaign is now commonly accepted to equate a crime against humanity, causing 700 000 Rohingya Muslims to seek refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh where they remain trapped in the world's largest refugee camp. Additionally, there has been growing violence between the military (Tatmadaw) and the ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army (AA), the result of historical grievances stretching back decades, if not centuries. The violence has escalated since January 2019 and many predict that this trend will continue, at least until the elections in November 2020 are concluded and/or the AA is formally unlisted as a terrorist organisation by the Myanmar government. As things stand, given the AA's growing influence on the ground and on-going attacks on civilian targets from all sides, communal trust, as well as trust in authorities, has deteriorated significantly.

The violence has escalated since January 2019 and many predict that this trend will continue

The intervention by ITI in Myanmar initially focused at the national level, advising on the peace process. After the NLD came into power, ITI initiated

the Rakhine Transformation Project (RTP). Several lessons emerged from ITI's project in Myanmar.

- The political capital and experience of individual ITI directors and associates is a critical factor, influencing how they are invited to support peace projects.
- Access to high-level political leadership enables ITI to engage with strategic players who can make decisions in a conflict situation.
- Scoping visits enable on-the-ground assessment of the conflict situation, players and dynamics in order to determine the appropriate intervention.
- Its ability to demonstrate neutrality while supporting peace processes engenders trust in ITI among stakeholders, thereby creating the necessary conditions for political dialogue.
- Sharing the South African experience through various strategies and activities continues to provide hope of peace for people in conflict areas.
- Peace committee initiatives provide an effective and sustainable bottom-up approach to peacebuilding, effectively empowering local `insider mediators' and creating tolerant and resilient communities.



INTRODUCTION

The Myanmar case study forms part of a series of country case studies that document lessons learnt in the last seven years In Transformation Initiative (ITI) has been in operation. The historical and on-going conflict context in Myanmar presents a unique test for the application of the South African experience to bring about lasting peace in the country. This analysis is intended to distil lessons learnt from ITI's intervention in Myanmar, firstly in the engagement at the national (government) level and secondly at the local level in Rakhine State through the peace committees initiative. Although the intervention in Rakhine State is ongoing, insights have already emerged on the potential impact of local-level peace-building efforts on national peace outcomes. Overall, the outcomes of the analysis are intended to contribute towards strengthening the ITI 'model' in peacebuilding. The case studies will also be shared with practitioners in conflict management and peacebuilding to provide opportunities for reflection and dialogue around peaceful conflict resolution.

This case study is based on ITI's project and annual reports; interviews with ITI directors Roelf Meyer[1] and Ivor Jenkins,[2] and Fanie du Toit,[3] a reconciliation expert and ITI associate; and publicly available literature on peacebuilding and conflict management and resolution.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

The history of Myanmar[4] has been dominated by ethnic divisions and military rule despite its having been a parliamentary democracy since independence in 1948. The conflict in the country is a complex mix of historical grievances, ethnic domination and territorial displacement that has led to periodic violent inter-communal clashes and fighting between the military and armed ethnic groups. There are up to 17 armed groups in the Myanmar conflict, some of which are based in neighbouring Thailand. The prolonged conflict situation has dampened hopes for peace in Myanmar for several decades.

Political fragmentation and fragility have been compounded by infighting

Elections have also failed to ease the conflict. In 1990 the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the elections with 81% of the vote, but the military rejected and nullified the results. In 2010 the NLD boycotted the elections but participated in the 2012 by-elections, where it won 42 of the 45 vacant seats. The next elections in 2015 ushered in a new era in the history of Myanmar when the NLD garnered 86% of the vote and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party conceded defeat. Despite the landslide victory by the NLD, party leader Aung San Suu Kyi[5] was prevented

from assuming the presidency as a result of Article 59(f) of the Myanmar constitution, which the military had inserted to forbid anyone who is or has been married to a foreigner, or has foreign children, from running for president. Aung San Suu Kyi was married to a foreigner and so took the newly established position of State Counsellor, which made her head of government but not head of state. Effectively, she could run the government without being president. The new NLD-led government was formed by May 2016. The military remains a dominant force in government. According to the constitution, the military has authority over four ministries: defence, police, border control and immigration. In essence there are thus two sovereign governments at the national level.

Since assuming power Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party have mobilised government and organised national peace conferences (Panglong) to promote political dialogue among key stakeholders, including the military, Parliament and armed ethnic groups (United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)). These conferences have failed to move the country towards a peaceful resolution, largely because of inadequate preparatory work for peace negotiations. This has been manifested in the failure to draw up a national ceasefire to which all parties could agree. There are still some armed ethnic groups that have not signed the ceasefire agreement and continue to instigate violence, particularly in Rakhine State.

There are still some armed ethnic groups that have not signed the ceasefire agreement

Rakhine State has seen regular episodes of violence between Muslim and Buddhist communities (for example in 1993, 2001 and 2004), most of which have their roots in the colonial period when the United Kingdom (UK) empowered some and disempowered other groups. In 2012 Rakhine State suffered one of the worst episodes of communal violence in the history of post-colonial Myanmar. Rohingya Muslims and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists engaged in tit-for-tat attacks that resulted in 78 deaths. More than 140 000 Rohingya Muslims fled to the neighbouring town of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Further outbreaks of violence occurred in 2016 and more Rohingya Muslims fled the country. It was at this stage that Aung San Suu Kyi, on behalf of the government, appointed an independent inquiry commission chaired by former United Nations (UN) secretary general Kofi Annan to investigate the causes of this violence and reports of human rights violations in Rakhine State. In August 2017 the commission presented its report and made recommendations for restoring peace in Rakhine. However, following the release of the report another outbreak of violence erupted. It started with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacking several dozen border and police posts and killing a number of security force members. The national armed forces (Tatmadaw) responded with indiscriminate violence directed at Muslim communities. The result was the killing of thousands and the displacement of 700 000 Muslims to Bangladesh.[6]

The mass displacement and deaths, primarily of Rohingya Muslims, make building positive relations between the ethnic Rakhine and Muslim

populations much more complicated. In some of the key project locations, the Rohingya population has declined significantly following the post-August 2017 events. Most of those seeking refuge in Bangladesh are believed to have come from Maungdaw District (comprising Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships).

As yet it is unclear when the refugees will be able to return. To complicate things further, in early 2019 the Arakan Army (AA) conducted several attacks on military and police targets in northern Rakhine. These attacks led to more Tatmadaw troop deployments and the subsequent military offensive against the AA, resulting in further instability in the area. Fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw has continued well into 2020 and has spread to more townships in northern and central Rakhine, reaching Ann and Myebon, and as far south as Kyaukphyu and Manaung townships. Following the outbreak of the AA–Tatmadaw conflict, the government issued a notice blocking almost all non-governmental organisations and UN agencies from travelling to rural areas in townships affected by the conflict.

In late 2019/early 2020 the AA employed several new tactics in its asymmetric warfare against the Tatmadaw, including kidnappings of military personnel and civilians and targeted killings.

The government has responded by:

- Instituting a crackdown
- Cutting Internet coverage in eight townships in Rakhine and one (Paletwa) in neighbouring southern Chin State in July 2019 (coverage was partly restored only in May 2020, but only in two townships)
- Declaring the AA, along with its political wing the United League of Arakan (ULA), a terrorist and unlawful association

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The outbreak of COVID-19 has added an additional layer of complexity. Myanmar confirmed around 350 cases by the end of July 2020, with the first cases reported in Rakhine State in June 2020 among individuals who had crossed the border from Bangladesh. There is thus a threat of COVID-19's being associated with Muslims or returnees and of actions against those communities. Furthermore, perceptions of a Yangon- and Mandalay-focused response will only drive further discontent with the Naypyidaw government among communities in Rakhine State.

ITI INVOLVEMENT

The involvement of ITI in conflict contexts is invariably by invitation. The organisation does not advertise its services and, as emphasized by Ivor Jenkins, 'We are not a brand organisation. We do not push our brand. We just go out and do the work.' Furthermore, ITI is driven by the personalities

and experiences of individual directors. They have accumulated significant political capital based on their experiences in the South African peace negotiations and their work in politics, conflict management and peacebuilding. In early 2014, as a result of his political capital, Roelf Meyer[7] was invited in his personal capacity to form part of a three-member delegation to Myanmar under the auspices of the Global Leadership Forum (GLF) to see if something could be done to assist with the peace process. This was at the request of former South African president FW De Klerk,[8] the then chairperson of the GLF. The delegation had meetings with the military, politicians and representatives of armed ethnic groups, as well as the Myanmar Peace Centre, which served as the secretariat to the peace process in the country. At the time the military held the majority in the Myanmar government.

Subsequent to the trip, Roelf Meyer went on several visits to Myanmar at the invitation of Jonathan Powell,[9] the Chief Executive Officer of Inter Mediate, a mediation firm based in London that supported the peace process in Myanmar. It was during one of these trips that Powell facilitated a meeting between Roelf Meyer and Aung San Suu Kyi, who was a Member of Parliament (MP) at the time. It was clear that she had strong backing and was the leader of the official opposition in Parliament. As such she was a key figure in the peace process in Myanmar. It was also in 2014 that ITI as an organisation became involved in the peace project in Myanmar in collaboration with Inter Mediate.

After the 2015 elections in which the NLD won the majority vote, Roelf Meyer began to engage directly with Aung San Suu Kyi in an advisory capacity and made several trips to Myanmar in that role. However, after the disbanding of the Myanmar Peace Centre and the formation of the National Peace and Reconciliation Centre in 2016 under Aung San Suu Kyi's government, no trips were made to Myanmar for a whole year. From ITI's perspective this disrupted the peace process, as there was a lapse in the advisory work. It was only towards the end of 2017 that Aung San Suu Kyi invited Roelf Meyer to serve on a newly constituted Advisory Board set up to assess the implementation of the recommendations of the Kofi Annan report on the violence in Rakhine State.

After the disbanding of the Myanmar Peace Centre, no trips were made to Myanmar for a whole year

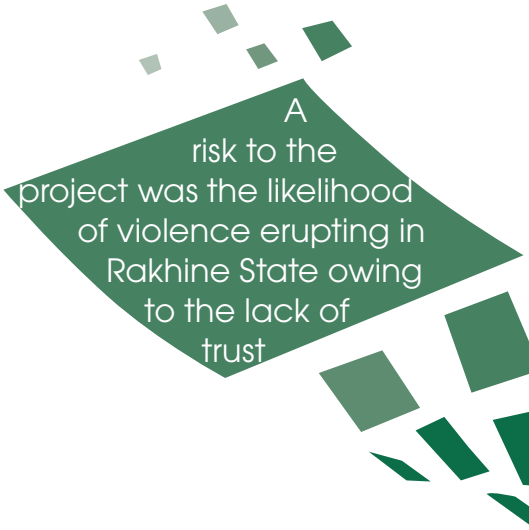
The Advisory Board operated until mid-2018, after which it was disbanded. It was felt at the time that the Advisory Board was not going to have any significant impact on the violence in Rakhine State. After the disbanding of the Advisory Board Roelf Meyer offered to assist Aung San Suu Kyi's government with regard to the restoration of peace in Rakhine State by implementing the concept of peace committees. Fanie du Toit[10] became involved with ITI, having had experience in implementing peace committees in Iraq. Thus, ITI began working in Rakhine State in August 2018, with the project scheduled to run until December 2020 as per the funding cycle.

ITI's initial involvement in Myanmar was focused on national-level politics and peace negotiations. Following the one-year lapse during which the Myanmar Peace Centre was disbanded and the National Peace and Reconciliation Centre formed, ITI shifted its focus to Rakhine State. This shift speaks to ITI's agility and alertness in identifying opportunities where it can make the most impact. Although there were opportunities for further engagement at the national level, the local-level intervention seemed more aligned with the peace committees implemented in South Africa and ITI had the necessary capacity and experience to take this on.

Following the one-year lapse, ITI shifted its focus to Rakhine State

The Myanmar case study is based on sharing the South African transition experience.[11] The South African experience informs all ITI's interventions, regionally and globally. Many political leaders have sought to learn from this experience and ITI has been active in sharing insights with governments and political parties, as well as hosting diverse delegations. This affords them an in-country experience and engagement with some of the individuals who were involved in or close to the peace negotiations. The South African experience was informed by a number of principles and processes that evolved as negotiations unfolded until the National Peace Accord was signed. The range and intensity of obstacles to peace encountered in South Africa more than two decades ago resonate with the challenges faced in many countries today; and the principles and processes can be adapted to a range of conflict contexts.

This case study shows how ITI applied some of the lessons[12] emanating from the South African experience in the Myanmar context and documents the lessons that emerged. A potential risk to the project was identified in the Kofi Annan report, which indicated that any form of political dialogue in Myanmar at the community level could easily be derailed by hardliners. In that regard it would thus be risky to form peace committees based on dialogue alone. In order to mitigate this risk the peace communities should focus on issue-based dialogue. Another risk to the project was the likelihood of violence erupting in Rakhine State owing to the lack of trust among the communities themselves, and among communities, local authorities and the government.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The three core principles guiding ITI's interventions in peacebuilding are trust, inclusivity and local ownership. These principles are derived from the South African transition experience, where they were shown to be effective in navigating challenges in peace negotiations. ITI has adopted and applied these principles in all its peacebuilding interventions.

This case study demonstrates how these principles were applied in Myanmar and the lessons learnt, which in turn enabled ITI to further refine its approach. The principle of inclusivity demanded that ITI engage with all stakeholders, including the government, military, representatives of armed ethnic groups and politicians, in order to ensure that no one was left out. In its engagement with stakeholders ITI emphasized the need for dialogue in order to build trust and explore possibilities for a homegrown solution to the conflict. While there are many variables to address in each unique conflict context, these three principles[13] have proven effective in setting the tone, shaping the direction and determining the outcomes of peace processes.

Trust – the Missing Link in the Myanmar Peace Project

The continued fighting in Myanmar is testimony to unresolved differences and a lack of mutual trust. Trust is one of the preconditions for the successful resolution of any conflict. Without trust there can be no commitment to political dialogue and peace negotiations. The lack of a national ceasefire subscribed to by all stakeholders remains a major obstacle to peace in Myanmar. Some armed ethnic groups, like the AA (which has been designated a terrorist organisation, thus blocking political dialogue for the foreseeable future), continue to clash with the military, causing considerable instability in Rakhine State. With no trust between armed groups and the military, the conflict is set to continue. Within the government, there is also mistrust between the military and the NLD. Peace conferences (Panglong) organised by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government have failed to yield any significant outcomes. ITI has engaged with the government, the military and the ethnic armed groups and underscored the importance of trust in peace negotiations based on the South African experience, where a seemingly hopeless situation took a turn for the better through a focus on trust building among stakeholders.

At the national level, ITI engagements with the military and government included hosting delegations in South Africa to expose them to the local experience and the processes that led to a new democratic dispensation. Through this exposure the element of trust was emphasized. For example, it would be impossible for the military to facilitate the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ethnic armed groups without trust on both sides. At the local level, in Rakhine State in particular, communities live in perpetual fear of each other and distrust the government. The intervention in Rakhine State by ITI is intended to rebuild trust among communities through inter-communal dialogue.

To date, the local authorities who previously were doubtful about setting up peace committees are now proud of these structures, which act as community forums. The peace committees are proving effective in mobilising communities. It is expected that the committees will continue to build and strengthen trust among communities, leading to political dialogue that can yield peaceful solutions.

The peace committees are an effort to develop a sustainable civil society platform for community dialogue across Rakhine, one that operates independently, inclusively, safely and credibly. This objective is fully aligned with international theorising on peace-making and with the South African experience, which increasingly, emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and community dialogue as crucial complements to national dialogue processes. Indeed, it is widely held that national peace processes are far more likely to fail without such a social component, than those who succeed in involving society in meaningful ways. Evidence from South Africa further demonstrates that civil society leadership relevant to and

organically tied in with communities on the ground can make a difference when politics reach a dead-end.

A network of locally based peacebuilders (or 'insider mediators') was established in two locations in Rakhine State – Maungdaw in northern Rakhine and Thandwe in southern Rakhine. The mechanism through which the networks operate is the Committee for Sustainable Peace and Development (CSPD). ITI together with its project partners have been supporting these community structures. Specifically, Roelf Meyer has spearheaded contact and engagement with the government and Fanie du Toit has led the implementation team as chief technical and strategic advisor. Groundwork for establishing the Maungdaw CSPD was laid out prior to the start of the project, with the formal launch in July 2019. The decision to start in Maungdaw was motivated by the fact that it had been at the epicentre of the 2017 violence against Muslims, and would therefore play a pivotal role in any potential return of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs). The Thandwe CSPD Planning Committee was established in March 2020 after extensive engagements with all communities in the township. While the Planning Committee had already implemented several community-based activities, a fully operational Thandwe CSDP was set to be formally established in August 2020. The project is poised to establish a CSPD in Buthidaung and launch similar processes in Gwa, Ann and Manaung. Each of the CSPDs comprise of a range of managers at different levels of responsibility, all the way down to officers who are permanently embedded in the communities where they serve.

An attitudinal and behavioural change among the CSPD members has been observed through their participation in capacity-building activities for the CSPD and the CSPD-led community-based initiatives and activities. Apart from its direct work in the project locations, the project team liaises with the CSPD on a daily basis and has great insight into individual personalities and group dynamics. The growing change has become clear since the CSPD's participation in the organisation of sports tournaments in December 2019. This has been confirmed through both formal and informal interactions with CSPD members throughout the course of the project. The strengthening of cooperation within the Maungdaw CPSD was proven on two occasions when the project team was unable to go to Maungdaw – in August–October 2019 owing to staffing challenges and in May–June 2020 owing to COVID-19-related restrictions. On both occasions CSPD members continued to hold formal and informal group meetings, discuss important community issues and plan upcoming activities. The CSPD members thus maintained the momentum by themselves. That this was done by a group of individuals who only a few months before had reported higher levels of mistrust within the group, shows that the project has achieved significant change in one of its main performance criteria. A more in-depth end-line survey will be done in the finishing phase of the project and should produce more reliable information on the levels of trust within the CSPD.

The conflict continues unabated. An inclusive peace process remains elusive

Levels of change observed and recorded by the project team therefore include:

- A rise in the level of trust and cooperation between selected community leaders with different ethnic, religious and gender identities
- A rise in trust and concrete cooperation between ordinary members of different communities within participating districts
- A rise in trust and cooperation between the community leaders involved in the project and selected government authorities

These changes benefitted direct beneficiaries (CSPD members), indirect beneficiaries (ordinary community members who participated) and the public at large (who passively witnessed the activities, read the promotional material and social media streams, and heard about the events through word of mouth).

In Search of an Inclusive Peace Process in Myanmar

Although it is understood that peace in Myanmar will require all stakeholders to commit to work together, the conflict continues unabated. An inclusive peace process remains elusive. Inclusivity ought to start with the signing of a national ceasefire agreement by all parties, but this is still a major challenge. Some ethnic armed groups remain on the warpath and have not signed the ceasefire agreement, essentially refusing to participate in peace negotiations. The continued fighting between the military and these armed groups is reinforcing radical positions in both parties and diminishing opportunities for a peaceful solution in the country. While working with Inter Mediate, Roelf Meyer met with the military and representatives of some of the armed ethnic groups. Meetings were arranged with individual groups and, in some cases, with representatives of armed groups in Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand.

The principle of inclusivity was one of the fundamental pillars that supported the peace process in South Africa. Representation of all stakeholders and stakeholder interests proved to be critical in bringing peace in the South African context. So ITI's insistence on meeting with all stakeholders in Myanmar was in keeping with its knowledge of the power of inclusivity.

The methodology had to take into account the profound lack of social trust in Rakhine. It was therefore clear that the classic mediation model of a neutral outsider bringing two sides together in an open and productive dialogue would not work easily in Rakhine. Instead, the project opted to select a group of very carefully identified community volunteers as the most direct beneficiaries of the project to take up the role of so-called 'insider mediators'.

Instead of neutrality, insider mediators' main qualifying trait is their connection to one of the opposing groups, as well as their ability to engage productively with peers from the other group or groups. As CSPD

members, these insider mediators have, and will continue to benefit from extensive support and capacity building by the support team in order to create a sufficient middle ground in the community to create the required momentum towards social cohesion.

While inclusivity does not guarantee agreement, it does provide an opportunity for dialogue, which could lead to identifying areas of common interest. The government of Myanmar has indicated that it is open to more ethnic armed groups' signing the national ceasefire agreement.

In Rakhine State, ITI also advanced the notion of inclusivity through mobilising communities and ensuring that all groups were represented in the peace committees. The Maungdaw CSPD, for example, consists of 27 members from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, representative of the multi-ethnic population in northern Rakhine. Of the CPSD members, 10 are Rakhine, eight are Muslim, three are Hindu, two are Thet, two are Mro, one is Mramagyi and one is Dainet. A total of 40% of the members are women (11 members), coming from the Rakhine (5), Muslim (4) and Thet (2) groups. The same principle of inclusivity is followed in each community.

The local council has supported the peace committees given the obvious potential value of collaboration among all groups in the community, especially with reference to service delivery. However, the greatest value of inclusivity in conflict contexts is the opportunity it gives all stakeholders to express their views on matters that are important to them and to participate in decision-making processes on issues that affect all stakeholders. It is through an inclusive approach that stakeholders find solutions leading to a sustainable and peaceful co-existence. In Rakhine State, the composition of peace committees is a clear sign of how the principle of inclusivity has been embraced and embedded in these structures. While more groundwork needs to be done to create a strong foundation for political dialogue, the peace committees are already positioning communities for peace negotiations.

Contested Ownership

Political conflict in most contexts manifests itself through power contestations arising from ideological, political or other differences. The need for power and control over others often inhibits the possibility of a peaceful resolution to conflict. The South African experience demonstrated that it is impossible to achieve peace without collective ownership of the process. Therefore, peacebuilding initiatives that focus on instituting an inclusive approach, building trust among stakeholders and facilitating locally derived and collectively owned solutions are most likely to bring sustainable and peaceful solutions. In all its initiatives, ITI always seeks to help stakeholders engage in processes sanctioned by all stakeholders to achieve solutions supported by all. Although ITI uses the South African experience to show how

the country navigated various challenges, stakeholders are always asked to come up with a solution that is appropriate to their context.

In Myanmar, there is an ongoing power contestation, with essentially two sovereign governments struggling to function as one entity. In addition, some armed ethnic groups are still determined to fight and have ignored calls for a national ceasefire. Although ITI, in association with Inter Mediate, targeted both the military and armed ethnic groups to facilitate an inclusive and locally owned peace process, the conflict rages on. This is not a sign of the approach's failure, but rather a demonstration of the significance of local commitment to conflict resolution. This is exactly why externally imposed ceasefire agreements and other peace deals only bring relative peace and temporary political stability. ITI's advisory role was based on stakeholders' making commitments and acknowledging ownership of the peace process. As it stands currently, the national ceasefire does not involve all the ethnic groups, even though the government said all armed groups were welcome to sign the deal.

At the local level, ITI has mobilised communities to participate in peace committees. Mindful of the significance of local ownership, ITI has sought to provide the necessary support to ignite and sustain inter-communal dialogue. The peace committees have been active in mobilising communities around activities such as rubbish collection and blood donations, and increasing activities around agriculture. Through these activities and other functions of the peace committees it is hoped that communities will eventually take ownership and drive these committees themselves.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM APPROACHES INFORMED BY ITI'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As an organisation, ITI has a set of strategies, approaches or tools for addressing different conflict situations. The choice of approach is based on the unique attributes of the conflict context, as well as the stakeholders involved.

The key purpose of scoping visits is to gather information to develop an intervention strategy

High-Level Access

One of the tenets of ITI's strategic approach is a focus on political elites and influential figures when planning interventions in peacebuilding. This approach has proven to be effective in facilitating ITI's entry in different countries and conflict contexts, as well as engagement with a broader network of stakeholders unlocked through the political elites. The political capital of individual ITI directors has also leveraged their access to high-level leadership. Roelf Meyer's invitation by former president FW de Klerk to join a delegation to Myanmar in 2014 facilitated access to top political leadership, including high-ranking army generals. Subsequent invitations by Jonathan Bowell under the auspices of Inter Mediate also led to direct

access to representatives of armed ethnic groups and key political figures, particularly Aung San Suu Kyi.

Through its direct access to the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) ITI was able to host army generals in South Africa. As a government institution, the MPC was responsible for the managing the peace process in the country. The MPC made the decisions regarding who should attend meetings with ITI. Therefore, the army generals that ITI hosted were selected by the MPC and the meeting that ensued was focused on sharing with the army generals the experience from South Africa regarding the transition from military to civilian control. Exposure to and discussions about the South African experience, in particular the role of the military and other state institutions, were well received by the generals. It seemed at the time that they could be persuaded to consider democratising the government of Myanmar. Roelf Meyer's appointment to the Advisory Board by Aung San Suu Kyi in 2018 further demonstrates how access to political elites facilitates ITI's interventions. This appointment was a game changer, as it paved the way for ITI's peace committees initiative in Rakhine State. Access to political elites and people in leadership with the authority to make decisions was critical in facilitating the acceptance of the peace committees initiative. Although movement was restricted owing to the conflict situation in the country, the government gave ITI the necessary logistical support to travel to Rakhine State. Ironically, the high-level access enabled ITI to initiate a project focussed on a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding.

Scoping Visits

Scoping visits are a fundamental aspect of ITI's approach to peace-building. The key purpose of scoping visits is to gather enough information egarding the context[14] and players in a particular conflict to develop an intervention strategy that is likely to bring about a sustainable peaceful solution. Consistent with this practice, Roelf Meyer went on multiple trips to Myanmar and engaged with the military, politicians, officials from the Myanmar Peace Centre and representatives of the armed ethnic groups in order to understand the nature of the conflict. A few the scoping visits were to neighbouring Thailand, where some of the armed ethnic groups were based. From these visits ITI became aware that not all of the armed ethnic groups were involved in the peace process. While some had signed bilateral ceasefire agreements with the government, some were still bent on armed resistance. Based on diagnostic assessments of the scoping visits, ITI concluded that a peaceful resolution to the Myanmar conflict would require creating conditions for a national ceasefire agreement that all the armed ethnic groups and the military could subscribe to and uphold. It was also evident that the role of the military was pivotal in the peace process. Having ruled Myanmar for decades, the military wanted to extend its stay in power and was determined to keep the armed groups at bay in order to do so. So the scoping visits were significant in building a rich base of information upon which to craft an intervention strategy.

Following the disbanding of the Advisory Commission, ITI undertook several scoping visits to Rakhine State between August and December 2018. The purpose of these visits was to explore the possibility of creating peace committees in states plagued by violent armed conflict. During these visits ITI met with representatives of four communities, as well as local council officials. ITI then produced a report proposing the establishment of peace committees as a means to contribute to the restoration of peace in communities that had been ravaged by violence. The report was verbally presented to the State Counsellor and ITI was mandated to go ahead with the implementation, with full support from the government, including being granted permission to travel to these areas, as well as logistical support. The proposal was funded by the governments of the UK, Sweden and Australia.

Although the government of Myanmar offered some funding, ITI declined, as that would have compromised its independence and neutrality. It is thus evident that scoping visits are a fundamental component of any initiative in peacebuilding and conflict management and resolution. Peacebuilding practitioners should have a first-hand understanding of the conflict in order to come up with a customised intervention strategy that addresses the core elements or root causes of the conflict.

Hosting Delegations in South Africa

The hosting of delegations from conflict areas for the purpose of learning from the South African experience is another strategy that ITI uses in its peacebuilding interventions. The South African peace and transformation experience continues to provide lessons to a wide range of stakeholders, including politicians, the military, civil society organisation leaders and activists, as well as the business community. The delegations go through a structured programme based on their composition and priority conflict management issues.

The first Myanmar delegation to South Africa, comprising three military generals and two officials from the Myanmar Peace Centre, was organised by Inter Mediate and hosted by ITI. The generals were selected by the Myanmar Peace Centre. The visit focused on learning more about the South African peace and reform process, the main issues that were at stake and the way they were addressed, and, in particular, how security sector reform (SSR) and DDR were addressed in this context. These aspects were very important given that these generals were involved in negotiations with representatives of armed ethnic groups in Myanmar.

The topics covered included the following:

- Background to the conflict in South Africa, focusing on the key issues at stake, the different positions and interests of the parties and other relevant stakeholders, and the challenges faced throughout the process

- Structure, management and timeline of the peace process and the reform process
- SSR, DDR and the process of integrating forces
- The role of intelligence services in the peace talks
- Truth and reconciliation – the role and achievements of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- The role of civil society and local communities, and the work of the peace committees
- The South African defence review
- The reform of the police and the process of integrating different forces into the reformed police force

Based on the feedback provided, the delegation was very engaged and active during all sessions. They asked numerous questions on the challenges encountered in South Africa and how these were faced; on the process of reforming the security sector and the specifics of integrating several armed forces into a new army; on the representation of women in the army before the reform and after, and their roles; on the personal experiences of the individuals involved, and so on. They expressed gratitude for the experience and were eager for their Commander-in-Chief and other colleagues back in Myanmar to also attend and experience the South African transition process.

ITI hosted a second multi-party delegation of senior NLD MPs, politicians and military personnel, as well as representatives of the Myanmar Peace Centre, from 2 to 8 October 2016. The delegates were exposed to the details of the negotiations, the peace process, reconciliation efforts and the drafting of a final constitution. The visit, organised by Inter Mediate and hosted by ITI, was also intended as a trust-building exercise in order to create the potential for joint solution-seeking efforts.

Peace committees are viewed as effective tools for non-political action in sensitive political contexts

Peace Committees

The idea of peace committees originated from the South African experience with the signing of the National Peace Accord in 1991, which paved the way for the establishment of peace committees in townships where violence was rampant. The peace committees were so successful that they have been implemented in other conflict areas. The decision by ITI to intervene in Rakhine State was an offshoot of Roelf Meyer's appointment to the Advisory Board. After the disbandment of the Advisory Board in mid-2018, Roelf offered to help in Rakhine State with the idea of creating peace committees.

As a result of historical experiences and the lingering threat of violence in parts of Rakhine State, there is little inter-communal trust, cooperation and social cohesion, rendering communities dysfunctional. The purpose of the peace committees is to increase levels of trust and cooperation between ethnic and religious communities through intra- and inter-community

dialogue, with a view to strengthen social cohesion and develop a unified voice on people's right to freedom, safety and prosperity. The key activities include giving peace committee members training in capacity development, conflict analysis, community dialogue, rumour management, social cohesion and inter-cultural competence.[15] The theory of change proposed suggests that political, technical and psycho-social support be provided to and through peace committees to promote safe, inclusive, voluntary and transformative dialogue in the townships of Maungdaw, Thandwe and Buthidaung. The composition of the peace committees was designed to cut across religious, ethnic, gender and age divides, while their impact was anticipated to be at the individual, local leadership, group and community levels.

To date, peace committees have been established in Maungdaw and Thandwe townships. The committees are viewed as an effective tool for non-political action in a highly sensitive political context such as Rakhine State. They are also seen to act as early warning mechanisms in conflict situations, promoting reconciliation and shifting interventions from mediation to persuasion.

It is still too early to assess the broader impact of the peace committees, but the fact that the peace committee in Maungdaw – where most of the violence erupted and displacement of people occurred – is still running is a sign of success. The mobilisation of the community to elect representatives and bring all the representatives to work together is a positive sign pointing to the possibility of improved relations within and between communities. The peace committees have so far organised community activities such as rubbish collection, health campaigns and anti-COVID-19 measures, and will be trained as election monitors for the national elections in November 2020. With respect to local leadership, the local government has endorsed and begun to work with the peace communities, thereby enhancing their legitimacy as platforms for community dialogue. Going forward it is anticipated that the peace committees will act as a litmus test for peacebuilding in these three townships. Based on their performance, the long-term strategy includes replicating these structures in other communities afflicted by inter-communal violence.

Although the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic initially threatened to disrupt the activities of the peace committees, in Thandwe this presented an opportunity for community mobilisation.[16] The RTP team took advantage of the opportunity to use inter-ethnic teams in the distribution of masks, hand sanitiser and essential information. These teams were deployed in marketplaces, hospitals, rural health facilities, quarantine centres, check-points and other essential points of contact, as well as more remote areas. No further information regarding the peace committees had been received at the time of writing. It would be interesting to know how these committees performed and the impact this had on community relations.

The sharing of the South African experience always results in some transformation on the part of stakeholders. This transformation is driven by the acquisition of new knowledge or insights emanating from how a particular strategy was applied in dealing with a specific issue in the peace negotiation process. In some cases, the transformative moments occur among delegates during the visits. In other instances, the moments of transformation take place in the communities where stakeholders are based, through their participation in activities designed to contribute to peacebuilding. In this case, the moments of transformation were closely tied to the activities of the peace committees.

One transformative moment occurred during a meeting of a peace committee. As indicated earlier, the composition of the committees is such that all members are represented in terms of gender, age, religion and ethnicity. During the meeting the committee leadership, which comprises both men and women, sit together. Previously, women and men would not sit at the same table, as per religious and customary practices. Furthermore, women would be less likely to participate and talk during meetings. Now women are speaking freely and men are slowly adjusting to the new development. However, in this meeting there was a heated exchange of views between a female and male committee member. The general expectation was that the female committee member would yield to the male member, but she stood her ground and made her point. This moment demonstrated the emergence of female leadership in the peace committees, signalling that in time women's issues can be placed on the agenda and be debated by all involved to explore potential solutions.

Another moment of transformation was reported in the peace committee in Maungdaw. One of the strategies used by the committees to facilitate dialogue within communities and among different groups is to identify activities, issues or events that are likely to connect people. Mobilisation of the community around rubbish collection was identified as one such connecting activity. The peace and development committee thus organised a rubbish collection event in Maungdaw. The idea was to bring community members together to clean up littered public spaces. It was expected that this would enable community members from different ethnic groups to engage in conversation, which is a significant step in building trust and has the potential to lead to dialogue on the more serious and sensitive conflict issues. However, what was amazing is that the military also joined in and participated in the activity with the community. It was evident that there was a shift in the way the military and the community perceived each other. This event showed that the military and community members could engage in non-violent dialogue going forward, as the seeds of trust were already sown by this gesture from the military.

LIMITATIONS

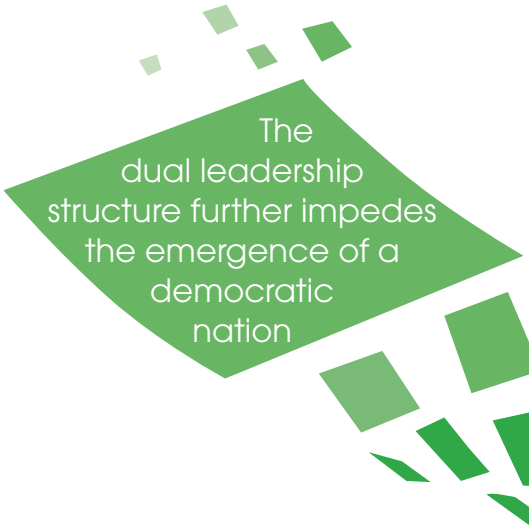
Despite the hope that the South African experience brings to every ITI intervention, it should be noted that each conflict context is unique and brings with it a mix of opportunities to leverage and limitations that might delay or derail progress. In Myanmar, the peace process has been marred by episodes of violence that have resulted in massive displacement. These armed conflicts have curtailed progress towards a peaceful resolution in Myanmar. The fact that some of the armed ethnic stakeholders have not signed the national ceasefire has also prevented the attainment of peace in the country. Therefore, the intervention led by Inter Mediate with support from ITI could not bring about a significant shift. A peace process cannot be imposed on conflicting parties. They have to make the decision and commit to the process. Therefore, as long as there is no national ceasefire subscribed to by all parties, peace in Myanmar will remain elusive.

The other limitation to the peace process in Myanmar is the continued influence and constitutional authority of the military. As long as the military remains in charge of key ministries, the peace process will struggle to gain the necessary traction. Given its capacity for armed combat and its experience fighting and keeping armed ethnic groups at bay, the military can easily become a spoiler in the peace process by plunging the country into war. While ITI engaged with army generals and discussed how South Africa managed its DDR process, it remains for the military to become depoliticised before that can happen. It is clear what needs to be done. It is necessary to democratise the country and move the government towards civilian control, including over the military. Although it is unlikely that the military will allow this to occur, it remains possible if it can be persuaded over time to accept a democratisation process. For now, the involvement of the military in politics is a major limitation to any intervention designed to bring peace to Myanmar.

Another limitation is the government's continued refusal to acknowledge the political leadership in Rakhine State. The government refuses to share executive power at the national level even after one of the ethnic political groups, the Arakan National Party, won the elections in Rakhine State in 2015. In recent years, politically motivated protests threaten the stability of Rakhine State and stall the peace negotiations, as grievances go unaddressed. These challenges can only be addressed through a commitment to genuine peace by all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Peace in Myanmar remains elusive. Decades of military rule and armed conflict have stalled the peace process. Although efforts are being made to persuade all parties to buy into the national ceasefire agreement, the propensity for violence remains a challenge in some parts of the country. The dual leadership structure, where the military is politically involved in the running of the country alongside a civilian head of government, further impedes the emergence of a democratic nation.



The manner in which ITI became involved in the Myanmar peace project demonstrates the centrality of the political capital of its individual directors. Global recognition of the South African transition experience also provides leverage for ITI interventions. In the Myanmar case, ITI's initial focus was to advise on the peace process and work closely with the Myanmar Peace Centre. However, political developments leading to a change of government also resulted in the disbandment of the Myanmar Peace Centre and the establishment of a new institution. This reduced momentum and disrupted the advisory work at the national level. However, buoyed by its experience in peacebuilding, ITI found an opportunity to focus on the grassroots level through the establishment of peace committees in Rakhine State, where the project is still running.

The case study reinforces the value of the principles of trust, inclusivity and ownership that guide all ITI's interventions in peacebuilding. The importance of scoping visits designed to facilitate a diagnostic assessment of the conflict was also highlighted. These visits enabled ITI to determine the appropriate intervention and approach in order to contribute positively to the attainment of peace in Myanmar. The significance of focusing on political elites and high-level leadership in driving peacebuilding efforts was demonstrated through engagement with army generals, MPs and representatives of ethnic armed groups. These political elites are invariably strategically placed to make key decisions about the peace process. Owing to its engagement with the military and the government ITI was granted permission and logistical support to set up peace committees in Rakhine State. These committees are already galvanising communities and creating opportunities for dialogue and conflict resolution. They have also been endorsed as effective community forums and enjoy the support of local government. While the signs are already positive, the full impact of the peace committees is yet to be determined.

PROJECT TIMELINE

2014

FEBRUARY
Myanmar
Three-member Global Leadership Forum delegation explores possibility of assisting in the Myanmar peace process.

2014
Myanmar and Thailand
Scoping visits to meet with military and representatives of ethnic armed groups.

2015

19–25 APRIL
South Africa
Tatmadaw delegation visit to learn from the South African experience, hosted by ITI.

2016

2–8 OCTOBER
South Africa
Multi-party delegation to South Africa, hosted by ITI.

2017

DECEMBER
Myanmar
Appointment of Roelf Meyer to the Advisory Board to assess the implementation of the Kofi Annan report's recommendations in Rakhine State.

2018

JANUARY – JULY
Rakhine
Trips to Rakhine as part of the Advisory Board.

AUGUST
Rakhine
Scoping visit to Rakhine to explore possibility of setting up peace committees.

AUGUST – DECEMBER
Rakhine State, Myanmar
Scoping visits to explore the possibility of initiating peace committees, Fanie du Toit comes on board.

2019

FEBRUARY
Sittwe, Rakhine state

Field visit to meet with the Rakhine Chief Minister and members of cabinet; Speaker of Rakhine State Parliament; Muslim elders; youth and student leaders.

MAY
Myanmar

Project delegation meeting with the Minister of Social Welfare and the Minister for the Office of the State Counsellor. Private briefing with the State Counsellor at her residence.

OCTOBER
Myanmar

ITI consultants meet with the Minister for the Office of the State Counsellor of Myanmar and the Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement to obtain official support from the government for the CSPD and gain travel permission for international staff to northern Rakhine.

22–26 NOVEMBER
Thandwe, Myanmar

Fanie du Toit, planning and networking trip

DECEMBER
Rakhine, Myanmar

ITI meets with U Sai Thaw Win, Deputy Director General, Commissioner, Administrator, Rakhine State General Administration Department, Secretary of the Rakhine State Government; and with H.E. Tin Myint, Deputy Minister, Ministry of the Office of the Union Government.

2020

JANUARY
Thandwe, Myanmar

Nomination of community leaders to attend a five-day planning and training session with RTP facilitators where, among others, the core values, mandate and membership criteria for a prospective CSPD are discussed and agreed upon.

APRIL
Thandwe, Myanmar

Introduction of peace committee members to government officials, MPs, the Red Cross and the local COVID-19 Prevention Committee.

ENDNOTES

1 Roelf Meyer, interviewed on 26 May 2020.

2 Ivor Jenkins, interviewed on 4 June 2020.

3 Fanie du Toit, interviewed 4 June 2020.

4 Story of Conflict in Myanmar, https://historydraft.com/story/conflict-in-myanmar/article/353

5 Aung San Suu Kyi is a Burmese politician, diplomat, author and a 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. She is the first and incumbent State Counsellor (a position equivalent to Prime Minister) of Myanmar.

6 In Transformation Initiative, Rakhine Transformation Project – 1 January to 31 December 2019 report.

7 Roelf Meyer was previously Chairperson of the South African Defence Review (2011–2014), Minister of Defence at the time of FW de Klerk's cabinet, Minister of Constitutional Affairs in Nelson Mandela's cabinet and Chief Government Negotiator in the peace talks.

8 FW De Klerk is a South African politician who served as the seventh and last State President of South Africa during apartheid from 1989–1994 and as Deputy President from 1994–1996 in the Nelson Mandela-led government.

9 Jonathan Bowell was a Chief of Staff under Tony Blair's government in the UK.

10 Fanie du Toit is Technical Advisor: Community Dialogue in Myanmar. He is a specialist in post-conflict reconciliation and transitional justice in Africa and the Middle East.

11 *In Transformation Integrated Governance Policy.* Version 1.4 (ratified on 31 January 2019), http://www.intransformation.org.za/wp-content/themes/intransformationinitiative/docs/integrated_governance_policy_1.4.pdf

12 In Transformation Initiative, https://www.intransformation.org.za/

13 Marais, N; Davies, J. (2014). "*Deconstructing the Conditions that Enabled South Africa's Transition to Power-Sharing*". White Paper prepared for the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, the Carter Center and Swiss Peace for a seminar "The Syria Transition Options project of The Carter Center".

14 Westendorf, J. (2015). "*Why Peace Processes Fail: Negotiating Insecurity After Civil War*". Lynne Rienner Publishers. https://www.rienner.com/uploads/55bfbb90085b6.pdf

15 Rakhine Transformation Project – Concept Note (October 2019).

16 Rakhine Transformation Project – COVID-19 Update (April 2020).