# The Politics of Silence

## Myanmar NGOs' Ethnic,
## Religious and Political Agenda

N°17

**IRASEC**

**Lois Desaine**

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## MYANMAR NGOS' ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AGENDA

A collection under the supervision of Benoît de Tréglodé

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IRASEC

INSTITUT DE RECHERCHE SUR L'ASIE DU SUD-EST CONTEMPORAINE
RESEARCH INSTITUTE ON CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST ASIA

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AYEYARWADY Division

Moulmein

YANGON Division

THAILAND

MON STATE

Tavoy

TANINTHARYI Division

0    100    200 km

# Introduction

The political regime in Myanmar[1] used to be a seemingly monopolistic structure where power was exclusively in the Army's[2] hands. A marginal external influence was exercised by businessmen with close ties to the regime while the country is also exposed to the influence of powerful regional states. Since the General Elections in November 2010, the establishment of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar with a parliamentary democracy (which remains under some control of the Army, but with notable civilian representation) is the most noticeable change in Myanmar politics for decades as it may shift the state away from the Army monopoly, although concrete changes remain to be demonstrated.

Increasingly visible are a range of non-state actors seeking to cope with the shortcomings of this economic and political system. Gradually, over the last 15 years, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been progressively exploring the margins of the Army's monopoly. They have become the experts of the "politics of silence"; attempting to influence decisions while remaining low profile and avoiding direct confrontation with various layers of the government. Generally structured around ethnic and religious identities, and rarely indicating hints of ideological motivations, these actors have been working to relax

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[1] In this study, the term "Myanmar" will be used to refer to the country, as it is officially the name since 1989, when the Junta changed the name of the State from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar. See David I. STEINBERG, *Burma/Myanmar, What everyone needs to know*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 216 p.

[2] In Myanmar language: *Tatmadaw* (တပ်မတော်).

the rigidity of the system. They are eager to participate in the creation of a more equitable economic order leading to a more inclusive political regime. In order to do so, they opportunistically engage at the geographical and political periphery of the central state wherever they identify the potential for change. NGOs are most likely to find operational space in marginal areas, where the Bamar prevailing state and its symbols have less presence. They are especially prevalent in ethnic states and among minority religions. Under various modalities, silent, long term agendas of NGOs can be identified as ultimately political in nature and more geared up to social changes.

At first tolerated as mostly religious umbrella organisations under British colonial rule, NGOs have been able to expand progressively since the end of the socialist era in 1988 and become more independent from the religious orders. NGOs' numbers and influence increased under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime after November 1997. Overall, NGOs were focused on long-term developmental issues until Cyclone Nargis (May 2008) claimed 138,000 lives and affected millions. The resulting humanitarian crisis temporarily transformed NGOs into essential relief organisations. In the wake of the disaster, while international aid delivery was hindered by the government attracting the interest of the international media, hundreds if not thousands of civil society groups provided immediate relief to survivors. Later, many established themselves as NGOs and most subsequently gained experience, legitimacy and the trust of the populations they served.

At first, exiled Myanmar communities and internationals (including Human Right lobby groups and governments) were suspicious of Myanmar NGOs, perceiving them as vassals of the state. However, over time, it became more obvious that the government was not able to exercise unilateral control over a set of organisations whose relief efforts had given them a high degree of social legitimacy which the government needed too. Only recently, the existence of a vibrant civil society has started to be acknowledged by a number of international analysts. This blossoming of NGOs is the result of a longer process of maturation.

The predecessors of these modern NGOs were mostly religious organisations and activities were based on charitable principles. The cease-fires in ethnic areas at the end of 1990s were a benchmark, marking the creation of a new generation of NGOs in the country. Due to the historical, geographical and political contexts of their inceptions, although a huge number of NGOs today do not promote faith in their mandate, they tend to maintain close links with religious movements. Similarly, many NGOs introduce themselves as having an inter-ethnic and pro-ethnic affirmative action policies illustrated by their recruitment of differing ethnic minorities, areas of intervention, and communications, for example. NGOs are becoming savvier in their use of international development jargon to please donors and to cover up hidden interests that would not be accepted by the government. For example, statements that can be found throughout their documentation insure their donors that they deliver assistance according to the needs and regardless of the ethnic, religious and political background of their beneficiaries. However, on the ground, the reality is more complex and the implications of the NGOs' agendas in their work are varied. Due to the authoritarian nature of the regime and the NGOs' limited margin for manoeuvre, these organisations are not able to openly articulate their long term political agendas.

A diversity of strategies defining how NGOs relate to the government can be identified, ranging from service delivery within public structures to an almost complete avoidance of the state. Today, most of the NGOs adopt a mixed position, maintaining a degree of openness with the government, while simultaneously protecting their autonomy. A tentative transition towards a less centralized state would allow them to occupy a greater space on the political stage. A critical analysis of this tentative transition will determine the role played by NGOs. Would NGOs then be recognised as protractors of the lifespan of the regime, mitigating its economic mismanagement and tempering the tensions in ethnic areas? Or will they be considered as the leaders of a silent, fragmented, opposition trying to influence positive political change in a constrained context?

This study has been conducted using mainly by primary sources and interviews.[3] It proposes first to analyse the identity of Myanmar NGOs. Their main features will be highlighted to demonstrate that most NGOs are deeply rooted in religious and ethnic dynamics that are not endogenous to the majority Bamar Buddhist society. The Burmese Way to Socialism resulted in attempts to eradicate the independent civil society of the late colonial and Parliamentary periods. Following the nation-wide uprisings of 1988 led by underground university student organisations, around 10,000 students fled to border areas occupied by ethnic groups at war with the regime, and later these students formed a core group of internationally recognised human rights, media, political and humanitarian organisations in exile. The departure of more university students to neighbouring countries occurred after a further demonstration in 1996, and a subsequent crackdown on opposition groups, resulted in exiled NGOs numbers being bolstered. In the early 2000s, ceasefire agreements between the regime and several ethnic groups also enabled the growth of civil society organisations in these areas. Using these examples this paper will demonstrate how the evolution of the first modern professional NGOs in Myanmar has been entwined with the history of political opposition.

In the second part, the modalities of NGO political involvement will be discussed. After exploring the sources of their legitimacy and assessing their actual capacity to use the available space at the margins of the state power to influence political change, the NGOs' perceptions of themselves as an element of the opposition will be analysed, taking into account the complex and somewhat paradoxical nature of their relations with the regime. The case of the decentralization power process post-cease-fire in Kachin State (before its violation in June 2011) will be discussed, illustrated by case studies of two NGOs. Then, the exploration of the motivations of socially engaged individuals working in NGOs will shed some light on the intricacy of political and social agendas of modern NGOs. Finally, their potential to offer an alternative to the present regime for a more inclusive political model will be discussed.

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[3] See details part 1, chapter 1.1.

Part One
# Religious and ethnic dimensions
# of Myanmar NGOs

The Union of Myanmar hosts a number of different ethnic groups, each with their own history, language and religious practices. Although the 2008 Constitution provides for freedom of religion[4], Buddhism continues to play a dominant role[5], as mentioned in article 361: "The Union recognises the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the huge majority of citizens". To simplify a complex reality, the main ethnicity, the Bamar – predominantly Buddhists – are located in its seven central divisions whereas ethnic minorities are more numerous in ethnic states; Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and others. Some of these minorities are mainly comprised of Buddhists; Kayin, Mon, Shan, and Rakhine. The seven periphery states are predominantly Christian or Muslim due to the history of population settlement. Along with religious divisions, ethnic diversity has also been source of schisms and tensions which were particularly exacerbated after Independence, when the central state was not able to generate a strong enough cohesion among the various groups. Political tensions since Independence can be

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[4] Ministry of Information, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), article 34: "Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practise religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution".
[5] "The special place envisaged for Buddhism and the Myanmar language seeks to continue the exclusion of minorities", in Yash GHAI, *The 2008 Myanmar Constitution: Analysis and Assessment*, p. 37.

analysed through a conflict sensitive lens: "The irreconcilable nature of the conflicts is compounded by the fact that the issues have become entangled in the broader views of history and mythologies of each side. While the military insists that the Union of Burma has existed since ancient times and only was divided by the British colonialists, ethnic nationalists maintain that the Kayin, Kachin, Shan and other minorities are nations in their own right with historic homelands and rights of self-determination". [6]

In contemporary Myanmar, ethnicity, religion and politics are intertwined. The centralised authoritarian political system, that has a legitimacy that is partly reliant on Buddhism, constantly attempts to homogenise the multifaceted ethnic and cultural mosaic into a national, unified, Bamar entity. Decades of implementation of this strategy, also known as "burmanisation", has resulted in a "Myanmar" identity, in which Bamar nationalist identity and Bamar Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices are intermingled.[7] Burma hosts a number of Buddhist missionary groups that attempt to convert those of a different faith. This homogenisation is generally not welcomed by those among the ethnic minorities who are non-Buddhist. For some, religion has become part of their political identity, a sign of opposition. Many among the religious minority groups feel the pressure of Buddhism as a controlling influence from the central government, as well as a rejection of their ethnic identity, in response project a political dimension as a more or less passive resistance.

In this study, we will use the following definition of civil society, "the sphere of institutions, organisations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests."[8] In Myanmar, this term tends

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[6] Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *Burma, mapping the challenges and opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation*, Crisis Management Initiative, Martti Ahtisaari Rapid Reaction Facility, Brussels, Feb. 2008, p. 10.

[7] Guillaume ROZENBERG, "Etre Birman c'est être Bouddhiste", in Gabriel DEFERT (ed.), *Birmanie contemporaine*, IRASEC-Les Indes savantes, Bangkok, 2008, p. 29-52.

[8] Helmut K. ANHEIER (ed.), *The Civil Society Diamond: A Primer*, Civicus Index on Civil Society Occasional Paper Series, Vol. 1, Issues 2, July 2001, p. 3.

to be used to categorise any group or initiative that is not directly piloted by the government. The common assumption that NGOs are leading the civil society movement can be explained by the fact that they are more visible, vocal and self-defined as a group than other components of civil society. Although, a wide range of groups of monks, teachers, businessmen, youth can occasionally get directly involved with NGOs, as was the case after Cyclone Nargis.

In the present document, the acronym "NGO" – unless contrarily mentioned, in some quotations for example – refers to the Myanmar based and led NGOs. The definition of NGO is framed by the following criteria:
1. Independence from the government and political parties.
2. Clearly stated mandate/vision to influence social and/or economic, and in certain cases political, models.
3. Non-profit organisations.
4. Work and adhesion on a voluntary basis for the supporters but operating with salaried employees.
5. Activities based in the wide scope of development and/or relief and/or social work.
6. Size demonstrated with an annual budget above 50,000 US Dollars and an operational presence in several townships.

The term "NGO" used throughout this study is irrelevant to the official and registration status of the organisations. Preliminary research identified common characteristics across NGOs, including: a vision to change/influence their socio-political environment, governance structure with centralised decision making process relying on one leader, and ways to navigate in a hostile political space. Some will be developed further.

Assuming that NGOs reflect to some extent Myanmar society as a whole, a majority of Buddhists from the Bamar ethnic group should be represented in the NGO sector. In reality, a quick observation of NGOs would show that the prevailing religion in Myanmar NGOs is not Buddhism but Christianity, and that the Bamar are under-represented at various levels. For example, Christian NGOs and affiliated groups appear to be more visible than Buddhist organisations, the density of projects is higher in non-Bamar areas and employees are often selected from ethnic minorities. This is a legacy of the colonial period, as the

British administrators were more likely to work with Christianised organisations.

A more detailed analysis of the ethnic and religious characteristics of Myanmar NGOs will be mapped, before elaborating on the context, as well as the consequences of the emergence of these social actors during the fifteen last years. Finally, Myanmar NGOs' increasing ability to develop and influence local and central power will be discussed.

# 1 - Myanmar NGOs: a multifaceted civil society dominated by ethnic and faith based organisations

After 1948, the context of the post-Independence and the Parliamentary periods was a space that allowed the burgeoning of non-government groups that would later be targeted by Ne Win and the military regime as a threat to the country's stability. Ne Win's military government, in power from 1962 to 1988 relied on "The Burmese way to socialism", a doctrine where Buddhism, Bamar identity and notions of socialism were linked and presented as the path towards a prosperous nation. It paved the way for a highly centralised state, with a military regime that increasingly used repression and terror to exercise and maintain its rule.[9] During the socialist period, independent organisations were forbidden by the government. For three decades, associations of individuals beyond the junta, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), were not allowed.[10] For the past 15 years, following a student uprising in 1996 and several cease-fire agreements in ethnic areas, NGOs

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[9] "According to the doctrine of the Myanmar way to socialism, not only political parties, but also many social and religious organisations were declared illegal, the free press was eliminated, schools were nationalised, and even the traditionally independent Buddhist monastic order (the *Sangha*) was attempted brought under state control", in Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[10] David I. STEINBERG, "A void in Myanmar: Civil society in Burma", in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma, possibilities and dilemmas for international NGOs*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1999, p. 1-14.

have been progressively tolerated in certain geographic areas, allowed to work in ring-fenced sectors. They have had access to some degree of formal authorisation to operate through a range of agreements, from informal oral clearances to the formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the government. As a consequence, a particularly relevant factor influencing the way NGOs work is the type of relations they have established with the government. This determines the degree of trust officials can have in a given NGO and, as a consequence, the scope of activities that can be undertaken more or less officially.

Since their inception, these organisations have aimed at coping with shortages in the social, economic and political systems which have resulted in poverty and unequal access to resources and opportunity. The often quoted official figures of spending in key welfare sectors such as health care and education (1.3 % and 4.13 % of the budget, respectively)[11] compared to the part of the budget allocated to the armed forces (23.6 %)[12] illustrates the critical state of public services. All interviewed NGO directors stated that political and economic mismanagement was a source of frustration that incited them to get involved in NGO activities. They generally perceive the current system as unfair and wish to change it in the long term, although their long-term vision is generally not openly stated for safety reasons, as the government tolerates NGOs as long as they stay away from formal political involvement.

Today, NGOs in Myanmar generally benefit from a positive image in the international community's eyes. Internationally, INGOs, UN and government agencies tended to view NGOs as working to improve standards of living, which is perceived as necessary, and overall is appreciated. Some interviewees among the Myanmar citizens, who are not working with or in NGOs, believe that NGOs target minority ethnic and/or religious groups and expressed negative judgment about this practice. Among some members of the international humanitarian

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[11] Anonymous, "Myanmar allocates 1/4 of new budget to military", *Associated Press Yangon*, May 10, 2011.
[12] *Ibid.*

community in International NGOs or United Nations agencies in Myanmar, two prevailing attitudes can be observed towards Myanmar NGOs. Firstly, they consider NGOs as not fully capable agents but useful as service providers where international agencies have no access.[13] This attitude became obvious in the Cyclone Nargis relief operation. Secondly, for those among the international community who have a political agenda, NGOs are a means to an end. They are the vehicle to drive the democratisation process. Overall, NGOS seem to be perceived by international stakeholders as a relatively homogenous group willing to offer social and political alternatives to the regime. They believe that NGOs genuinely embody positive values and are able to trigger a long awaited political transition.[14] As NGOs are perceived as systematically opposed to the regime by outsiders, in a simplistic Manichean vision, they are always on the side of good.[15] This study aims to demonstrate that NGOs use a variety of strategies, with various motivations in order to achieve their own political agenda without explicitly voicing it.

Since the mid-2000s, NGOs' identity has evolved as these organisations became more strategic and self-aware. This has been accompanied by an increase in funding and professionalization of the sector. NGOs have gradually started to identify themselves as being part of an entity, representing or even embodying, the whole of civil society.

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[13] "INGOs need to change to do more capacity building. The rules of engagement still see local NGOs as subcontractors because their capacity is weaker", according to Aung Tun Thet, senior advisor to the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Myanmar, in Anonymous, "MYANMAR: Call to build up local NGOs", *IRIN News*, 1 March 2011.

[14] "A newly arrived INGO country director remarked that 'civil society organisations here seem to be values driven', an observation echoed in reports about the rise of civil society after Cyclone Nargis, and existing strong social cohesion", in LOCAL RESOURCE CENTER and OXFAM, *Progressing through partnerships: how national and international organisations work together in Myanmar*, Yangon, March 2010, p. 33.

[15] Such as the allegory of the beauty (Aung San Suu Kyi) and the beast (*Tatmadaw*) as an allegory of international community perception of the political issues in Myanmar, developed by Prof. Hans-Berndt Zoellner in a book to be published at the end of 2011 under the tentative title: *A History of the Conflict between the Military and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma/Myanmar Set in a Global Context, 1988-2010.*

The poem below was written by the director of a NGO and has been widely circulated in civil society *fora* in Yangon:

> **"I ... Myanmar Civil Society**
> I have… mythical land and cornucopia trees
> Grow with suppleness and passive resistance;
> I… live and life through grassroots and
> Bridge heaven and earth;
> I… reconciling the fractured land
> Deposit myself for verdant generation;
> I… guardian of chances for youthful future
> Dancing with uncertain fire inside of the havoc's games;
> I… vibrate solo of peace and delightful lyric
> Singing among the world of children;
> I… raft when flood of misery
> Propel to space of opportunity;
> I… dissolving the weakness and
> Sustain to nurture to stand on their own;
> I… hug people to be aware of
> How Mother Nature loves you and to respect her;
> I struggle every single instant and
> Keep on flowing for Endless journey.
> I … Myanmar Civil Society."

Above are some obvious references to the territory, civil society is depicted under the features of Mother Nature and the notion of ambition and maturity. Before elaborating on the relevant component of the actual identity of NGOs, including their ethnic, religious and political characteristics, a description of the methodology of the study is developed below.

## 1.1 - Methodology of the study

After clarifying the data collection methodology and highlighting the limits of such an approach, the term "NGO" will be defined in the Myanmar context. Then, emerging trends in the sector will be presented.

This study has been documented by various sources in an attempt to include different perceptions, experiences and opinions of individuals regarding the growing NGO sector in Myanmar. The data collection was mainly conducted between October 2010 and May 2011, using the following methodological tools:

- Interviews in Myanmar language (and in some cases in English) of various informants, including junior and senior employees of NGOs, Myanmar and international practitioners, academics working with/on civil society, Myanmar individuals having various types of contacts with NGOs, and civil servants interacting with NGOs.
- Field visits in two ethnic states with the purpose to identify local NGOs and to interview their leaders, employees, beneficiaries but also individuals who are not directly engaged with NGOs.
- Focus individual or group discussions in Myanmar in cities, towns and villages where NGOs implement projects to reflect on their image and common practices, with beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, NGO employees, and local authorities when possible.
- Review of primary sources, including NGO websites, public communication document, press statements, reports when available, and other documentation.
- Review of relevant literature and secondary sources including recent academic writings on ethnic conflict, civil society, political development but also local and international press and media.

Names of interviewees and organisations are not mentioned to preserve anonymity as interviewees often feel very nervous about sharing information in Myanmar for fear of negative repercussions. Although there are obvious signs of opening in Myanmar nowadays, the political engagement of NGOs remains controversial and for some sectors of society, taboo. Failing to respect discretion could result in negative consequences to those who facilitated the collection of study material.

Several interviews have been facilitated thanks to the efficient support of Daw May Myat Noe who has been a considerable support in brainstorming ideas, debriefings and discussing the key findings of this study.

Several filters hindered the data collection during interviews. The main challenge was to point out the unformulated motivations in order to gain clarity on organisational agendas beyond relief and development work. Individual narratives and observations, in a country where safety means operating with low profile, can also inform an understanding of how personal aspirations and experiences are articulated within organisational strategies. As a NGOs' lifespan depends on the ability to be seen as non-politically partisan or to be protected by government connections, in spite of obvious indicators of political involvement, most of the stakeholders were not keen to discuss sensitive topics openly. The reluctance of some informants to share their ideas can be understood as the agenda is not explicitly stated and as it depends on the space that is made available (depending on the context of the moment, connections with/protection from the government, location and degree of sensitivity of the work). Those interviewed feared that they would be in danger if others knew some of their strategic directions. Most NGOs strategize as they go and do not have detailed long terms plans. They might adjust and make *ad hoc* decisions so as to make the best use of their influence. As they are used to working in a fluid political context, they do not often elaborate future plans but rather adopt an opportunistic approach. This has two main advantages: it is safer and more likely to appear non-threatening to the government and furthermore, it allows flexibility.

In some cases, when interviewees were not senior employees, they were afraid to break the chain of command. Some of these barriers could gradually be overcome with trust building through repeated meetings and informal discussions. It also seems that some respondents were simply not informed of the silent longer term objectives of the NGOs, especially the junior employees.[16] Information was sometimes channelled indirectly through what they were told by other people or staff from other organisations. Written documentation on a potential role in political transition is seldom shared. Such documents could compromise

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[16] Meanwhile, many members of civil society are simply getting on with the job of helping vulnerable populations cope with the pressures of everyday life. They may not always have a broader vision, but they all recognise that local communities have to work together to cope, whatever happens politically. See Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

the mere existence of the given NGO if it came into the possession of the police Special Branch[17]. Nonetheless, some documents produced by NGOs are meaningful as they are the vehicle of their political views; those collected through open sources are cited in this study.

It was easier to carry out research in urban areas like Yangon[18], compared to rural areas, and it was easier to gain trust in towns. In Yangon, where NGO employees were more used to interacting with foreigners and researchers, NGO staff displayed greater confidence, however, they also demonstrated that they had learned how to answer questions without disclosing any indication of their ethnic, religious or political views, probably as they have an awareness of the potential dangers involved in this type of information sharing.

Many interviewees stated that they were engaged in NGO work because they were striving for positive change in achieving economic or political changes to people's lives. Generally these NGO employees explained that their commitment to work towards poverty reduction had started among their own communities, and that they were guided by the aspiration to foster a more equitable and just system for the distribution of resources. In their conception, this new system goes together with a new political order. They assess the capacity of the government to reform itself as limited. As a consequence, they believe that political change is a necessary step, although not necessarily always an end in itself. Practically, there seems to be a difference between their long term vision and short term reality. NGO employees do not consciously pursue a given political agenda when they accomplish daily basic tasks. They mainly consider their activity as a livelihood, and often do not expect a concrete impact as a consequence of their immediate actions. They look for progressive changes, enabling their organisation

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[17] The police Special Branch, also known as the 'SB' in Myanmar, is utilized by the state to monitor activities of opposition groups and individuals, and civil society groups. The military intelligence was dismantled after the arrest of Secretary 1 and Intelligence head, General Khin Nyunt. As a consequence the Special Branch is now under the control of the Home Ministry and a new military intelligence service has been created with less capacity.
[18] As highlighted in the Dave Matthieson's presentation on Human Rights study methodology at the Burma Studies Conference, Marseilles, July, 10th 2010.

to earn some ground for example in influencing policies with the local government, in order to scale up and exercise some pressure to facilitate more social and political transformations at regional level.

NGOs developed their own codes to communicate in the restrictive political context. The use of a specific vocabulary illustrates how NGOs have been working within the boundaries of tolerance set by central authorities. For example, instead of implementing projects of "peace-building", NGOs based inside the country use the terms "community harmony" or "reconciliation". These terms do not imply that there is a conflict, which would sound too political. "Protection" can be mentioned, but not "Human Rights". Instead of "journalism", NGOs would organise "mass media" training, and instead of "community mobilisation", they support "community based projects". They work on "capacity building" instead of "empowerment". If a given NGO wants to provide education services with the objective to develop analytical skills, instead of calling it "critical thinking"[19], it will call it "general skills" or "English Learning" in the project documentation, using a government friendly vocabulary to shape reality.

The present study focuses on the NGOs based and/or operating in Myanmar under Myanmar management. Out of an estimated 300 to 400 large scale and above ground NGOs working in Myanmar, a maximum of 10 per cent are registered with the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (GRUM)[20], according to the United Nations' Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU)[21]. No comprehensive list of NGOs is available and it is difficult to accurately quantify the NGO growth phenomenon in Myanmar. The Capacity Building

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[19] Such as the American Center in Yangon is able to because it is a foreign entity, with diplomatic status.

[20] The Government prior to the 2010 General Elections is referred to as Government of the Union of Myanmar (GoUM). After November 2010, it is referred as the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (GRUM). When a continuity is observed and both governments are concerned, the term "government" is used through this study.

[21] See http://www.themimu.info

Initiative (CBI)[22] produced a Directory in 2000 that has been annually updated since 2004. It is a key document to monitor the evolution of NGO numbers over the years. In 2001, it recorded 31 NGOs, 62 in 2004 and increased up to 88 in 2009, as depicted in the table below. These figures are likely to be a conservative estimation of the real figures.

**Table 1: Evolution of the number of NGOs participating
to the data collection of the LNGO directory between 2001 and 2009**
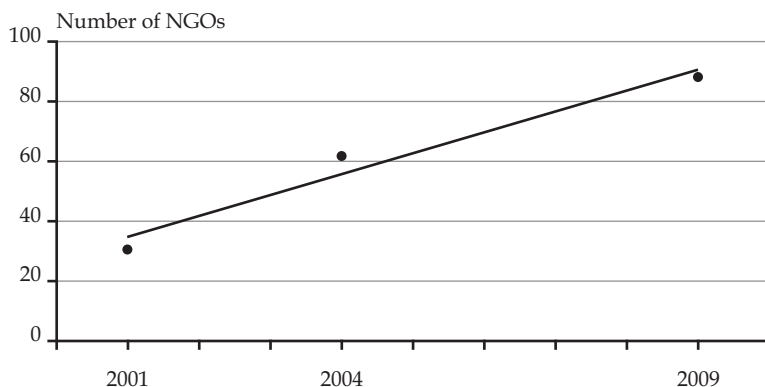


Source: CBI Directories

The LNGO Directory is not comprehensive as many NGOs are not taken into account, whereas some Government Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) are included[23] although they appear to be unconnected and working with different values, mandates and methods than NGOs. According to a NGO director: "We [Myanmar NGOs] do not cooperate with GONGOs. Our organisation values the political

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[22] A NGO based in Yangon providing training and other capacity building services to NGOs. CBI itself is not registered as a NGO but as a project according to an interview with the Director.
[23] NGOs were required to meet the following criteria to be included in the 2004 Directory: "non-profit, voluntary initiative, independent, self-governing, socially accountable, human welfare aims, acting as intermediary, socially progressive, voluntary values, willingness to participate, clear leadership to contact, multiple sites of work or areas of beneficiaries, Yangon office".

neutrality of civil society. Civil society should stand on the direct engagement with community in a participatory and moral manner. Otherwise, it will lead to a downward spiral for the reputation of civil society in the eye of community we aim at serving".[24] Typologies of information slightly vary over the years, hindering systematic comparison. Nonetheless, these directories enable quantification of general emerging trends. For example, it highlights the number of NGOs identifying themselves as religious.[25] The weight of the education sector is noticeable and symptomatic of the substitution role to public services by NGOs in some geographic areas.

**Table 2: Evolution of NGOs' sector of intervention between 2004 and 2009**
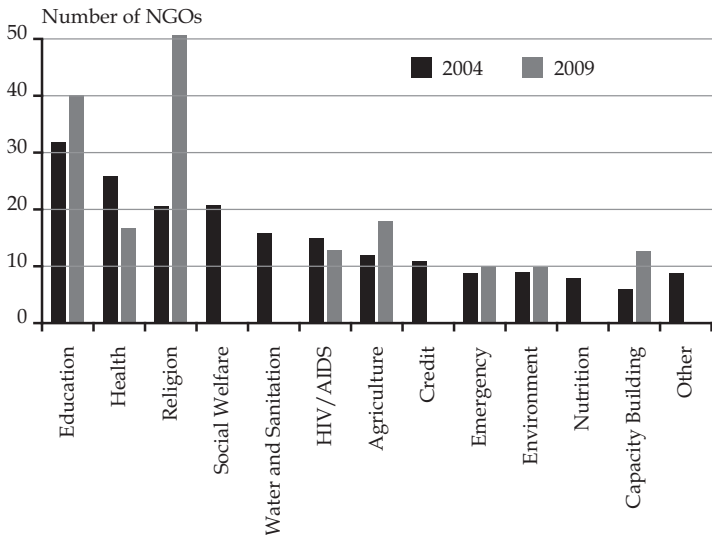


Note: One NGO can be active in several sectors.
Source: CBI Directories 2004 and 2009.

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[24] Interview by the author, Yangon, January 2010.
[25] The rapid growth of religious NGOs here could be attributed to a more tolerant approach adopted by the government over the years towards these actors, as they seem not to be engaged in political opposition activities. As a consequence, NGOs would be less reluctant to define themselves as religious.

Not all the existing NGOs in Myanmar could be considered in the present study as several hundred meet the criteria and interviews could only be conducted with a number of representatives. Remarkably, most of the findings can be expanded to a reasonable number of NGOs. The NGO sector remains dominated by the oldest ones that have a greater legitimacy but the above figures show a quick progression. The notions and vocabulary related to NGOs have been imported, as have those pertaining to civil society. The etymology of the such vocabulary in the Myanmar language leaves no doubt, for example, civil society "လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်း" [people's group] and NGOs "အစိုးရမဟုတ်သောအဖွဲ့အစည်းများ" [the groups that are not the government] are the literal translation of the English language terminology.

The nature and the modalities of the relations between NGOs and the government are both complex and fluid. In order to function, NGOs have established relations with authorities at different levels, depending on their size, activities, and legal status. Relations with government agents are often considered as a threat to an NGOs' autonomy. For government officials, the main concern is the potential of NGOs to support political opposition movements. To circumvent this possibility NGOs must abide by a system of periodic reporting to Ministry of Home Affairs, with regular monitoring visits to NGO offices and areas of operations. Today, it is generally acknowledged that the surveillance system is not flawless. The main limiting factor appears to be the lack of skills and resources available to the authorities. For example, at the time of writing, some employees of the Ministry of Agriculture based in the Ayeyarwady Division reportedly had a budget of 300 Kyat (approximately 50 cents in USD) per month to conduct their field visits.[26] Needless to say, these civil servants do not visit many project sites unless NGOs support their expenses. In this geographic area, where significant funds were injected into the humanitarian response after Cyclone Nargis, NGOs often had more resources than the local government. Training of civil servants by NGOs appears like an innovation in the

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[26] A bus ticket is around 3,500 MMK from Pathein, the main city of this division and Laputta, a town that was largely swept away by Cyclone Nargis where many NGO based their temporary field office.

post-cyclone relief effort.[27] It was actually an opportunity for some NGOs to establish trust with the authorities to prevent hindrances to their work. For example, NGOs were able to obtain authorisations to organise meetings, work, and travel, through enhanced relationships.

Smaller NGOs surveyed tended to avoid relations with the government as much as possible. Being more mobile and less visible, some have chosen to work "below the radar", with no legal status but with only the acknowledgement of local authorities. The director of a small scale NGO working in the Delta in Ayeyarwady Division[28] spoke about his experience: "In the project sites, we don't have any problem, no visits from the government. As long as we are transparent with local communities and they have ownership over the project, it is ok [...]. Our organisation operates with the lowest visibility possible and is regularly reporting to the local authorities who grant us a township level registration, so we are legally authorized to work."[29] The strategy to rely on cordial relations with local populations to gain favour from local government agents and to avoid monitoring was stated several times by interviewees. NGOs also work in collaboration with traditional leaders such as elders, or monks so that there will be "less interference from the authorities" according to another director of an NGO operating in the same area.

NGOs elaborate diversified strategies to create and maintain their operational space. All interviewees acknowledged that good relations with local authorities is key to being able to function efficiently and most agree that cordial relations with the central government allow the sustainability and growth of their NGOs.[30] According to a presentation made by a group of 20 Myanmar NGO representatives: "The ability to

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[27] Sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union and Australia on Myanmar do not allow training of senior civil servants from government offices.

[28] In some townships affected by Cyclone Nargis, relations between NGOs and local authorities were smoother as the central government generally acknowledged the need for aid, but this observation could not apply to other geographic areas.

[29] Interview by the author, Yangon, October 2010.

[30] A registered NGO has to report annually or bi-annually on their activities and finances. Funds are supposed to be solely channelled through the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank.

maintain and extend an NGOs' working space is dependent on their legitimacy coming from the trust of the communities and the local authorities, the choice of a non-sensitive or non-threatening vocabulary and their ability to engage with the military."[31] NGOs also mentioned the importance of sharing credit to government officials for the tangible outputs of their project.[32]

Among the several factors identified in shaping space for NGOs to operate, other key factors include: the location (urban/rural areas, centre/periphery); the sensitivity of the sector of activity (what is the potential link to politics?) and finally the benefits the government (at local, regional or national level) can take from the projects. Several NGOs reported that they have been invited to manage projects in urban areas or in the Dry Zone in Magwe Division (where many generals are from) by the authorities and felt like they had to comply in order to maintain good relations. In some cases, NGOs reported that they had to hand over innovative projects to the authorities for management at the request of the local administration.

Some sectors are more likely to generate official suspicion than others. For example, HIV/AIDS used to be very sensitive until the early 2000s. Prior to that, the government had denied the scale of the epidemic and there was no room for NGOs to work on this issue.[33] Today, there is a National Strategic Plan, drafted by the National AIDS Program (under the Ministry of Health) in collaboration with UNAIDS, and with civil society inputs and participation. HIV/AIDS is seen as less threatening sector, compared to the period before 2004.

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[31] Public statement during a meeting held in Bangkok in August 2010 about the emergency of civil society organised by a donor organisation. In this statement, the military means the military government prior to November 2010.
[32] For example, local authorities are invited and greeted as the most important guests at a school opening ceremony and are thanked for allowing the NGO to build the school.
[33] In the early 2000s, the government used to be in the denial of the epidemics and wasn't supportive of any intervention in prevention or treatment of the disease. *Cf.* Anonymous (R. H.), "A new epicenter, Burma ignores its AIDS crisis", *Time Asia*, Vol. 156, No. 15, October 16, 2000.

According to an interviewee who worked for several years in this sector: "NGOs can influence policies through networks. For example, the HIV networks in 2004, there was no voice at all in the thematic working group for NGOs. Decisions were made at the higher level (GRUM, INGOs and UN). But in 2010, NGOs have three representatives sitting on the table to establish the country coordinating mechanism supported by the Global Fund. The HIV National Strategic Plan was written after consultation with the Strategic Plan Committee (that included NGOs)".[34] Other sectors, such as formal education, still cannot be tackled directly by civil society groups as they remain too sensitive. As a consequence, very few NGOs have attempted to establish relationships with the Ministry of Education, and most education projects are cautiously implemented within a limited scale.[35] These projects tend to target education for young children under the umbrella of other activities, such as religious projects.

Although a point that most Myanmar NGOs have in common is that they define themselves as independent from the government, they all have to maintain relations with the authorities to some degree. The NGO sector displays a great amount of heterogeneity, while operating under the scrutiny of the regime and having only recently expanded. NGOs have different sizes, capacities, mandates, methodologies, and areas of intervention, but this complex reality is often eclipsed by the domination of a handful of larger NGOs that are over-represented in the international humanitarian community fora, and in some cases claim to represent the whole of civil society. A concise overview shows that overall NGOs' identity is generally structured around ethnic and/or religious lines that help to shape their longer term, silent agendas.

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[34] Interview by the author, February 2011, Yangon.
[35] Recently, some more relations were established with NGOs to re-build schools in the context of post Cyclone Nargis reconstruction, and the Ministry of Education allowed targeted material support: construction work, furniture and material purchases.

## 1.2 - Religious and ethnic trends framing Myanmar NGOs and solidarity networks

*"Ethnic Youth Network is led by Rakhine, Kayin, Shan and Chin youth members [...]. According to my experience, we have never, not once, invited a Bamar to a meeting".[36]*

*"Being Buddhist, we are disconnected from NGOs, because here in Yangon, most NGO leaders are Christian and so are connected to people from the outside. Church organisations have many connections".[37]*

After a brief overview of the ethnic and religious trends in Myanmar, their impacts on the NGO sector will be shown, in the light of their recent history, and according to their geographic and ethnic context. This paper will briefly describe the situation of NGOs in each ethnic state.

Myanmar hosts a majority of Bamar ethnic people, said to be roughly 70 % of the population.[38] Figures for breakdowns of the population by religion are sensitive and official figures are acknowledged as generally inaccurate and potentially biased. It is generally estimated that the total population is composed of: Buddhist 89 %, Christian 4 % (including: Christian Protestant 3 %, Roman Catholic 1 %), Muslim 4 % and Animist 1 %. The table below illustrates the disproportion of the religious group in the total population.

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[36] Young Rakhine man working in a NGO in Yangon, in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak*, Phnom Penh, 2010, p. 154.
[37] Young Rakhine woman from Rakhine State, in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *op. cit*, p. 63.
[38] Figures according to the latest Census carried out in 1983.

**Table 3: Religions in Myanmar**



89%
Buddhist

4% Muslim
3% Christian Protestant
1% Catholic
1% Animist
2% Other
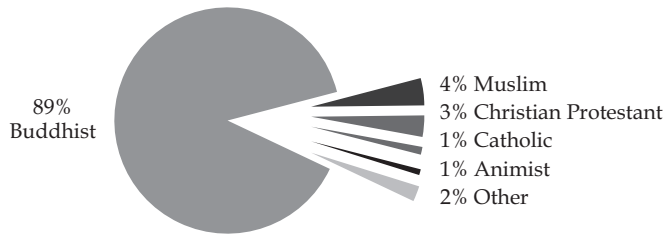
Source: from Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book*, 2011.

The pressure to "Burmanize" the population[39] is recurrent among ethnic groups. There are regular allegations of attempts to convert minorities by Buddhist missionary groups.[40] The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights pointed out that: "While a failure to accommodate ethnic minority needs is thwarting the adaptability principle, there is some disturbing evidence of the Government using State resources to promote Buddhism through the Ministry for Development of Border Areas and National Races and Municipal Affairs". [41]

In this context, the figures, actual location and evolution of the religious minorities are seen as politically controversial. The observation of the geographic concentration of religious and ethnic groups shows an obvious correlation.

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[39] See Jean A. BERLIE, *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2008, 156 p.
[40] Buddhists missionary groups are very active in Myanmar. The International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon (http://www.itbmu.org.mm) has reportedly close links with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.
[41] Paragraph 70, Progress report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana, 7th March 2011.

**Map 1. Major Ethnic Groups of Myanmar**
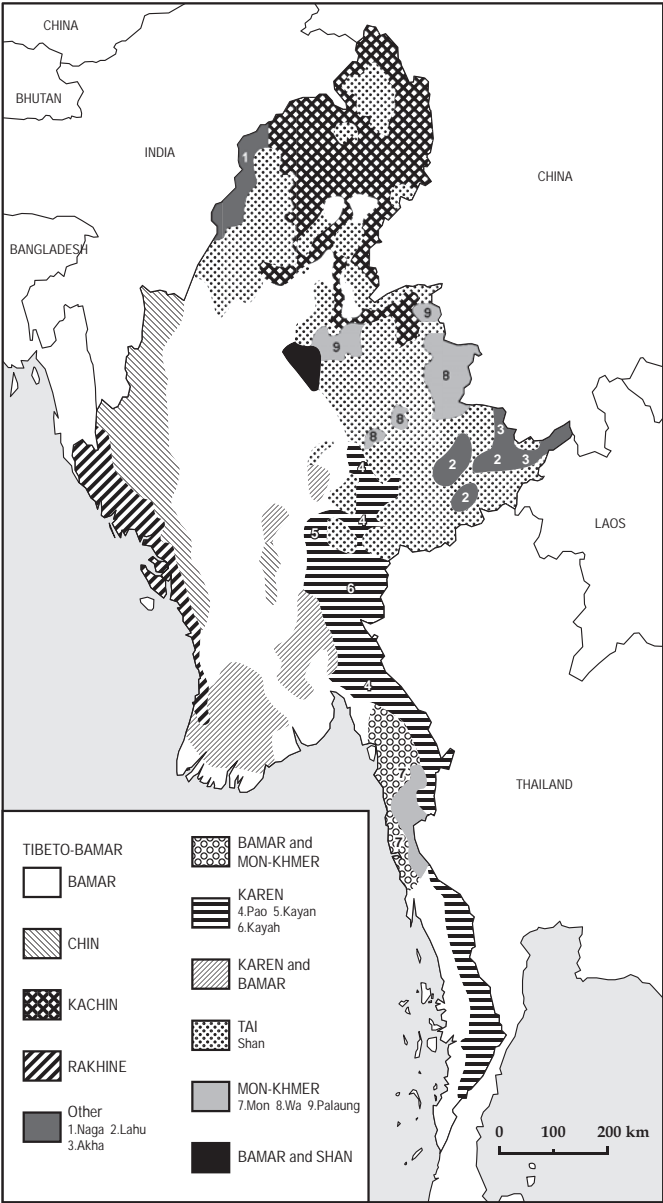


CHINA

BHUTAN

INDIA

CHINA

BANGLADESH

1

4

9

9

8

8

8

3

2

2

3

9

2

LAOS

5

4

6

4

7

THAILAND

7

TIBETO-BAMAR

BAMAR

CHIN

KACHIN

RAKHINE

Other
1.Naga 2.Lahu
3.Akha

BAMAR and
MON-KHMER

KAREN
4.Pao 5.Kayan
6.Kayah

KAREN and
BAMAR

TAI
Shan

MON-KHMER
7.Mon 8.Wa 9.Palaung

BAMAR and SHAN

0    100    200 km

Ethnicity and religion have implications in many aspects of Myanmar social and political life, and the NGO sector is no exception. Among the faith based organisations, the Christian groups seem to have developed in greater number and have achieved legitimacy, gaining power in ethnic regions where the Christian population is more numerous. Some are operating under the umbrella of a Church, but many groups do not openly display their religious identity as they worry that this could invite the antipathy of the authorities. One report noted that "Many NGOs have formed out of each of the major religions. However, data from this research clearly shows that the proportion of Christian NGOs was much larger than the proportion of Christians in the population, while the number of Buddhist NGOs was much smaller. The number of Hindu and Muslim NGOs was closer to the population ratio for those religions."[42] In the 2009 LNGOs Directory, out of 88 organisations, there are 14 faith-based Buddhist organisations and 18 Christian (including 10 Baptist, 2 Catholic and 6 non-specified). In total, 13 NGOs display explicit missionary mandates (including both Buddhist and Christian).[43]

Apart from the main urban centres where many NGOs can be found, there is a singular overlap between ethnic and religious minority concentrations and NGOs' project locations. For example, NGOs are numerous in the Kachin (the void in the northern part of Kachin is explained by the low density of population in this mountainous area) and Chin States, although these are remote and sparsely populated areas.[44] This contrasts with the situation in some other areas that happen to host greater Buddhist populations, where there is a void of projects and NGO presence[45].

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[42] Brian HEIDEL, *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar*, 2006, p. 12.

[43] LNGO directory 2009, *The directory of local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) in Myanmar*, English and Myanmar version, Yangon, 2010, 101 p.

[44] Former armed ethnic groups in these two states have signed peace agreements after years of civil war with the Myanmar Army and the states host large non-Buddhist minority populations.

[45] See www.themimu.org

**Map 2. Number of LNGOs per township (May 2010)**
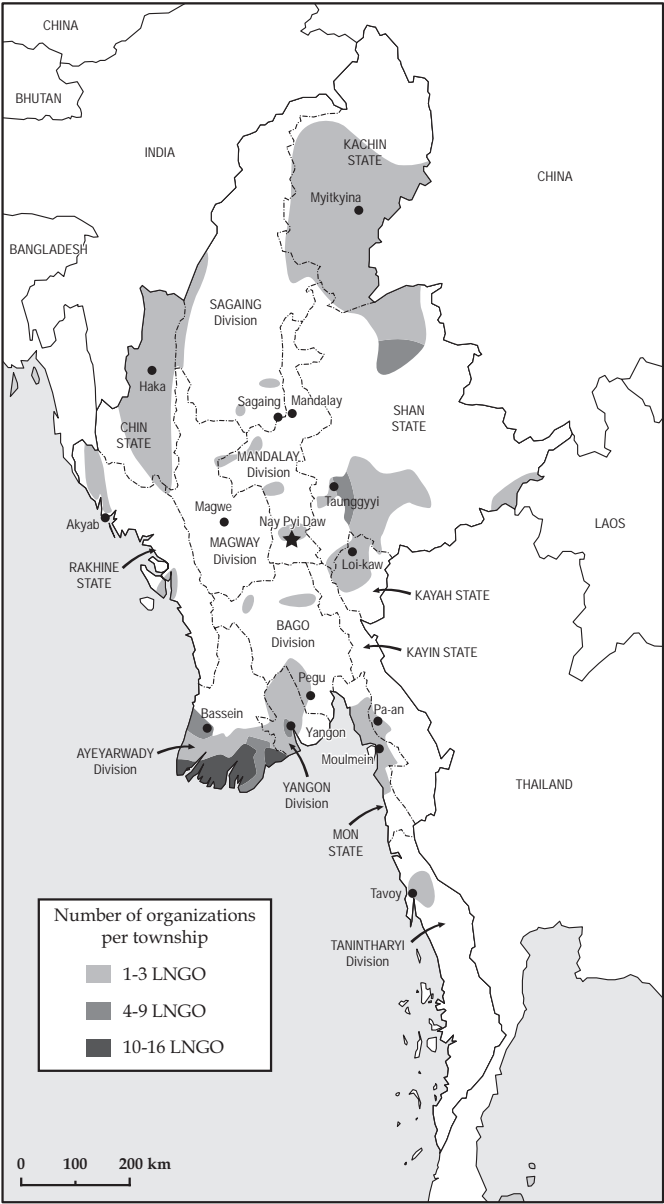


CHINA

BHUTAN

INDIA

BANGLADESH

KACHIN
STATE

CHINA

Myitkyina

SAGAING
Division

Haka

CHIN
STATE

Sagaing   Mandalay

SHAN
STATE

MANDALAY
Division

Magwe

Nay Pyi Daw

Taunggyyi

LAOS

Akyab

MAGWAY
Division

Loi-kaw

RAKHINE
STATE

KAYAH STATE

BAGO
Division

KAYIN STATE

Pegu

Pa-an

Bassein

Yangon

AYEYARWADY
Division

Moulmein

YANGON
Division

MON
STATE

THAILAND

Tavoy

TANINTHARYI
Division

Number of organizations
per township

1-3 LNGO

4-9 LNGO

10-16 LNGO

0      100      200 km

This map[46] shows that the presence of NGO's is unevenly concentrated in some parts of the territory.[47] Among the factors explaining this disparity, history of population settlement is a determining factor. In central Myanmar, social support among the members of the community was been traditionally managed by the Buddhist community; hence the presence of NGOs remains limited there. This gap has apparently been noticed by the central government that reportedly invited NGOs to work in these areas. More recently, Cyclone Nargis, that devastated the southern part of the Ayeyarwady Division, generated a large influx of funds and international attention, allowing a greater NGO presence.

Since 1988, the substantial reduction of armed insurgency in many ethnic areas has been favourable to the growth of ethnic-based organisations including ceasefire groups, political parties, and a variety of civil society organisations located in ethnic states.[48] Here is the breakdown of NGO projects per ethnic state:

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[46] This map is not comprehensive as only partial information could be collected by a few INGOs working with NGOs. Myanmar NGOs were generally not keen to share their information with the MIMU. This is reportedly due to a lack of trust and the fear to appear on a map in an area where no formal authorization to work has been granted by the GoUM.

[47] The higher concentration in the Delta is due to the response to Cyclone Nargis with many NGOs deployed at the time of the mapping exercise.

[48] "There are also a large number of community-based welfare organisations [...]. Many of these groups are associated with or operating in the space created by the ceasefires (particular in Kachin State amongst Jingphaw whose clan-based society has unusually strong community networks), but civil society is emerging even in some conflict-affected areas. The main exceptions are eastern Shan State, where few above-ground civil societies exist due, in part at least, to a hostile political culture that includes non-state actors, and the northern Rakhine State, whose mainly Muslim Rohingya population faces extreme repression by the Myanmar authorities. Ethnic civil society groups also operate in the cities and towns of central Burma" (Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73).

**Table 4: NGOs projects in ethnic states**



22% Shan
16% Kachin
6% Rakhine
17% Kayin
22% Mon
5% Kayah
12% Chin
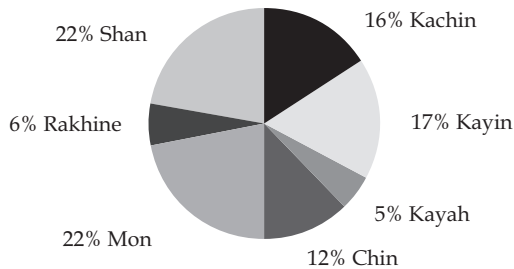
Source: CBI Directory 2004.

Whereas numerous NGOs are present in Kachin, Shan, Mon and Chin States, the number of NGOs present in Kayah and Rakhine States is lower. Nonetheless, in both of these areas, humanitarian needs are notorious. Factors of implementation of NGOs appear not to be primarily the needs of the population but their ability to access a zone that is a result of the local history. A concise overview of inception contexts of NGOs at the state level provides a sense of their diverse backgrounds and sheds light on religious and political dynamics.

Kachin State has been the cradle of an impressive number of NGOs. Case studies of two of these NGOs that grew to become among the largest (in terms of political power, scope of implementation and budget) will be developed in the second part of the present study. The two main Kachin armed groups, namely the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)'s armed group, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the New Democratic Army - Kachin (NDA-K) signed cease-fires respectively in 1994 and 1989 after negotiations to gain access to some areas of governance (i.e. border guard forces, authorization for delivering social services, etc.). After many years of armed conflict that left populations in great need, the Christian churches have been acting as the main service provider. Nowadays, more than one third of the estimated 1.4 million residents of the Kachin State are said to be

Christian[49], with a majority of Baptists. Bamar and Shan populations, generally Buddhists are also numerous there. As the southern part was historically the land of Christian missionaries, Kachin religious leaders, educated in the missionary traditions, have maintained international connections and facilitated access to funds for development and pastoral activities over the years. A degree of autonomy from the central government as well as financial support allowed religious NGOs to implement projects aimed at coping with the shortcomings of public services such as education, health. Kachin NGOs do often have a Kachin centred ideology (generally based on a strong nationalism and the resistance to the "Bamar oppressor") that is getting more radical with sensitive issues such as the massive spoliation of the natural resources by Myanmar and Chinese companies. According to interviews conducted in this region, Baptist NGOs are very influential and maintain close links with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)[50].

> *"As a Baptist, I didn't know there were Catholic NGOs here. I know there are Baptist ones. Baptists must be less organised as they are always looking for funds within the community".[51]*

The Kayin have a population of between 4 and 7 million based all over Myanmar. Their main ethnic nationalist armed group, the Karen National Union (KNU)[52] has been at war with the Myanmar government since 1949.[53] The KNU leadership largely consists of Christians, particularly Baptist and Seven Day Adventist denominations. Due to the protracted armed conflict, many Kayin went in exile and have

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[49] Mary P. CALLAHAN, *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states: devolution, occupation, and coexistence*, East-West Center Washington, Singapore, 2007, p. 43.

[50] The KIO has been active in relief activities after the signature of the cease-fire with the GoUM. They organised the first immunization program in the Kachin hilly region, resettled 10,000 refugees from China, implemented intensive forest replanting since 1997 and lead with the government an opium eradication program.

[51] Kachin Baptist Shop keeper, Interview by the author, Myitkyina, May 2011.

[52] The KNU objects to the burmanisation of the word Karen to "kayin" – as a consequence they only use the name "Karen".

[53] See Ashley SOUTH with Mali PERHULT and Nils CARTENSEN, *Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in south-east Burma*, Chatham House, Asia Programme Paper ASP PP 2010/04, London, September 2010, 72 p.

established strong relations with international NGOs and supporters. Historically, Kayin enjoyed a special status under the British rule, and at that time many converted to Christianity, so they have been able to maintain links with Christian advocacy groups based abroad, to plead their cause and attract international attention. NGOs close to the KNU are numerous in Thailand where they have better access to funds and media. In Kayin State as well as in the neighbouring Kayah State, NGOs often legitimate their actions using religious principles, also relying on strong ethnic nationalist feelings. There again, Christian groups appear to be dominating in number and influence with reported contention between the different Churches. In spite of the general perception that the majority of Kayin are Christian, the greater portion of the population is actually Buddhist. A significant proportion of the Kayin live in Bamar majority areas, including in the Ayeyarwady Division.

> *"If Kayin nationals want to do a programme, they can do it under the church umbrella [...]. They have meetings in the church compound; there they can do it! Within religious organisations it is very free. Outside, government organisations can watch".* [54]

The remote and mountainous Chin State is one of the poorest areas of the country, with a population of about 500,000 individuals the majority of whom are Christian. Infrastructure is minimal in spite of the heavy presence of the Myanmar Army since the end of the 1980s. SPDC troops have redefined the local leadership and, according to interviewees, development expectations are fulfilled predominantly by the Church. The scarcity of education opportunities has been recently highlighted out by a Special Rapporteur assigned to Myanmar by the UN[55] and the lack of an effective communications infrastructure

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[54] Older Kayin businessman, in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[55] UNITED NATIONS, *General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*, by Quintana Tomás Ojea, A/HRC/16/59, March 7, 2011, New York, paragraph No. 74: "Although the right to education begins with free, compulsory primary education, the right applies also to older children and adults. However, there appears to be a serious shortage of education opportunities above primary school. For example, there are only 49 high schools and no higher learning institution such as college or university in Chin State. High school graduates must continue their higher education

discussed at the first Parliamentary session in 2011[56]. Chronic poverty and lack of public services has resulted in migration out of the State. Local Christian communities have relations and linkages with international Churches and organisations. Youth from Chin NGOs are regularly invited to various trainings in other countries (i.e. India and Philippines) by Church groups. In spite of this challenging environment, several Chin NGOs were created and the Chin ethnicity seems to be overrepresented among employees in the NGO sector. During a large scale cyclic rat infestation in 2008, a committee called "Chin for Chin" was established to raise awareness and find solutions and resources to the cope with the losses. This committee mobilised several influential Chin active among NGOs in Yangon, and this highlighted the concentration of Chins in this sector.

> *"As NGOs and INGOs have formed, our youngsters can get jobs easily because Chins are Christians and they have learned English. This is one way in which Christianity has supported us. In the southern Chin State, every priest has to have a building for educating youngsters. As boarders, they are trained in religion and education. Good students will be sent on for further education". [57]*

The pluri-ethnic Shan State, where the majority of the population is Buddhist, has not produced such a large number of NGOs in comparison to the above mentioned ethnic states, relative to their population. For geographic reasons, some Shan NGOs are based in Thailand (the Thai national language is close to Shan language) and

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outside of Chin State, a considerable additional financial burden for parents, and thus an added barrier to educational access for Chin students".

[56] The lack of public infrastructures and services has recently been the object of questions in the first regular session of the Pyithu Hluttaw. See, among others: Anonymous, "U Ngon Moung of Haka Consitituency submitted a motion 'Transport facilitation in Chin State by the Union Government'", *The New Light of Myanmar*, 11 March 2011, p. 9, and Anonymous, ""Health Minister replies to the proposal of U Paul Hlyan Lwin of Chin State Consistency – 9" to issue Sa Ma to graduate Chin male doctors as soon as possible and send them to the region of Chin State which are in need of doctors", *The New Light of Myanmar*, 17th March 2011, p. 12.

[57] Older Chin man from southern Chin State in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak, op. cit.*, p. 62.

operate from there in sectors such as media, Human Rights advocacy, education, and health. Many members of the Shan elite in exile advocate for their cause from Western capitals. This is the case as well for the Mon who are also mainly Buddhist and can operate in Myanmar through Buddhist monastic networks, and with culture and literacy groups.

In the Rakhine State, a void of NGOs was reported in the North[58] where a Muslim minority called the Rohingya live and who are highly discriminated against by other ethnic groups in Myanmar. More recently, Rakhine NGOs seem to have developed in the Southern part of the State, based on Buddhist charitable pillars. Several NGOs specialized in environmental projects and prevention of disasters. The recent emergency operations following Cyclone Giri on the 22nd and 23rd of October 2010 showed that very few NGOs from this area were operational or prepared for large scale relief.

> *"Working with local people was a great benefit for implementation of project. We found that there are many local youths who want to do community work but no space for them. When we were distributing rice, local volunteers were very active in working with us and useful for dealing with local residents where Rakhine and Chin ethnic languages are used. They also work until late night and carried rice bags".[59]*

Foreign evangelization by Christian groups had often taken place prior to the emergence of civil society groups, and had in many cases generated the formation of NGOs in ethnic areas. The country's border areas have seen more contact between Myanmar inhabitants and foreign missionaries since the 17th century. Evangelizations took place through pastoral activities by Christian missionaries and were generally mixed

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[58] The Northern Rakhine State is partly populated with a Muslim population called "Rohingya" who are not recognized as genuine populations by the vast majority of the Myanmar people. They are not listed among the 135 national races. Only a couple of international NGOs are periodically allowed to carry out activities in the part of the country. For more information, see Francis ARCARO and Lois DESAINE, *La junte birmane contre "l'ennemi intérieur" : répression ethnique et exil des réfugiés rohingya*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2008, 230 p.

[59] Bamar NGO worker from Yangon, about his experience of work in the Cyclone Giri affected area, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

with social projects. This evangelization carried foreign norms and values to the local populations. Later, after years of war between ethnic groups and the state, the role of engaged religious NGOs to alleviate suffering might have created favourable conditions for faith-based organisations' creation and development. Today, their ability to deal effectively with internationals is clear. As noted by Martin Smith: "In Christian communities especially, the understanding and coordination with international NGOs has often been easier to establish."[60] Not only is the contact with missionaries a strength of Christian NGOs, but more so are the broader international connections and greater education opportunities.

Buddhist groups active in social work can be found all over the country. Like the Christians, some Buddhist monasteries have been established in remote areas of the ethnic states where they host and provide access to education for orphans. One Buddhist missionary organisation named *Sitagu* collaborated with Christian communities in the Cyclone Nargis affected areas. They gained exposure to international aid agencies. In addition, Buddhist organisations are traditionally specialized in development and often play a pivotal role in transmitting cultural heritage. For example, culture and literacy groups promoting education of local languages and traditions are often Buddhist. Interestingly, these organisations were not shut down during the socialist period, but were heavily monitored and constituted of government staff.

> *"Are we a NGO? Are there more NGOs nowadays? How could I say? I don't know about the Bamar side but, for sure in minority ethnic groups, more than hundred and the number is growing. But for our Christian society, all I can say is that before we never knew we were a NGO, because this is a very broad term. You can do what you want and call it as you like! For example, when I was young, we were active in the "Baptist Youth Fellowship", this was exactly like a NGO. We were a small group but we did something for our community. Today I am still organising some of these groups, but in Yangon.*

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[60] Martin SMITH, "Ethnic Conflict and the Challenge of civil society in Burma", in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

> *These groups gather roughly 150 youths. We call it English Learning Group and we are hosted by some international umbrellas but our discussions go much beyond just learning English. It is about critical thinking. When the term "NGO" became much more popular, we didn't apply it, but others did. This also came to the Buddhist groups. Of course, some [religious] groups have their own services, but they don't call them NGOs".[61]*

In isolated geographic areas, traditionally more difficult to access for the central authorities, the history, culture, religion differ from the Bamar dominated mainland. In parts of central Myanmar, where the majority of the population is Buddhist, and have not been exposed to such external influences, the term NGO itself might be alien. Supporting the poorest members of the community is the duty of the monastery thanks to in-kind and cash donations made by followers. According to some Buddhist NGOs values, donations doled out to those in need in the community (အလှူ, *Ahlu* in Myanmar language) with the best of intentions, as a final objective that is for the donor to acquire spiritual merit, and this is not always compatible with international donors' requirements and values. As these groups are generally not familiar with international standards required by donors, they struggle to meet them. Some values even appear to be contrary to Buddhist principles, for example, an interviewee highlighted that Buddhist NGOs were few in number because Buddhist monks are not supposed to record good deeds or take any kind of pride from their compassionate actions, hence they are not used to documenting and reporting project results. He thought it could be delicate to request Buddhist monks to report in detail on their activities, capturing their impact on the beneficiaries and critically evaluate it, as donors would expect. This explanation remains superficial and there might be many other factors that would explain why Buddhist NGOs often remain disconnected from mainstream channels of international aid.

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[61] Young Kachin working for a NGO, interview by the author, Yangon, February 2011.

In spite of their social influence, Buddhist NGOs remain generally unconnected to the international community and are mainly funded by their community of followers, at the local level. Because some of its members have organised and supported opposition movements against the military junta, the *Sangha*[62] has been under close scrutiny for the last thirty years.[63] In addition, as noted by Smith when comparing the Christian groups' work: "By contrast, the involvement of Buddhist groups in this deeply religious land has been more limited. Partly this is due to the greater political problems in the country at large, where a number of monks and monasteries have been involved in anti-government protests since 1988; thus the organisations and practice of the Buddhist *Sangha* remains a sensitive issue. But partly too, there is no tradition for Buddhist monks in Burma to become involved in the same array as NGO and development projects as today exists in, for example, neighbouring Thailand".[64]

Myanmar NGOs, motivated by the same will to bring about what they consider as positive societal and political change, interact with the government to gain official support, while attempting to maintain their independence in a system where the state aspires to a monopoly of power. In ethnic areas, where the relation to central authority and repartition of power are complex, religious, ethnic groups and NGOs have been taken on various humanitarian and development roles. In the national context, the history of NGOs is characterised by fluctuating relationships with the government that resulted in alternating periods of support, tolerance and retaliation. This has also resulted in the current strategy adopted by most NGOs, to enter the politics of silence.

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[62] The *Sangha* (သံဃာ) is the community of the Buddhist monks.
[63] Zunetta LIDELL, "No Room to Move: Legal Constraints on Civil Society in Burma", in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
[64] Martin SMITH in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…*, *op. cit.*, p. 15-53.

# 2 - Religion and ethnicity in Myanmar NGOs: Historical factors and contemporary facts

> *"Sometimes I see the help that comes through international organisations. It comes maybe because the local organisation's mission and vision coincides with their political or religious interests. If your organisation is based on church or religion, OK. But if your organisation has a free base, then it is better not to be coloured by that kind of thing [...]. Sometimes there are other groups that would like to help us, but they also want to have some kind of influence. I want to see pure intentions. A pure secular opportunity... [but] People want to know, who is the person behind you?"[65]*

The authoritarian nature of power exercised by the colonial government as well as after the parliamentary period from the 1960s shaped the operational context and had impacts on the identity of Myanmar NGOs. After an almost exhaustive interdiction to exist, NGOs were reformed and developed in a coercive system, where since the early 1990s they often highlighted the shortcomings of the central authorities. The over representation of ethnic and religious minorities, who largely consider themselves as discriminated against and marginalised by the centralisation process, is a likely catalyst for opposition ideas within the contemporary NGO sector. It is worth questioning the motivation of the government in tolerating them at the price of their silence.

An overview of the history of NGOs in Myanmar will shed some light on the roots of their religious and ethnic identities. There have been three waves of development of modern, professional NGOs: the cease-fires in the late nineties, the discrete emergence of new political ideas aiming at setting a just political system in the early 2000s and finally the boom generated in the aftermath of the Cyclone Nargis. After describing the initial struggle of NGOs, we will turn to an examination of the case of the largest deployment in NGOs in the Myanmar history.

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[65] Young Kayin female INGO employee in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak, op. cit.*, p. 67.

## 2.1 - From the first modern professional NGOs to the emergence of a Myanmar civil society

During the colonial period, religious organisations could be established under the Patriotic Act. The first established NGOs in the second half of the 19th century in Burma were Evangelists.[66] The very first one was the Kayin Baptist Home Mission Churches Association that was used as an umbrella by a few organisations such as the Yangon Kayin Baptist Women Association created in Yangon in 1857. Their objective was to spread Baptist faith. The Myanmar Baptist Churches Union, which was then called "The Rangoon Myanmar Baptist Association", was established in Thonze, Bago division in 1860. The creation of numerous regional and national Baptist associations followed over the years. The Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) was established in 1865, by the first Baptist Missionary couple that arrived in 1813 in Myanmar. MBC's mission is: "To spread and propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ and labour for the ministry and the growth of the Church in Myanmar and throughout the world". Then in 1910, the Kachin Baptist Convention was formed, soon followed by the Kayin Baptist Convention in 1913. These organisations are today active in various sectors (ranging from HIV/AIDS to relief, support to opium cultivators in the Golden Triangle, etc.). In 1914, the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) was established by foreign missionaries. Their main goal was: "To unify all the Christian Churches in Myanmar". Today this organisation is still involved in the promotion of the faith and implements educational and social activities. It is one of the rare NGOs often cited for having an official registration with the government.

The reported first non-Christian organisation was formed in 1906 in Yangon, called the Young Men's Buddhist Association. It embodied the growing nationalist anti-colonialist values that spread along with increasing discontent with the colonial regime. The Burmese nationalist movement that would lead to Independence established its legitimacy through its Buddhist identity.

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[66] LNGO directory 2009, *ibid.*

In the middle of the twentieth century, a number of free dispensaries were opened that could be labelled as the predecessors of health NGOs. They were often managed by retired civil servants and had relatively close relations with government officials (authorising their existence while the context was not conducive to such initiatives). This is the case of the Jivitadana Sangha Hospital, a free dispensary established by a retired commissioner U Ba Aye in 1940 offering in-patient accommodation for monks and nuns.[67] In 1937, the Muslim Free Hospital was created in downtown Yangon. In 1956, the Guru Nanak free Dispensary and Eye Hospital opened under Hindu management. According to the mandate of these organisations, health care was provided based on the needs of the patients, regardless of religion or ethnic origins.

Several education-focused NGOs were established during the same period. These organisations, often Buddhist, were set up by individuals or groups close to the government. Under Bamar leadership, they had clearly stated missionary objectives, as a response to the evangelization that missionaries had conducted in ethnic areas. This was the case with the Nan Oo Education and Parahita School (1958) whose mission is "Buddha's teachings must spread and reach the remote areas of every state and division of Myanmar through educating young nationalities". The Patauk Shwewar Monastic Primary School (1958) and the Pyinnya Theikpan Monastic School (1958-1959) also opened in this period with the objective to improve the quality of education in line with the views of the central government. The Pyinnya Tazaung Association was established in 1952 by the retired Deputy Education Commissioner U Tun Aung, with the support of some employees from the Department of Education. The emergence of these Buddhist associations is a concrete expression of the post-Independence nationalist movement.

Muslim and Hindu religions have not been as productive in creating NGOs as the Christians or Buddhists. They also started to use this type of social organisation later, with a tendency to focus on health

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[67] Cherry THEIN, "Jivitadana Hospital marks 70th anniversary", *Myanmar Times*, May 17-23, 2010.

and education. Their later inception might be due to the fact that they were not comfortable or familiar with the NGO model and because there were more restrictions on people of Indian ethnicity at the beginning of the 20th century as Bamar increasingly asserted their majority influence. The first reported Muslim NGO was the Muslim Free Hospital and the Medical Relief Society, registered in 1937, while the All Myanmar Hindu Federation was created in 1953.

When General Ne Win oversaw the implementation of the doctrine of the "Burmese way to socialism", NGO space dramatically diminished. According to Steinberg: "Civil society died under the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP); perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered".[68] All political dissent was then crushed and mistrust spread through the population due to constant repression, intensive surveillance, and constant fear. Only welfare and religious organisations were allowed to maintain their activities as long as they kept far from politics and maintained a low profile. In rare cases new organisations were formed during this period, but they had to demonstrate they were not a threat to the BSSP and their autonomy was severely limited with much greater scrutiny than during the colonial period.

Under the post 1990 regime, called the State Law and Order Reconciliation Council (SLORC), the few NGOs that survived the BSSP had to maintain a low profile and their ability to expand was marginal. Nonetheless, an expanded space appeared in some limited geographic areas, mostly in the cities. Later in the 1990s, it would also be the case in some ceasefire areas. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) was founded on 15th September 1993.[69] It remains the biggest GONGO in the country, with over 22 million reported members including students, civil servants and business men.[70] Although all members are not necessary active or willing, the power of

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[68] David I. STEINBERG, "A void in Myanmar" in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…, op. cit.*, p. 8.

[69] See NETWORK FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT, *USDA: How the white shirts will become the new face of Burma's dictatorship*, Mae Sariang, 2006, 90 p.

[70] See, among others: INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *The role of Civil Society*, Asia Report 27, Bangkok-Brussels, 6 December 2001, 37 p.

USDA is not negligible due its capacity to mobilise large groups of people. A vast majority of its members seem to take part in activities as they are afraid to be reported as opponents of the regime if they do not. They also seek to gain access to some protection in return. The USDA mandate was to support the activities and policies of the military and the Chairman of the SLORC, including social welfare activities. The USDA along with local authorities exercise some surveillance on the population. As a consequence, NGOs had to maintain good relations with USDA leaders, who are invited to official gatherings such as school opening ceremonies for example. In Preparation for the 2010 General Elections, the USDA became a pro-regime political party, called the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). It won with a large majority; up to 95 % of the votes in the Bamar areas and around 60 % in ethnic areas. Generally, apart from the Red Cross and some medical organisations such as the Myanmar Medical Association (MAA), the interactions between GONGOs and NGOs are limited.



USDA logo.

Since the early 1990s, the government progressively allowed NGOs and some International NGOs to resume working in Myanmar, especially in the health sector such as World Vision and Médecins Sans Frontière Nederland after 1991. In 1995, according to Martin Smith[71], there were at least 15 international NGOs in the country, some operating without any official authorisation but still tolerated by the government.[72] These INGOs were invited to work in targeted geographic areas, mainly in ethnic regions, which were perceived as having special and more acute needs. "So are there any lessons in this for international NGOs with a working interest in Burma? Certainly there are – especially in ethnic minority areas and for those proponents of civil society who support the notion of institutional pluralism, human rights and community bridge-building as ways to encourage and stabilise reform"[73]. For Myanmar NGOs that have generally maintained their relief programmes in ethnic conflict areas, cease-fires offered a favourable context to extend the scale and scope of their activities in health, education and support for resettlement.[74] In 1996, Steinberg wrote that: "The immediate future for civil society remains bleak".[75] But, unexpectedly, the late nineties created more NGO space. NGOs created during this period enjoyed legitimacy with local populations, were recognised by the government and hence became key players. In many ethnic areas, people enjoyed a greater freedom to associate than in the previous decades, which has led to a growth in the number of NGOs. Many cease-fire organisations and religious groups were launched while

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[71] Martin SMITH in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

[72] Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Association Fancois-Xavier Bagnoud, Australian Red Cross, Bridge Asia Japan (BAJ), Care International, Groupe de Recherche et d'Échange Technologique (GRET), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Eye Bank, International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), Leprosy Mission International, Médecins du Monde, Population Services International, Sasakawa Foundation, Save the Children UK, World Concern according to Martin SMITH, *ibid.*

[73] Martin SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[74] Cease-fires were signed then with Wa, Kachin, Palaung and Pa-O armed groups.

[75] David I. STEINBERG, "A void in Myanmar" in BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in Burma…*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

existing organisations became more vocal. They carried out relief and development projects.

The 1988 demonstrations, followed by the 1996 student movements led to the departure of many political activists, student leaders and intellectual elites. Many of them established groups in neighbouring Thailand, which became a staging ground to launch their campaigns calling for the junta to leave power and restore democracy. In each of the states located on the Thai-Burmese border (namely: Kayin, Kayah, Mon and Shan States), cross border relief was organised by exiled Myanmar nationals and international supporters. Many of these groups are Christian and they all have stated political agendas. The exile groups played a critical role in denouncing human rights violations and drawing international attention to the plight of the Myanmar people. Some members of political organisations linked to Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), or armed ethnic and political groups inside the country have joined NGOs to produce a wealth of reports detailing human rights abuses. They also engaged in lobbying foreign governments and advocating for isolation of the regime, through economic sanctions. These exiled NGOs do not attempt to change the political system progressively but want to overthrow the government. They used to criticise any form of engagement with the government whereas Myanmar NGOs based inside the country increasingly consider that pragmatism is more efficient. Most NGOs in Myanmar envisage political change through dialog and the progressive establishment of a new system. As a consequence, whereas both exiled and insiders' NGOs have the common long term objective of a more inclusive and fairer political system, there is deep disagreement on the most appropriate approach to change the system that has resulted in a long-standing schism.

The early 2000s set a context more conducive to the development of NGOs and civil society on the whole became progressively more organised. New ideas germinated in the minds and some leaders wanted to be involved in political change in a quiet way, and created their own NGOs. More organisations were authorised by a government that might have seen the advantages in allowing these groups to operate (for

example, an improved image internationally, balancing ethnic tensions in some cases, and saving money). External factors, not directly related to the government's willingness to allow NGOs, set up a new landscape. The first of which, was the fall of General Khin Nyunt in 2004, followed by the dismantling of the Military Intelligence (MI) services that never recovered their initial ability to paralyze masses with fear. This left some space for NGOs to carry out their activities with looser monitoring. Individuals who were not identified as potential trouble makers by authorities felt less pressure in their daily life; minders disappeared from tea-shops, tailing became rare, as did the house checks in the night. As a consequence, a wider range of subjects became safe to discuss in public and the confidence to speak up also increased. Furthermore, since the move of the capital from Yangon to Nay Pyi Daw in November 2005, the presence of military in the streets of Yangon, where most of NGOs headquarters are located, is obviously less visible, leaving more room for gatherings in urban centres. This led to the emergence of increased mutual trust between individuals and groups. In ethnic areas, where cease-fires were maintained, NGOs could work in broader geographic areas on increasingly ambitious projects. Finally, the remarkable amplification of communication means, such as the spread of internet and mobile phones, enabled more information sharing and mobilisation.

With less fear and more room to foster their new initiatives, NGOs started mushrooming. Interviews show that the latest generation of NGOs is not based on religious ideals and maintain some distance from cease-fire groups. They generate new ideas, being more openly politically engaged when they can find safe space to make their voices heard. In spite of the 2007 *Sangha* demonstrations, the disappointment with the results of the referendum in 2008 and the 2010 elections, most of the interviewed NGO leaders said that they were optimistic for the future. They believe that the space allowed for NGOs is increasing. This is the context in which Cyclone Nargis hit the county and the Ayeyarwady Division became the theatre of the biggest emergency response ever in Myanmar. The aftermath of the Cyclone was favourable to the development and the multiplication of NGOs at an unprecedented level.

## 2.2 - Cyclone Nargis: disaster or opportunity for Myanmar NGOs?

*"Under-appreciated positive legacy of the cyclone response: the development of a group of new, truly independent and experienced civil society organisations in Burma, which now seek to use their skills to address other humanitarian challenges in the country."*[76]

*"In 2002, an INGO employee told me 'Burma seems very sexy' in the eyes of the international community. Of course, it was. But today, it is the sexiest! As most people would say, Nargis was the strongest force for people to emerge. Among NGOs, you had relief groups, food distribution groups, etc. This didn't exist before. After that, it mushroomed. Another good example is the relief operation in Cyclone Giri. Not many NGOs were known there before. There civil society organisations would have worked in a traditional way, with low profile on sectors such as funeral services, education of the local language and culture and others. So the cyclone supported the creation of NGOs. When we go in Sittwe now, we meet here and there people who want to tell us about their various projects for the community. It created a push for the civil society to come NGOs!"* [77]

It is now a cliché in Yangon to state that the Cyclone Nargis tragedy also enabled the emergence of Myanmar civil society. The modalities and implications of faith and ethnicity of the humanitarian NGOs deployed after the disaster provide an illustration of the stakes on the ground. Cyclone Nargis struck the Ayeyarwady Delta on the night of 2nd to 3rd May 2008, devastating the rice bowl of the country. Populated mostly with Bamar and "Pwo" Kayin, this region did not benefit from much interest from the central government since Independence, except for pockets of KNU insurgency that were wiped out by the Myanmar Army in the nineties. Due to the success of the "Four cuts policy" designed at cutting supply to armed groups initiated under Ne Win,

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[76] HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, "I want to help my own people", State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis, New York, May 2010, 102 p.
[77] Senior Myanmar NGO employee, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

once the KNU were routed out of the area, it remained relatively peripheral although geographically close to Yangon.[78]

**Table 5: Evolution of the total number of NGOs
before and after the Cyclone Nargis**
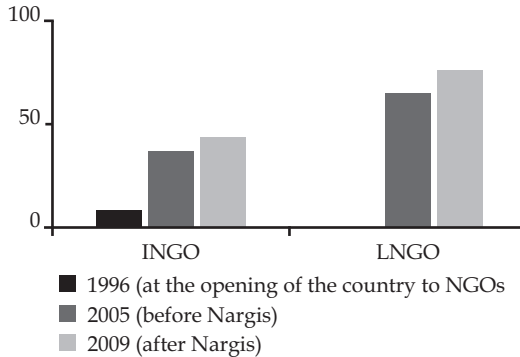


Source: BURMA CENTER NETHERLANDS and
TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, *Strengthening civil society in
Burma, possibilities and dilemmas for international NGOs*, 1999; CBI directories.

The above table shows the constant growth of the NGO sector since 1996. Whereas INGOs are generally more vocal, they appear to be fewer in number. LNGOs creations and official recognition occurred later and at a slower pace at first but grew quicker in the 2000s. It is worth noting that numerous post-Nargis NGOs didn't register officially and their boom is in reality much larger than the above presented figures.

Before Nargis, very few NGOs were working in the Ayeyarwaddy Division,[79] this included Metta Development Foundation and a few

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[78] The four cut strategy aimed at isolating population hosting insurgent of four items 'food, finance, intelligence and recruitment' to weaken the rebellions. See Patricia HYNES, *Country Guide: Burma*, Forced Migration Organisation, 2003, 38 p.

[79] According to the Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) Directory there were a total of 41 development projects in the whole Division in 2004. These projects ranked from funeral services to English classes, or support to farmers to improve crop harvests (LNGO Directory 2004, *The directory of local non-governmental organisations in Myanmar*, English and Myanmar version, Yangon, 2005, 162 p.).

Christian churches organisations. They mainly implemented livelihoods and health projects. Following the cyclone, the number of NGOs working there exploded[80], as international funds poured in the country. Most of these NGOs had no experience in relief and none had ever had to face a large scale disaster. They were also new to the cultural and ethnic context of the Ayeyarwaddy Divison.

After Cyclone Nargis, international aid agencies' perceptions of local NGOs slowly shifted from being suspicious of their possible alignment with the regime or radical opposition forces, to consider them a worthy source of local knowledge. NGOs played the strategic role of intermediaries between local groups and beneficiaries, as they channelled aid when International NGOs' access was restricted. Their work was less visible as they usually did not flag banners at each project site and were absent from formal coordination meetings lead by International NGOs and UN agencies. NGOs tended to judge these meetings as non-inclusive (because they were conducted in English) and time-consuming. NGOs' presence was tolerated by the local authorities without any official authorisation, under the condition that their efforts remained very low key (no logo, limited communication about the project, no advocacy). As a consequence, capturing NGOs' inputs as well as their social and political impacts was relatively challenging, however, some trends could be identified. For example, according to various International NGO reports, their response generated the reaffirmation or the redistribution of pre-existing social and political powers at the village level. Village leaders ended up playing the role of intermediaries with aid providers. This re-legitimised their leadership position and strengthened it. In other villages, previously powerful individuals passed away and new leaders had to be identified. Women's roles significantly changed in some villages as they suddenly became formally involved in decision-making processes where they were only privately consulted by the men of their families before.[81]

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[80] 28 out of the 81 recorded NGOs in the CBI Directory in 2009 (LNGO Directory 2009, *op. cit.*).
[81] TRIPARTITE CORE GROUP, *Post-Nargis Social Impact Monitoring: June 2009*, Yangon, 2009, p. 43-44.

# The NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

Volume XVI, Number 22　　　　　6th Waxing of Kason 1370 ME　　　　　Saturday, 10 May, 2008

**To approve the State Constitution is a national duty of the entire people today. Let us all cast "Yes" vote in the national interest.**

| Four political objectives | Four economic objectives | Four social objectives |
|---|---|---|
| * Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order<br>* National reconsolidation<br>* Emergence of a new enduring State Constitution<br>* Building of a new modern developed nation in accord with the new State Constitution | * Development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well<br>* Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system<br>* Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad<br>* The initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples | * Uplift of the morale and morality of the entire nation<br>* Uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character<br>* Uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit<br>* Uplift of health, fitness and education standards of the entire nation |

## Lt-Gen Myint Swe provides food, medicines to storm-hit regions

YANGON, 9 May—Lt-Gen Myint Swe of the Ministry of Defence comforted storm victims in Twantay, Kawhmu and Kungyangon townships this morning.

At Yangon International Airport, he inspected relief items donated by local and international wellwishers.

Accompanied by Minister for National Planning and Economic Development U Soe Tha and Deputy Minister for Health Dr Mya Oo, Lt-Gen Myint Swe left for Twantay by helicopter, carrying relief aid for the victims. He supervised unloading of the relief items onto vehicles.

While in Twantay, Lt-Gen Myint Swe inspected provision of health care services to the victims at the relief camps and presented food and medicines to them.

On arrival at Kawhmu, they were welcomed by Minister for Energy Brig-Gen Lun Thi. At the relief camps, they consoled the victims and provided food and medicines.

At Latkhokkon Model Village of Kungyangon Township, they comforted the storm victims at the relief camp of Latkhokkon BEHS and presented relief supplies to them. Later, Lt-Gen Myint Swe and party arrived back in Yangon. — MNA

*Lt-Gen Myint Swe presents relief aid to storm victims in Twantay Township.—* MNA

*Lt-Gen Myint Swe comforts storm victims of Kawhmu Township.—* MNA

**Emergence of the State Constitution is the duty of all citizens of Myanmar Naing-Ngan.**

Officials' role is highlighted but the disaster should not eclipse the coming referendum for the Constitution. (*The New Light of Myanmar*, "Special Issue: Nargis", Vol. XVI, No. 22, May 10, 2008)

တွေ့သမျှလူကို ဆရာခေါ်နေရတယ်။ အန်ဂျီအိုအဖွဲ့အစည်းတွေရဲ့ ရုံးကို သွားတော့လည်း ဂိတ်စောင့်ကအစ ဆရာခေါ်ရတယ်။ ဘာဖြစ်လို့လဲဆိုတော့ ကိုယ့်ရွာအကျိုးအတွက်ပဲဆိုပြီး ခေါ်ရတာပေါ့။

(လယ်သမားတစ်ဦး၊ ဘိုကလေးမြို့နယ်)

We have to call 'Sir' to all. We call 'Sir' even to the security guard of NGO offices. We endure it for the sake of village's own benefit.

(A Farmer, Bogale Township)

ရပ်ရွာလူထု၏ ရင်ဖွင့်သံများ

Source: ACTION Aid, အလှူရှင်အဖွဲ့အစည်းများသို့ ရပ်ရွာလူထု၏ ရင်ဖွင့်သံများ [Voices of Communities towards aid agencies], Yangon, 2010

Religious organisations traditionally play an important role in providing social services and have their own specialties; Buddhist monasteries provide education, churches provide early childhood care and support for livelihoods, for example. In a humanitarian setting as well, they play a crucial role, especially in conflict affected areas.[82] After Cyclone Nargis hit, churches and monasteries provided relief. Places of worship that had not been destroyed were made available as public shelters and distribution points. Religious leaders became focal points to interact with outside aid providers and access financial and material support. Religious organisations based in urban centres collected funds and organised transportation to the villages. Different religious NGOs ran large scale relief operations and collaborated with each other for the first time. This has been described by NGOs and international observers as a positive, albeit unexpected, outcome of this humanitarian response. The Myanmar government echoed this idea through the Tripartite Core Group made up of the United Nations, Association of South East Asian Nations and the then Government of the Union of Myanmar: "Many Buddhist monks from all over the country also went to the affected difficult to access areas and disbursed substantial quantities of cash and relief materials to the villagers using the local monastery as base. Likewise, religious leaders and members of all other faiths in the country contributed substantially to the relief efforts".[83] Local actors also congratulated each other for the collaboration between groups. "We didn't care if people were Kayin or Buddhist or Myanmar, we made no distinction. Before Nargis there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in the house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people didn't want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit. The response to Nargis crossed all ethnic lines". [84]

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[82] For instance, in South Eastern Myanmar where the Christian population suffered from food shortages, Churches have been supporting IDPs with relief distributions.
[83] TRIPARTITE CORE GROUP, *Post-Nargis Joint Assessment: July 2008*, Yangon, 2008, p. 40.
[84] CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Myanmar civil society's response to Cyclone Nargis*, Phnom Penh, 2009, p. 34.

THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

NGOs employees, originally from other parts of the country, went through an unprecedented cultural shock. A Christian Chin employee newly appointed manager in Lapputta explained to the author how difficult it was at first for him and his team to adapt. He did not know how to address to the Buddhist monks. His organisation had previously assigned him to take contact with some Kayin pastors to collect information and be accepted by the local community. He then found out, that he would have to deal with the local Buddhist community too. Delta inhabitants were not used to meet visitors from other states of the country.

> *"Although they could all speak Myanmar, it was difficult to understand each other's accent. We felt a high level of suspicion at the beginning. The other employees were also feeling homesick and I had to persuade my team to stay. It took about four weeks for them to feel accepted by local communities".*[85] This NGO's first action has been to rebuild a temporary church. Meetings to assess needs were held in the church. *"Discussions on aid started only after singing prayers".*[86]

The use of religious connections to channel aid to the affected community, although widely spread and reported as logistically efficient, was problematic in some religiously heterogeneous villages.[87] While the early weeks and months after the Cyclone were perceived as a fruitful collaborative time of support between various ethnic groups and faith groups, some tensions were detected as time moved on from the disaster and aid resources dried up. The traditional ethnic and religious conflict dynamics were in some cases exacerbated by what was seen as unequal access to aid. A few cases of faith-based targeted aid creating tensions have been reported. Most of the religious organisations

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[85] These employees were generally working out of their native region for the first time and were probably recruited less for their skills than for their religious orientations in most of the observed cases.

[86] Interview by the author, Yangon, October 2010.

[87] According to an international consultant working for a faith-based NGO after the Cyclone, Christianity was perceived by Buddhist inhabitants as a "foreign religion".

recruited their employees from their own community[88]. In addition, some practices of religious groups, not necessarily meaningful for the protagonists, carried strong exclusionary messages to others. For example, in a few villages, people reported that they did not dare to go to distributions held in worship places of other religions although the organisation processing the distribution claimed that any villager was entitled to receive aid items, regardless of faith or ethnicity.

In many villages, the monastery or church was the most solid building of the village and was used as a shelter, storage and distribution point. To access outsiders' support, those affected had two options: either to stay passively with the hope of being identified when NGOs deployed their employees in the region or to proactively use their own social and religious networks to attract attention to their needs. Most of the religious leaders opted for the second option. In some cases, collaboration with groups sharing the same faith enabled the development of closer relations between NGOs and their beneficiaries, enabling more information sharing and more involvement in aid delivery, hence reducing aid dependency syndromes.

Aid delivery was partly conditioned by NGOs' ability to collect funds. Christian groups had developed more expertise in fund raising, for the historical reasons mentioned in the previous section. This can be a factor for their wider and longer term presence in the recovery phase. As there was no centralised information system and most of the local actors operated under the radar, international donors often used traditional channels and networks. In practice, more funds were channelled to Christian NGOs without the donors' community full awareness of the complex interethnic and religious dynamics at work, potentially exacerbating antagonisms. Actors' positions can be contra-dictory. According to the Archbishop of Yangon:

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[88] When interviewed by the authors, bigger-sized NGOs would systematically deny such practices, though it appears that smaller NGOs – who are less exposed to international norms such as ethnic inclusiveness – admit giving priorities to those whom they consider as "their own people", feeding mistrust between religious groups at local level.

*"The Baptists work for the Baptists, the Anglicans work for the Anglicans, but the Catholic Church works for all. Our Catholic people do not get aid form others. Our aid workers were human, so human that their own people were left out, too busy to help others. This is one issue for the respect of the Rights to dignity for the Church followers. We need more regular cooperation with NGOs, we need to have the systems in place. After Cyclone Giri, many NGOs rushed there to get a place. There were some catholic villages, although picked during the coordination meetings by seven, non-Catholic, NGOs. I visited one month later and our people were still waiting for the necessary items (rice, water, etc.). This is what I see."[89]*



Christian Kayin ladies in their village after Nargis.
Source: Photo by the author, Ayeyarwady Division, May 2009.[90]

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[89] Public speech, Yangon, March 2011.
[90] This picture has been taken in a Kayin Christian community affected by Cyclone Nargis where Baptist NGOs distributed food and first aid in the church (interestingly, it was the first building to be repaired after the Cyclone). In surrounding villages, Buddhist Bamar

With time, some tasks fell back to religious groups' responsibility depending on their traditional approach and areas of expertise. "In the aftermath of the cyclone, all kinds of religious leaders were involved in the aid effort. A year later, as the immediate emergency had dwindled, Buddhist monks appeared to have focused on providing support for education and other realms. Christian and Muslims religious leaders continued to be involved in day-to-day recovery activities".[91] The withdrawal of the monks from rehabilitation work is presented as a fullfilment of their tradtional role of "education providers". According to the Tripartite Core Group: "This is consistent with Buddhist teaching: monks are expected to separate themselves as much as possible form the secular affairs, something that, in the absence of extraordinary circumstances such as a cyclone emergency, would circumscribe day-to-day involvement in aid-related activities but allow for involvement in education, a realm in which they continued to be involved".[92]

Interfaith, and to a certain extent interethnic, work established temporary bridges over ethnic and religious gaps, at a small scale and there is no indication that such collaboration could be reproducible at this scale elsewhere in the county. More prevailing was the risk to expand cultural and religious divisions by international actors' lack of understanding of the conflict sensitivities. As noted by Smith, 15 years ago: "If aid is given only to one sector, faction or group within such culturally diverse communities, not only can this politically, socially, or religiously divisive, it could actually fuel even deeper grievances and misunderstandings. This has been privately acknowledged within many ethnic minority communities and, in the longer term"[93] and Cyclone Nargis related aid showed that progress remain to be seen. Although the

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interviewees expressed their frustration as aid was at first delivered exclusively to Christian minority community by faith-based organization channels. The picture is taken from the village pier that is the main entry point of the village. Obviously, no visitor can ignore the villagers' religious orientation.

[91] The TCG was the body mandated to coordinate aid by the Myanmar government between June 2008 and July 2010. It was composed of members from the Association of South East Asian Nations, the United Nations and Myanmar Government.

[92] TRIPARTITE CORE GROUP, *Post-Nargis Social Impact Monitoring: June 2009*, Yangon, 2009, p. xi.

[93] Martin SMITH, "Ethnic Conflict and the Challenge of civil society in Burma", *ibid.*

Cyclone will last in the memories as a huge tragedy, the relief operation provided more long term space for NGOs in the country. As such, it is a pivotal date in the contemporary history of Myanmar civil society.

Between the repression of the regime and the ethnic and religious complications, NGOs developed and grew despite these constraints, making them somewhat vocal, with varying degrees of closeness to the regime. Voicing the concerns of the silent majority, and more particularly minority groups, they nonetheless developed an identity over two decades and became influential players in local, regional and national politics. The NGOs that have the freedom to verbally articulate their long term agendas are very few. Nonetheless, political agendas can be inferred within this silence. This is what we will argue in the following part, with focusing on NGOs' modalities of intervention, personal testimonies of engaged individuals as well as tangible political impact.

# Myanmar NGOs:
# support to the regime
# or roots of the opposition?

*"Today what people are not happy with is injustice. There is an institutional collapse of morality. Bribery and corruption are everywhere. People are not happy with the education system; they do not want the students to bribe their teachers anymore. There is the need for a 're-moralisation' and justice in the society".[94]*

After the previous analysis of NGOs' main characteristics and history, this section will explore their modalities of interactions with the government as well as their capacity to influence it at local, regional and national levels.

Since the mid nineties, NGOs have provided a venue for individuals who find themselves in disagreement with the political, economic and social systems in place and have decided to engage in activities beyond the state's authority to bring about what they consider as positive changes. Instead of tackling issues in a confrontational manner with the regime, they decided to use alternative methods to influence policies. In rural townships where the surveillance was high and activities are almost systematically reported to the military intelligence, it meant working on non-threatening sectors to constantly appear docile and

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[94] Chin NGO Director, Interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

compliant with government rules.[95] In remote and cease-fire areas where the local armed groups have political legitimacy, NGOs are often close to, or affiliated with these armed groups who provide them with authorisations to operate. In the areas that are still administrated by the central government, although armed groups can be still very influential, NGO employees sometimes acknowledged the buffer role they had to play, dealing with diplomacy with each of the sides. Even then, NGOs remain cautious not to appear one sided to the government. In states with cease-fires, they generally implement activities in both administration areas.

It has been critical for NGOs to be perceived by the highest authorities as not politically involved. Strategies could be diversified, ranging from the use of non-threatening vocabulary, compromising to work in government recommended areas or to get protection from influential individuals. This minimum trust reduces suspicion of political activities and enables NGOs to progressively establish relations with various layers of the Myanmar government. Most of the time, this trust is built purely for strategic reasons and the relations remain unbalanced as, in all the cases, the NGOs are taking the majority of the risks while the government representatives' favour can change on short notice. In some cases though, authorities also take a risk as officials can be blamed by higher authorities.

During the data collection, a denial, or at least low awareness, of any "agenda" was stated by some interviewees. All agreed to say their NGOs are working to support the neediest. But, political and religious dimensions of their organisation remained vague. For instance, some mid-level employees of NGOs working in the sector of peace-building and mediation between armed groups and the Myanmar Army stated that they had no idea of the political orientation of their organisation. This statement can be partly explained by three factors: the lack of knowledge and understanding; the lack of trust and the fear to speak to

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[95] See Monique SKIDMORE, *Karaoke, Fascism, Burma and the politics of fear*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, 248 p.

an outsider; the organisational culture of operating with a low profile, avoiding the mention of sensitive issues for safety reasons.[96]

Ethnic and religious identity of the organisations could also appear taboo. Several interviewees stated that they had noted that the majority of their colleagues were from the same community or that one ethnic group was over represented. They often verbalised ethnic and religious issues when they were part of a minority within their own organisation and experienced some resentment. In any case, employees are generally not comfortable with discussing the implications of this fact. Most interviewees would avoid mentioning the scarcity of Bamar or Buddhist colleagues. Others would justify the NGO recruitment by the historical background in ethnic areas. In actual fact, only faith-based NGOs recognised religious criteria as part of their recruitment policy.

Documenting the long term agendas of the Myanmar NGOs is even more delicate as, in most of the cases, written documents do not exist. NGOs generally do not rely on long term planning. No long manifest on their mandate or mission could be identified. Nonetheless, neither neutral nor genuine, NGOs encompass a myriad of political players with their own road maps, ambitions and rules, those of the politics of silence.

In order to understand the scale of NGOs' power and their social, economic and political areas of influence and its expressions, in the absence of explicit primary sources documentation, examples of outcomes of the NGOs work are presented below. The push factors, risk mitigation strategies, as well as the sources of legitimacy of NGOs will be analysed, taking into account their ethnic, religious and political identities. Then, the examination of the formulated agendas of some of the most powerful NGOs will be presented through case studies, followed by a reflection on the political involvement of some employees, based on individual testimonies. Finally the role of NGOs in the political transition of Myanmar towards a democratic system will be discussed.

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[96] Unexpectedly, during the interviews conducted for this study, it appeared that it was sometimes simpler to tackle ethnic and religious issues in some ethnic states than in Yangon.

# 1 - How powerful are Myanmar NGOs?

The contemporary capacity of NGOs to influence decision makers must be analysed within a context where the mainstream opposition has been weakened by the government over the years. Alongside the traditional opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a growing number of people believe that the situation in the country cannot be successfully addressed by confronting the government but rather by cooperating in order to influence policies, while seeking to empower and build the capacity of civil society. The current emerging civil society is not a coherent movement but rather a collection of individuals willing to try to change the system by influencing it from within. A large and growing number of NGOs engaged in a wide range of social welfare activities labelled as being a softer way to offer political alternatives[97]. They could be the seeds of a broader social movement that could possibly be more effective in representing the people's aspirations for change than traditional radical opposition. In spite of structural issues involving a lack of coherence, they are participating in influencing and shaping some policies, while training future leaders and empowering local communities. As a group, these NGOs are the embodiment of an increasingly dynamic element of the movement for change. They have a common understanding of the obstacles to democratization in Burma's deeply divided and impoverished society. It can be expected that some of these individuals will emerge as political leaders in the foreseeable future.

Cases where NGOs were able to have their say and influence policies are not yet numerous but their frequency appears to be growing over time. NGOs' capacity to influence governmental decisions and their legitimacy at local and central levels are illustrated below.

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[97] Previous confrontational attempts, such as the demonstrations in 1988, 1996 and 2007 were severely repressed and failed to bring about the desired changes.

## 1.1 - What are the sources of power and legitimacy for NGOs?

*"With ethnic minorities, majority of the political and armed groups have links with religious groups. It is more obvious there [than in the seven divisions]). Look at the leader of the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army [DKBA][98]: he's a priest! Religion in some ethnic groups is acting as cement to bring the people together to discuss about politics."[99]*

Among the sources of NGO power, the capacity to get external support and to liaise with networks based outside of the country is central. Although international community actors who are involved in funding NGOs don't necessarily have a thorough understanding of these NGOs' agendas, their financial support enables them to expand both national and international influence. Access to a foreign audience makes these NGOs more capable of spreading their messages about the situation in Myanmar, to promote their work and to call for more support. It also provides a kind of protection from the government as tentative retaliation would be more visible and likely to be reported and condemned by international public opinion. Finally, there seems to be a snow ball effect for the NGOs that are able to articulate clear messages to an international audience. Not only do they enjoy greater access to financial resources, but they also get the chance to be more frequently represented in various *fora* organised by their partner INGOs, donor governments, UN and others. Consequently, one of the indicators of NGO power is their international exposure and their capacity to influence international sources. In this area, currently exiled NGOs based in Thailand and in Western countries are more proficient. They call for condemnation of the regime with radical messages, supported by Western countries. This is quite different from NGOs working in the country that have to mitigate their own views and repeat that proactive "engagement" is the only way forward.

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[98] In 1995, the DKBA allied with the Myanmar army eventually leading to the fall of the then KNU headquarters at Manerplaw.

[99] International observer, interview by the author, Chiang Mai, Thailand, February 2011.

Some of these NGOs appear to be well-funded and even wealthy, when one sees their busy headquarters. Huge offices and numerous employees suggest a degree of economic and political power. It also suggests a degree of indulgence from the authorities allowing their work. Money is not perceived as a strong vector of power of NGOs to influence Myanmar politics according to the directors of NGOs interviewed. Nonetheless, an important portion of international aid is channelled by NGOs and these funds are partly used to provide public services (which can save money that the government would have spent on public sector activities); it doesn't seem that this money carries much weight in assessing NGO legitimacy towards the communities they work with. Indeed, this economic factor might, in some cases, be considered as a benchmark to measure government acceptance but also by international donors' support.

As for the interviewed employees, salary is a motivation, but it is not the key factor. In faith-based NGOs, the monthly salary of junior and intermediary employees remains extremely low. In some cases, in the rural areas, monthly salaries are the equivalent of a few US Dollar per month only. In other NGOs, salaries are higher but, overall, the motivation to engage in this sector is not purely for income. It emanates from another source, although the increasing professionalization of the sector might be accompanied by new, more inclusive practices or recruitment. According to a senior employee of an ethnic based organisation:

> "Among the main strengths – that are also weaknesses. We are ethnic people and our organisation is led by ethnic people. We have diverse employees who are really committed. Remember that our organisation started as a very small organisation. I recall my first salary, at the end of the 1990s. That was 6,000 Kyat (currently approximately USD 10). It means that without commitment it wouldn't have lasted long. The commitment of the leadership is also one of our strengths. Now, we have over 120 employees. We are in all ethnic states except one that this is too far and we have no network there. Our weaknesses are reflected in our strengths, most of our

*activities focus on ethnic minorities. Thanks to our project in the Ayeyarwady Delta, we could re-balance a bit."[100]*

The main motivation for the employees is to generate change. In several interviews, NGO employees expressed the rewarding aspects of their work as noticing change in people's lives:

*"Before I worked for this (faith-based) organisation, I used to be a teacher, a private teacher. I also taught English and trained Church volunteers. Now, after years of working in development, I would like to work with people who are interested in development. When I trained church volunteers, the objective was to get the youth to help the priests, to know how to communicate and be more educated. After several trainings abroad, I really felt I wanted to empower these young people. The young people I trained during my career, they became appreciated in their own communities. And when they came back to visit me later, they had become chief agents. They are so empowered, so when something goes wrong, they dare to say it. The communities rely on them. Two of the youth I trained died in the on-going armed conflict near the Thai border and I felt like I was responsible as I sent them to die. I wondered what to do for these people. I want to help, not only a religious group, but the whole community in the village. Some of them became teachers, child care takers, others spread cultural teachings. Even if they are poor and not properly dressed, kids go to school. Before, when they heard the car, they ran and hid. Now they are more confident, when they hear a car, they run to see it. People trust the youth whom have been trained by me a bit more. So I want to continue. I can see consequences in each village. So I will continue [...]. When I get to the villages, people I know come and give me eggs, sesame, whatever they can offer to greet me".[101]*

At the local level, faith-based organisations and NGOs can play a crucial social and political role for communities. The following anecdote was reported by a senior employee of a NGO. At the end of the 1990s, when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) carried out assessments in the country, villagers were asked to draw a bike representing their political system; then they had to identify the various

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[100] Interview by the author, January 2010, Yangon.
[101] Interview by Daw May Myat Noe, September 2010, in Yangon, translation by the author.

elements of their drawing as the different actors and their importance. In Kachin, Shan and Chin States, villagers drew two giant wheels. They explained to the UNDP facilitators that the wheels, the most important parts of the bike, were the faith-based organisations. According to several interviewees, this is not surprising because during the socialist era, only religious NGOs could remain active and support the populations in these areas, while the relief needs were vast during times of armed conflict.

In some areas, access to education is exclusively provided by NGOs and ethnic non-state actors, creating generations prone to being closer to the NGOs ideology as they are familiar with the NGOs' cultural context and political stances. This is the case with many Christian NGOs playing a leading role in providing access to education in minority areas. From pre-school day care to the primary schools, children are immersed in the NGOs' values from a young age; this undoubtedly creates longer term links. A child-centred approach to teaching was adopted by some monastic schools and various private schools supported by NGOs. This has reportedly helped younger generations to develop their critical thinking abilities, in contrast with government schools' teaching relying on rote learning without understanding or questioning. Educational activities will also have an impact on the NGOs' legitimacy in the foreseeable future. Some of the ethnic opposition groups understood this, especially in border areas affected by decades of armed conflict. There, the interconnections between aid groups and armed groups are obvious. In many cases, the opposition groups set up their own infrastructures. For example, the KNU created a health and an education department to provide services to the Kayin populations in the area they administrate, near the Thai-Burmese border. These remote areas are barely accessible from inside the country and the government services there are largely sub-standard. The KIO has also opened schools in areas where government education services are poor. When asking a Kachin NGO employee about education in Kachin, he instantly replied: "The KIO areas are worse. There is not even a government school in those places. People are very poor and the government doesn't have enough teachers to send there. So, we support the KIO to run schools. We provide them with text books that are according to the government

curriculum and with teacher trainings, to familiarise them with a child-centred approach. They also learn Kachin language and culture in these schools. You have to imagine that these teachers are not professional, so they do what they can".[102]

The borders of pastoral activities, evangelization and aid can be blurry. It has been observed that in some cases that the incentives of faith-based NGOs are religious conversion. This was mainly reported in ethnic areas but also in poor suburban areas. In some cases, religious NGOs get support from foreign groups. For example, in the suburbs of Yangon, Korean Christian missionaries run "banana schools". Children from disadvantaged backgrounds can access school for free[103]. The children also get free bananas for lunch, which, according to a Korean sponsor, is their only food intake, hence it helps to maintain a low dropout rate. The school day starts with prayers and religious songs.

If NGOs can have a religious impact, they can also have a social impact. They encourage the emergence of new practices as well as the promotion of ethnic or religious norms. If the agenda is not clearly stated in the NGOs' documentation, it sometimes transpires in their activities on the ground. For example, according to Kiwimaki and Pederson's typology, there are four categories of civil society organisations, each specializing in different activities and having different socio-political impacts: [104]

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[102] Interview by the author, Kachin State, May 2011.

[103] Primary education is free in Myanmar but parents have to buy books, uniforms and pay different sorts of presents to the school administration and teachers.

[104] Extracted from Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *Burma, mapping the challenges and opportunities for dialog and reconciliation*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

**Civil Society Organisations' type**: Peace mediators.

**Main activities:** mainly from the church, have played an important political role in facilitating the ceasefire negotiations and resolving tensions between the government and the ceasefire groups.

**Example of socio-political impact that became locally sources of legitimacy**[105]: Cease-fires negotiations in Kayah State took place with the mediation of the Catholic Church, by Bishop Sotero (among others), who later became the founder of the NGO Caritas Myanmar, was a great credit to his group.
The Shalom (Nyein) Foundation played a key role in the cease-fire negotiations in Kachin State and have been cultivating peace building and mediation activities in various states ever since.

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**Civil Society Organisations' type**: Religious groups.

**Main activities:** involved in various social works.

**Example of socio-political impact that became locally sources of legitimacy:** In the Kachin State, the Church reportedly convinced the regional commander, General Onh Myint, to exempt Christian communities from labour requirements on Sundays.[106]
In Kayin State, the Church is a crucial face of the opposition to the government.

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**Civil Society Organisations' type**: Ethnic culture and literacy committees.

**Main activities:** actively involved in reviving and promoting languages and cultures.

**Example of socio-political impact that became locally sources of legitimacy:** These groups perpetuate local knowledge for thousands of students every year, especially in Shan, Kayin, Kachin and Mon States where children gain traditional local knowledge

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**Civil Society Organisations' type**: Specialised development organisations.

**Main activities:** more recent, in limited but growing number (agriculture, health, education, etc.).

**Example of socio-political impact that became locally sources of legitimacy:** The more recent and westernized NGOs display a wide panorama of projects with various positive impacts on the local population's livelihoods all over the country. As an illustration, community forestry projects' objective is to allow the local communities to negotiate with local authorities for the issuance of certificates allowing the agricultural use of plots of land covered by forest, in order to avoid land grabbing by private companies and to clarify official land ownership.

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[105] The examples for all four organisation types have been collected during interviews, unless another reference is mentioned.
[106] Mary P. CALLAHAN, *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states…*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Most of these illustrations demonstrate long term impacts, at the township or the state level of NGOs work that provides them with trust from the grassroots level, hence the legitimacy to negotiate with authorities at the township level and if possible higher. But their ability remains limited as most of the interviewees consider that as much as it seems possible to bring about change at the local level, it is extremely delicate to access policy makers as the national level. The ability to influence remains in the hands of only a few individuals in the country. According to Callahan: "Although few ordinary citizens anywhere in the country have significant opportunities to influence the policy choices of various political authorities, those who live in ethnic minority states are the most disfranchised. However, in certain cases, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), some ethnic minority political organisations, and other non-state actors can serve as buffers or mediators between authority figures and local populations"[107]. Several interviewees consider that this might change with the new political structure and the establishment of national and regional parliaments. They believe that opportunities to influence politics will increase.[108]

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[107] CALLAHAN Mary P., *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states…*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
[108] The new government is nominally a civil one, headed by a retired General who used to be the Prime Minister. It introduced new decentralized legislative and executive structures, at the state level. How the articulation between regional and central power works remains unclear at the time of writing. See Richard HORSEY, *Who's Who in the New Myanmar Government*, Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, Social Science Research Council, New York, 14 April 2011, 15 p.

## 1.2 - Are changes at higher, central levels possible?

*"As for influencing the central government, we are still trying".[109]*

If a number of illustrations were provided by practitioners to demonstrate their influence on policies and in some cases on politics at the local level, NGOs' operational scope remains dependent on the space left by state. This space can be conditioned by several factors, including the specific local and regional political contexts, the degree of independence from the central government, the profile of the ethnic and religious groups and the relations with the Army. After discussing general modalities of the relations between NGOs and the government, the study case of two NGOs will be developed to illustrate their competency.

At the central level, in ministries, the GoUM acknowledges the role played by NGOs: "It has been found that certain local organisations have been established by the non-government organisations to add efforts by the government organisations to carry out political, economic and social activities of the Union of Myanmar aiming to join hands with the people."[110] The Government has a stake in coordinating NGOs (local and international as well as UN agencies) and maintaining some degree of control on them. Logically, official guidelines for NGOs to operate in country state that: "It is clearly observed that there are many programmes and projects of activities that will [...] contribute to the well-being of the communities in Myanmar. It is also observed that UN Agencies, International Organisations and NGO/INGOs that have been providing assistance for the socio-economic development of Myanmar should be systematically coordinated and guided so as to achieve more effective and efficient outcomes".[111] In practice, this position justifies the monitoring of NGOs' activities and funds. The stake for the NGOs is to

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[109] Senior employee of a NGO by the author, May 2011, Myitkyina.
[110] Ministry of Information quoted by Brian HEIDEL, *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
[111] MINISTRY OF NATIONAL PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPEMENT, Guidelines for UN Agencies, International Organisations and NGO/INGOs on Cooperation Programme in Myanmar, February 2006.

get some kind of green light, either formal or informal, to operate. The few officially registered organisations are required to produce biannual financial and narrative reports. As for the great majority of the non-registered ones, they can be controlled at any time and their activities can tentatively be shut down temporarily or definitively.[112] In the case of an unexpected government check, several interviewees reported the same experience, trying to hide and destroy as much written documentation as possible on the activities that could put them in trouble. This type of monitoring appears as a heavy constraint and all interviewees mentioned good relationships with the different levels of the government (local, regional, national) as a necessity to be allowed, or at least, tolerated, to work. It was widely asserted that these relations have been recently relatively improved.

A NGO leader, speaking about his own experience when dealing with officials, said: "At all levels, we have to be careful and make sure that we have a good relationship with the authorities. The situation is never fixed and can change rapidly. Policy can change their practices and procedures suddenly and some have a good impact and some do not. We have to be very careful and maintain good relationships with authorities [...]. Cyclone Nargis brought about the opportunity to expand to higher levels and create new relationships, but this has created more challenges also and more stress. It has led to more confusion. We have to be sure to bow down to them and this is stressful. Last week we went to the field with permission from the highest level. Despite this, we were questioned by local authorities. People are fearful. We realised that because of the fear, we have to create relationships with all levels, including the lower levels. Improving the communication and negotiation skills of our employees is critical to building good relationships with the authorities, if we have a good relationship with the local level, then generally, we don't need to deal with the higher level".[113]

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[112] A registered NGO, working on a range of activities and clandestinely provided civic education training in 2010, was reportedly warned by the Special Branch of the Military Intelligence had to stop this activity.

[113] CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Myanmar civil society's response to Cyclone Nargis*, *op. cit.*, p. 106-107.

Sustaining the government's consent allows NGOs to implement their projects while keeping suspicions at bay. On the other hand, it also allows the GRUM to keep track of the funds allocated to NGOs. Indeed, hypothesized that the international funds poured into the country allow the government to save money by reducing government spending on social services. It could also be hypothesized that NGOs provide services to populations living in poverty and in remote areas, mitigating their potential frustrations generated by the central government. To this extent, NGOs' work is not without consequences for the beneficiaries' relationships with and perceptions of the authorities. It can be a double edged sword as those beneficiaries can either feel resentful that the government is overlooking their needs or appeased as they get access to needed services in the end. In some cases, NGOs conceive of their work as subsidiary or complementary to government projects in some cases, but more generally, they consider it is as a substitution for it. They generally consider that NGOs have to take action as government services are not satisfactory, or simply not available.

Senior NGO employees often reported difficulties in gaining access to higher levels of government officials, especially the Army commanders. It seems that technical ministries, such as Agriculture, Social Welfare and others are friendlier to NGOs but they are not ultimately in charge to take the decisions at the national level. According to their experience, the civil servants have nothing against NGOs' work, as long as it is demonstrated as non-sensitive, monitored and somehow contained. NGOs having some ex-civil servants among their employees comprehend better the internal mechanisms; they can navigate among the services to get what they need. Great difficulty appears when it comes to negotiating with military representatives, as they feel unsecure and unfamiliar with Army processes, values and chain of command. NGOs struggle with the 'culture' of the Army and attempts to communicate had mixed results. Not only are NGOs not acquainted with the ways to persuade military agents, but also, as their governing bodies are mainly composed of ethnic and religious minority groups, they do not share the Bamar values promoted by the Army. Without the necessary degree of trust, margins of manoeuvre remain limited.

As long as NGOs' work appears religious in nature, it is given a different, generally non-political, meaning. It is perceived as less threatening, less contentious and distinct from pure political involvement. Nonetheless, close surveillance by the government still applies to faith-based organisations. Notably, faith-based NGOs have not established a solid trust with the government as they were often involved in cease-fire discussions and have traditionally supported ethnic armed groups. The religious institutions in general seem to be a serious enough concern to the government that they added a provision in the 2008 Constitution in order to keep them away from politics during the elections periods. Among the persons who shall not be entitled to be elected as a *Pyithu Hluttaw* (lower house legislature) representative, include**: "**[A] person himself or is of a member of an organisation who abets the act of inciting, giving speech, conversing or issuing declaration to vote or not to vote based on religion for political purpose".[114]

As demonstrated above, NGOs' stated objective to influence the decision making process at the local and national levels can be achieved by using different methods. In several cases, NGOs developed the technical expertise to lobby for their focal point in the local government to amend policies with the promise of help in implementing it. Reported successes are generally at the local level. At the regional or national levels, NGOs' influence is acknowledged, but rather limited. This capacity to influence is more obvious in certain sectors than in others although it is overall difficult to comprehensively assess the impact of NGOs. For example, strong developments have been reported within the eight last years in the sector of health; more precisely in the prevention and support to those affected by HIV and AIDS. Whereas the government was in a state of public denial of the scale of the issue until around 2003, there is evidence that the increased interest on HIV and AIDS was partially generated by NGOs.[115] This led to the acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation by the Ministry of Health that made it a priority to address the disease and supported large

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[114] Article 131 (h) of the 2008 Constitution in MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, Ministry of Information, Nay Pyi Daw, 2008, p. 44.
[115] Interview by the author with HIV civil society international donor organization staff, Yangon, 2011.

scale prevention campaigns. Such an attitude change was positively acknowledged by the members of the international community. They perceived HIV and AIDS as a priority but also a way to increase international aid in the country without tackling political issues. Therefore they increased funding, allowing a greater number of NGOs to work on this issue. This demonstrates one of the still rare examples where national policies have been amended partly due to the NGO lobbying. [116]

The sensitivities of the issues adopted by NGOs fluctuate over time. For example, within the last few years, the GoUM has also increasingly agreed to discuss and review its position on women and environmental issues[117] due to the common approach of the aid community and NGOs. It sometimes resulted in the drafting of national work plans[118], which are yet to be translated into concrete actions. As much as it is still almost impossible to request respect for Human Rights, women's rights are no longer taboo. NGOs are certainly playing a role in influencing the policies when a sector has been cleared as no longer sensitive by the government. As for the factors that make a sector sensitive, they are diverse and generally driven by internal logic that is rarely clearly exposed. As for the NGOs, they are also influenced to a certain extent by their donors. Some temporary trends motivate donors' priorities. For example, gender is now very broadly funded and this very fact induces NGOs implementing gender projects, as they have a greater potential to be funded. But, at the time of writing, it seems that the relative scarcity

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[116] With the mechanism of the implementation of the Three Diseases Funds, a pooled funding mechanism from various Western government targeting malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS prevention and treatment projects.

[117] "I work with Bamar, Shan, Chin, Kayin, and Kachin people on environment issues. We want to meet and do something together, but we need a good strategy to work together. The environmental issue is easier than other issues to bring people from different groups together. This is a good time for us. If we talk about development or ethnic empowerment we also need to talk about environment, because it is a real, practical, issue". Middle-aged Rakhine female INGO employee in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak*, *op. cit*, p. 156.

[118] Such as the Myanmar Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction or the National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women 2011-2015 (http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs 09/UNCT_UNCountryTeam_Annex2-Plan%20of%20Action_eng.pdf).

of donors combined with the monopoly of NGOs to access government stakeholders, and to reach out to remote areas, are as many limitations in NGOs' political power.

## 2 - NGOs as actors of the decentralization at local level: case studies in the Kachin State

*"There are many Christians here. All those we work with are Christian, except the Shan literature Committees that are Buddhist. I am Buddhist as well. But I work mostly with Christians. I don't like the idea of this much, nonetheless, in practice it is good to work with them. They are very capable. There are no Buddhists in the KIO, they are mainly Christian, and like everyone, they are connected to each other here."[119]*

*"My organisation is based in Laiza, Kachin State. We have 110 employees and 20 volunteers. We have a very low profile as we also work in SPDC administrated area. We have no website, no publication, etc. We tend to maintain good relations with the KIO too. We have several projects with the health department, department of education and the committee for NGOs of the KIO. In SPDC areas, we can work through the Christian Churches. We also have links with larger NGOs that are based in Kachin".[120]*

The Kachin State is among the ethnic areas that receive the highest amount of international aid. It is mainly populated by the Kachin Jingpaw ethno-linguistic group, along with 6 other sub groups who identify themselves as Kachin with an important Shan minority (reportedly up to one third of the population). This mountainous region bordering China is traditionally rich in natural resources due to its lush forest and rich mineral deposits. Private companies, generally from Myanmar and China, have been meticulously extracting and exporting teakwood, precious minerals etc. Kachin State also has great hydropower potential with the building of a massive dam at the confluence of the Mekha and Malika Rivers, upstream from the Ayeyarwady, which are

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[119] NGO employee, Interview by the author, Myiktina, May 2011.
[120] NGO manager, Interview by the author, January 2011, Yangon.

symbolically the heart of Kachin culture and the legendary birth place of its people. There are several large dam projects on going at the time of writing, generating resentment of local communities. In June 2011, the cease-fire between the KIO and the Army was broken near the Tapai Dam.

In Kachin State, many small scale NGOs have been created since the cease-fire agreements in the mid-1990s. Prior to the peace agreements, the faith-based organisations appear to have been the main conduit there of aid delivery. There is a tradition of relative independence from the central government due to historical and geographical factors. Several interviewees mentioned that Bamar are still perceived as oppressors who came and killed the Kachin's ancestors.[121] The main cease-fire group, the KIO, has had a strong relationship with the Baptist Church. As a consequence, the Christian churches play an important role with leaders involved in peace negotiations. The KIO is very influential in Kachin State and can influence some of the NGOs' work: "The KIO tried to establish a state within a state. As the oldest and more probably broadly supported nationalist group in Kachin State, the KIO faced pressure from followers to obtain major political concessions from the military junta to stop fighting [...] the cease-fire arrangements have led to multiple sites of overlapping and indefinite authority [...]. Myanmar NGOs that want to work in KIO areas have to apply for permission from the central government, the regional commander, and the KIO."[122] The number of NGOs in Kachin State have increased significantly since the cease-fire agreements.

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[121] One of the key reasons for the KIO taking up arms against the government was that U Nu's government was attempting to institute Buddhism as the state religion.
[122] Mary P. CALLAHAN, *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states: devolution, occupation, and coexistence*, op. cit., p. 42-44.

**Map 3. Number of LNGOs and Organizations Working
with LNGOs in Kachin State (May 2011)**
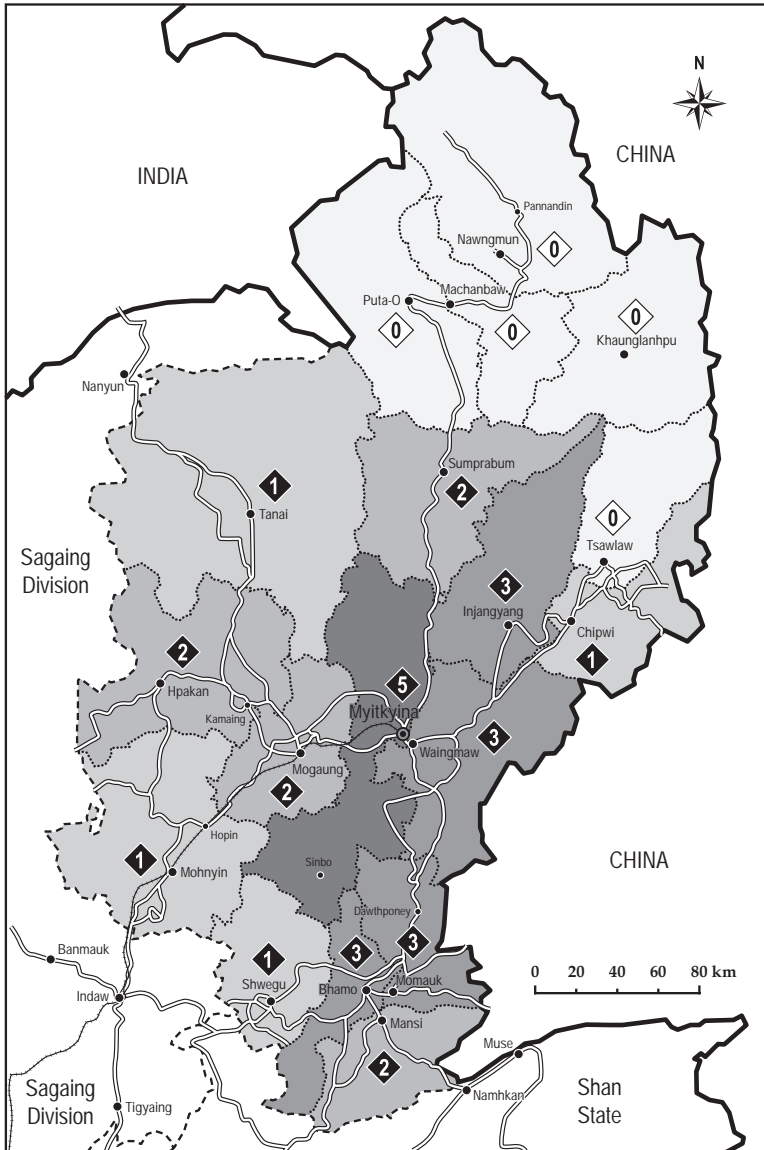


Source: based on *Myanmar Who/What/Where*, Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2011.

**Table 6. Names, Locations and Projects under Implementation of LNGOs and Organizations Working with LNGOs in Kachin State (June 1st 2011)**

| # | Area | Organization* | Projects |
|---|------|---------------|----------|
| 5 | Myitkyina | Metta, KDN, MANA, WFP (SF), PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta, KDN, PCF), Food (WFP), Health (Metta, MANA), Wash (Metta) |
| 3 | Bhamo | Metta, KDN, MANA | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta, KDN), Health (Metta, MANA) |
| 3 | Injangyang | Metta, WFP (SF), PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta, PCF), Food (WFP), Wash (Metta) |
| 3 | Momauk | Metta, WFP (SF), PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (PCF), Food (WFP), Health (Metta) |
| 3 | Waingmaw | Metta, WFP (SF), PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta, PCF), Food (WFP), Health (Metta), Non-Agricultural Livelihoods Infrastructure (Metta), Wash (Metta) |
| 2 | Hpakan | Metta, PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (PCF) |
| 2 | Mansi | Metta, WFP (SF) | Education (Metta), Food (WFP), Health (Metta) |
| 2 | Mogaung | Metta, UNFPA (MMA) | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta), Health (Metta, UNFPA) |
| 2 | Sumprabum | WFP (SF), PCF (KBC – Kachin) | Education (PCF), Food (WFP) |
| 1 | Chipwi | Metta | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta) |
| 1 | Mohnyin | Metta | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta), Health (Metta) |
| 1 | Shwegu | Metta | Agriculture (Metta), Education (Metta) |
| 1 | Tanai | Metta | Agriculture (Metta) |
| 0 | Khaunglanhpu | *none* | |
| 0 | Machanbaw | *none* | |
| 0 | Nawngmun | *none* | |
| 0 | Puta-O | *none* | |
| 0 | Twawlaw | *none* | |

\* Organizations in brackets are implementing partners.
Source: based on *Myanmar Who/What/Where*, Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2011.

After focusing on the case of the two most influential Kachin NGOs, we will turn to an examination of how individuals became involved in NGOs to highlight how personal agendas can be articulated with organisational agendas.

## 2.1 - Case studies of two Kachin NGOs

*"I don't know any Kachin NGO – ah yes, Metta Foundation, of course! This is an NGO? And Shalom? All I know is that they are rather discreet, active in the remote areas, they are Baptist, but I am not sure what they actually do".[123]*

*"Did our people get any support from Metta? But I told you we are Catholic! They go to the Baptists. They do their meetings and distributions within their Baptist Church compound, where we dare not enter."[124]*

*"I am very impressed by Metta Foundation; they are so humble, discreet and so professional. Do you know that they even turned down some donors' offer as they didn't want to change the way they're working?"[125]*

The strength of the KIO and its relative independence from Nay Pyi Daw's authority results from the power gained during the armed conflict. The cease-fire agreements allow them important incomes due to border trade control with China. These were the fundamental enabling factors for the inception of what can be today labelled as the first Myanmar NGOs. Indeed, before these organisations, religious groups and faith-based NGOs had a monopoly on aid. Both of the following organisations are formally independent from the regime and the KIO, they are based in Myitkina and were able to extend quickly and dramatically to become two heavyweights in Myanmar political life and in the development sphere. In Kachin State, they reached the status of institutions. Many of the educated youth have been supported by and have volunteered in these organisations. In spite of obvious signs of power, both of these organisations find themselves in a delicate

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[123] Shop keeper, interview by the author, May 2011, Myitkyina.
[124] Catholic male, interview by the author, May 2011, Myitkyina.
[125] International NGO employee, interview by the author, May 2011, Yangon.

situation. They have to accommodate the GoUM showing their positive impact on the ground while striving to appear as non-political and constantly negotiating access and trust with the KIO, while the local context sensitivities are exponentially growing regarding border guard force issues.[126] Both of these NGOs have adopted a very different style and in spite of many common points, they illustrate two extreme positions in regards to their organisational approach and political involvement.

The creation of the Metta Development Foundation[127] was a direct output of the talks between the KIO and the government during the peace negotiations fifteen years ago. This information was collected and cross checked orally with various informants in the absence of public sources of information and written documentation. On the website, one can read that "Metta" was the first organisation to be officially registered as a NGO under the Ministry of Home Affairs in October 1998. The main objective of its programmes is to assist local communities to recover from the impact of decades of civil war by initiating a development process that helps them to evolve into stable, self-reliant societies. It has established close working relationships with the development departments of various church organisations, as well as with ceasefire organisations, and as a matter of principle works in all ethnic minority communities, regardless of race and religion".[128] Metta recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, and a public document was released. The chairman of the Foundation, the prominent mediator, Reverend Saboi Jum[129] reminded people that: "The situation at the time of Metta's foundation was indeed difficult. Nevertheless we were able to succeed in

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[126] The government has called all the troops of the armed groups to convert into border guard forces, prior to the November 2010 General Election. The KIO army, called the Kachin Independence Army, has refused to date to process and is still in a trial of strength with the government as none of the parties is willing to give up. The conversion of the KIA troops would have had a dramatic economic impact for the KIO that is controlling several border points with China. At the time of writing, fighting had broken out between KIO and government troops around a Chinese hydropower project on the China border.

[127] *Metta* (မေတ္တာ) means compassion in pali.

[128] See http://www.metta-myanmar.org

[129] He is interestingly referred to with his title of Doctor in the document, while his religious role is not mentioned.

Metta's establishment and have been able to assist many long-suffering communities through the decade since".[130] Indeed Metta was created in a climate of extreme tension in the Kachin State, soon after the cease-fire that was expected to implement a lasting peace through development. The inception of Metta illustrates the political nature of the first NGOs whose inceptions took place logically in cease-fire areas before the model spread out towards central Myanmar where the army presence and monopoly of power left less space for them. The current first executive Director is a "Christian Kachin".[131] She also was, according to several interviewees, the former liaison officer of the KIO, based in Bangkok during the armed conflict in the late 80s and 90s, to promote KIO ideas and raise awareness among the international community of the organisation's struggle. Informants also reported that during this time, the KBC was a main relief provider in the conflict affected area, including in the KIO areas. These close links are still strong today and have resulted in Metta having access to both SPDC and KIO administrated areas to supply aid.

Today, Metta has positioned itself as the main non faith-based and non-political organisation. It strives to demonstrate no specific ethnic identity feature, and focuses on remaining unconnected with politics. It targets safe areas such as livelihoods and aid relief. With 1000 employees and a total budget for the Nargis emergency relief of over 8 million US Dollars, Metta has expanded its work in several states and divisions in the country. Half of their total activities still take place within the Kachin State. No documentation from Metta about the above mentioned facts or direct links with the Baptist Church could be found. Nonetheless, several indicators could be identified to demonstrate that religion is not totally absent from their work and vision. For example, many among Metta's donors are Christian foreign organisations. Among the senior management team, two thirds of the members are Christian with links to the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC), half of them being from

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[130] METTA DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION, *10 years Metta, 10 years jubilee report*, Yangon, 2010, 44 p.

[131] In the 10 year jubilee report, key employees are presented with their picture, ethnicity, religion and educational and professional background. This is symptomatic of the way NGOs tend to self-define themselves.

Kachin State.[132] Nonetheless, the communication documents highlight the religious and ethnic inclusiveness of the organisation:

> *"Metta Board members represent diverse ethnic, religious and professional backgrounds.*
> *Their common bond is their role as peace negotiators. Their common goal is building on peace for the generations to come."[133]*

Finally, allegations of aid targeting Baptist populations as well as invitations to conversion have been reported during food security programmes in the Northern Shan State in 2005 by Myanmar employees of International NGOs.[134] In addition, some field offices of the organisation display huge crosses, including in their offices in the Ayeyarwady Division in 2008, where the majority of the population is Buddhist.

Metta is clearly not willing to be seen as involved in politics today. Senior employees are very clear about this: Metta is working in relief and development with a greater focus on livelihoods. It is emblematic of the position of those NGOs trying to change the system discreetly, engaging with the government as much as possible, and progressing slowly towards a greater ability to influence policies. Their strategy was to focus on the safe sector of livelihoods and agricultural development to be freed from suspicion of political activities. Hence they are today able to approach the government up to high levels in order to lobby for operational space and a wide range of issues, while remaining extremely cautious in their approach.

The Shalom (Nyein) Foundation[135] was created a few years later by a breakaway faction from Metta, wishing to emphasize their work on the most sensitive activities: peace building. A few years after Metta's

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[132] According to METTA DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 11.

[133] Extract from METTA DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION, *op. cit.*, 2010, p. 6.

[134] Interview by the author of a Myanmar NGO worker who was based in Northern Shan State in 2005, May 2008.

[135] *Nyein* (ငြိမ်း) means "Peace". The previous name of the Shalom foundation was "*Nyein*". It subsequently changed as this sounded too political and sensitive for the GoUM according to the interviewees.

creation, some disagreements appeared within the board. In 2000, those who wanted to emphasize peace mediation and conflict resolution activities created their own NGO, led by the Reverend Saboi Jum. Due to the significant overlap with Metta's founding fathers, Shalom's board was unsurprisingly very close to the KIO and the KBC. Since, Shalom also worked to differentiate their image from a given ethnic group. Shalom usually present their organisation as being representative of various ethnic minorities without highlighting their Kachin background. Reverend Saboi Jum (who left Metta to found Shalom), along with twenty colleagues established the Ethnic Peace Mediators Fellowship to help form and strengthen mediators groups in all ethnic areas. It also was granted the mandate to facilitate educational and training programmes on peace-building, undertake development activities, and represent local communities. Today, this Fellowship operates with mediators from five states (Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, and Chin) and has invited members from Shan and Rakhine States.



The political leaders five years after the cease-fire agreements in Kachin State (source: Public Communication material by Shalom, 2001). In the middle, the former Prime Minister Gen. Khin Nyunt and Rev.-Dr. Saboi Jum, with the key members of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the New Democratic Army - Kachin (NDA-K). The picture was taken in 2001.

Shalom's strategy was to expand its activities over time to include community development work as a means to build and sustain peace. According to their website, the Foundation aims at cooperating with all religious and ethnic communities, and its board includes both Christians and Buddhists.[136] According to informants, the relations between Saboi Jum and the KIO worsened over time. The pressure on the KIO to convert into a border guard force as well as the dismissal of the registration of the Kachin State Progressive Party for the General Elections, as a consequence of the refusal of the KIA to be integrated in the *Tatmadaw*, boosted tensions with the central government. The legitimacy of Reverend Saboi Jum is challenged as both the government and the KIO suspect him to have acquaintances with the other side.

Shalom also does not openly promote any religious message, but its links with the Baptist Church are palpable. Most of the employees are Baptist and it is reportedly difficult to climb the ladder inside the organisation for the non-Kachin or non-Baptists. As the director is a reverend, meetings often start with prayers and commonly take place in religious buildings. It seems that religion remains a key component of their organisational identity, even if some efforts have been made towards a greater inclusiveness. This could be an encouraging sign of progressing towards national reconciliation, if there was not a growing number of voices both in and out of Kachin State that criticise this approach as a superficial one. [137] Shalom is suspected of aiming at earning power, ultimately benefitting only a limited group of people, close to its founders.

Both Metta and Shalom developed technical abilities to implement development and relief activities. Metta has also supported a great number of small scale NGOs to develop expertise, access funds and become bigger players. They succeeded in implementing their

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[136] See http://www.shalommyanmar.org/index.htm
[137] Critics heard during the data collection phase relied on different rationales: inside Kachin State, they are due to Reverend Saboi Jum, the leader, having personal connections with powerful individuals in the government, who challenge his autonomy in decision making, and outside of Kachin State, he has been accused by other ethnic groups as representing them without consultation.

communications strategy as most of their donors and international agencies label them as non-religious organisations and representative of all ethnic groups. For example, several embassies have funded activities because they consider Metta or Shalom to be neutral. The case of Kachin State is specific, although similarities can be found with other ethnic areas. The visible autonomy from the central authorities added to the conflict a sensitive context which conveyed a certain degree of legitimacy and an increased power to NGOs.

## 2.2 - Personal trajectories: from NGOs involvement to political activism

*"If you look for someone who is not affiliated in one way or another to the KIO in Kachin organisations, you would have to look very low, down the organizational chart to find this person".[138]*

In Kachin State, many youth from the KIO administrated area have been associated with this organisation. At the very least, they have been in their schools and associate with their members on a daily basis. Many youth serve later as volunteers, although sometimes they do not subscribe to the political decisions of the organisation and tend to seek a degree of autonomy from it, within the NGO structure for example.

The following are extracts from the transcripts of personal stories from two senior employees of NGOs, both fluent in *Jingphaw* language, that illustrate the complexity of the relations between the stakeholders, the operational modalities and the intricacy of their identity in relation to their organisations' work. The first interviewee is very close the KIO and grew up in the headquarters of the KIA during the armed conflict. The narrative reveals a motivation to engage in NGO work as the result of a strong rejection of the political system in place at local and national levels. The interviewee was asked to explain his own history and what led him to become a NGO leader.

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[138] International employee working with ethnic NGOs, interview by the author, Chiang Mai, March 2011.

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**Interview of a senior employee of a Kachin organisation,
interview by the author, January 2011, Yangon**

"I was born and grown up in Laiza, Kachin State. I studied up to the equivalent of Grade 11 in a Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) school. Then, as all of us, I had no opportunity to study further in Burma. We have nothing else to do there, see? It was only informal education for SPDC, so no college for me.

The Kachin youth can only go abroad and study illegally in Thailand, China or India. So I went abroad to go to college. There, I met with some Assamese rebels. They wanted the independence of Assam, so I joined them. A few years later, I was prosecuted as I was an illegal migrant. I have been in jail for one month and a half. Then I had to go to the court every so often for four years. Can you imagine? During day time, I was going to study at the college and then, when the class was finished, I went to the court… I don't really want to recall these years. I did a lot of things for this movement. I travelled a lot in India, in Nepal, I have been up to Kathmandu… I could understand their fight for Independence. But I cannot agree on some of their practices. Abductions, killings, violence… this, I didn't believe in it.

I came back to Burma. I worked for a mediation group for several years as I felt I had to do something there for my people. But how can we bring peace to the state with so many conflicts inside the organisation? I left again. I went to study abroad and once I graduated from the university, I came back to Kachin. There, I still feel the strong duty to report to my old organisation, but I wanted to work with another group, at the border.[139] This group is mainly supported cross-border by Thailand based NGOs. I often go to the border and Chiang Mai. I don't understand why people do not help us from inside Burma. We work there with the Education and the Health Departments of the KIO".

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The following interview highlights other aspects of the NGO engagement, the attempts to change the system from inside. It illustrates the links between NGOs and government officials but also the complexity of the relations with the non-state actors. Finally, it provides a testimony of the current political sensitivities related to environment in the Kachin State.

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[139] The interviewee refers to the China/Myanmar border.

**Interview of a Bamar employee of a NGO based in Kachin State,
Interview by the author, Myitkyina, May 2011**

**Question:** Can you explain your work?

**Answer:** "I am working for my organisation in the Kachin State conservation and community forestry.[140] We have many activities, such as awareness campaigns, community mobilisation, etc. We have had legal authorisation to do so for 2 years now. Initially, in Kachin State, we started with 10 townships, as a consortium with 6 other LNGOs [...]. Our objective is to raise awareness of the population and mobilize them to understand the value of the forest and to preserve natural resources surrounding them. We explain them the land tenure related rights to strengthen their capacity".

**Q.:** How do you work with the government (i.e. the Ministry of Forestry)?

**A.:** "Of course, our NGO tries to build linkages between the Forestry Department and the communities. We provide opportunities to the villagers to do link up, to "joint"[141]. The villagers are usually very afraid of the Department people and didn't dare to approach them at first. So our organisation approached this Department. We then explained to the villagers how they should approach them".

**Q.:** How do you link the officials and the villagers?

**A.:** "I was myself an employee from the Forest Department, for 10 years. I have worked for the government all over Myanmar [...]. My initial interest for forestry was as leisure, when I was at school. I graduated from my school. I had good marks. I didn't know what to do, as I wanted to save the forest [...]. Two years later, I could start to focus on my specialty and that interested me a lot. After these years, I have been progressively interested in trees, forest, environment issues, etc. Now, after several years working for this organisation, I wanted to work in Kachin State. I asked my managers to be stationed here. It has been a long time I've been willing to work in this region. This is the Northern part of Myanmar, where I'd never been before. Now, after a few years, I would like to stay and become a local here!

It is very easy for me to approach the Forest department. This is my added value for my organisation; I have previous contacts with Forestry Department who were my peers at school. They help me and I help them to do their management planning and

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[140] This NGO displays neither sign of faith, nor any affiliation to political ideas. This is almost an exception in the Kachin State.

[141] Words in English during the interview.

other tasks. It helps to raise awareness also. As I know all the rules and regulations, they all trust me. I am now familiar with the officers of each township. I even get closer to the Director of the Forestry Department for Kachin State [...].

The Forestry Department, on its side, understands it as if we were helping them to do their work. In this case, they have to let the companies carrying out deforestation, as revenues are expected from this Department by the central government. So they give plots, manage where companies can cut, according to the local context. In some places that are not classified as natural reserves but where the soil is fertile, companies' plant sugar cane, cassava, etc. and the soil then is totally drained. The Forestry Department also let companies dig their gold mines. They cut the trees and come with their bulldozers.

With the land rights approach, we get the Forestry Department to issue certificates preventing companies to buy or grab lands and allowing local communities to stay. When the company is using the plots, in villages where people rely on the forest to earn their living, there is simply no livelihood anymore.

My experience in this organisation is very different from my assignment for the Forestry Department. As a civil servant, if I wanted villagers to do something, I used to force them. In a NGO, I facilitate the process of people's understanding. I use soft ways. They trust me. I am no one now. I have no influence. It takes more time. But when people do understand, they do things willingly, not under fear. At the beginning, it was a bit difficult, but now it is positive. They listen to me. Even better, I have more impact on villagers than before".

Q.: What are your links with the KIO?
A.: "They have an interest in forest. I deal with the Kachin Relief and Development Committee, under the KIO. Two of our project sites are located in zones under their control. We collaborate for the projects. Before the elections, due to the tensions, we could not access these zones. We have to ask for authorization to travel there from the KIO. One of the employees from the consortium can go there, as he's close to the KIO. I cannot go there; I need a clearance, because I am not a Kachin. This is unless they need a hand on something. Then, they provide me with a special travel authorization.

There is no Chinese NGOs working to protect the environment here. In the KIO administrated areas, near the border with China, there are trees very near behind the border line, visible from the Myanmar side. But the Chinese cross the border and come to cut our trees. So I don't believe that Chinese NGOs will ever come here to speak with the companies from their country to stop logging.

All the KIO villages needed assistance, so the KIO left the Chinese companies to cut all the trees. Now the hills are empty, they are like craters. When I travel to these villages, I ask them: "Are you happy now with your nice houses and you mobile phones? What do you leave your children with? What will be their generations' income means? The Chinese will not come anymore at that time". Now for sure, they listen to me. At the beginning, they fled when they saw me. They could read on my face that I am a Myanmar (Bamar) so they assumed I was a military. For me, it took four months the first time to get an authorisation to travel there and once there, no way to meet anyone! Over time, I gained their trust and meet the people there".

Q.: Why are there more Christian in your consortium?
A.: "At the beginning, Shalom started to work on peace building and attracted international attention. They have a good network, and they contacted my boss. This is how it all started [...].

With the companies, there are sometimes conflicts. Local authorities provide them with legal authorisations to use the land. They don't care about the villagers. The villagers get angry and destroy the material of the company. They also sometimes file complaints. In two villages, they got compensated. When people leave with money in their pocket, then I can see the impact of my work. I see that this is the result of the advocacy on conservation in each township. We also invite local authorities and the Forestry Department to our meetings. In some places, they request companies to agree with villagers and other stakeholders before they start working. When the company gets to know that there is a community forestry project, they step back and the Land Department can't issue an authorisation. The company has then to step back when they see the determination of local villagers. Even when villagers have no official certificate to keep the land, they produce the copy of the letter they sent to the Land Department and companies are afraid to face troubles. They are surprised by the empowerment of the population. It means that my work has a growing impact.

As for influencing central government, we are still trying. Our manager goes to Nay Pyi Daw and meets people there. He has good connections within the Ministry of Forestry and Land Department. He also has contacts with the parliament now. He tries to represent the forestry community in a bill to the national parliament. It mentions land tenure and land rights for villagers. Passing a bill is the only way for many villagers to gain back their land one day. This would alleviate poverty. The consent of central authorities is necessary to enable these people to win their land for real. But the bill hasn't been validated yet".

**Q.:** How do you see the future?
**A.:** "I am optimistic. It has been four years since I have been working here now. At the beginning, no one knew the community forestry concept. Now, all the townships located on the East Bank of Ayeyarwady River are aware. We started then to work on the West bank. Some townships also came to know about it now, as far as in Putao (a town in the north of Kachin State). Before, villagers had no knowledge and were hopeless. Now, I can really see the results of our work. It is a central livelihood issue. For the future, I hope that the children of today, being the adults of tomorrow, will enjoy land property and will own their lands. They will be more united and have a better life. If it goes this way, better things can also be expected. Planting a tree is a long term project you know."

These two different trajectories point out the multiplicity of motivations to get engaged in the NGO sector but also how these personal histories are translated in the organisations and their cultures. It can range from the perspective to ameliorate the government services, to militant systematic opposition and strive to establish a parallel system to escape from the state authority. In the political sphere these two extreme positions of NGOs are reflected, as well as the wide range of options in between.

# 3 - The role(s) of NGOs in a political transition

As the links between ethnics, politics and religion are demonstrated in the case of the Kachin State, some of these findings too can often be seen in other parts of the country, among various ethnic and religious groups. We will now turn to a discussion of the role of NGOs in politics as well as the role they are already playing and how this may reinforce a political transition process. Whereas NGOs used to be few in number and occupied a restricted political space, they now are increasingly numerous and progressively have more opportunities to exercise power. With the recent transition to a parliamentary democracy, these social actors seem to have been called upon to play a more important role in the political life of the country.

Some of the individuals interviewed seem to use NGOs as a mean to carry out activities they wouldn't dare to do on their own, without a protective umbrella. They get involved as a way to cope with the inability as single individual to influence government politics. One hypothesis that could be applied is that many of the NGO leaders would actually be political leaders if the situation had evolved in a different context, with a longer democratic tradition. A fair proportion of them appear to be evolving into future, long term, authentic political actors, if the timid progress toward the opening of the country and the changes in the political environment is confirmed in the coming years.

With the emerging trend of increasing access of civil society to power, it seems likely that some of the NGOs' positions will become more polarised. Some will more than likely go in the same direction as the new government, a government that seems to be allowing more flexibility, inclusiveness and potentially support,[142] associating their

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[142] In his inaugural speech the President Thein Sein stated the will of the government to collaborate with NGOs in education and health sectors: "We will practice free compulsory primary education system, improve the standards of present universities, colleges, and high, middle and primary schools, provide more teaching aids, sharpen the abilities and improve the socio-economic status of educational employee, and increase the enrolment rates in middle and high schools. In that regard, we will work in cooperation with international organisations including the UN, INGOs, and NGOs [...] we will improve

successes with those of the government, increasing its capacity towards good governance and legitimising it. The introduction of the article from a governmental daily newspaper reproduced below shows the positive and nationalist feeling leaders can experience about NGOs. On the other hand, some NGOs will have fed opposition leaders with ideas and education over the years, enabling them to offer alternatives to the authorities in place.

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### Perspectives: Humanitarian Projects picking up momentum

"Inspired by a strong sense of altruistic spirit, Myanmar people by nature are willing to contribute volunteer service for welfare of others, provide assistance to needy people, and encourage those who are getting into troubles.

Every now and then, the world sees natural disasters due to climate changes and human activities. The Myanmar Red Cross Society is aimed at rescuing and rehabilitating victims of disasters. With the objective :to alleviate suffering, the social organizations is in pursuit of humanitarian tasks for providing health care, control and prevent diseases and rehabilitate those in troubles.

Red Cross members are taking part in community-based health care projects, collecting safe blood, prevent HIV/AIDS, and providing artificial limbs. The association in cooperation with UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and congenial organizations is working closely for those vulnerable to diseases and those who have only little chance to receive medical treatment.

Preparedness against natural disasters and rehabilitations is one of the major tasks of the Myanmar Red Cross Society. To expedite the tasks, first aid course and community-based first-aid course are being conducted on a wide scale across the nation.

Now, the number of the number of township Red Cross societies is 325. With the total number of Red Cross members is over 200,000, humanitarian projects are gathering momentum."

*The New Light of Myanmar*, 9th May 2011[143]
(just 3 years after the Cyclone Nargis)

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quality of [...] hospitals [...] and skills of medical employee [...], the quality of rural health centres and medical employee. In the process, we will work together with international organisations including the UN, INGOs, and NGOs." See EURO-BURMA OFFICE, *President Thein Sein's inaugural speech*, EBO Analysis Paper No. 2/2011, Brussels, April 2011, 11 p.

[143] Anonymous, "Humanitarian Projects picking a momentum", *The New Light of Myanmar*, Vol. XIX, No. 18, May 9, 2011, p. 2.

## 3.1 - Individual perceptions and NGOs' politics

The following extracts of interviews have been selected as they have been collected from NGO employees who are not labelled as politically involved. The selected questions aim at discussing the recent political context of the emergence of NGOs as well as the path that led the interviewees to choose involvement in this sector. Their organisations cannot be stigmatised as a politically involved. They illustrate different modalities of individuals taking part in political activities, without identifying themselves as politically involved. They might be well aware of the nature of their activities but refuse to acknowledge them as political. They represent the lesser degree of politicization of the sector. They reflect individual stories, motivations and perceptions of individual dreams to change the country, while not considering their action as political. They appear as closer to the massive, silent, majority of the population that feels disempowered and disengaged with politics, and who cope with the shortcomings of the system through engagement with various solidarity networks among families, peers, and others.

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**Interview of a Buddhist Bamar, Director of a NGO,
interview by Daw May Myat Noe, in Yangon, October 2010.**

**Q.:** Please explain your own history and how you got involved in the NGO sector?

**A.:** "I have been a civil servant for 20 years, during the socialist period. There was a project of cooperatives. At that time, cooperatives were numerous. I was in charge of the training. After an internship, I studied again cooperatives structures. I was based in the Mon State [...]. All cooperative schools became colleges, and I involved with the committee in charge of this transformation. During my assignment as a civil servant, I have been sent abroad, to communist countries. By chance rather, I was always in charge of the training unit. So I was chosen to become the director of a training project.

I worked in different ethnic states. When I was a student in the university, I visited Kayin State. At that time, when the Kayin saw me, they thought I was the enemy, but at that time I wasn't afraid [...]."

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As a civil servant, I learnt that for any manager to change, methods had to change, and I had to find the positive ways to work with different people. Some of my managers were good teachers, guiding me. Others let me do it the way I wanted. Now with my organisation, I am more independent, I have no manager. I am the manager. I try to teach to others. We started with three employees and one room. Now we have 20 employees. I still remember the long road to get to here. This is a great experience for my life. I must do everything, take all decisions, and provide guidance to the employees. For the next generation, I would like to recommend them to work with NGOs. This is the way I grew. I started from little, and here I am. Managers and big men trained us. We also shall train the next ones so that they can become good leaders. Every time I look at the younger generation, I compare them with my life, to see where they are at, to understand them [...].

When U Thant (the former Secretary General of the United Nations) passed away and Ne Win refused to bury him in Yangon, I was commuting daily, near the university, and I could hear their speech, so sometimes I would get off the bus to attend [...].

We need to think like leaders, for old men to achieve. Today a way for my employees to learn is to do things by themselves. I let them do that."

Q.: What do you think is different between NGOs in Myanmar and abroad?
A.: "NGOs in Myanmar are the same nature for these groups but the context is different. In the countries I have been to, it is easy to register, for example. Even in Vietnam and China, there are many NGOs. They have some freedom. Here, it is a bit different. We cannot do what we want. As our existence, it is difficult. There are many limitations, for example, to become an organisation, we need to be registered. In other countries, even small organisations in suburbs, they can receive money into their bank account. Here, all of it is controlled and monitored. We can even find ourselves in trouble. Some INGOs or donors cannot understand, as they do not know this system".

Q.: Can NGOs change the system?
A.: "Yes, as these organisations are made by men, if the majority can accept the change, it would work. The NGOs should adopt general values, they should adapt to communities in order to influence them, then to empower them and then you can change them, this is the basis of change. NGOs evolve too. The messages they carry evolve, along as the communities ideas are changing too".

**Q.:** Could you witness changes after Khin Nyunt's fall?

**A.:** "We didn't have any problems, but some other NGOs had some problems. For us, there was no problem as we are based in an urban area and the beneficiaries come to our office. NGOs deploying employees in communities in rural areas used to have issues with Military Intelligence as people were not allowed to gather as a group".

**Q.:** What do you think of the border guard forces issue?

**A.:** "Local communities, in some places, are not united. In the Constitution, there is one command, one control and all the soldiers are under the *Tatmadaw*. They offered a chance to try to integrate all the border guard forces. So, before ethnic armies were in remote, bad places, then, they could get integrated in central army. If this is for the good, it will last, but the *Tatmadaw* has also the power to change things over night. If local communities and armies stay in their regions of origin, if they do not disturb central authorities, there would be no conflict. They can keep a degree of independence. If a local army is formed, still the central army is needed to protect them. I think that, for each state, there should be a regional army for those who want and others under the National Army. When I was younger, people gathered as armed groups to protect their village. They do not use the weapons properly. If a group takes arms, it is important for it to understand how to use the arms properly".

**Q.:** Do you think the General Elections will have an impact?

**A.:** "Only now, is there an emergence of NGOs. It is the beginning only. The movement will continue after the elections. The country needs a civil society. Elections are the ground for the future at the moment, there might be a transformation and, if this happens, ideas and values will change. This will take time. If the same people are in power, it is going to be difficult to change the system. For example, as for me, if I have to change the system I am in, it is going to be difficult as I have my way of thinking, my own habits and values, as this cannot be changed overnight, we will not see these changes tomorrow. We need leaders today. There will be a mix between the traditional leaders and the new ones. We don't know yet who will have the power. According to who will get the power, the change will happen earlier or later. We don't know yet how balanced the power will be. For the first four years after the elections, we are not sure what type of laws will be enforced. If there are more people who want a change, it will change quicker. After four years, as people will have some experience, they will have a better vision. They will be able to choose what is best for them. We do not plan for huge change after elections, its business as usual!"

**Interview of a senior employee of a Christian faith based organisation,
Interview by Daw May Myat Noe, Yangon, September 2010**

**Q.:** How would political change happen?

**A.:** "With more and more youth and local NGOs, there will be a change one day. Young people have the will to change the system. During the NGOs meetings, I can see the difference. Before, only the twenty or so of the same faces could be seen, every time. Now, after Nargis, at least fifty people can be counted during these meetings. Presentations delivered during the local NGO meetings, they incorporate new ideas, and we actually have to learn from the youth".

**Q.:** Please explain your own history and how you got involved in the NGO sector?

**A.:** "I am from a conflict affected area, in Eastern Burma. In my experience, conflict was somehow a good thing, as it enabled NGOs to enter there. Before, there was only the Church. Now, youth are more empowered. Before, during religious and social festivals, there was only one ethnic group, one religion. Now, thanks to the NGOs' work, Buddhists, Animists, Roman Catholics and Baptists, we can understand each other much better. But because of the conflict, we cannot implement wherever we want. The education system deteriorated a lot, so the education level of the people decreased. People did not want to understand other realities or to accept each other. Because of that, conflict arose sometimes. In the early 2000s, due to armed conflict, entire villages have been displaced. It was very difficult for the communities. There are at least 4 or 5 different armed groups in this region, they do not want to unify as they are from different ethnic groups. They need more education but as they are in a remote location at the border, the government can't and doesn't want to develop these areas, and thus doesn't provide education services. Sometimes when NGOs have a problem with the local authorities, it becomes very difficult to operate. You have to think of both sides: the government and the armed groups".

**Q.:** Do you think the General Elections will have an impact?

**A.:** "The new government will come after the Elections. I think that the change will be positive. But, they need to educate the people. The change can have a big effect on the country. I am optimistic because I think the government's ability to change depends on the NGOs. For example, in Maungdaw, Northern Rakhine State[144], I've heard that

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[144] The Northern Rakhine State is often qualified as an area where there humanitarian needs are acute due to the deliberate poor treatment and isolation of the Muslim population. See ARCARO Pascal and DESAINE Lois, *La Junte birmane contre "l'ennemi intérieur" : répression ethnique et exil des réfugiés rohingya*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2008, 230 p.

NGOs have opened the eyes of the government. There, the local communities called for NGOs. Now, NGOs are trying to become stronger. NGOs help each other and some of the NGO leaders have a vision, they are very capable, so I have hopes for the future".

Q.: What do you think is different between NGOs in Myanmar and abroad?
A.: "The difference between NGOs here and in other countries is that there are more democratic systems elsewhere. Here, we have a lot of regulations".

Q.: Could you witness changes after General Khin Nyunt's (Secretary 1 and head of the Military Intelligence) fall in 2004?
A.: "We opened an office in the region in 1993. During the war near the Salween River, I helped internally displaced persons (IDPs) to move from their homes that were not safe anymore. In 2005, I got arrested when we shipped some unauthorised books through the border, after a training exercise on peace building abroad. All of the team was arrested. I was training a group of youth on the day the Special Branch came. I asked if I could come after 5 PM for the interview as I wanted first to finish my training session. They didn't come back until the next afternoon. I had the time to be briefed by friends to know how to reply as they had already been interrogated. I only spent one night there, in the police station. The books, usually, are not a big deal. I was so relieved after my release. The pastor from my native town called me when I was there. I had so many feelings. I was so afraid. They read the books and saw that they were nothing. So they let us go. I felt so happy then. My friends worried a lot. I was told by the Special Branch: "If you do religion, do only religion and don't do politics" and I was able to calm down. This was a somewhat great experience for me. When I came out from their office, I learnt that everyone have been praying for me, it was a nerve-racking time for my community. Those who prayed did so with a lot of strength. But some other people also said: "This woman is dangerous; she is going to destroy the country". I heard about this. I know the mentality of these people. When the news spread in our office that I had been caught, some people hid all the papers related to our work. One of my colleagues, she trusted me. She said I was doing something on the behalf of God, so God will protect me. "I don't worry" she said".

**Interview of a senior NGO employee, a Buddhist Chin,
interview by Daw May Myat Noe, Yangon, September 2010**

**Q.:** Please explain your own history and how you got involved in the NGO sector?

**A.:** "I worked as a civil servant for 14 years. When I studied my parents couldn't afford it. So to get a scholarship, I had to sign a contract saying that I would work for 6 years for the government. At the end of the 1990s, I left this job. In 1998, there was ethnic movement; I participated in this ethnic movement. At this time in Yangon, there was an organisation for the literature and culture of ethnic groups. At that time The Myanmar Peace and Democracy Group and the Communist Party organised meetings between different ethnic groups. They had about eighty employees in Northern Myanmar. I supported this initiative. I was involved for several years, but it became a worry for my family, as these activities were not allowed by the government. So I promised my wife I would stop. So I quitted politics and engaged only in development. I took up a job in development. Now I work in micro-credit. This is an innocent sector so the government is not interested in it, if I could do something else, I would like to work in literature or education, as these are also safe sectors".

**Q.:** Do you think the General Elections will have an impact?

**A.:** "Look at the situation of the paddy fields after Nargis. The soil is deteriorated, water salinity prevents cultivation. No shoot can grow on this soil now. It will take several heavy rains of the monsoon to get back to the fertility prior to the disaster. This is the same thing with the government. In 2010, it will be difficult, but better in 2015 when we will have learnt how the system works".

**Q.:** What do you think is different between NGOs in Myanmar and abroad?

**A.:** "I trust in a grassroots approach to minimize the gaps between rich and power people. In each country, in each city, 75 % are poor and only 25 % are rich. So we have to work for the poor. In this country, it will be like this for the 10 next years. We need to understand how to revolutionise attitudes on ethnicity and religion. Because the people who govern use these two elements to divide us, so we need to find a way to cooperate between ethnics and religions".

**Q.:** Could you witness changes after General Khin Nyunt's fall?

**A.:** "Now, we have more doubts, because of the move of the capital, not because of Khin Nyunt's fall. When ministers were in Yangon, we could ring them and meet in their office. Now, as many already moved to Nay Pyi Daw, many people who are left here do not know well the situation of NGOs. Some old people from the government didn't want to go to the capital so they resigned. As a consequence, the people we used to deal with are not here anymore and things are complicated for us".

These interviews illustrate the optimism of the NGOs, with all interviewees acknowledging the role to be played by NGOs in politics after the Elections. They also display a diversity of attitudes towards the central government. Ethnic and religious issues are not absent from concerns of the interviewees, but it seems that they are only a second priority, the first being to be able to manage some safe space with the government to remain operational. The positioning of the NGOs is said to be increasingly influential, some having affinities with opposition groups, others supporting government structures to improve services delivery. Nonetheless, both extreme positions are nuanced out of security concerns. So, as a sum, are the NGOs sustaining the regime or preparing its handover to new actors?

## 3.2 - "No word, no confrontation"

*"We don't want to confront the SPDC. We don't want to make any mistake to directly confront the government so we don't want to say about our activities".[145]*

*"We have this joke – when our prime minister comes somewhere to visit all signs of poverty are removed, flowers are planted, buildings are painted, etc. This is to show him the wealth of the place. So how could he know how bad are the living conditions for the people? How could he realise? So we have this joke: is it the government that is destroying the people or is it the people who are destroying the government?*

*The government is a product of our society. Should we consider our society as good? Or should we say it is a bad one as the government itself is bad? If the community is wealthy, well educated, people can have the capacity to think about governance. People inside the government will then also deserve trust. They could be good people, humanists. Actually, our society is not bad, but it's not good enough. We need to change communities, if we can change their attitude; they will try to bring the government down and will install a new one to replace it. Today civil society is too weak to do so. We shall not only point the finger at our government*

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[145] NGO employee, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

*and lay blame on it for all our problems. They are responsible, but so is the rest of society".[146]*

*"Civil society needs to be politically motivated; they must have a political will".[147]*

*"Don't do a second Mae Sot! We shall not create another Mae Sot here in Yangon. All exiled Myanmar NGOs are based in Mae Sot in Thailand and they make other realities and other non-Kayin people are forgotten. I don't want to see the centralisation of aid. This is playing the game of the Myanmar government. They've centralised everything. And now, we do the same. All aid just goes through Yangon. Why don't NGOs have their headquarters in the states where they are from? Why is most of the money spent here and not reaching out of the city? This is just reinforcing their power. For example the Network for Free Elections, how could they be representative? They don't even include ethnic people".[148]*

NGOs act with respect to the regime's face and want to work around the rigid system to change it, without confrontation. This is an unspoken agreement allowing their existence. As NGOs expanded within the politics of silence, they do not appear to have a concrete programme for the transition. They would attempt to facilitate it discreetly and be reactive when they identify new areas where they could influence the decisions.

Many civil society actors, in particular, feel that the space for social and, to a lesser extent, political activities are expanding. As political parties were not authorised to be vocal until the campaign of the 2010 General Elections, NGOs were previously in a position to offer a rare platform to promote political ideas and tested new and creative ideas. They also promoted a more open, positive attitude among the younger generation, encouraging them to be more hopeful for the future. They also called for national reconciliation and inter-faith as well as inter-ethnic collaboration. Although these changes are tangible and some

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[146] Senior employee of ethnic based NGO, Interview by the author, January 2011,Yangon.

[147] Rakhine INGO employee in CENTER FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES, *Listening the Voices from inside: Ethnic people speak*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

[148] Kachin NGO employee, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

spread through various layers of the urban well-educated society, a huge majority of the general population remain disenfranchised. In addition, in recent years, NGOs have been under increasing suspicion for being more closely associated to the central government by exiled pro-democratic groups advocating for a quicker, more radical political change. If these NGO leaders were to become a formal political actor at the national level, the question of their legitimacy and credibility would surely be questioned by those groups in exile.

With the establishment of the new parliamentary system, including the regional parliaments, political decisions will not only be made at the highest level of the state anymore. A degree of decentralisation is expected. In this scenario, the role of NGOs, already more prominent in the ethnic states would more likely be amplified. If most of the NGOs understood this stake and are exploring the opportunities to expand their influence through dialogue and lobbying with the elected members of parliament, a minority of them could audaciously opt to get involved in civic education.

An NGO employee who worked on civic education, discussing the NGOs' role in the democratisation process, commented that: "At the moment, the main issue in Myanmar is governance. No organisation can tackle it directly. We can advocate to political parties. We did work through political parties to speak to the Parliament in order to bring changes. People get confused and they think that democracy is good governance. It's wrong. Good governance is something else. People don't know what civic education is. We are trying to raise awareness and also to increase the capacities of the political parties. But we don't have a direct prospect. We should start from the bottom. If you target the top and the person sitting at the top is replaced, you have to start all your work again. You worked for nothing".[149]

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[149] NGO employee, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.
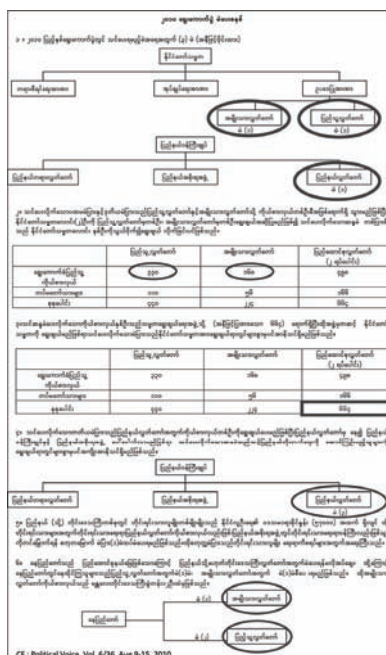
Example of voters' education in the media[150]
Source: ANONYMOUS, "2010 ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ မဲပေးစနစ်" [Voting for the 2010 elections], *The Voice*, "Political Voice", August 9-15, 2010, p. 26

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[150] This illustration shows the organisational chart of the new democratic system. At the top is the president, according to the separation of powers, above the judiciary, executive and legislative institutions. The circles indicate legislative institutions the voters will be required to vote for. The 2008 Constitution establishes the structure of the legislatures as a national bicameral Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*) comprised of a People's Assembly (*Pyithu Hluttaw*) and a National Assembly (*Amyotha Hluttaw*). It also establishes the 14 State and Regional Assemblies (*Pyineh* and *Taing-dethagyi Hluttaws*). The two tables show the numbers of candidates to be elected in each body.

More than the content itself, the mere publication of this type of document is noticeable in a regime where media are tightly censored. The newspaper, ran by editors known to be progressive and close to NGOs, used personal connections with government officials to be authorized to publish this material. At the bottom of the page, the advertisement for civic education by a NGO indicates a massive change, civic activities and trainings getting out of clandestinely for the first time for decades. This was generally interpreted like the government's willingness to associate with some NGOs to convince international community of their good will to set up a democratic system well as an outcome of the NGOs' pushes to increase their political impact.

The role of the traditional political opposition, centres around the National League for Democracy (NLD), is respected among the non-faith-based Bamar NGOs. Long term committed NGO senior employees often had their first political experiences as part of the student movements.[151] The NLD recently made public its focus on "social work". The party reportedly supports very remote communities that do not have access to government services, in southern Chin State for example. But, as much as Daw Aung San Suu remains an iconic figure, the articulation of her party with the rest of the NGO community remains limited. She also recently recommended the formation of a Youth Group, the Bae Da Foundation. The following anecdote shows how this openly political motivated aid could create issues for other NGOs who are concerned about their security concerns while attempting to push the limits of the civil society space. "Military commanders frequently have the last say. This was in response to such concerns that Aung San Suu Kyi wrote to Mr. Gustave Speth, administrator of the UNDP, in January 1996, complaining of the discrimination that many citizens felt in gaining access to aid and, in the future, UN agencies should consider ways of implementing programs 'in close co-operation with NLD;' in this way, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi argued, UNDP would be working with the only organisation in Burma which, through the 1990 election results, had been shown to represent 'the will of the people'".[152]

NGOs' relations with international stakeholders are critical for NGOs to be heard and influence external perception on the political transition process. Support to NGOs has been a diplomatic tool for the Western governments' foreign policies. The objective of grants and programmes to "support civil society" is generally to prepare a ground to the democratisation process. But a democratic system should, by definition, allow the majority to choose in the first place, and most of the embassies managing these grants are supporting NGOs representing ethnic, religious and political minority concerns. Donor attention is also

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[151] NLD is the visible Bamar opposition. Student groups were around and at the vanguard of opposition long before the NLD came around – as were communist groups – and these groups were often linked.

[152] Letter to the Editor, "Independence: The Shan Herald Agency for News", *Shan Herald Agency for News*, vol. 144, 20 July 1996, p. 33-34.

generally directed the same few large scale NGOs. In addition the grantees' actual agendas remain generally unknown to those who make the decision to fund them or not. They often took the risk to fund an opposition representing a marginal portion of the population, as if democratic ideas were a justification in itself. This strategy could result in "*divide et impera*", preventing unity to avoid a strong, unified opposition. Root causes of conflicts among the different groups remain unaddressed. If these NGOs' power grows without strong legitimacy from their peers, it might result in greater conflict sensitivity. In spite of a political transition that could be favourable to increasing their power, NGOs might lose some ground due to their tendency – both inside the country and exile groups abroad – to demonstrate a persistent inability to build an unified anti-authoritarian front, despite the presence of a common "enemy"; in absence of the latter, their capacity to compromise and work together would remain to be demonstrated. As noted by a senior employee working in an ethnic area: "We can provide education on peace but we hardly know peace ourselves, from interpersonal relations among the employees."[153]

Finally, the more common NGO structures with one charismatic leader, in whose hands lies most of the power, tend to mirror those of the military government. With some behavioural similarities, these leaders demonstrate a limited potential to serve as driving forces for greater participatory structures. They hardly work together and conflicts between opposing NGO leaders are regular. Most Myanmar organisations are dominated by strong, charismatic leaders who generally take the decisions without participation of their colleagues. The NGO sector offers a rare opportunity for the pursuit of power by leaders, besides military, armed groups and recent political parties. As a consequence, NGOs are in some cases driven by the interests of authoritarian leadership rather than by the pure promotion of broader community interests. NGOs seem to be caught up in the typical lack of consensus that can be observed in the Myanmar political arena. "Political participation and debate is stifled by a seemingly systemic intolerance for diverging views. Even the NLD, whose stated objective is

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[153] NGO employee, interview by the author, Yangon, January 2011.

to work to spread democratic norms into society, has shown a disconcerting tendency to expel party members who disagree with the official line or act independently of the party leadership. This inability to accommodate, and work through, disagreements is also evident in negotiations between different organisations, which often turn confrontational, reflecting the unwillingness on all sides to compromise on maximalist positions".[154] If NGOs are to have a role to play in the transition in lobbying the members of parliament and ministry officers, they may find themselves too divided, and with little experience of democratic systems within their structures, may only be able to play the role of advisors.

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[154] Timo KIWIMAKI and Morten B. PEDERSON, *Burma, mapping the challenges…*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

# Conclusion

Civil society, especially via NGOs, has great potential to bring about social, economic and political changes in Myanmar. All interviewed NGO representatives believe that NGOs can change the political system, in time and appropriate strategies. Since their inception, they have been exploring ways to set up a more just system. They started at the local level, with small initiatives and have tried to replicate it at higher levels, more or less fruitfully. The NGO phenomenon boomed during the last decade and the number of new NGOs is growing. However, their ability to work constructively together in the long run remains hypothetical. It appears that NGOs are embroiled in the same ethnic and religious divisions as the rest of the society, and they can even exacerbate those divisions. Being primarily led by leaders from minority groups, a main concern for them to play a political role is the issue of representation in terms of the society as a whole. Besides, the disunity among NGOs is obvious. The absence of common positions previously allowed them to progress in an authoritarian context but when it comes to sustainable political change, the variation in their mandates, methodologies, and areas of intervention, could become a significant hindrance to NGOs craving a wider role in Myanmar political space.

Due to the political sensitivities, assessing NGOs' long term agendas remains a delicate task. NGOs are taking constant risks to test the limits of the repressive system and their main strategy to protect themselves is to avoid direct confrontation with the authorities and also limit information sharing with their peers. Silence is golden and actions

are preferred to words. Overall, NGO agendas largely depend on the results of *ad hoc* experimentation. Nonetheless, some trends can be identified. The formal faith-based organisations are reportedly sometimes involved in religious conversion especially in poor and remote areas. Other NGOs with a strong ethnic component can have nationalist aims, advocating for a greater autonomy for their people. If most of the NGOs are avoiding the state on the one hand, while coping with public service shortages on the other hand, few are those who define themselves as part of the political actors.

To a certain extent, NGOs, when substituting the non-existing state services (creating less public pressure on the regime for service delivery) and it could be hypothesized that they prolong the regime's rule. The recent shift towards a parliamentary democracy with elected civilians makes a distinct categorisation of NGOs more and more complex due to the greater connections between stakeholders. The lines drawn between politics and social work are increasingly blurry. Over time, changes in the nature of governance could facilitate a shift in NGOs' underlying relations to power. This could also help to weaken traditional hierarchies. Some NGOs have already started to build bridges with members of the parliament, thus further reducing the gap between them and the governing bodies. A major stake for NGOs will be to reject the temptation to reproduce an authoritarian system. Furthermore, the obvious absence of unity among the NGOs, their limited scope and their own identities are as many challenges.

Myanmar civil society is fundamentally structured around a number of individuals and groups belonging to the NGO sector, which strategized to promote ideas on behalf of people's interests. When compared to the messages of other members of civil society, such as religious leaders or businessman, the NGOs' messages are more clearly articulated for the international audience. The whole civil society is traditionally characterised by a great heterogeneity and a lack of consistency that is equally deeply rooted in the NGOs' identities. NGOs as well as other civil society actors are interpreted by political economists as a key "driver for change" in the country. They use negotiated spaces at the margins of government power to conduct their

projects, gain authority and recognition. Often the assumption is made by international actors, such as state agencies, donors, and international organisations that Myanmar NGOs are neutral, or worse, that they embody the hopes of a fully-fledged democracy, battling in the frontline against the "evil regime". As NGO agendas remain generally unmentioned, they are largely ignored by their main international supporters. Nonetheless, there is an emerging tendency of international actors to support an increased politicisation of NGOs to emulate a softer, pragmatic and consensus-oriented opposition than the traditional one. For example, the social welfare projects led by the NLD gathered interest from some foreign governments. Meanwhile some NGOs were preoccupied by the too palpable mix between politics and social work instead of their traditional desire to demonstrate their harmlessness to the government. The increased availability of funds, due to the acknowledgement by a number of donors of promising signs of opening, leads to greater competition between NGOs. NGOs now embrace new Western centred topics such as gender and disability. International donors, collaborators or supporters of Myanmar NGOs should realise and acknowledge possible bias and adopt, before it is too late, a Do No Harm approach[155] in order to avoid privileging ethnic and religious minorities over the rest of the society, favouring one dimension in the myriad of conflict sensitivities. In addition, given that the diversity of civil society's praises is today being sang by the same actors, they should be cautious to avoid repeating errors made in other countries in the region and support local models instead of importing readymade, Western oriented, development models that have proven to be inefficient.

The emerging Myanmar civil society and NGOs, with few exceptions, still generally display an apolitical appearance. Yet, over time, some aim to help produce capable leaders and strengthen local governance structures, either by engaging with the state or with non-state actors. The role of the youth has to be highlighted. New active generations, generally not involved in armed struggle, tend to have less

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[155] May B. ANDERSON, *How aid can support peace – or war*, Lynne Reiner Publication, Boulder, April 1999, 170 p.

resentment than the elders to the state and demonstrate more openness to consensus-building. They could be called upon to play a role in the future political landscape. It remains to be seen if NGOs are actually working in the direction of a power shared system. In spite of the values they promote, NGOs in some ways continue to rely on the current stable and rigid political regime. If political constraints were abruptly removed, their opposition role would be seriously destabilised as they are somehow dependant on the status-quo maintained by the current regime. As much as they are comfortable working around a deficient system, their ability to establish an efficient one today remains to be demonstrated. Nonetheless, in the more likely event of a progressive transition, NGOs might increasingly influence local politics and potentially gain expertise to influence higher levels in the government. Greater coherence among them would be strategic for NGOs to weigh in the new decision making processes.

Myanmar NGOs' creativity and capacity to adapt to challenges doesn't need to be proven anymore. The latest trend among the NGOs is to federate various actors, generally alien to the NGO sector, who enjoy charisma, visibility and economic influence to get their messages heard. The recent collaborations with Buddhist monks' networks during the Cyclone Nargis relief operations are also signs of a more mature understanding by NGOs of the need to evolve and to move beyond the traditional ethnic, religious and political lines that have been sustaining the rhetoric of conflict for decades. But will they be able to cement such a diverse society where coercive methods used by the Army for half a century haven't succeeded?

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