

strengthening civil society in myanmar

paung ku 09/10



Cover photos: After Cyclone Giri in Rakhine State (Myepon Township)

Introduction

Paung Ku's goal is to strengthen civil society in Myanmar.

Over the last year (Oct 2009-Sept 2010) this has led to a wide range of conversations -with civil society groups and networks around the country and international agencies, embassies and donors- about what civil society is in Myanmar and how it might become stronger. The following reflections are drawn from these conversations.

What is Paung Ku?

Paung Ku was established in 2007 by a consortium of international and local agencies in Myanmar. In Myanmar language, '*paung ku*' means bridging and connection. The initiative works with Myanmar civil society initiatives ranging from networks through to established local non government organizations (NGOs) and community based organizations.

Paung Ku aims

- **To build capacity** of civil society organizations
- **To improve practice** within the international development community
- **To facilitate networking** within civil society for learning, sharing and influencing wider change.
- **To enhance advocacy** between civil society and policy actors.

While attempting to reflect on Myanmar civil society we also recognize that our perspective is limited in certain ways.

Crucially we must acknowledge that all the combined international NGO, donor and embassy initiatives in Myanmar only interact with a tiny fraction of the country's civil society. The section of civil society which we do interact with tends to be urban, elite and development (or humanitarian activity) focused. If civil society in Myanmar is indeed becoming stronger it is difficult to *attribute* that to us. Our role as international actors is important, but by no means at a sufficient scale to have any significant influence on the wider civil society.

Due to the limited engagement of the international community our *analysis* is also patchy at best and skewed toward the urban, elite and development focused segment that we work with. Therefore, not only must we be careful about attributing change in civil society to our own programs, we must also be humble about our ability to understand and influence change itself.

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Despite this limitation, we hope that these ideas have some value. Improving the way international actors (including Paung Ku) engage with civil society in Myanmar will require a great deal of collective thinking and learning. We hope that this review can be one small contribution toward this.

This year's review reflects on the goal of Paung Ku - asking the key question *are we strengthening civil society*.

The report is divided into three sections.

- The first explores Paung Ku's new perspectives on what 'civil society' is in Myanmar and the importance of working with a dynamic definition.
- The second section looks at what we mean by a 'strong' civil society and then gives some reflections on the role of international initiatives like Paung Ku and their potential to have both a helpful -and sometimes unhelpful- influence.
- The final section outlines five emerging opportunities for civil society strengthening work in Myanmar which Paung Ku will be focusing on in the coming year.

What is civil society in Myanmar?

When trying to strengthen civil society in Myanmar one critical challenge we face is in defining what we mean by 'civil society'. By default, we often tend to define 'civil society' according to what we are comfortable working with - which invariably only includes development focused local NGOs rather than less obvious actors such as professional associations, activists or artist groups. Alternatively, when looking for a formal definition we tend to draw on the standard international understanding of civil society as the space between government and private sectors (in other words, civil society as a 'third' sector in society).

Paung Ku's experience over the last year is that while international definitions can be useful, in practice it is more helpful to have a dynamic or fluid concept of civil society which can be reframed according to new experiences.

Civil Society is Local but also International

Civil society in Myanmar must be considered locally due to the vast differences between different areas of the country. For example, Yangon civil society may have few elements in common with civil society in Chin State where very different social, religious, cultural and economic forces are at work. Further, areas of Myanmar that are not administered by the central government have an entirely different set of civil-state relations. Therefore, can we say that there is one civil society in Myanmar or are there are many civil societies?

Meanwhile, with Myanmar facing a growing range of international environmental and social issues we must also see civil society stretching beyond national boundaries. When faced with issues such as foreign investment in agriculture, oil and gas pipelines and hydropower or millions of illegal Myanmar migrant workers in the region, the ability of actors within Myanmar to work alone is extremely limited. Therefore, increasingly, we need to recognize both the local and the regional and international dimensions of civil society.

Civil Society is 'Groups' but also 'Individuals'.

Civil society in Myanmar is often thought of as being a collection of organisations. Not least because a frequently used translation of civil society into Burmese is *ayat bet lu hmu apwe a si mya* (or public-social-organisations). But in understanding Myanmar civil society only as *groups* we miss the critical wider role of association. This is especially important in an authoritarian context where it is too sensitive for formal groups to address issues directly.

For example, a range of people concerned with issues of river management in Myanmar met together several times in 2010. Individually they were all from local and international NGOs, but none of their own agencies were directly able to support these issues because of concerns about sensitivity. Seeing civil society only as 'organizations' misses a range of

critical interactions that take place outside of this sphere. So civil society goes beyond organisations. (See the below poem 'I, Civil Society').

I ... Myanmar Civil Society

By Zaw Oo

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 love you and to respect her;
I struggle every single instant and
Keep on flowing for Endless journey.
I ... Myanmar Civil Society.

Civil Society and Me

Many staff of international organisations and initiatives tend to view 'civil society' as something outside them.

"I was running a workshop with an international NGO in Yangon. I said 'the centre of the room is civil society, where do you put yourself? Are you in civil society or outside?' The staff arranged themselves around the walls of the room, except for one foreigner who put himself in the centre of the room". *Workshop facilitator in Yangon*

Perhaps one key question for individuals working for international organisations is where do they place themselves? Is it possible to work for civil society while seeing yourself as being outside of it? Or does working effectively with civil society require us to also place ourselves in the picture?

Civil Society is Political but it is also beyond Politics

Within authoritarian contexts such as Myanmar, civil society is often forced to take a role and image which presents no challenge to the government. Therefore, there is often a separation between civil society (which is supposed to focus on services for beneficiaries or constituencies) and political society (which focuses on access to state power). However, as the opportunities for political engagement in Myanmar have increased (albeit in an

extremely limited way), this division has become less distinct. For example, several candidates for the elections were previously active members of civil society organisations or networks and may return to them. Further, a number of local organisations have become involved with pre election civic education with the public.

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This presents a challenge to civil society strengthening initiatives such as Paung Ku. It is increasingly difficult to say that civil society in Myanmar is apolitical. Yet at the same time the wide role of civil society sits outside of the competition for power in the state. Myanmar civil society is political yet is also beyond politics.

Civil Society is Long Term but can also be Short Term

A major assumption in working with civil society organisations is that we are always working toward long term sustainability. Considering the long term future of civil society in Myanmar is critical, however the response to Cyclone Nargis also highlighted that civil society mobilization and energy can also have a short term focus. For example, over half of the local groups supported by Paung Ku in the Nargis Response no longer exist.

In supporting sustainable and long term work of civil society actors we should recognize that this may appear as a series of short term activities or groups. When groups disband, the enduring lessons and capacity are retained in individuals and in communities. This is often of long term value within the civil society even when some activities are completed or some organisations cease to exist. Support to civil society requires both a short term and a long term lens.

Civil Society can have an Empowering and also a Disempowering Culture

The response to Cyclone Nargis highlighted for many people Myanmar's strong culture of volunteerism and civic responsibility. This brings enormous energy and potential to Myanmar civil society. However, it is important to recognize that in some circumstances this energy may result in a weakening of civil actors and voices.

For example, it is often observed that while NGOs may aspire to being democratic, they are often prone to centralised and non participatory decision making processes. Neither can we assume that smaller community based organisations are more democratic. Paung Ku's experience is that CBOs also commonly have a centralised leadership structure. While there is enormous variation in structures, in most Paung Ku funded CBOs one, two or three

individuals would effectively control much of the group decision making. International agencies or initiatives engaging with civil society in Myanmar (including Paung Ku) often underestimate this potential tension between personality led or single leadership and much of the participatory rhetoric in Western discussions of civil society.

International agencies or initiatives engaging with civil society in Myanmar often underestimate this tension between empowering and potentially disempowering features.

Civil society in Myanmar is difficult to pin down- it is intensely local yet must also be international, it is groups but also individuals, it is something separate from us but something we are also a part of, it is political yet outside of competition for state power, it is long term but can also be short term and it has both empowering and sometimes disempowering features. Overall, it is Paung Ku's view that supporting debate on locally appropriate understandings and approaches of civil society is the first step in attempting to strengthen its role in Myanmar.

What would a strong civil society look like?

Another key challenge in understanding civil society strengthening in Myanmar is recognizing what it is that makes civil society 'strong'. What would a strong civil society look like (see box below)?

What would a strong civil society in Myanmar look like?

Through a series of workshops in 2010, Paung Ku has explored this question with members of international and local civil society organisations. While the picture was extremely diverse, five themes were particularly prominent.

Unity and diversity

Within Myanmar culture there seems to be a challenge in encouraging diversity yet at the same time fostering dialogue between these diverse elements. Both unity without diversity (through a focus on mass government sponsored organisations), and diversity without unity (through never ending splits within and between groups and organisations) may constrain the development of a strong civil society.

Accountability

Downward accountability of groups to communities and beneficiaries- through transparency and participation- was identified as another key component of a strong civil society. If civil society organisations are representative of and closely linked to communities or constituencies they were perceived to have greater strength.

Vision

'Sovereign' vision and belief in itself were often identified as being key components of a strong civil society. It was recognized that this vision can be challenged internally (through individuals overly exerting their own opinions) and by externally (such as through government restriction or by uncompromising donor directives).

Networks

The connections both within local and international civil society and between civil society and other sectors were seen as being important to the overall 'strength' of civil society. Networks provide the ability for sharing of resources, mutual learning and the strength of combined 'voice'.

Voice

Finally, a strong civil society was seen to be one which had 'voice' in society which could influence and hold others accountable. Critically, this means that a strong civil society is one which has moved beyond a role only in services.

Based on the features of civil society strength (unity and diversity, accountability, vision, networks and voice) identified in Paung Ku workshops in 2010, there are many reasons to be hopeful about recent growth in Myanmar civil society.

As we have noted earlier however, attributing any wider civil society change to the Paung Ku initiative's activities -or even all the combined work of international agencies- is not possible. Instead, for each of the below sections we give examples from Paung Ku's experience and hope that this begins to build a picture of how civil society strengthening (or in some cases weakening) may happen.

1. Unity and diversity

The response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 spawned hundreds of new civil society organisations, especially at the grassroots level. Paung Ku alone worked with over five hundred group many of whom were recently formed. Across the country, the opportunities for action by civil society organisations and cooperation between them seem to be increasing¹. Indeed, it is likely that there are more civil society groups and networks active in Myanmar than ever before.

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In 2009/10, Paung Ku received hundreds of funding applications from civil society organisations with a diverse range of goals from better access to schools or markets (through the building of bridges or roads) to improved livelihoods for vulnerable people (through livestock banks) or capacity building for the group itself.

However, diversity is not only related to numbers of groups or associations but also the kinds of activity and visions. While we focus on a tiny development focused section of civil society there is also a far more diverse set of actors which are largely ignored by the international community (these include free funeral services, blood donation groups, alms donation associations and countless others).

Therefore, at one level there are encouraging signs of a proliferation of civil society activity by an incredibly diverse range of actors. The opportunities and support provided by international actors (including Paung Ku, donors and embassies) may have had a positive effect. However, there are some ways in which international support may have also undermined this interaction between unity and diversity.

For example, in reflecting on Paung Ku's support during the Cyclone Nargis response there were several examples where funding seemed to increase conflict within groups, between groups and communities and between different local organisations. With more resources came more conflict over how the resources should be used. Funding from international agencies (especially when it involves amounts which are far larger than groups have previously used) can be a trigger for increasing conflict.

¹ See 'Listening to Voices from the Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis' Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/publications/> for more examples of cooperation and unity following Cyclone Nargis.

Further, on some occasions there was also tension created within local groups in deciding how to respond to Paung Ku's funding proposal formats -which asks for details about organisation structure. Many local groups only had informal roles for members and the process of completing the application form at times caused division. The key lesson from this for Paung Ku was that both our proposal formats and our processes need to be more flexible.

Unity and diversity is essential for a strong civil society. Paung Ku experience is that international support can play a positive role in developing this aspect of civil society, yet there also needs to be caution about the divisive role that external systems and support can play.

2. Accountability

The increase in international support to civil society actors following Cyclone Nargis brought with it many international mechanisms (eg HAP) and concepts for promoting downward accountability.

However, along with these ideas, local organisations were also faced with at least as many new structures promoting a culture of auditing and upward accountability. In Paung Ku's experience, this emphasis on detailed auditing and upward reporting- while attempting to increase accountability of local groups- may actually undermine it.

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For example, there was one Yangon based group who legitimately purchased materials according to the grant activities which they agreed with Paung Ku. However, they were unable to obtain a receipt as evidence of their spending. Then in response to Paung Ku's repeated request for detailed financial information, the local group felt pressure to comply and ended up producing a fabricated voucher.

It is unclear to what extent this kind of fabrication of receipts occurs when international agencies give funding support to local groups, but it may be far more widespread than is reported. What is most alarming about this example is that the actual practice of the group was accountable and honest, yet the perception of an international audit culture pushed them to fabricate the voucher.

The group themselves were deeply unhappy with the situation and stated that they disagree with the procedures and approach of Paung Ku. They have since decided that they will never apply to Paung Ku again.

Accountability and Trust

After meeting with a community based group he was working with, a Paung Ku mentor was accompanied on his 45 minute walk back to the main road by a member of the village, who asked to share with him a problem. The mentor invited him to do so and was told it was a matter of confidentiality. The man then spoke about some potential misuse of the funding received by the group from Paung Ku.

After hearing about the issue, the mentor did not give advice but instead asked the man what he thought would be best to do. The man wanted to go to the village elder and talk to him about it and the mentor supported this. However, as time passed, the Paung Ku mentor began to worry that the matter was not being resolved.

Therefore, he went directly to Paung Ku monitoring staff to try to resolve the matter. However, this resulted in the loss of trust between the mentor and the village and the mentor realised that his role was not to resolve but to work with, facilitate and support existing systems.

Perhaps most telling is the lack of attempt by most international organisations to understand the accountability frameworks that already exist within Myanmar culture itself

Perhaps most telling in this situation is the lack of attempt by most international organisations in Myanmar (including Paung Ku) to understand the accountability frameworks that already exist within Myanmar culture itself. For example, Myanmar has a long history of using accountability mechanisms related to religious donations (with Buddhist monks playing a key check and balance role). Strengthening these existing frameworks may ultimately be more effective in building accountability than continuing to use imported concepts and frameworks.

While there is need for sober reflection by international agencies on their push for accountability, there are also some encouraging signs that international support can increase participation and accountability. For example, in late 2009 Paung Ku conducted a review of its mentoring approach. The most commonly reported change during the period of the mentoring was increased participation within the group itself and increased involvement of the community (and beneficiaries) in planning and decision making. Attribution of this change to Paung Ku's mentoring alone is extremely difficult, yet there is some indication that Paung Ku's support was associated with an increase in the level of participation and downward accountability within the group.

Nurturing a culture of downward accountability will be critical in the future strength of Myanmar civil society. International agencies can play an important role in supporting this. However, we must also reduce our emphasis on upward accountability and do more to cultivate existing community mechanisms.

3. Vision

Many civil society actors report that Cyclone Nargis contributed to the self belief and overall vision (or visions) of Myanmar civil society. Their combined ability to mobilize people and resources toward helping hundreds of thousands of survivors- in a way which government, private sector and the international community were unable to do- perhaps gave Myanmar civil society groups a greater sense of confidence.

Further there are some encouraging signs that external support can help clarify and focus the vision of local groups. Paung Ku's review of mentoring in late 2009 showed that facilitated reflection on group goals often led to a clarified and expanded vision for community level groups. For example, one local group had the immediate objective of building a school in their village, however there was often no broader vision for the role of the group. Discussion within the group (facilitated by the mentor) helped to clarify their long term vision and ultimately led to a wider focus on education.

While there have been some positive examples of supporting vision of civil society organisations, we also see that the offer of funding support can sometimes harm the 'sovereignty' of local organisations. For example, despite Paung Ku being non sector based (in other words we do not focus on any one sector such as health, education or water and sanitation) there are a number of examples where –through word of mouth- local groups have applied to Paung Ku for funding for a project identical to one in a neighboring village. By our approach to funding local groups Paung Ku may be drawing groups away from their original visions to something they assume they can be funded for.

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A strong civil society is one with self belief and vision (or perhaps a diversity of visions). While there is reason to be wary of the impact of funding on local organisation sovereignty, there are also some encouraging signs that our support can contribute positively.

4. Networks

The connectedness within civil society is also often recognized as a sign of its strength. In 2009/10, there have been many efforts to develop these ties both internationally and locally.

A number of groups (mostly Yangon based) further built their connections with civil society groups in the region over the last year through attending regional conferences and study tours. However, while there have been some positive increases in relationships across borders over the last year, links to civil society organisations in Bangladesh, China and India (the most immediately influential neighboring countries) remain extremely limited. Without an increase in not only relationships across borders- but also common voice- it will remain difficult for Myanmar civil society to be able to meaningfully influence many of the social and environmental issues of the future.

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At the local level, the picture is more encouraging with several new local organisation focused networks forming in 2010. For example, several Paung Ku supported groups in Pyapon Township (in Ayeyawaddy Division) began to meet during 2010 to share experiences about their recovery activities after Nargis. This has now developed into a network of forty seven community based organisations in Pyapon which are meeting regularly for mutual learning and which may take on their own small grant function in the future.

While we see an increase in the number of networks there are two main reasons to be cautious. First, it is the function of networks which are valuable – in mutual learning, combined voice or sharing of resources – rather than the presence of networks themselves. Second, the example of the network in Pyapon illustrates a wider trend that networks are between similar entities (rural CBOs with rural CBOs, urban NGOs with urban NGOs). The most dynamic and important network interactions are likely to be between a variety of different entities including both rural, grassroots voices and urban based elite ones. Links across ethnic and religious groupings are also likely to be critical in the future development of Myanmar.

The most dynamic network interactions are likely to be between a variety of different entities

Overall, while international connections remain limited many new local networks are emerging to contribute to both mutual learning and collective voice. The challenge for initiatives such as Paung Ku is to know how to support these links more effectively

5. Voice

Within the authoritarian context of Myanmar, there are many tangible constraints to the voice of civil society. Yet, local organisations continue to find ways to bring change.

For example, in mid 2010 a local group ran an art show in Yangon exploring issues of water in Myanmar. Indirectly, it challenged the Myanmar government to think more wisely about their water resource policies. Another environment network ran a seminar on river management which raised the issues surrounding hydropower dam construction on the Ayeyawaddy River.

Negotiating with Authorities

A community based group in Thar Gyi Village in the Dry Zone was aware of the importance of securing an electricity supply to their village. They applied successfully to Paung Ku in 2010 for a grant for a generator and a Paung Ku mentor was also seconded to the group.

However, to install the generator they needed permission from the Department of Energy. Paung Ku's mentor encouraged them to think how they might obtain this permission. On discussion, they decided to ask a community member -who had built good relations with the local authority- to liaise on their behalf. Added to which, their village was located in an area where the government had paddy projects. They were able to use this to their advantage in offering to grow more rice for the government projects, the husks of which could be used as fuel.

Paung Ku was able to support the community in identifying their goal and achieving it through their own means. Using their relations with the local authority and their location in part of a government paddy project, the community was able to ultimately obtain permission for the installation of their generator.

While there are some examples which have a policy change focus, in Paung Ku's experience, most of the interaction with authorities takes place (like the story above) with the goal of gaining permission for activities. For example, a small unregistered group in the Dry Zone who are working on care for the elderly organised a meeting with the township level authorities. They presented the needs of elderly people within their township and asked for permission to continue their work (despite having no formal registration or legitimacy for their activities).

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One of the key limitations to the ability of local groups to engage in advocacy is the restricted vision of the international community. Many donors (especially multi donor trust funds such as Three Diseases Fund and LIFT) and international NGOs emphasise only

service delivery functions for local groups rather than supporting creative opportunities for engaging with authorities.

It should also be noted however that some donors (such as DFID) are leading the way in forming a new set of principles for engagement with civil society in Myanmar which emphasise the key capacity of civil society 'voice'. The translation of these principles into practical change in donor practice will be a positive step toward supporting a civil society with voice.

Overall, there are some reasons to be encouraged that civil society in Myanmar is becoming stronger through greater unity and diversity, more downward accountability, clearer vision, closer connections and stronger 'voice'. Paung Ku may be playing a role in supporting this change, however we also have much to learn about both minimizing harm and being more creative in our engagement.

What are the emerging opportunities for civil society strengthening in Myanmar?

Reflecting on these questions of civil society strengthening has led Paung Ku to explore several emerging opportunities for future support in Myanmar. They are related to issues such as natural resource management and capacity building, use of media and the arts and civil society's engagement with both government and international donors.

Civil Society & the Environment

Myanmar is now facing a daunting range of environmental issues.

However, in a context of limited accountability (for private or public sector) and rapidly increasing investment in extractive, agricultural and other industries, it is difficult to see clear solutions to these problems. Perhaps surprisingly, parts of the Myanmar Government have shown an openness to work together with key environment focused civil society groups in responding to these issues. This openness is unusual in the current context and the opportunity for constructive civil society–state interaction needs to be taken.

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One key example that Paung Ku will focus on in the next year is the current environmental issues related to Inle Lake in Shan State. From high level authorities to local level government departments (such as forestry and irrigation) there is recognition of the severity of the situation (especially since it is one of Myanmar's natural heritage areas). A number of key civil society organisations have been included in discussions with government and there seems openness for cooperation between grassroots level groups, national level NGOs, government and private sector.

Paung Ku's analysis is that environmental issues (like HIV&AIDS or disability related issues in the past) are developing as a key engagement point for strengthening the role of civil society in Myanmar.

Civil Society & Capacity Building

There is much debate about how the capacity of organisations increases. However, many agree that active facilitation of learning and reflection (from mentoring/coaching roles through to training) by an external actor can have a role in increasing capacity. However, while there is a proliferation of both *donor funding* for capacity building in Myanmar and in the *number* of local groups, there has not been a corresponding expansion in actual capacity building activities. Increasingly, international actors (donors, international NGOs

and embassies) have little ability to provide the support which is required. All are willing to outsource capacity building, but there are few options of where it can be outsourced to.

While externally supported activities can be beneficial, ultimately organisations themselves need to drive change. Capacity building is not a product that we can deliver or outsource but a change process driven by an organisation. Sometimes the best thing we can do for capacity building is to simply fund them to do what they want to do.

Therefore, there is a growing need to find ways to increase the supply of external capacity building services for local organisations but more fundamentally we need to find ways to better foster the sovereign vision of organisations (see next point).

Civil Society & International Donors

Many observers predict (and there are some signs already) that international assistance to Myanmar will increase in the coming years, yet many donors will remain reluctant to give funds bilaterally to the Myanmar government. Therefore, it is possible that the amount of funding support to local organisations (either direct or channeled through international NGOs or embassies) could increase significantly.

Local groups are constantly negotiating between their vision on one hand and opportunities for funding support (which in Myanmar are mostly sector focused eg Three Diseases Fund, LIFT) on the other. There is sometimes *overlap* (where funding opportunities coincide with their own vision) but more often there is *tension*. And the critical factor in successfully negotiating this is the strength of vision and accountability within local groups. If overall funding does increase, this tension will become more challenging for civil society organisations.

In the coming year Paung Ku will continue to work with donors, international NGOs and embassies toward putting principles -for engagement with civil society in Myanmar- into practice. Most critically, Paung Ku will continue to examine the ways in which our own approach may be undermining the vision and accountability of local groups.

Civil Society, Media & the Arts

As we have said, it is tempting for us to define civil society within the boundaries we are comfortable with. However, a focus only on professionalised development actors can miss significant opportunities for influence.

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In particular, arts and media groups have enormous influence- despite government censorship- through their ability to raise issues in a non threatening way. This can be

directed toward the public in desensitizing key topics and creating space for discussion or toward shifting the opinions of policy makers.

In the coming year Paung Ku will make further attempts to engage with arts and media groups (especially related to awareness of environment issues) and connect these groups together with other more development focused actors. We believe that the combination of grassroots action and wider communication of those actions can strengthen the role of civil society in Myanmar.

Civil Society & the State

The impact of the 2010 elections on the space for civil society-state relations in Myanmar will not be clear for some time. What is clear is that there will necessarily be a renegotiation of key relationships occurring in most constituencies. Civil society organisations will also need to renegotiate their relationships with authorities at various levels. Therefore, while it is unclear what the changes in civil society-state relationships will be, there will definitely be change and it is important that any emerging opportunities are taken.

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In the coming year Paung Ku will focus first on further developing our own understanding of the dynamics of the state–civil society relationship. Paung Ku will also continue to support groups to engage proactively with government (particularly at the local and township level). However, Paung Ku recognizes that in most cases local authorities are severely constrained by their own capacity (financial and human resources). Rebuilding accountable governance will require attention to both civil society ('voice') and government ('responsiveness') sides of the relationship.

Conclusion

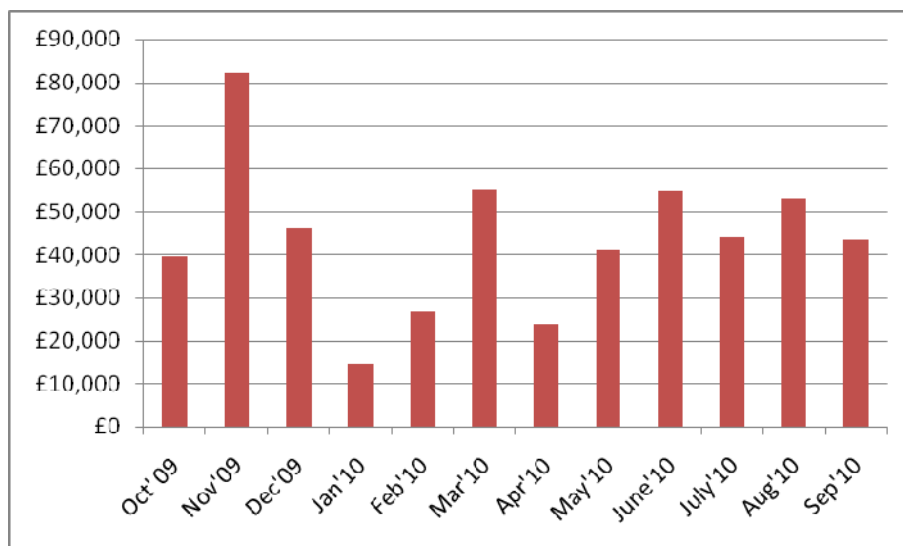
There are signs that civil society in Myanmar may indeed be getting stronger and that international agencies can potentially play a positive role in supporting this. However, we have also seen that the role of international actors (with Paung Ku as an example) can also at times be harmful.

Ultimately, our underlying attitude may be a key reason for this harm. Most often, we focus on all the ways in which Myanmar civil society needs to become more like us. We focus on shortcomings in financial systems or sector related knowledge and then the ways that we can help civil society to get closer to where we are. The challenge for Paung Ku is to recognize that in many ways civil society is actually far ahead of us and working toward change in a way that we cannot yet understand. Our attitude in strengthening civil society in Myanmar should not be one of charity, but one of admiration.

We hope that this report contributes toward an ongoing dialogue between local groups, communities and international organisations about how we can all work toward a civil society in Myanmar which is unified yet diverse, accountable, visionary, connected and which can present a voice for change.

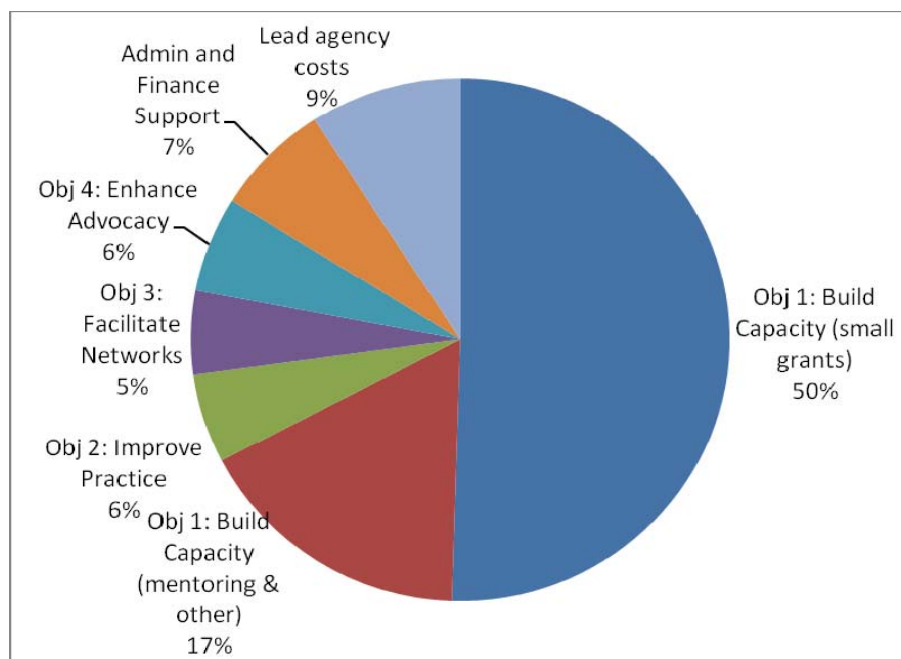
Annex 1: Financial Report

Paung Ku Expenditure by Month 2009/10



Please note that figures for expenditure are in GBP.

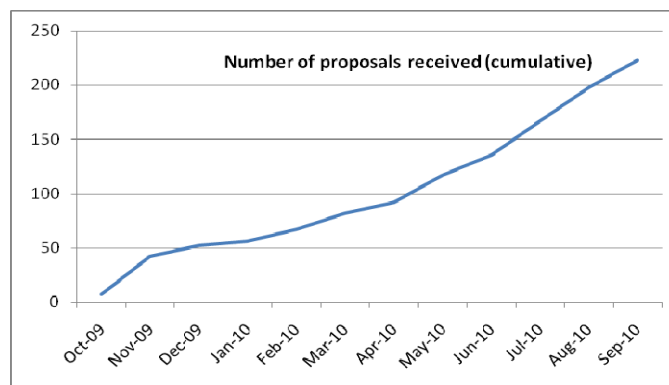
Paung Ku Expenditure by Objective 2009/10



Please note that the expenditure by objective chart only applies to Jan-Sept 2010 and the new Paung Ku objectives. Prior to the Mid Term Review in 2009, there were a different set of objectives and expenditure cannot be broken down by the new objectives.

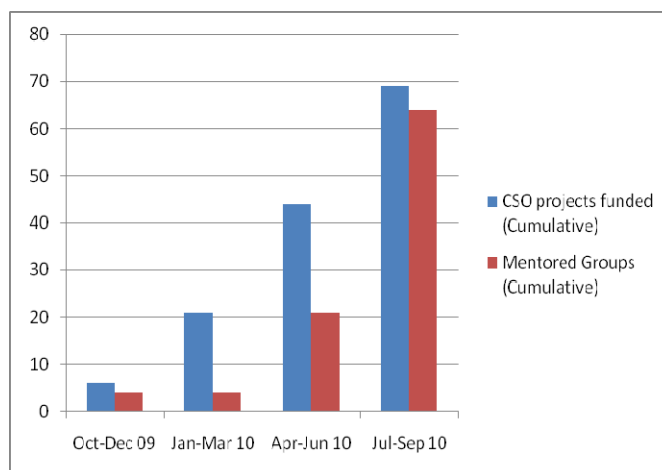
Annex 2: Small Grants Data

How many proposals did Paung Ku receive in 2009/10?



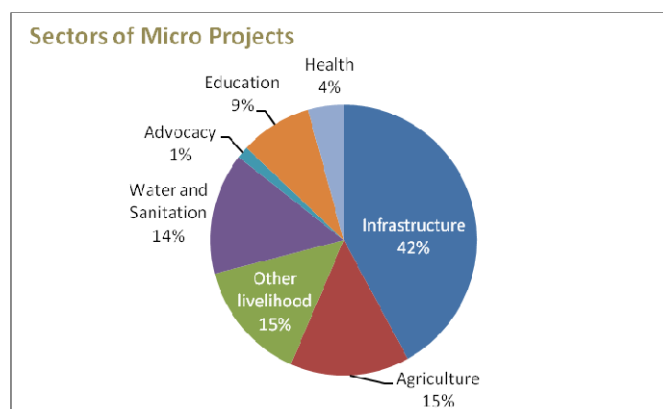
How many groups has Paung Ku worked with?

One key way in which Paung Ku works with local groups is through small project funding (with an average grant size of approximately USD 3000). Through 2009/10 Paung Ku supported a total of 69 micro projects in a variety of sectors. Together with project support, Paung Ku also facilitates mentoring of civil society organisations through both employing experienced mentors and seconding staff from other organisations. Through 2009/10 Paung Ku supported the mentoring of 64 local groups (see graph below relating to progress through 2009/10).



What kind of projects did they do?

Paung Ku supports CSOs to do an enormous variety of different projects. Over the last year this has involved building infrastructure such as schools, bridges, electricity lines and roads to livelihoods and environmental advocacy (see chart below for breakdown of different sector areas of micro projects).



Where are they working?

Paung Ku works with CSOs from throughout the Myanmar and in 2009/10 Paung Ku supported groups from 10 of Myanmar's 14 States and Divisions. While there is diversity in areas of group activity, there was a cluster of grants (60% of the overall funded micro projects) in Ayeyawaddy and Yangon Divisions. This reflects Yangon as a centre of civil society activity where Paung Ku is well known and Ayeyawaddy where local groups are continuing to be active in long term recovery after Cyclone

