



International Peace Support and Effective Peacebuilding in Myanmar

Executive Summary, March 2024

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This research project explores the peace process that surrounded the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. It focuses on the successes and failures of international support for peacebuilding at that time, drawing together findings that can be applied by policymakers and practitioners in Myanmar and internationally. While future efforts to find peace in Myanmar will look very different from those of the past, it is vital that lessons from the past are taken on board.

Myanmar lurched into crisis when the military ousted the civilian government in February 2021. Conflict engulfed much of the country as resistance spread and existing armed groups that had been active for decades were joined by a myriad of new defence forces.

The crisis reached an intensity not seen since the country's independence. Much of the country was directly affected by widespread violence, displacement, and great humanitarian need. Over the three years following the coup, more than 45,000 people were killed in 30,000 separate armed clashes or events. At least 1.5 million people had been displaced and much of the population was in significant need of humanitarian support.^a

The military coup and its aftermath followed a period of change, a brief flourishing of democracy and economic opportunity that offered opportunities and hope. As reforms were taken forward, sanctions were lifted, international development agencies looked to provide support and accelerate the country's development. A ceasefire agreement was signed in 2015, covering some areas that had been affected by long-term conflict for decades, leading to optimism that a peaceful future was possible.

Conducted by The Asia Foundation with the support of the Canadian government, research involved intensive rounds of interviews during 2023 with key informants: peace specialists, civic activists, national and international experts, foreign aid officials, and others. The research team also drew on a small mountain of reports, papers, articles and books. The study is presented in several sections:

- **Key findings and recommendations.** Outlines the main lessons learned for future international development assistance to Myanmar.
- **The Context for Building Peace: Entrenched Challenges and Partial Reforms.** Provides the background to Myanmar's peace process, 2010–2020.
- **Lessons from Foreign Assistance for Peacebuilding in Myanmar.** Summarizes the successes and failures of international support.
- **Women, Peace, and Security Funding Dynamics in Myanmar, 2010–2020.** A closer look into funding for gender inclusion in peace processes and how the Women, Peace, and Security agenda was advanced.

^a Incident and casualty data from [IISS / ACLED](#). Displacement and humanitarian data from [UNHCR](#). [Accessed 12 February 2024.]

Main Findings

Western aid programs provided valuable support yet struggled to engage with the entrenched problems that have driven conflict for many decades. From 2010 to 2020, strong support for Myanmar’s political and economic reforms among Western and other democratic countries meant that problems were overlooked, especially ethnic tensions and conflict. Myanmar had become a global success story, and Western donors were overly optimistic in expecting that the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement would lead to a formal peace agreement in a short period of time and that the trajectory of the peace process would be maintained.

Western donors involved in peacebuilding did not take regional geopolitics sufficiently into account. China as well as other Asian countries are significant influences within Myanmar.

Donors looked to build confidence in the peace process but were hampered by their own short-term thinking, clunky project delivery mechanisms, and their tendency to align with the central government. Politically engaged programming was supplanted by larger, more conventional initiatives much too soon.

Gender equality and Women, Peace, and Security programs often failed to achieve real impact. Performative or poorly conceived approaches risked targeting superficial changes, as well as overburdening a small pool of local actors with competing demands.

Flexible funding works best. Rigid project delivery tended to limit vital adaptation, and there were mixed experiences with pooled funds.

We have to consider the peace process as a series of initiatives, actions, and contributions over time that may not always be an actual failure, despite the initial impression. It is just part of that process, building on the last and all the previous contributions undertaken before 2011.

(Interview with donor peace specialist)

Main Recommendations

Take a long-term view: If opportunities to support peacebuilding emerge in future, donors should still be prepared for uneven and unpredictable pathways.

Don’t expect the same again: Myanmar has changed and future peace processes will look very different from the past. Claims for autonomy are stronger and aid agencies will need to recognize immense diversity as a fundamental. The challenges presented by contested governance and conflict in Myanmar are also so thorny—they are such ‘wicked problems’—that nuanced and varied approaches are needed.

Support trust-building and public confidence measures as soon as conditions allow. If there is progress, look to start early by supporting domestic efforts at conflict resolution, dialogue, and consultation with all parties.

Treat all conflict parties with equally high levels of respect. Non-state actors cannot always be offered full equivalence but their challenges need to be understood and their positions acknowledged.

Think more about working with neighboring countries. Consider finding areas of common ground with Myanmar’s neighboring governments, regional powers, and ASEAN, including specific opportunities to build such as external monitoring or advisory bodies.

Adapt national approaches and build understanding of Myanmar’s rich diversity as a central pillar of programming, not an afterthought.

Think twice about multi-donor pooled funds and consider coordination carefully. Pooled funds can end up acting as a lowest common denominator, while coordination mechanisms are important but need to be simple, practical and effective.

Be strategic about engaging on Women, Peace, and Security. Funding streams may remain small but they can achieve impact if support is well-coordinated, long-term and based on strong contextual evidence.

Build on existing knowledge of what works and devise implementing mechanisms accordingly. Base programs on evidence including past evaluations and be willing to back pilot programs. Evidence shows that locally-led and flexible programs work best, particularly as they fit the needs and priorities of existing efforts.

Don’t rush in. Start small and build gradually in order to avoid a gold rush of foreign aid.