

# URBANIZATION & CONFLICT IN MYANMAR: A BRIEFING PAPER

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND



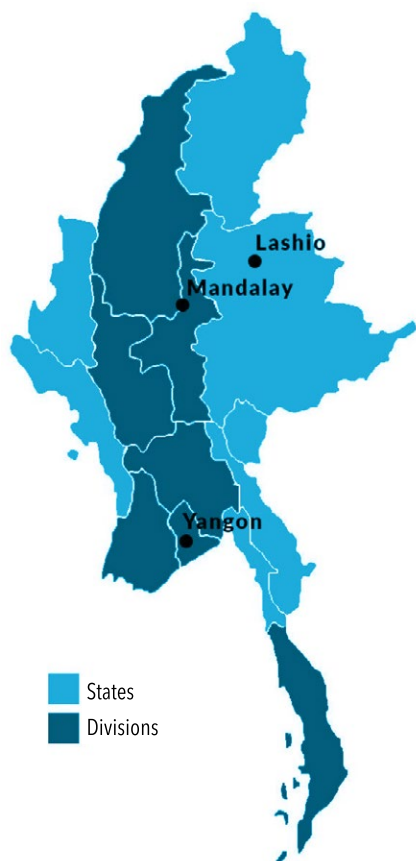


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## COUNTRY CONTEXT

Myanmar stands at a critical juncture in its development as it works to successfully navigate a national peace process, continue its democratic transition, and grapple with the ongoing effects of inter-communal tensions after clashes in hotspots throughout the country.

National level political issues, intercommunal violence and armed conflict influence localized conflict dynamics in urban areas, especially in urban communities that continue to struggle with longstanding issues of poverty and underdevelopment.

In a time of growing information sharing and social media usage, localized issues and incidents of violence have the ability to snowball into conflicts of national importance.

With increased migration and urbanization resulting from rapid economic development as the country transitions, the importance of addressing conflict issues and dynamics in urban centers grows, especially as new opportunities to foster diversity, support inclusion and conflict transformation present themselves.

## MIGRATION AND URBANIZATION

Migration and urbanization are major foci of the international community, particularly in developing countries, where 90% of urban growth is taking place. As demographic makeups change, and urban management and planning become more difficult, leadership structures – from the global United Nations-Habitat initiative to local, municipal government – will have to consider how to effectively navigate the convergence of diverse, concentrated populations.

In Myanmar, migration and urbanization are amongst the many dynamics affected by the country's current economic and political transition. While increased urbanization and migration have the potential to complicate existing social tensions, they too create opportunities for the people of Myanmar to discover new ways to foster peaceful relationships amongst the country's diverse populations.

Currently, around 70% of the country's 51 million people live in rural areas, mostly engaging in local agricultural work.<sup>1</sup> However, as the industrialization of Myanmar continues, it is estimated that 10 million non-agricultural jobs will be created<sup>2</sup>, creating incentives for more people from rural areas to migrate to urban centers. The trend is already becoming clear, with a 26% rise in the urban population since 2000.<sup>3</sup>

Increasing rates of urbanization in Myanmar resulting from a rapidly changing economy have the potential to complicate existing conflict dynamics in urban centers as well as to strain the capacity of local governmental agencies to adequately serve the needs of local populations in a fair and balanced manner. While Myanmar has a history of internal migration and diverse groups co-existing, under the current political and economic transitions it can be seen that larger numbers of diverse people are now sharing physical space and traditional social bonds are fragmenting.

1 UNFPA, <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/country-profile-0>

2 McKinsey Global Institute. Myanmar's Moment: Unique Opportunities, Major Challenges, 2013, Last accessed June 26, 2017.

3 World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2015&start=2000>. Last Accessed June 21, 2017.

While this migration trend may lead to more economic opportunities, it also creates increased strain on urban infrastructure and the reach and effectiveness of government service delivery, and in some cases risks increasing tensions amongst diverse populations.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the challenges that increased migration and urbanization bring, they also create an exciting opportunity to address issues of trust, inequality, and violence in Myanmar. The coming together of diverse groups, relaxed laws around assembly, and the dramatic opening of the media space create unique opportunities to leverage positive change.

## RESEARCH PLAN AND OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Search for Common Ground conducted a rapid conflict assessment in November 2016 in Lashio, Shan State and North Okkalapa, Yangon to identify key conflict drivers and forces for peace in these two urban areas. Through qualitative desk research and field-based enquiry, findings noted that the following dynamics influence the level of urban-based intercommunal tensions and potential for intercommunal violence to occur:

Dynamics influencing conflict within urbanizing areas of Myanmar:

1. Economic inequality and political competition
2. Ineffective or unbalanced delivery of social services
3. Municipal government responsiveness to urbanization and migration
4. Limited trust and cooperation between citizens and local authorities
5. Lack of availability of public spaces for social interaction
6. Lack of availability of activities for young people that promote intergroup interaction
7. Street crime and drug abuse
8. Social discrimination
9. Nationwide intercommunal conflicts and peace process dynamics

While the dynamics noted above are local in nature, they link to national level conflict dynamics, and in situations where urbanization and migration are poorly managed they can contribute to mistrust and a weakening of social ties between diverse identity groups<sup>5</sup> across the country. While the way each of these dynamics manifests in urban centers around the country is unique, each of them is considered relevant to the level of peaceful coexistence experienced amongst diverse populations living in each area.

Findings also identified historic coexistence in urban centers as well as local forces for peace, and further noted that increased urbanization creates opportunities for diverse communities to create common bonds, be connected to national processes, and use social media to build peace.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS AREAS

Search for Common Ground conducted a rapid conflict assessment in November 2016 using a qualitative methodology comprising desk and field work. Desk work included the review of relevant writings on Myanmar's political context, the presence of hate speech in social media, and on urbanization and intercommunal violence. Field work included 16 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with persons representing social and/or political authority in their community such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ward administrators. The work also included 12 focus group discussions with Buddhist and Muslim youth and parents and guardians. Based on recommendations from local partners the Buddhist and Muslim youth were interviewed separately as were the youth and parents and guardians.

4 Cohen, Michael. *Urbanization and Conflict: Trends, Impacts, and Challenges for Development Assistance*. 2009.

5 Dhungana, Shiva. *Final Evaluation - Community Information Management to Reduce Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar*. Search for Common Ground, 2016.

Lashio and North Okkalapa represent two urban centers with existing diverse populations that are currently experiencing increased rates of population growth and shifting demographics. They are also areas with significant political and economic divides. Finally, they are critical urban centers that act as central information hubs to transmit information to the regions via radio and social media.

**Lashio:** Lashio is the largest town in Shan State (northeast Myanmar) with a population of 323,405 people.<sup>6</sup> It is a religiously and ethnically diverse area with Buddhist and Muslim Shans, the Wa, Ta-Aung, Chinese and Burman peoples. The city also sees sizeable numbers of migrant workers from central Myanmar and other parts of Shan State, as well as persons who are internally displaced due to the armed conflict between Non-State Armed Group (NSAG) and the Tatmadaw, creating an ethnically, religiously, socio-economically, and generationally diverse environment. It is also a militarized area, with the center of the Tatmadaw's North-East Command located in Northern Shan State. Armed conflict in Shan State further influences urban conflict dynamics.

**North Okkalapa:** North Okkalapa is a township comprised of 19 wards (administrative divisions) in Yangon with a population of 333,293 persons. In 2007, many of the townships' monasteries were raided and monks were arrested in retaliation for anti-government protests during what became known as the "Saffron Revolution." In July 2013, in recognition of interreligious clashes threatening urban centers in Myanmar, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian leaders in North Okkalapa's Ward 1 held the "Peace and Unity for All Religious Groups of North Okkalapa Township Meeting."

## CONFLICT DYNAMICS ASSOCIATED WITH MIGRATION AND URBANIZATION

Increased levels of migration and urbanization in Myanmar leads to higher levels of interaction between diverse groups, can complicate existing issues, and in some communities can create increase tensions between members of diverse groups and pose risk for conflict and violence. Search found a number of dynamics that influence levels of trust and the quality of relationships amongst diverse groups living in urban areas.

**Economic inequality and political competition:** Economic inequality, while typically analyzed in relation to conflict dynamics in rural and ethnic areas, is also a factor that influences conflict dynamics within urban centers. The uneven distribution of wealth and power is often quite visible to local residence in urban centers just as it is in ethnic states. Poverty being a struggle that many people are faced with on a daily basis, political competition for groups seeking to access political space in order that economic inequality and related grievances of their ethnic or religious group be addressed is a factor that can increase tension amongst diverse groups in urban centers. In diverse areas, political competition coupled with the inability to address longstanding issues of poverty and economic inequality can breed frustration and resentment, in some cases as a contributing factor to violence and conflict in urban areas.<sup>7</sup>

**Ineffective and unbalanced delivery of social services:** Public administration and service delivery in Myanmar is complicated and bureaucratic, and struggles to keep pace with the increasing rates of development and urbanization. Implementation oversight and quality control is rare, particularly at the municipal level, and accountability is frequently lost between the tangle of bureaucratic departments.<sup>8</sup> Longstanding ethnic conflicts and ethno-linguistic diversity, seen in diverse urban areas, also contribute to inequitable and ineffective delivery of educational, health, and infrastructural public services.<sup>9</sup>

Insufficient and unequal service delivery is a critical factor fueling marginalization and mistrust in urban centers. For example, there are many factors that contribute to poor and unequal education service delivery in urban areas. Low levels of public funding dedicated to education, a system long based on knowledge based rote learning, authoritarian teaching patterns and content produced to reinforce the Burman-Buddhist centric political perspective of military

6 Myanmar Information Management Unit

7 Saferworld: Addressing Horizontal Inequalities as Drivers of Conflict in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2013.

8 <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MunicipalGovernanceinMyanmarENG.pdf>

9 <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MMEthnicConflictandSocialServices.pdf>

leadership during past decades are all concerns that contribute to intercommunal tension in both rural and urban areas. Teacher recruitment and training often replicate longstanding patterns of privilege and inequality.

As is common practice around the country, research found that teachers in public schools in Lashio and North Okkalapa hold private tutoring classes in their homes for students who can afford to pay. In Myanmar's education system, based solely on students ability to pass exams, teachers maintain their ability to generate students by withholding key information needed to pass exams when they teach classes within public schools. In order to pass exams, students must attend paid classes after school. This puts poorer students at a disadvantage, results in many not being able to complete their middle or high school education and contributes to widening inequality between rich and poor social classes within urban centers.

#### Box 1: Burmanization and structural inequality

Denied by successive military regimes of the past, ethnic forced assimilation to Burman/Buddhist culture (often referred to as Burmanization) is commonly understood amongst ethnic and religious minorities throughout the country. Carried over from methods used by Burmese kingdoms to assimilate conquered groups during pre-colonial times, successive military regimes used an array of often brutal tactics to force the assimilation of minority ethnic, religious and linguistic groups.

Burmanization tactics of ethnic, religious and linguistic forced assimilation during 50 years of military rule deepened cultural and social divides among Myanmar's ethnic and religious groups and have created insurmountable barriers to citizenship, acquisition of basic services, and protection of human rights. The 1982 Citizenship Law, for example, created three levels of citizenship based on recognized "indigenous races" and numbers of generations born in Myanmar, creating an official basis for discrimination against ethnic minorities.<sup>10</sup>

Decades of militarized authoritarian leadership and divide and rule tactics by the former military regime that have left the population with deeply entrenched ethnic, social, and religious divides that play out between identity groups. The visible effects of entrenched policies and practices of Burmanization are amplified in urban centers. The education system and other departments of government promote and reinforce Burman-Buddhist conceptualizations of national identity, in many cases reserving positions of authority for those who fit the dominant ethno-religious identity group.<sup>11</sup> Diverse groups in urban centers feel the impacts of public policies very differently and these can lead to deepening feelings of resentment and marginalization.

As in rural areas, minority groups in urban settings struggle to mitigate the detrimental effects of a legacy of Burmanization, to preserve and protect their cultures and to combat current manifestations of what they consider to be modern day Burmanization.<sup>12</sup>

**Municipal government responsiveness to urbanization and migration:** Despite political will and efforts made on behalf of the Government of the Union of Myanmar, wffective municipal governance remains a challenge in Myanmar, with public pressure and expectations to decentralize urban leadership, revealing the gaps and shortcomings in municipal service delivery - not just in Yangon and Mandalay, but in all urban areas.<sup>13</sup> The Myanmar government is pushing to decentralize its governance structure and allow for more concentrated attention and autonomous decision making for township leaders. The municipal government represents a key interface between the state government and Myanmar people, directly managing service delivery (education, water, etc.), economic governance (issuing

10 <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm>

11 <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm>

12 Burma Link. Burmanisation and Discrimination. <http://www.burmalink.org/background/burma/dynamics-of-ethnic-conflict/burmanisation-and-discrimination/>

13 <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MunicipalGovernanceinMyanmarENG.pdf>

licenses, permits, leading tax collection), and infrastructure development, including receiving bids for infrastructure projects.<sup>14</sup> Multi-layered bureaucracy, limited funds, and communication, throughout many government structures, presents challenges for the decentralisation processes and the frontline government staff.

Even at present, there is a distinct lack of consistency, transparency, and accountability in municipal operations. Decision-making structures, service delivery provision and citizen relations reportedly lack structure and can be easily perceived as biased. Further, there are often high levels of mistrust in relationships between citizens, businesses and local government officials and civil servants.<sup>15</sup> As Myanmar's urban populations grow and demographics continue to diversify, these political shortcomings at the municipal level, and the often poor level of state-civilian relations in growing urban centers, paired with rapid economic and infrastructural development, could manifest in greater dissatisfaction and inequity in Myanmar's urban centers.

**Trust and cooperation between citizens and local authorities:** After decades of military rule there remains a significant level of mistrust between the Myanmar government and citizens, preventing meaningful engagement to resolve grievances and collaborate around shared concerns. The inconsistent enforcement of the law contributes to poor levels of trust between citizens and local authorities and further opens space for citizens to perceive the actions and practices of authorities as discriminatory. Examples from Lashio and North Okkalapa show how the inability of local authorities to resolve disputes between citizens contributes to conflict between diverse community members.

*One respondent in North Okkalapa, a Muslim woman, described a dispute between a Muslim candle maker. The candle maker would use space in front of his house to dry candles, thereby taking up space in the street and interfering with traffic. A Buddhist neighbor complained to the man, and upon his inaction, destroyed his candles. The Muslim candle maker complained to local authorities, who did not act upon the complaint. The Muslim man and his son then beat up the Buddhist neighbor and went to the police to justify their action. By taking the law into their own hands they were in trouble. More importantly, however, is that a case that should have simply been a dispute between neighbors, became a much more serious case of interreligious fighting and physical violence.*

Findings noted that local authorities were described as important but often inefficient actors in maintaining calm at the ward level. Currently in urban areas, evidenced in Lashio and North Okkalapa, the local police are seen as partial agents to a dispute and contributing the existing stereotypes, unwilling to intervene lest their reputation may suffer.

**Availability of public spaces for social interaction:** Contributing to community mistrust and lack of meaningful interaction between diverse groups is the lack of public space where citizens can assemble away from work and family. Research has shown that investing in public spaces provides impressive social returns in urban areas, improving equality and social cohesion.

In both Lashio and North Okkalapa, there is a distinct lack of public spaces (parks, sporting grounds, etc.) where both men and women can come together. Most urban residents spend their time at gendered and ritualized spaces such as tea shops and religious facilities, resulting in people only socializing with their own in-group and limiting the flexibility and openness of their views and behaviors. Religious and ethnic identities, along with gender and generational divides, are also solidified by these urban special constraints.

In many urban areas of Yangon, citizens live in cramped spaces with limited facilities and access to greenery. In North Okkalapa, the ward authorities appear to be aware of the lack of such free public spaces in their area, particularly for youth, and have indicated that plans have been made for the development of sporting facilities on public land. However, urban planning issues, particularly surrounding land ownership and a lack of political will at higher levels, have stalled this project, which is estimated to cost USD 200,000.

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

**Availability of activities for young people that promote intergroup interaction:** Religious institutions - for example, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian - appear to dominate social life in urban areas, as evidenced in Lashio and North Okkalapa - and religion's link to national identity and citizenship is never far from people's minds. The majority of activities in which youth participate are sanctioned by religious authorities and are charitable in nature. While well-intentioned, these activities do not shift citizens' focus away from religious issues to the common interest and do not provide spaces for young people to interact with persons outside of their ethnic and religious groups. This lack of interaction means that young people are not exposed to alternative ideas and viewpoints - the building blocks for creating meaningful discourse and intergroup interaction.

**Street crime and drug abuse:** Coupled with economic insecurity and economic inequality, as urbanization rates continue to grow, it is seen that local urban populations often develop a fear and mistrust of unknown outsiders moving to their communities and in some cases stereotype them as criminals, while at the same time these newcomers are at a disadvantage in new environments and feel vulnerable. Drugs are seen to represent youth's moral failure and urban citizens did not express compassion for drug addicts and did not speak of any initiatives to help young people avoid drugs. The stigmatization is high and pushes drug users to the margins of their communities, rendering them vulnerable to ideological and other predators with motives to destabilize the urban area.

Young people, increasingly moving to urban areas for new, non-agricultural employment, are the prime targets for drug use - vulnerable, seeking work, and unfamiliar with the community. This is dangerous, as it can fuel negative stereotypes towards newcomers and spoil relationships between diverse groups in urban centers. Respondents in both target communities identified drug abuse as an issue of great concern, particularly that drugs contributed to rising aggressive behavior of youth and renders them vulnerable to being involved in violence.

In Lashio, the current armed conflict in the vicinity of the city and drug abuse emerged as the main drivers of distrust and fear. Drug abuse, especially in Lashio, is one of the most serious social ills affecting young people in the city and contributes to social divides and insecurity. Lack of opportunities, poverty, the availability of cheap drugs, discontent and malaise were all listed as contributing to rampant drug abuse.

In North Okkalapa, drug abuse, violent crime, gender-based violence - especially the rape of girls - and poverty resulting in internal displacement emerged as the main issues of concern. In North Okkalapa, there is a pervasive fear of newcomers. Displaced people, mostly poor Buddhists from the area displaced from their homes due to speculation, and immigrants, are considered more dangerous than known people from the area who are "different."

**Social discrimination:** Stemming in large part from the legacy of Burmanization and longstanding associated policies identifying religious and ethnic minorities (particularly Muslims) as unwelcomed immigrants, and negative stereotypes of ethnic and religious minorities have contributed to social discrimination common in urban areas around Myanmar. While stereotypes and forms of social discrimination are complex in manifestation in urban centers around Myanmar, these are recognized as salient factors intertwined with urban conflict dynamics. Stereotypes are reinforced by inconsistent and untrustworthy media reporting that often selectively identifies suspected perpetrators and victims of crime by name, religion, and/or ethnicity.

Examples of widespread discrimination manifesting in urban centers abound. In North Okkalapa, Muslim women described being harassed on public transport throughout the city because of their headscarves. Additionally, a young man from the area spoke of his inability to secure a job because many companies have an unwritten or expressed policy that prohibits the hiring of Muslims. One Muslim respondent spoke of the ridicule that Muslim men experience in public - being called "brides" due to their religious dress.

In Shan State, the armed conflict taking place between NSAGs and the Tatmadaw stems partly from decades-long discrimination against ethnic populations such as the Shan, leaving them aggrieved. This institutionalized discrimination traces back to British rule in Myanmar, which created anti-'foreigner' sentiment and strong Burman-

nationalist sentiments,<sup>16</sup> and the decades of military rule, which were marked by discrimination against non-Burmans, insurgencies of NSAGs, and the suppression and persecution of all political opposition and movements.

**Nationwide intercommunal conflicts and peace process dynamics:** In Myanmar, many people are concerned that the peace process does not include the broad range of perspectives needed to craft an effective political transition.<sup>17</sup> Many people remain unaware of the aims of the national ceasefire agreement and do not see a role for themselves in peacebuilding at a local level. Yet, any hope of converting the current ceasefire into an actionable political process depends upon popular accompaniment in dealing with core political and structural issues<sup>18</sup>, like land rights and the treatment of ethnic minorities, through an inclusive public discourse.

People living in urban centers such as Lashio are concerned both by heightened levels of violence between the Tatmadaw and NSAGs and when incidents of intercommunal violence affect other areas of the country, violent incidents in other parts of the country can deepen feelings of mistrust and injustice and solidify negative stereotypes of others.<sup>19</sup> Violent incidents in other parts of the country also contribute to gossip and reinforce stereotypes of some groups as inherently violent, bigoted or criminal.

While respondents from our assessment in North Okkalapa, Yangon, felt as though the violence in Rakhine was far away from their daily lives, they pointed to it as an example of the problems, or the likelihood of problems, between Buddhists and Muslims.

## FORCES FOR PEACE IN URBANIZING AREAS

**Historic coexistence in urban centers:** While Myanmar's history contains many examples and instances of conflict and violent clashes, there is also precedent for intercommunal peace and coexistence in urban centers of the country. These past and current community ties, paired with assessment participants' universal desire for peace, can be leveraged to make future migration flows and urban demographic changes smoother and more peaceful.

One of the most troubling aspects of the intercommunal violence that took place across Myanmar, notably from 2012-2014 is that some incidents occurred in communities with a history of peaceful co-existence. Despite these flashes of violence, there are promising examples of communities of diverse people living together peacefully, even in times of stress or hardship.

One interviewee in this assessment from North Okkalapa spoke of one particular area of town, which is comprised of Buddhists and Muslims who were collectively moved to the Ward from Yangon's Kamaryut Township in the 1980s following a severe fire. While tensions still exist and the urban spatial changes posed some challenges, the community is known and regarded for its peaceful co-existence over the past 30 years.

In order to leverage communities' history of coexistence to respond to current tensions and lay a sustainable foundation for peace and cooperation, it is critical to engage peacebuilders, or *common grounders*, from diverse communities to discuss common concerns and hardships, and how they can be collaboratively addressed.

**Local peace heroes:** There are also promising examples of urban citizens forming mutually beneficial relationships amongst their neighbors. Looking deeper into the dynamics of peaceful relationships in local centers one will find numerous examples of local peace heroes, forces for peace, whose lives are a testament to goodwill and peaceful coexistence between diverse groups.

In North Okkalapa, a well-known Muslim doctor is a medic to the local monks and laypeople and is a well-respected member of the community. He actively supports peaceful dialogue and nonviolence in his community

16 <http://www.newmandala.org/colonialism-and-ethnic-conflict-in-burma/>

17 Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar, Ashley South and Marie Laili, 2016, p7

18 CDA The significance of NCA: What everyone ought to know about the peace process

19 Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar, Search for Common Ground <https://www.sfcg.org/rumor-management-myanmar/>

and has cultivated close relationships with both Buddhist and Muslim members of the neighborhood.

Another North Okkalapa citizen, a Muslim woman, spoke of having a Muslim father and Buddhist brother. She said, "We all get along. Our neighbors always respect my family and they ask me questions about my religion or why Muslim women cover their heads and faces. I explain to them and we understand each other."

Despite their spatial restrictions and competition for services and infrastructure, communities in North Okkalapa, Lashio and urban centers around the country have been able to come together, address disagreements and find creative ways to value diversity and demonstrate respect for each other's beliefs. These individuals can be learned from in other urban contexts as populations grow and evolve and present an opportunity to share positive examples widely and shift popular, public narratives.

## EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

While urbanization can complicate existing conflict dynamics and pose unique challenges it also creates numerous opportunities for diverse groups together to build peaceful relationships.

**Building common bonds:** Research revealed that many populations throughout Myanmar focus predominantly on issues that affect their own community and seldom consider the relevance of resolving conflicts beyond those that affect their own communities. For example, communities in North Okkalapa were not very aware of issues relevant to the conflict in Rakhine State and did not feel it was relevant to their daily existence. So when diverse communities migrate to urban areas it provides opportunities for those living in urban centers to learn about the issues and struggles of people from other parts of the country. They have an opportunity to learn from people with diverse backgrounds with unique perspectives and experiences, and in building relationships can empathize with diverse people while drawing parallels with their own experiences. Establishing bonds together they may often then share common experiences in facing common problems brought on by the new strains on urban governance and infrastructure.

**Exposure to the national peace process:** Increasing urbanization also creates an opportunity to improve the inclusion and participation of diverse voices in national processes including the peace process. Thus far, the peace process has remained mostly a high level exercise, involving primarily leadership from the military and the National League for Democracy (NLD). This process, has largely been unsuccessful in sufficiently reaching rural populations and minority ethnic groups, many of whom are unaware of the peace process or unclear about any effect it will have on them.<sup>20</sup> Urban areas, with populations with connections back in ethnic/rural areas, provide an opportunity for exposure and engagement to a greater number of citizens, improving the inclusivity, and hopefully representation, of the national peace process.

**Utilization of social media to promote coexistence:** Since Myanmar's technological revolution began in 2014, the number of internet users has risen from 2 million to 39 million, and according to the 2014 census, over 60% of Myanmar's urban population has access to a mobile phone (compared to only 21% of rural people).<sup>21</sup> While social media presents significant risks and challenges to reducing conflict and violence, it also creates an opportunity to bring diverse groups together and debunk dangerous rumors.

Our analysis showed that individuals in both Lashio and North Okkalapa show an awareness of the dangers that social media can present and respondents spoke of some restraint when sharing information that could be untrue. This was particularly true for Muslim respondents who feared to share information about the conflict in Rakhine State concerned that it could fuel the conflict or bring unwanted attention to themselves.

Recognizing how social media has been used to spread misinformation and trigger conflict, with increasing numbers of

20 Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar, Ashley South and Marie Laili, 2016, p7

21 The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. [http://www.dop.gov.mm/moip/index.php?route=product/product&product\\_id=140](http://www.dop.gov.mm/moip/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=140).

people using social media in urban centers social media can be a powerful tool for information sharing and connection, providing a safe way to find new ideas and reach out to different groups and individuals, particularly among the young populations in Myanmar's urban centers.<sup>22</sup> Further, the proliferation of mobile technologies and social media provides a powerful platform for creating connections and debunking rumors among diverse communities in Myanmar's cities.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Myanmar stands at a critical juncture in its development and citizens continue to increasingly concentrate in cities, it becomes increasingly important to effectively analyze and address drivers of conflict in urban areas. While the conflict dynamics that coincide with urbanization and migration are complex and difficult to address – including deep-seated discrimination and a trust deficit between authorities and citizens – there are also distinct, emerging opportunities to engage across dividing lines and work towards a common vision for the future.

Peacebuilding in Myanmar's rapidly changing urban contexts is an incredibly complex process that needs to be dynamic and long-term. Particularly when working with vulnerable people and diverse groups, explaining grievances and injustices is difficult and requires localized, in-person engagement, focused on understanding core inequalities and building trust and dialogue.

Based on findings from Search's research into urbanization, migration and conflict in Myanmar the following recommendations are provided:

### Research recommendations

- Conduct more research into the demographics of Myanmar's urbanization and migration to understand city populations and vulnerability to conflict. Include the internal migration trends and urban vs. rural conflicts in Myanmar, to understand the new demographic makeups of Myanmar's cities and the effect on relations between diverse groups.
- Research the legally prescribed role of ward authorities – their power and limits – and design activities aimed at building their capacity in alternative dispute resolution.
- Map peacebuilding and social cohesion programs targeting urban areas that have received large numbers of migrants in recent years.
- Explore opportunities for partnerships between non-governmental organizations, government representatives, and other stakeholders

### Training and program recommendations

- Promote livelihoods activities and income generation activities in urban areas with large numbers of migrants.
- Design trainings for ward authorities to build knowledge about socioeconomic and cultural drivers of conflict and social inequalities as well as skills for dialogue facilitation and dispute resolution.
- Provide support to government institutions to provide effective service delivery to urban areas.
- Conduct programming that fosters trust between local authorities and communities, including ward representatives and police. Conduct activities that bring together police and municipal leaders with community members to discuss shared concerns in a safe space.
- Explore avenues for collaboration with municipal government and relevant ministries to streamline service delivery processes and improve the equity of government services.
- Support activities that promote the creation or revitalization of public spaces. Support activities that utilize public spaces for community events that bring together diverse people.

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22 Dhungana, Shiva. Final Evaluation - Community Information Management to Reduce Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar. Search for Common Ground, 2016.

- Use programs to explore ways that shared concerns, including drug abuse, can be used to bring local authorities, service providers, and communities from across dividing lines together.
- Support social cohesion programming in urban areas with large numbers of migrants.
- Share information about opportunities for participation in the peace process in urban centers, particularly those with large numbers of migrants.
- Create or promote activities that bring diverse youth together in safe environments to build relationships and create shared experiences taking advantage of the relaxed laws around assembly. Provide opportunities for youth in urban centers to be involved in sport activities, art activities, music, social service or other activities of their interest.

### **Education and media recommendations**

- Ensure that education sector reform targets the promotion of equal education service delivery for all diverse groups and across social classes in urban centers.
- Promote learning about historical existence and peaceful coexistence of diverse communities in Myanmar.
- Amplify narratives and stories of peaceful coexistence between diverse communities in social media and traditional media sources,
- Celebrate past and present peace heroes through media, education, storytelling and events.
- Conduct ethics training for Myanmar journalists and social media producers with particular focus on raising awareness on reporting practices that contribute to stereotypes and discriminations (ie. selectively identifying suspected victims and perpetrators by name, religion, and/or ethnicity).
- Use social media as a tool for information sharing and connection, providing a safe way to find new ideas for building peace and reach out to different groups and individuals, particularly among the young populations in Myanmar's urban centers.