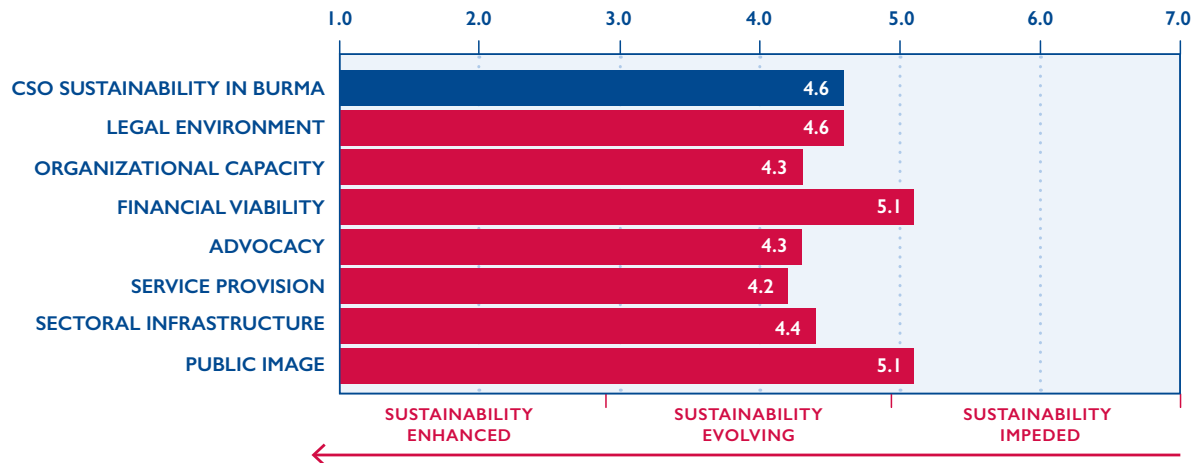


BURMA

Capital: Naypyidaw
Population: 55,123,814
GDP per capita (PPP): \$6,200
Human Development Index: Medium (0.578)
Freedom in the World: Not Free (32/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.6



Burma has undergone profound transformation since 2011 after more than fifty years of authoritarian rule. Widespread democratic reforms have been introduced, including the election of Burma's first post-junta national parliament in decades, the creation of new state-level legislatures, and the gradual lessening of restrictions on civil society and media. The democratic election in 2015 led to the assumption of power of the civilian government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2016. The elected government initiated additional positive developments, such as the release of political prisoners, the ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and reforms to laws affecting the freedoms of expression and assembly. However, the elected government has continued to use restrictive legislation, particularly a criminal defamation provision of the Telecommunications Law, to stifle criticism of authorities.

Despite the introduction of civilian rule, the military remains a major power-holder in the country. The military continues to block efforts to amend the 2008 Constitution, which provides the military with control of the Ministries of Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. Another constitutional provision allows the military to appoint 25 percent of parliamentary seats, in essence affording it veto power over constitutional amendments. The military's lack of accountability to the civilian government constitutes one of the largest obstacles to full democratic reform. Politically, the civilian government generally seeks to avoid offending the military's interests, viewing its acquiescence as a requirement for any significant change. Moreover, there appears to be increasing alignment between influential Buddhist nationalist factions and military-backed parties. The NLD-led administration, which had campaigned on a platform of democracy and human rights, has thus taken a less progressive approach than many observers had expected, including imposing closer oversight and control over civil society.

After decades of armed conflict between Burma's military and armed ethnic groups, new hope for peace emerged when the quasi-civilian government under former General Thein Sein secured ceasefire agreements with over a dozen armed groups in 2015.

During the Second Panglong Peace Conference in May 2017—a biannual conference reestablished in 2016 to promote peace among the various ethnic factions in Burma—representatives of the government, parliament, political parties, the military, and signatory armed groups to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) agreed to thirty-seven principles as Part One of the Union Accord. However, these principles were fairly uncontroversial and did not include sticking points such as equality among all ethnic groups. In November 2017, the various parties to the peace process agreed on additional points for future dialogue at the Sixth Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting (JICM), effectively paving the way for the ceasefire to continue. Civil society has been largely sidelined in the peace process, unable to participate in meetings of the Joint Monitoring Committee (the body authorized to monitor the ceasefire) or conduct consultations in conflict areas due to security concerns.

Despite the steps made to advance the peace process, throughout 2017 fighting intensified between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the military in several townships in Kachin State and northern Shan State (Burma's northern states bordering China), resulting in forced displacement and other abuses against civilians, primarily by government forces.

Late 2017 was further marked by brutal ethnic conflict against the Rohingya minority Muslim population in Rakhine State, which borders Bangladesh, triggering a humanitarian crisis and the exodus of more than 650,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. A report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) accused the Burma military of widespread human rights infringements against the civilian Rohingya population. The elected government has denied these accusations and refused to grant access to a UN fact-finding mission created by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March 2017. In December 2017, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution urging Burma to give the mission full, unrestricted, and unmonitored access. The government also continued to restrict access to humanitarian agencies, compounding the already-dire conditions faced by the population.

The crisis has affected the tourism industry, with Western tourists beginning to avoid Burma and tour operators shifting to other markets in the region. In Rakhine State, tour operators indicated that up to 90 percent of reservations for the most prominent tourist sites were cancelled in the weeks after the crisis unfolded. Despite this sharp decline in tourism, as well as concerns about the banking sector, Burma's economy was expected to grow by 6.7 percent by March 2018, driven by recovery in crop production, improved manufacturing performance, and expanded services. There is significant concern, however, that the Rohingya crisis will complicate future efforts to attract more foreign investment from Western countries, following years of over-reliance on China.

While media freedom has expanded significantly over the past few years, the government still maintains tight control over the media through defamation and other restrictive laws. Burma ranked 131 out of 180 countries in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index. According to Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press 2016*, "In addition to prosecutions, in 2017 media workers faced threats and physical violence in response to critical or investigative reporting, especially concerning government corruption, the military, and rebel groups." Coverage of the status and treatment of the Rohingya ethnic minority is also subject to government scrutiny. In December, two Reuters journalists investigating the killings of ten Rohingya men and boys in Rakhine State were detained in Yangon and charged under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act, which carries a maximum prison sentence of fourteen years.

Before the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings, civil society within Burma was extremely constrained. Several decades of authoritarian rule overtly threatened the mere existence of an independent civil society. Nonetheless, over the last several decades, CSOs have played a key role in providing basic services to local populations, complementing or even replacing government services. This was particularly true following the 2008 Nargis Cyclone, when ordinary citizens and newly created CSOs rushed to help victims in hard-to-reach areas and—in spite of military restrictions—to deliver essential relief aid. Moreover, numerous Burma-focused CSOs and CSO networks developed along the border areas in Thailand after 1988. These organizations were instrumental in providing basic services to the large refugee population from across the border, as well as conducting international advocacy about human rights in Burma.

As political conditions improved in Burma, several of these border organizations moved back to the country, bringing with them essential technical skills, experience, and donor connections. Some people from these and other CSOs eventually joined the NLD party. In the last few years, civil society has become increasingly vocal and the government is starting to recognize civil society as a key player, albeit sometimes in an adversarial way.

The majority of CSOs in Burma are small- to medium-sized organizations that—despite limited capacities—play a key role in providing basic services to the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations in the country. Small and local CSOs are mostly based in cities, townships, or population centers and are usually not registered with the government. The top ten sectors in which CSOs operate are: health, livelihoods, disaster response, gender, food security, water and sanitation, peace-building, agriculture, education, and humanitarian protection. While the exact number is unavailable, the number of CSOs has increased exponentially over the past few years. According to a 2016 study called “The Art of Networking: A Study of Civil Society Networks in Burma,” commissioned by Paung Ku and Christian Aid and supported by the EU, in 2011 an online directory of local NGOs in Burma listed 119 organizations, 105 of which had head offices in Yangon. In 2016, the Local Resource Center (LRC) listed 480 organizations in its database, with 420 based in Yangon. Although the data is from different sources and neither database lists all organizations in the country, a comparison of the two suggest a significant increase in the number of organizations in the last five years.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 4.6

The 2014 Association Registration Law (ARL) is the main law regulating CSOs in Burma. When it was adopted, civil society hailed it as progressive as it reduced barriers to CSO formation and registration. This resulted in an exponential increase in registered organizations. The ARL states that registration is completely voluntary, with no penalties for organizations that choose not to register. However, unregistered CSOs are more easily denied permission to conduct public activities—such as trainings and awareness-raising campaigns—and face more difficulties in setting up formal meetings with government officials or members of parliament (MPs). In addition, local governments often exclude unregistered CSOs from consultations, such as on environmental impact assessments.

The registration process is straightforward, with the requirements and procedures laid out in the ARL. CSOs register by submitting applications to offices of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) at the township, regional, or state level. However, the process the application goes through within the Ministry lacks transparency. Once an application is submitted, authorities provide no feedback or updates until a registration decision has been made. Depending on the administrative level of registration, the ARL provides a thirty-, sixty-, or ninety-day timeframe for deciding on an application, though delays are common. If registration is denied, the ARL requires the registration committee to issue a letter to the applicant disclosing the full reasons for the denial. Organizations whose applications have been rejected can reapply after fulfilling the specified requirements.

CSOs must renew their registration certificates every five years, potentially increasing the administrative burden on CSOs and providing the government periodic opportunity to deny them registration. The ARL requires CSOs to submit annual reports and financial statements to MOHA to prove they are still operational. If reports are submitted as required, the ARL recognizes the possibility of “extending” an association’s certification for another five years. However, since the ARL was passed only in 2014, CSOs have not gone through the renewal process yet.

Unclear implementation of the ARL is a key barrier to operational activity. Depending on the location and scope of activities—whether township, region, or state levels—CSOs must seek registration with the “concerned registration committee.” However, the term “concerned” is vague, making it difficult for CSOs to determine the appropriate registration committee. In addition, regional and township authorities often lack knowledge about the ARL. A CSO seeking to change its geographical scope, for example from township to regional level, must also apply to the relevant registration committee. The ARL also requires CSOs to secure governmental permission when changing the focus of their organizational mandates and to inform the government in writing of changes to their membership.

Although the government amended the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act in 2016 to remove the requirement for government consent to hold an assembly, in November 2017 the Yangon regional branch of the military-controlled Minister of Border Affairs issued a total ban on all public assemblies in eleven of the thirty-three townships in Yangon, Burma's largest city. The ban instructs police in these eleven townships to deny all applications for processions or assemblies to avoid "public annoyance and anxiety." The directive, which appears to be permanent, sets aside one small area of Yangon for all protests, precluding protests near Yangon's City Hall, most government offices, and many foreign embassies. This makes it impossible for those protesting government policies to demonstrate anywhere near the target of their protests.

The government uses several outdated laws to restrict the actions of civil society and media, particularly in ethnic minority areas. For example, the Unlawful Associations Act of 1908 defines an unlawful association as "an association which encourages or aids persons to commit acts of violence intimidation or of which the members habitually commit such acts." Authorities use this provision in ethnic minority areas when they perceive hostility towards the military. In 2017, at a time of heightened tensions between the Burma military and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), reporters on a trip to a territory controlled by the TNLA were arrested and charged under the Unlawful Associations Act. In another case, two Kachin pastors were charged for helping reporters to reach a church that was allegedly destroyed by Burma military fighter jets. The threat of being charged under the Unlawful Association Act thus limits CSOs' work in ethnic minority areas.

Since the NLD took power in early 2016, prosecutions of criticism against government or military officials have surged. Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Act is a vaguely worded provision that criminalizes broad categories of online speech. Since November 2015, according to the #SayNOto66.d coalition, 106 cases have been filed under section 66(d), ninety-five of which were filed under the current government. Thirty-two of the 106 cases involve a journalist or human rights defender as the defendant. The threat of prosecution under 66(d) has thus resulted in increased self-censorship by CSOs, journalists, and activists. In September 2017, after the parliament rejected a proposal to remove the law's criminal penalty, President Htin Kyaw signed into law amendments to the Act that reduced the maximum prison sentence from three years to two years and allowed for bail. Most of the Act's problematic provisions, however, remained in force, and thus self-censorship persists.

In December 2017, the government released a draft law on international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), which imposes a burden on Burma citizens and local organizations to monitor INGOs and report any cooperation with them. Many CSO activists fear this could decrease domestic associations' access to foreign funding. The government invited comments to the draft but its status at the end of the year was unclear.

While CSOs are generally allowed to engage in fundraising campaigns and receive funds from foreign donors, CSOs are generally not believed to be eligible to participate in competitive bidding for government contracts or procurements at the local or central level. CSOs and their donors do not receive any tax benefits.

There are few local lawyers trained on or familiar with civil society legal issues. Nonetheless, there are local organizations that offer legal advice and support services to CSOs. These include the Legal Aid Network, Legal Clinic Burma, and Free Legal Aid Burma, as well as international rule of law programs and other projects that include legal aid to CSOs. A number of international organizations, mostly based in Yangon or Mandalay, also provide pro bono assistance in civil society law, specifically on ad hoc legal reform issues. Some of these organizations include Justice Base, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), and Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG).

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.3

Capacities among different types of CSOs vary greatly. At one end of the spectrum are "traditional" community-based organizations (CBOs), and on other end, "modern" corporate-style CSOs. "Traditional" organizations are typically informal, with few clear governing structures; have limited scopes of operations; are volunteer-based; and are funded mostly through local contributions. "Modern" CSOs have higher organizational capacities, clear governing bodies, professional management, international and other sources of funding, and larger geographical and topical scopes of work.

They also have more access to technology. “Modern” CSOs are gradually proliferating alongside “traditional” CSOs. CSOs seek to represent varied interest groups in Burma, including women, LGBTI individuals, youth, workers, migrants, displaced persons, and various religious and ethnic groups. In general, CSOs—particularly small CBOs, which are more prolific outside Yangon—enjoy support from their constituencies, as demonstrated by their reliance on volunteers and local donations.

The reforms initiated by the government in 2011 and the relaxation of international sanctions over the past few years have led to an exponential increase in foreign funding and strong demand for local CSO partners to implement donor-funded projects. CSOs therefore have had more access to technical and financial resources critical to their development. At the same time, some CSOs struggle to fulfill donor expectations to strengthen their internal management structures due to lack of capacity in and unfamiliarity with management practices. CSOs have also expressed concern about the shifting funding priorities of INGOs, which drive CSOs to re-adjust their programs and strategies in the medium and long terms, rather than building institutional capacities.

The improving economic environment is impacting the ability of local CSOs to attract and retain qualified personnel, as many job candidates take better-paid positions at INGOs or in the corporate sector. Volunteerism is deeply embedded in Burma culture as part of *dāna*, the Buddhist virtue of charity, as evidenced by long-standing traditions of community volunteering in the country. According to the 2017 World Giving Index, 51 percent of respondents in Burma indicated that they had volunteered during the reporting period in 2016.

The use of social media, especially Facebook, is widespread. Better access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) has brought significant advantages to civil society, making it easier for them to mobilize their constituencies, conduct advocacy or awareness-raising activities, and attract funding. However, it has also increased the workload in certain program areas and requires staff to be proficient in using new technologies.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.1

International funding in the form of grants and sub-grants is the primary funding source for CSOs in Burma. However, such support is concentrated in urban areas and on CSOs with greater capacities. Smaller CBOs and community groups—particularly those based in remote or conflict-affected areas—have more difficulty accessing foreign funding.

As a result of Burma’s transition to democracy, coupled with the lifting of sanctions, foreign funding has increased, donors have shifted their support from diaspora-focused activities to in-country activities, and INGOs and other international stakeholders have initiated or expanded development programs in the country. According to the Mohinga Aid Information Management System, an aid transparency portal hosted by the Ministry of Planning and Finance, total Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to grants, both to government and CSOs, has increased from \$144 million in 2011 to \$505 million in 2016. At the same time, the top donor priorities have shifted from agriculture, health, and “government and civil society” in 2011 to conflict prevention and resolution and developmental food aid and food security in 2016. In addition, according to a 2016 UNDP report, until 2013/2014, the majority of ODA was delivered as grants, but now multilateral development organizations and financial institutions increasingly extend loans to the government instead.

Donors and development partners like the EU, USAID, DFID, AusAid, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) support many programs to strengthen civil society. Large-scale programs include USAID’s Civil Society and Media Project, implemented by FHI 360, the British Council’s Sone Sie Programme (previously Pyoe Pin), and the EU-funded Promoting Equitable, Accountable Civic Engagement (PEACE) program implemented by Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF), LRC, and Helvetas Burma. DFID-funded programs include the Paung Sie Facility, a peace-focused program, and the Community Engagement Support Facility, which supports CSOs and CBOs in Bago and Kayah. INGOs and smaller international donors—like foundations, universities, and think tanks—are also important sources of funding for civil society actors.

A few programs were initiated in 2017, including a program by The Transnational Institute (TNI) to support ethnic minority CSOs; a 2017-2020 project by Trocaire to empower marginalized and ethnic communities; Bread for the World – Germany’s project focused on strengthening the capacities of CSOs; the Government of France’s Support to Burma Civil Society project; and USAID’s Advancing Community Empowerment in Southeastern Burma, which works to empower communities by mitigating their vulnerabilities, encouraging robust community participation in decision making, and strengthening mechanisms for more accountable local governance.

Burma topped the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index in 2017 for the fourth year in a row, partly due to the widespread Buddhist-inspired culture of giving donations. According to this Index, 91 percent of respondents in Burma reported that they donated money in the reporting period during 2016. However, most individual donations go to religious institutions and religiously-affiliated CSOs, rather than secular CSOs.

Traditionally, cultural and ethnic-based CSOs providing health, education, and emergency services are the most successful at local fundraising given the immediate, tangible benefits they provide to local communities. For example, the Shan Culture and Literature Committee and the Yone Kyi Yar Knowledge Propagation Society collect donations from local people to support their library services. CSOs working on more sensitive issues, such as human rights, religious freedom, or environmental issues, have much more difficulty raising such funds. The government is not known to provide funding to CSOs to implement projects.

Charitable giving by businesses and individual executives is a nascent phenomenon in Burma. The scale of such giving is still limited, and such donations focus mostly on religious and social welfare activities. Furthermore, CSOs are hesitant to be associated with certain corporations and business groups that have ties to former junta authorities implicated in human rights violations.

Social enterprises, on the other hand, are on the rise, as there is growing interest in putting profits back into local communities and providing professional training to vulnerable groups like disadvantaged women, youth, and people living with HIV. For example, the social enterprise MBoutik run by ActionAid sells fair trade goods made by women in the rural villages of Burma who would otherwise lack access to income-generating opportunities, with profits going back into ActionAid’s community initiatives focused on education, health care, and social support. Other well-known examples are Hla Day, Proximity Designs, and the Yangon Bake House, each of which aim to economically empower diverse and marginalized groups in Burma through training and employment.

Financial management in the CSO sector is generally weak. Most CSOs understand the importance of having sound financial management systems, but do not have the capacities to develop these systems. Generally, only CSOs that have governing structures or receive international funding produce annual programmatic and financial reports or undergo audits. Professional financial management services are scarce and rarely pro bono. INGOs, larger CSOs, and CSO networks play an essential role in supporting smaller organizations in developing policies and procedures and conducting general capacity-building activities.

ADVOCACY: 4.3

In 2005, Burma’s administrative capital was relocated from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw, a remote, sparsely populated area 200 miles from the old capital. Access to Nay Pyi Taw is limited, with advance authorization required for official meetings with the government and the parliament. Little public explanation has been given for the move. However, CSOs and academics theorize that the military moved the seat of the national government to insulate and protect itself from the threat of popular uprisings and worries of foreign invasion. Partly because of this move, advocacy in Burma is challenging and civil society’s access to and influence on policy decisions and law reform processes are limited. In addition, CSOs have limited technical capacities and lack knowledge and exposure to advocacy work. It is also difficult to measure the impact of advocacy initiatives, in part because few CSOs have strong monitoring and evaluation systems.

Contact between legislators and civil society actors, at both national and sub-national levels, is very limited and depends on personal connections. The informal nature of this dialogue limits its influence on decision making since officials feel little pressure to make firm commitments. Furthermore, the NLD-led administration discourages its own party members from talking to civil society representatives or participating in civil society-led initiatives. For example, MPs of the ruling NLD party need advance permission from party headquarters to attend events organized by CSOs or to talk to the media.

Space for broad-based advocacy was limited in 2017. Authorities increasingly prosecuted individuals for online and offline speech, and reporting and advocacy on sensitive issues was tightly restricted. Journalists and activists increasingly had defamation cases brought against them under the Penal Code, particularly if their speech implicated the military. In July 2016, two journalists with Ladies' Journal were sentenced to six months in prison or a fine of 20,000 kyats (about \$13) for publishing a story about a case in Bago Region where farmers' lands were confiscated under the authority of the military. Additionally, as described above, Article 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law penalizes a variety of broadly worded acts, including defamation, and is frequently used to attack activists and journalists. As a result of these government actions, CSOs have increasingly engaged in self-censorship.

Despite the difficult environment, CSOs in Burma continue to engage in advocacy and lobbying efforts at national and sub-national levels. At the national level, the government increasingly accepts that civil society should be able to provide inputs to policy making, although on an ad hoc basis. In 2017, labor unions actively participated in the negotiations that led to the approval of the new Employment Contract Template (Notification 140/2017), and civil society actors were involved in drafting the Occupational Safety and Health Bill. In addition, the guidelines for the establishment of the Township Rural Development Strategy and Program released in August 2017 by the Department of Rural Development of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation encourages consultations with civil society actors and advocacy groups in the drafting stage of such strategies and programs. However, inputs from civil society are not always incorporated in final outputs. CSOs tend to have less influence on issues related to security, sovereignty, human rights, or legal reforms, while reforms related to socioeconomic or technical matters are more likely to succeed.

CSOs are largely excluded from official negotiations of the ongoing peace process. The political dialogue only recognizes the government, military, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), and political parties, limiting the influence of civil society actors in events that will shape the future of the country. However, CSOs conduct peace-related trainings, organize public consultations on the peace process, and participate in ceasefire monitoring as part of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team. Some of these groups include the Karen (Kayin) Development Network, Gaia Sustainable Management Institute, Karen (Kayin) Affairs Committee, New Generation Shan State, Kayah State Peace Monitoring Network, Chin Peace and Tranquility Committee, and the Peace Network. These CSOs increasingly work with ethnic-based organizations to support dialogue between armed groups and the government.

Some Burma civil society groups like the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) and Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT) engaged in international advocacy by joining the 23rd Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP23) in November 2017. The conference raised awareness of the rights of indigenous people and served as a platform for CSOs to recommend that the government recognize them in Burma's Nationally Determined Commitments (NDC)—the government's action plan to implement the Paris Agreement for tackling carbon emissions—in order to prevent indigenous groups from being driven from the forest to make way for climate change mitigation projects.

CSOs regularly set up networks and coalitions to coordinate efforts and increase the reach of their advocacy efforts, including for reform of laws affecting civil society. Coalitions are often informal and theme-based or geographically-focused. For example, each region has a youth network and a women's network. At the national level, the *Say No to 66.d* Coalition unites more than twenty CSOs opposing the controversial Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Action Group, a group led by Equality Burma and composed of more than forty organizations, raises awareness about the rights contained in the ICCPR and advocates for Burma to ratify it.

In 2017, the member organizations conducted a national campaign that collected almost 10,000 signatures supporting ICCPR ratification. The joint approach gave them strength in numbers while minimizing risks for individual members in confronting power holders. In December, the government released a draft Law on INGOs and invited the public, civil society, and international stakeholders to provide comments and inputs.

SERVICE PROVISION: 4.2

Burma CSOs have proven to be highly capable of providing services to the poor and underserved, particularly in conflict-affected areas and regions with weak government control. CBOs and volunteer networks, as well as monasteries, have filled gaps in social services in areas such as education and healthcare for decades. In ethnic minority areas such as Kachin or Kayin State, church-based organizations have played a similar role.

Since Cyclone Nargis in 2008, civil society has played a key role in providing immediate response and relief to natural disasters, in collaboration with or in lieu of the government. Most recently, in July 2017, monsoon rains and increased water levels in major rivers caused seasonal floods in thirteen of the country's fourteen states and regions, displacing more than 320,000 people. Civil society groups mobilized to raise funds and deliver humanitarian aid, collaborating with the government to establish evacuation centers.

Organizations in urban areas tend to focus on providing education, basic healthcare, and general community welfare. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities along the borders of the country in ceasefire areas focus on food security, income generation, and acute intervention in basic healthcare and education support. CSOs also support the peace process by conducting trainings, organizing public consultations, and participating in ceasefire monitoring. Many CBOs are religious-based and provide support for funerals and family or community emergencies.

CBOs arise largely to meet community needs and address critical social issues. Hence, their goods and services at least reflect immediate needs of their constituents. Their scope, however, is limited and constrained to their locales. There is limited coordination among CSOs on service provision, leading to service overlap, particularly during emergencies. In June 2017, the Joint Monitoring Committee declared it would not support ceasefire monitoring activities by CSOs and CBOs because they overlap and create confusion in the official monitoring mechanism.

Funding for service provision is limited. Domestic funding peaks during emergencies, but is not normally available for long-term operations. International funding is more readily available, but many donors emphasize themes broader than traditional service provision, such as developing institutional capacity and emergency resilience.

Local CSOs and INGOs note that the newly-elected government is actively bringing civil society under closer scrutiny to increase "efficiency" and "stop the waste of funds." However, some national ministries and departments, notably the Ministry of Health and the Department of Rural Development of the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries, and Rural Development, have actively worked with and solicited civil society participation in their activities, including HIV prevention and community-driven development projects funded by the ADB and the World Bank. Ministries tend to only request CSO engagement as technical advisors or as intermediaries to engage with communities.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.4

A handful of larger organizations with access to international funding and skilled staff act as intermediary support organizations (ISOs) or resource centers, providing smaller organizations with training and financial support. The LRC, for example, focuses on the holistic development of local CSOs through institutional capacity strengthening and skills development. Other organizations acting as ISOs include Equality Burma (EQMM), Capacity Building Initiative (CBI), and the Comprehensive Development and Education Center (CDEC). These ISOs offer specialized training on a variety of topics, as well as grants and scholarship information, media and printed resources, and small-scale funding opportunities. ISOs typically re-grant donor funding, but sometimes also re-grant locally-sourced funds. Most of these organizations are based in major urban areas.

In 2017, there were also a number of major CSO capacity-building projects implemented by international organizations. For example, the UNDP Local Governance Project strengthens the institutional capacity of civil society and media institutions to engage the public and private sectors in the provision of public services. The British Council's MyJustice Project strengthens the capacity of both formal and informal justice service providers in Burma. USAID's Civil Society and Media Project supports the efforts of CSOs and media outlets to advocate for their constituents' interests. Some INGOs also have annual calls for sub-grants for local CSOs. Other initiatives include direct implementation of projects at the grassroots level. For example, the ActionAid Burma Fellowship Program provides intensive training to local organizations and youth leaders who are deployed to target communities to assist in community development, democratic decision-making, and resource mobilization.

Local and international CSOs and some CBOs have formed or joined thematic or issue-based coalitions, umbrella groups, and networks. For example, the Burma Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA) is a nationwide network composed of over 450 organizations and individuals that advocates for transparency and accountability of the government, elected representatives, companies, donors, and civil society. The Gender Equality Network (GEN) is a network of sixty local and international CSOs, civil society networks, and technical experts focused on developing systems and practices for the advancement of women and gender equality. Ethnic-based CSOs also organize themselves in coalitions. For example, CSOs in southeastern Mon State, bordering Thailand, collaborate on gender equity issues, namely through the Mon Women Organization (MWO) and the Mon Women's Network (MWN), which in turn participate in the national alliances GEN and the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP).

Training for CSOs is widely available, although offerings remain concentrated in Yangon, Mandalay, and other urban areas. In addition to the ISOs specifically geared to CSOs, private education centers offer a wide array of trainings at relatively affordable prices. Topics include project cycle management, financial management, human resource management, leadership, advocacy, and public speaking.

Multi-stakeholders partnerships in Burma are still nascent, although there is awareness of and openness to the benefits of such partnerships. The Ministry of Planning and Finance developed a Burma Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Policy Document in late 2016, followed by a Burma PPP website, to create an enabling environment for the emergence of PPPs. However, while PPPs can include CSOs, civil society is not clearly referenced in the policy document or website. Furthermore, current PPPs are focused on power, telecommunications, and infrastructure, as opposed to other project areas listed in the policy document in which CSOs have expertise, such as health or education.

CSOs collaborate with media, and have developed small initial projects in collaboration with the private sector, mostly on ICTs for development (for example, the Phandeeyar technical innovation lab) or priority sectors such as agriculture. The Burma Center for Responsible Business (MCRB)—a joint initiative of the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) and the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR)—encourages responsible business activities throughout Burma and facilitates dialogue and processes aimed at building national and local capacity, as well as partnerships, on business and human rights related issues.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.1

The public image of CSOs in Burma is polarized, largely as a result of the political and media environment.

The media environment in Burma has undergone dramatic changes in the last five years. Independent media has expanded alongside the widespread state-owned media controlled by the Ministry of Information, providing CSOs with more opportunities for media coverage. Exiled media groups such as Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Mizzima, Irrawaddy, and Burma News International (BNI) have returned, while new media and journalist groups such as the Burma Journalists Network (MJN), Burma Journalist Association (MJA), and Burma Journalists Union (MJU) have been established.

The differences in content between state and private media are less visible than in the past; however, according to a 2016 report produced by the Burma Institute for Democracy and the Slovak media watch-dog MEMO 98, the state TV channels Burma Radio and Television (MRTV) and the military-owned Myawaddy TV (MWD) continued to offer biased and uncritical coverage of the elected government and the military, respectively. According to the same report, private media offered more pluralistic coverage of political actors and key developments than state media. Overall, the media focuses primarily on the authorities, particularly the government, and coverage of CSOs and their work is very limited and often focuses on service delivery or humanitarian relief.

In 2017, the media landscape was increasingly polarized along political lines, which affected how different outlets covered civil society issues. Some CSOs think the state-owned media provides a biased and unfairly negative view of their work—mainly that CSO views countering the government's narrative, such as human rights violations of the Rohingya population, are a foreign fabrication. In contrast, most independent media groups work with civil society and have mutual interest in pushing for reform and government transparency. Independent media and civil society have a synergistic relationship—the media receives information from CSOs working on the ground, while CSOs receive media coverage for their causes. However, even within independent media, accomplishments in education or health seem to receive greater and more positive attention than CSOs' work on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, drug abuse, or human rights violations.

The government's perception of CSOs, particularly of those working on human rights or accountability issues, deteriorated significantly in 2017, derailing progress made over the past few years. In some government circles, CSOs are perceived as working on behalf of the international community and are derogatively called "dollar eaters." Some government officials view CSOs as troublemakers making unconstructive noise, rather than advocating about critical issues. In addition, some civil society groups were very critical of the government's response to the Rohingya crisis. In response, the government has depicted CSOs as favoring the Muslim community over other groups and thus picking sides in the crisis. However, there are some good examples of CSO-government collaboration when there are common interests, such as climate resilience or disaster risk reduction efforts.

Likewise, the public perception of CSOs has become more polarized. While public perception of CSOs that provide services in areas such as emergency relief, health, and education is predominantly positive, the public perception of CSOs working with religious minorities and refugees has deteriorated. These CSOs are often perceived as pushing international interests, echoing the messages of state media. Cartoons on social media have depicted both domestic and foreign NGOs as using foreign funding to help the Rohingya, who the cartoons falsely portray as "migrants" (or worse) deceiving the world into believing they are being persecuted. When a local CSO recently published a series of civic education textbooks that promoted religious literacy and included information on four major faiths (including Buddhism and Islam), it prompted a national outcry with claims that the textbooks were an attempt at "Islamization" and demands that children are only taught about Buddhism.

To counter the negative coverage, some CSOs emphasize transparency and outreach to help the public understand their work better. Most of the outreach is done through social media, though this comes with its own risks, as social media has also given demagogues and hate groups a platform to reach more people. A dramatic rise in online hate speech during the past few years has coincided with, and contributed to, severe escalation in intercommunal violence, such as the kind in Rakhine State in 2017.

CSOs recognize the need for improved governance and accountability, and international donors have emphasized these aspects. Some prominent CSOs have their own codes of conduct, publish annual reports, and undergo audits. However, these reports are mainly created for donors rather than the public.