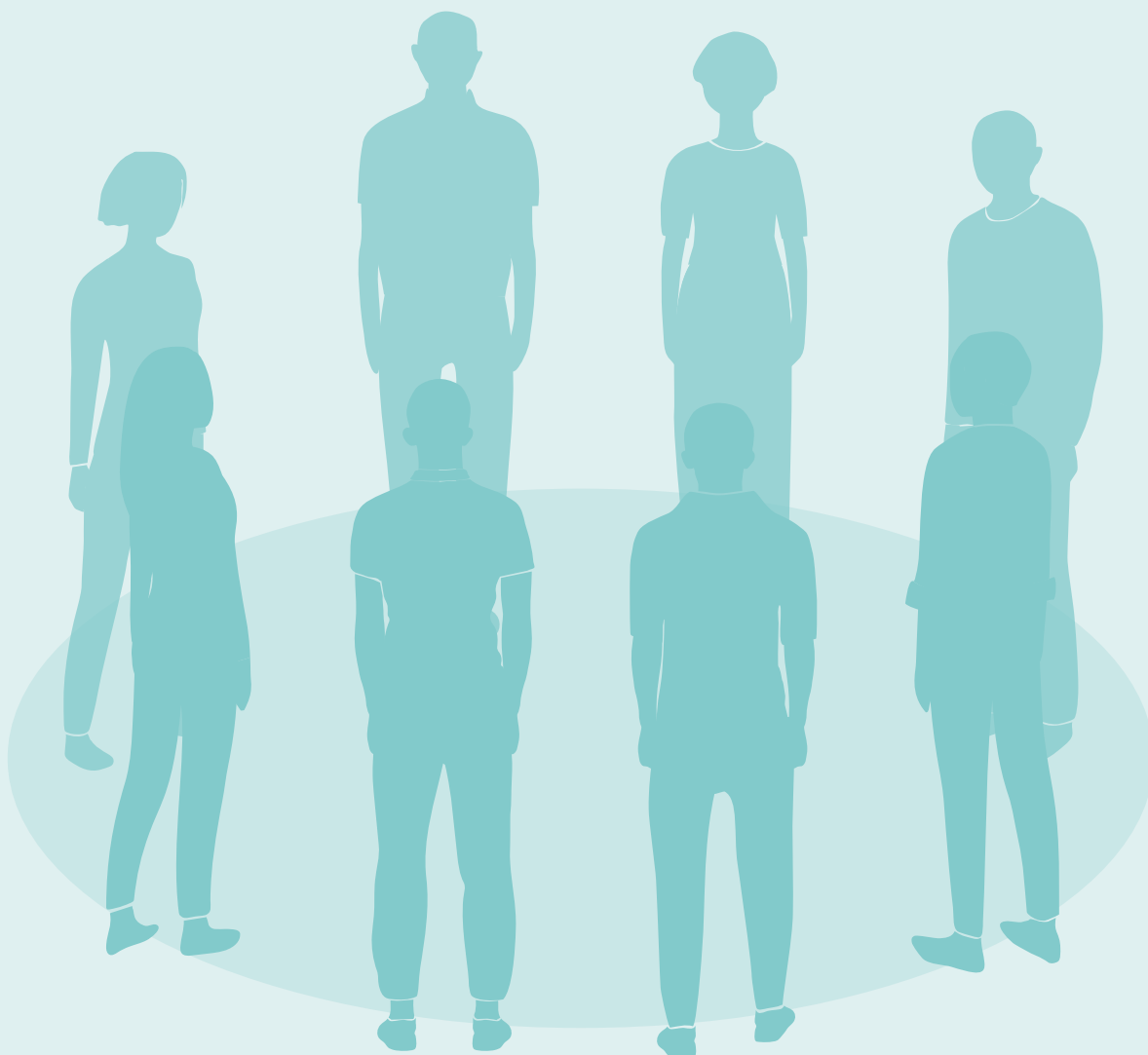# Collaboration as a Plus for Peace: Increasing Youth Participation in Myanmar's Peace-Building Process through Collaboration

Htet Lynn Oo and Myo Myo Kyaw
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FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

PLRI
Peace Leadership & Research Institute

Abstract

Previous studies have already investigated youth participation in Myanmar's peace process; however, collaboration of youth among themselves as well as with other actors has not been specifically examined. In order to fill this gap, the purpose of this current research is to determine the level of collaboration of youth with the government and adults as well as collaboration among diverse youth groups in order to contribute to the increasing of youth participation in the peace-building process of Myanmar. The study used qualitative methodology with a purposive sampling strategy, conducting three focus group discussions with 18 youth participants in total, divided into three groups in three different areas: urban, rural, and conflict-affected. The study identified different types and levels of collaboration as well as barriers to collaboration. The findings suggest that a strong collaboration among youth groups, intergenerational collaboration, and collaboration between youth and the government are important ingredients for increasing youth participation in the Myanmar peace-building process.

Acknowledgement

Introduction

Youth are commonly considered change-makers in society, since "youth are at the forefront in any kind of revolution and are likely drivers of change" (Bennett, Karki, & Nitu, 2012, p. 8). Similarly, many previous studies have emphasized youth's significant capabilities to take on the role of peace-builders (e.g. McEnvoy-Levy, 2001). It has been argued that even though youths in conflict-affected areas and situations often grow up in parallel with conflict escalation, they still have a lot of unique skills to contribute within peace-building processes; for instance, they "maintain a clear vision of what peace should be and of a future without violence" (Conciliation Resources, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, Del Felice and Wisler (2007) pointed out that young people in general are more open to change, future-oriented, idealistic, innovative, and possess courage, one of the useful capabilities for building peace. Youth are also more flexible and it is easier for them to forget the past than for the older generation. This quality can be very helpful for a post-conflict reconciliation process.

Historically, Myanmar's young people, especially university students, have played a significant role in the political and social changes of Myanmar's society. For instance, they participated as frontline actors in the early anti-colonial and independence movement (Aung Saw Oo, 1993; Thar Nyunt Oo & Ingjin Naing, 1997), in the protest for holding an appropriate funeral for U Thant (Selth, 2018), in the Four Eights Uprising, and more recently, students and young people joined the 2007 Saffron Revolution (Sithu Aung Myint, 2018) as well as initiated a strike against the National Educational Law in 2015 (Thet Ko Ko, Wei Yan Aung, & Vrieze, 2015). When it comes to peace-building activities, youths were the initiators of peace marches in 2012 and 2013, demanding an end to civil war, as well as of the National Youth Congress and National Ethnic Youth Alliance, whose representatives were invited to attend the second 21st Century Panglong Conference as official youth observers (Paung Sie Facility, 2017). On the whole, all these events show the crucial role of youth

in the political and peace development in the country. Moreover, one of the important underlying factors that can be seen in the various activities calling for independence, democracy, and peace is strong collaboration between youth groups and other civilians, among different youth groups as well as some collaboration with the government. Hence, this paper argues that a successful collaboration and partnership between youth and other stakeholders is crucial for increasing youth participation in Myanmar peace-building process and, consequently, for achieving sustainable peace in the country.

However, previous research (Grizelj, 2016; Paung Sie Facility, 2017) has identified a number of barriers to youth participation in Myanmar's peace process, such as socio-cultural norms and perceptions, the non-inclusive nature of peace negotiations, legacy of fear and mistrust, limited financial and technical support, socio-economic barriers (education, migration and displacement, drug usage), hierarchical society, inequality between central and peripheral areas, and division within and between youth organizations and networks. It can be argued that one of the reasons for the existence of these barriers is weak collaboration between the responsible parties. For example, the hierarchical culture of Myanmar's society widens the intergenerational gap, creating a number of challenges for youth to engage with adults. Next, mistrust towards the government, the non-inclusive nature of peace negotiations, and the lack of an official channel for youth to engage with the parliament might be hindering the youth-government collaboration. In addition, division within and between youth organizations and networks could be overcome by increasing their collaboration. Hence, a lack of or weak collaboration seems to be the underlying obstacle to youth participation in peace-building activities. That is why the current research will investigate the levels of collaboration between youth and the government, between youth and adults, and among diverse youth groups, as well as the factors hindering collaboration between them all.

Methodology

This study used qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured focus group discussions. This way, the participants could reflect on their previous experiences of collaboration in their contexts and exchange their ideas with each other. Moreover, the discussion alerted them to think of the respective collaboration levels and make them aware of ways to improve collaboration in their community. The focus group discussion guide questions were open-ended to enable participants to discuss and generate their ideas and experiences freely. The questions were created based on various literature sources, especially research papers and articles conducted on the issue of youth participation in peace and politics in the Myanmar context (Grizelj, 2016; 2018a; 2018b). Firstly, the questions were formulated in English and then translated into Burmese. To ensure the questions were clear to future participants, a small pilot study was conducted at the Salween Institute of Public Policy with ten university students. Moreover, by conducting the pilot study, the researchers practiced skills needed to facilitate and intervene in discussions.

Sample, Sampling, and Procedure

The sample included 18 participants in total (nine males and nine females), divided into three groups, based on where they lived and worked. Six of the sample participants were recruited from rural areas (a village in Ayeyarwaddy Region), five were from urban areas (Yangon), and seven were from conflict-affected areas (Myitkyina, Kachin State). The reason why the sample groups were based on location was to document and analyze diverse voices and ideas of many youth, not only those from urban areas and conflict-affected areas that are studied rather often, but also those from rural areas that typically have less experience in participating in research. A non-probability sampling strategy, specifically purposive (selective) sampling, was used in the study, selecting young people who have already experienced working in civil society organizations (CSOs), active young community workers, and youth activists that could provide the researchers with important information. The participants were recruited by local young people who had contact with the researchers.

The focus group discussions were conducted in February 2019. At the beginning of the focus group discussion, the researchers introduced themselves and explained their research project and the research institute. The researchers explained the informed consent form and asked the participants to sign it if they agreed to participate. Then, the participants were asked to introduce themselves to each other. In that way, they got to know each other and became more comfortable sharing their ideas. All the focus group discussions took about two hours. After the focus group discussions were completed, the participants were debriefed and the researchers explained how the data generated from the discussions would be applied in their research paper. Moreover, the researchers opened the floor to raise any questions related with the research project from the participants. In addition to that, researchers promised to send the research paper to the participants once it was published.

Findings and Discussion

Collaboration among Youth Groups

According to the discussion of participants in focus group discussions, there is a willingness among youth to collaborate with each other. They believe that an existence of a strong collaboration among youth groups would be more effective to achieve their goal, especially when advocating for a specific policy or campaigning for a specific group. One of the participants from the rural area said that "events run with strong collaboration among youth groups are more successful than those which are organized by adults". Moreover, based on the participants' experience, the collaboration among youth groups can be differentiated into two types: issue-based and identity-based. Issue-based collaboration is typically a short-term collaboration based on an escalation of a specific issue. One of the participants said that "it is very easy to call and organize the youth to join immediate actions like demonstrations" (urban area participant). After that action is completed, the collaboration ends. On the other hand, there is also collaboration based on identity, such as ethnicity and religion. For example, in Kachin State, there is strong collaboration among church-based youth.

At the same time, identity-based collaboration also divides the youth groups and decreases inter-youth group collaboration. For instance, based on specific churches, there are different youth groups in the Kachin community, and the collaboration among these groups is weak. One of the participants from the Kachin community said, "I have never seen a collaborated event by the Kachin Baptist Convention, Roman Catholic, and Assemblies of God youth groups". Apart from religious identity, ethnic identity also creates divisions among the youth groups. A participant from the Kachin community stressed the link between separated existence of sub-ethnic groups in Kachin State and the subsequent weak collaboration between them. Hence, while the youth groups may be internally strong, there is evidence of weak collaboration among youth from different sub-ethnic and religious groups. These divisions lead to misunderstanding and misperceptions among youth groups, which then lead to even more divisions. In accordance with this, previous literature has also mentioned that most of the division among youth organizations occurred along ethnic,

religious, and gender identity lines (Paung Sie Facility, 2017). Grizelj (2016) similarly mentioned that "many youth-led organizations have ethnic, religious or political foundations. This can be considered as both the strength and the weakness. . . it can also reinforce the existing divides" (p.6).

Moreover, it was found that different levels of education also divide the youth groups. One of the participants of the urban focus group shared his experience with respect to the collaboration of youth groups on university campus. He differentiated between three youth groups: the outstanding students, the average students and the inactive youth group. He said that "the outstanding students live and work within their own group, they already have enough skills and good ideas, but they neither try to collaborate with nor empower the other youth groups". Similarly, in the rural area, there is weak collaboration between the educated and illiterate youth, which leads to a gap between these two demographics. All in all, this evidence shows that the collaboration level among youth groups is weak; youth do not have a stable relationship among themselves to build strong collaboration. At the same time, the focus group participants believe that there needs to be strong collaboration between youth groups. Relating to the two types of collaboration identified in the data, both issue-based and identity-based collaboration are important not only for peace-building but also for youth participation in peace-building activities.

Collaboration between Youth and Adults

According to some of the participants' discussions, the collaboration between youth groups and CSOs led by adults has increased compared to the previous years. These CSOs are gradually giving space to youth in terms of chances to speak and raise their voices in meetings or at fora. One of the participants shared that, in her experience,

> "the elder generation collaborate with youth when making some policies such as the internally displaced people policy or social policy. Besides, they prepare courses, fora, and workshops

together. Especially, in the Kachin Youth Movement, the religious leaders and community leaders helped the youth to meet with the government" (conflict-affected area participant).

However, another participant said, "When we talk about these adults, they can be divided into two groups; adults between 35 and 50 years old and adults over 50 years old". He continued,

> "Adults who are over 50 years old share their experience with and support the youth. So, the youth are comfortable working with those adults. However, adults who are between 35 years and 50 years old think of themselves that they are still young and they can work like a youth because they still have the experience of youth. Thus, it is difficult for the youth to work with such kind of adults" (urban area participant).

Collaboration between Youth Groups and the Government

Through the discussions, it was found that the collaboration level between youth groups and the current government has increased during recent years. One of the participants mentioned that "the collaboration of the current government with youth groups has increased compared to the previous government by doing youth fora or workshops together with their local government" (urban area participant). However, even though some collaboration can be seen, the level of collaboration is still insufficient. Specifically, one participant mentioned that "even though there is considerable collaboration between high-level officials and youth groups, the collaboration between the lower level of government officials and youth groups is still low" (urban area participant). Some participants pointed out the relationship between the level of collaboration and the location where they grew up. They stressed the fact that there tends to be more collaboration in urban areas than in rural and conflict-affected areas. For example, one participant said that "collaboration in urban areas is higher than in rural and ethnic areas because the youth in rural and ethnic areas do not have enough resources, such as money or places for gathering to have meetings like the youth

in urban areas do" (urban area participant). Another participant mentioned that "youth from border areas do not have any trust in government officials because of their traumatizing experiences concerned with the brutal actions of the military regime" (urban area participant).

Barriers to Collaboration

The education system, individual personal attitudes, previous political systems, distrust in the government, lack of transparent information and low media literacy, religious influence, weak organizational structure, and low interest of youth in social movements are most important factors preventing strong collaboration among youth groups, between youths and adults, and between the youth and the government. First, the current Myanmar education system does not provide youth with enough skills and knowledge for collaboration and teamwork. One of the participants stated that "education teaches students to compete with each other and to be divided, not to collaborate and work together" (urban area participant). Moreover, Myanmar education does not provide young people with the adequate skills necessary for peer communication; it does not encourage the behaviors of active listening and mutual respect. Previous literature has also indicated the limitations of Myanmar education system in terms of analytical, critical thinking, and life skills (Paung Sie Facility, 2017). Consequently, the collaboration among youth groups cannot be built and strengthened.

Some participants highlighted personal interests and attitudes of specific individuals as the factors preventing strong collaboration. One of the participants shared his experience of working at a university campus, saying that "among youth groups, the number of people who want to lead is more than the number of followers" (urban area participant). Another participant said, "Some organizations that are led by adults recognize youths' voices and they let the youth participate in decision-making. But it happens only sometimes". The participant continued, "In the 2015 election campaign, adult party members from one of the political parties told the youth that 'You all should be in the party, you are the future of the country, but don't speak at this time. You can speak when you are over 30 years old'" (urban area participant).

One participant from the rural area stated, "Some adults don't accept the agenda and ideas of youth because youth are young. Some adults have the misperception that youth don't have enough experience and they cannot work as well as them". It appears then that even though the elder generation repeatedly says that youth should be supported, in reality, they do not recognize and trust the youth's efforts. Indeed, there are several social norms that affect intergenerational collaboration, for example, it is considered rude if young people argue with older people even if the latter are wrong. In general, "Pervasive age-related socio-cultural norms perpetuate hierarchical views that youth do not have the capability, experience, or ability to lead" (Paung Sie Facility, 2017, p.24). The existence of the traditional, hierarchical social structure is an underlying factor contributing to the intergenerational gap and different understanding between generations.

Some of the participants pointed out that the political culture and the experiences under the military regime make youth groups hesitant to participate and collaborate in peace-building activities. One of the participants from the Kachin community said, "As we used to be victims of the previous brutal political system, we are afraid of religious and political affairs". Another participant mentioned the role of parents in this regard. Since most parents have experiences of political uprising and violent actions of the military regime, they are very strict when it comes to allowing their children to participate in protests or movements. The participant said, "My mother did not allow me to join the anti-war movement; she said if you want to die and be arrested, go and join". These restrictions by parents prevent youth from joining various events even if they themselves are enthusiastic. Some participants mentioned that most adults are afraid of the risk:

> "Due to the wrong governance system of the military regime, adults are afraid of risk. When youth submit a program or project, adults are afraid of the risks arising from that process. Youth do not look at those risks and then youth and adults cannot adapt to each other", a participant from the rural area said.

Distrust of youth towards the government can be seen as another barrier of the collaboration between youth groups and the government. Still now, most youth do not trust the government, which leads to lower youth engagement and interaction with the government, contributing to weak collaboration between them. Additionally, youth are afraid of working and collaborating with the government; they feel too uncomfortable and insecure to do so. One participant expressed that

> "the government went to our camp [internally displaced people camp] and offered an opportunity of delivering training and giving jobs to the youth there. But the youth were still hesitant to go and attend the training, because they were afraid of the government" (conflict-affected area participant).

Another participant added that "it is rare for youth to join government offices according to the tradition. The community views government staff as enemies" (conflict-affected area participant). Some participants expressed their distrust towards the government's capabilities. One participant said that "most people in the high positions of the government are not so qualified in my opinion, I mean not all government officials. The government is still weak when it comes to accountability and responsibility" (conflict-affected area participant).

Weak access to correct information and low media literacy seem to also impede collaboration. One participant said that "weak media literacy awareness creates an information gap between youth groups and increases chances of misunderstanding among them" (urban area participant). Lack of transparency is also one of the main causes of weak collaboration between adults and youth. One participant argued that

> "there is no transparency between youth and adults both in urban and rural areas. The adults only know and focus on what they are doing and the youth also. Sometimes, when the youth have a meeting, it ends within the youth and what youth are doing does not reach the adults" (conflict-affected area participant).

When it comes to social barriers to collaboration, most of the participants pointed to religious restrictions. One of the participants from the Kachin community said

that "some religions are formalistic and conservative. So, they do not allow their religious youth to participate in external youth movements, specifically in politically related events". Even though internal collaboration among the church-based youth organizations is high, it is at the same time limited, since they focus on internal religious and cultural matters rather than external ones. Moreover, religious leaders influence the participation and collaboration of youth groups. Some religious leaders are flexible and open-minded but some are conservative. So, the collaboration level among youth groups also depends on the personality and beliefs of their religious leaders. Similarly, one participant mentioned the role of university authorities in the collaboration among youth groups on the campus: "On the university campus, the university authorities make the student unions more and more divided. At some universities, the rectors create students' unions on the campus and this tends to split the student groups there" (urban area participant).

Another factor is the low interest of youth in participating in social and political events. One of the participants stated that "youth are not interested in development trainings, peace, or political events" (conflict-affected area participant). Moreover, in rural areas, the number of youths is really low compared to the number in urban areas because of migration. The lack of employment opportunities might be the reason why youth are not interested in social movements and they focus on earning a living instead. Moreover, the lower number of youths in rural areas can be a confounding factor of weak collaboration among youth groups in these areas. Even when youth are interested in participating in politics, there is still a lack of job opportunities, which makes it difficult for them to participate without being concerned about their livelihood. One participant said, "In Myitkyina, there is a lack of job opportunities. Youth are chasing job opportunities and some youth go to Yangon or other places to work. Thus, they cannot focus on collaborating with adults" (conflict-affected area participant). Having enough livelihood opportunities might be a solution for increasing youth participation in a peace-building process. On the other hand, unemployment can be one of the big causal factors pushing youth to become violent. High rates of unemployment encourage youth to join armed groups and commit acts of violence, since taking up arms often becomes the only option for youth to earn money in conflict-affected areas (Conciliation Resources, 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the present research was to examine the level of collaboration among youth groups, collaboration between youth and adult groups, and collaboration of youth with the government, with the aim of contributing to increasing youth participation in the peace-building process of Myanmar. Previous literature has identified division among youth groups and intergenerational gap, and the present findings confirm that collaboration on these levels is quite low. The study also found similar barriers as the findings of previous literature, such as personal attitude of adults, government staff, authorities; fear of risks because of the previous military regime and distrust in the government; weak education system; lack of job opportunities; etc. Despite many barriers, the study found two kinds of collaboration among youth, namely issue-based collaboration and identity-based collaboration. It seems that if youth have common goals, and if adults and the government give youth the space needed by appreciating their efforts and supporting them, youth have more willingness to participate and to collaborate with adults and the government. Hence, the results of this research support the idea that strong collaboration among these groups is needed to increase youth participation in the peace-building process and collaboration among all actors should be balanced. Thus, all main actors, youth, adults, and the government need to change their individual mindsets about each other for mutual trust first. Then, they must find possible ways to overcome certain barriers, such as the weak education system or lack of job opportunities, to increase youth participation in peace-building activities for sustainable peace in Myanmar.

To our knowledge, this research is the first report investigating three levels of collaboration; most previous studies on youth participation in relation to the peace process have not focused on collaboration of youth with other actors. Having done so, this study found additional factors affecting youth participation, such as the influence of religious identity on collaboration and new angles of looking at collaboration (identity-based or issue-based). Moreover, similar studies rarely reach rural areas and include the voices of youth there, which the current study did. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that the study did not include the voices of adults, government officials, and authorities as focus group participants; the results of this research are only derived from the discussions and perspectives of the youth participants. Yet, when collaboration on such three kinds of levels is discussed, the perspectives of the other two groups, adults and the government, are also needed in order to bridge the gap between these actors and to create new paths for youth to increase their participation in the peace-building process.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1/ The government should implement curriculum reform and teacher capacity development training, integrating concepts of teamwork into the basic education curriculum. During the process of curriculum reform, the government should seek advice from not only local and foreign experts but also from local organizations and think-tanks. The government should hold public consultation workshops and this way, make an assessment based on feedback from parents, teachers, children, and youth.

2/ The government should create an official platform for youth to be able to engage with them comfortably and efficiently. The government could strengthen the existing Youth Affairs Committee; alternatively, it could resume the committee of youth affairs in parliament.

3/ The government should extend constructive engagement to youth in rural and ethnic areas, holding events like the All-Round Youth Development Festivals held in Yangon and Mandalay, and more talks and round-table discussions in rural and ethnic areas.

4/ Both union and state government should appreciate and recognize youth efforts by sending appreciation letters to specific youth groups and/or by attending their events. Moreover, the governments should provide financial and technical assistance to youth groups from different corners without discrimination based on the geographic location, ethnic, or social status.

5/ Youth should implement mutual recognition programs for youth and elder generations, educating and raising awareness on generation-gap-based problems, like literacy talks on generational issues, workshops, fora, essay competitions, fun fairs, and so on.

6/ Youth-focused organizations should initiate inter-ethnic reconciliation exchange programs, and religious leaders should foster more inter-religious fellowships.

7/ The government, community leaders, traditional leaders, and youth groups should try to have a youth center at least in every township of the country, accessible to all youth groups without discrimination. Here, the youth groups should collaborate among themselves by holding inclusive youth fora and youth gatherings.

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About the Authors

Htet Lynn Oo is a young and active Burmese peacebuilder from Ayeyarwaddy Region. He is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in International Relations at the University of Yangon. He participated in short-term courses in Human Security Development and Energy Science at Kyoto University, Japan, and Leadership at Indiana University in the United States. Additionally, he has the experience of attending workshops and trainings in Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia. Previously, he worked as a Program Intern at the Salween Institute of Public Policy, and at the moment, he is working as a Book Reviewer at the Institute of Strategy and Policy – Myanmar. He is also one of the Council Members of Ambassador Youth Council in the United States' Embassy to Myanmar. Moreover, he is working as a Trainer and Project Leader at Myanmar Youth for Peace Development (a youth-led initiative). Recently, Htet Lynn Oo has been selected to attend the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative Regional Workshop for Advancing Gender Equality in Brunei in October 2019 and his research proposal won the Emerging Young Researchers Initiative of the Institute of Strategy and Policy – Myanmar. His future plan is to conduct more evidence-based research to provide effective and adequate data for policy makers as well as pursuing a Master's Degree in Peace and Conflict Studies abroad.

Myo Myo Kyaw comes from Pyinmana Township in Naypyitaw. She graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations from the University of Yangon. She has completed courses in Peace Education, Communication for Civil Society, and Foundation for Community Development, conducted by the Institute for Political and Civic Engagement. She also completed the diploma in Business Law from the University of Yangon. In addition, she conducted a Yaw youth empowerment training for youths in Htilin Township, Magway Division. Before joining the Peace Leadership and Research Institute, she worked as a Project Assistant Intern at National Youth Congress. Currently, she is working as a Data Assistant under the Training and Capacity Building Department of the Institute of Strategy and Policy – Myanmar. Specifically, she is assisting the Emerging Young Researchers Initiative program, which is mainly intended for young researchers and university students. After finishing the Graduate Research Diploma in Peace Leadership program, Myo Myo Kyaw is even more eager to conduct further research, especially peace-related research that could support peace-building activities in Myanmar.

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