

Civil Society Strengthening in Myanmar

Good practice and lessons learned

March 2018



Acknowledgements:

The study team would like to thank to the respondents who gave their time to participate in the interviews and discussions during the study. We would also like to express our appreciation for Paung Ku and Christian Aid for providing support and guidance.

Irena Grizelj, Michael Lidauer, Seint Seint Tun

Disclaimer:

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Christian Aid is a Christian organisation that insists the world can and must be swiftly changed to one where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

We work globally for profound change that eradicates the causes of poverty, striving to achieve equality, dignity and freedom for all, regardless of faith or nationality. We are part of a wider movement for social justice.

We provide urgent, practical and effective assistance where need is great, tackling the effects of poverty as well as its root causes.

christianaid.org.uk

Christian Aid is a key member of

actalliance

Contents

Executive summary	5
1. About this study	6
Overview of SPACE project	6
Scope and limitations	7
Civil society in transitional Myanmar – a brief assessment	7
2. Strengthening civil society organisations: effective capacity building	9
Reflective organisational development	9
Lessons learned	11
Efficiency in financial management	12
Lessons learned	12
3. Strengthening civil society: sustainability and funding	14
Building horizontal foundations	16
Lessons learned	17
Enhancing vertical influence	18
Lessons learned	19
Funding approaches	20
Lessons learned	22
Conclusion	23
Annex 1	24
Methodology	24
References	26

List of acronyms

3MDG	Three Millennium Development Goal Fund
CBO	community-based organisation
CSO	civil society organisation
FGD	focus group discussions
KII	key informant interviews
MCPWC	Myanmar China Pipeline Watch Committee
MKLDO	Mawkkon Local Development Organisation
MYPO	Mon Youth Progressive Organisation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
SHANAH	Supporting Harmonious Actions and Nurturing for Advancing Hope
SPACE	Strengthening Participation, Accountability and Civil Society Empowerment

Executive summary

Since 2010, there have been significant shifts in Myanmar's socio-political and economic contexts, which have affected the role and dynamics of civil society in the country. There are mixed insights and experiences with regards to the opening or shrinking of space for civil society in Myanmar, particularly with the National League for Democracy (NLD) assuming power as a democratically elected government in 2016. As a critical pillar of a democratic society, there are correspondingly increasing numbers of donor-funded programmes on strengthening and building the capacity of civil society.

There are a limited number of published evaluations and assessments on the utility and effectiveness of approaches to strengthening civil society available in the public domain, and this report seeks to take a modest step towards filling the gap. This study builds primarily upon an external final evaluation of the Christian Aid and Paung Ku project Strengthening Participation, Accountability and Civil Society Empowerment (SPACE), which ran from 2014-2017 and was funded by the EU. This report highlights good practices, case studies and lessons learned from this project. The report is structured into five sections that explore different dimensions of civil society strengthening, with 18 lessons learned and recommendations summarised below.

Section	Lessons learned
Reflective organisational development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Training is only one element of capacity development. ■ Organisational development should be integrated into project design. ■ Patience is a virtue, as building staff capacity requires time. ■ Build and sustain long-term relationships with partners. ■ Prioritise mentoring and field visits for partners.
Strengthening financial management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Internal financial policies should not be driven by donor requirements. ■ Financial management should not be limited to donor compliance. ■ Flexibility is essential in managing finances.
Building horizontal foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Networking facilitates connections, but not necessarily collaboration. ■ Exchange and learning platforms are useful entry points for collaboration. ■ Empowering communities requires knowledge dissemination as a first step.
Enhancing vertical influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Perceived legitimacy of civil society matters for policy engagement. ■ Evidence-based advocacy is crucial to influence power holders. ■ Media is an important avenue for civil society to sustain their space.
Funding approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fund the vision, not just the project. ■ Partner, rather than simply fund. ■ Duration of funding is more important than the amount. ■ The funding modality should depend on the capacity of the civil society organisation.

1. About this study

There have been notable and significant shifts in the political and operational context over the last decade for the donors and local and international organisations working to support civil society in Myanmar, impacting the approach and mechanisms utilised by supporting organisations.¹ In order to support the democratisation process, there has been a proliferation of civil society strengthening projects in Myanmar, particularly since 2012. In examining information and literature on civil society strengthening in Myanmar, it becomes clear that there are few publically available studies that assess the utility and limitations of current approaches in working with civil society.² This report seeks to take a modest step towards filling the gap.

In particular, this study builds upon an external final evaluation of the Christian Aid and Paung Ku project Strengthening Participation, Accountability and Civil Society Empowerment (SPACE), which ran from 2014-2017 and was funded by the EU. One key output of the project envisioned that ‘good practices for community empowerment are documented and disseminated amongst development actors’.

This report is a result of this intention, developed to highlight good practices and lessons learned from the SPACE project.³ By building on available reports, evaluations and research that reflect upon civil society and civil society capacity building programmes in Myanmar, this report is targeted towards supporting organisations and intends to provide food for thought, with the call for further assessments and evaluations to be funded and published – stimulating dialogue, debate, and discussions on successes and lessons learned in supporting a sustainable and strong civil society in Myanmar’s dynamic transition.

Overview of SPACE project

In 2014, Christian Aid in partnership with Paung Ku applied for a grant from the EU for their SPACE project.⁴ The project’s goal was to **strengthen the capacity of civil society actors across all 14 states and regions** in Myanmar and contribute to an enabling policy framework and environment conducive to a strong and vibrant civil society in the country. The SPACE project **supported an existing Paung Ku programme**, and therefore contributed to Paung Ku’s ongoing capacity building efforts for civil society. The project targeted 100 civil society organisations (CSOs) annually over three years through a cyclical *action–reflection* process of capacity strengthening. As part of this, the SPACE project provided **additional funding for 18 small grants to civil society partners**. The recipients of the small grants were selected through an **independent Civil Society Grants Committee**, following a call for proposals that was circulated among Paung Ku’s civil society networks. The project therefore provided support on three levels – to Paung Ku, which in turn supports more than 100 CSO partners that work to address issues that affect their communities at regional and national levels.

Key objectives of the SPACE Project

Overall objective:

- To strengthen civil society actors’ capacity to address and effectively influence the marginalisation and underdevelopment that affects their communities and country.

Specific objectives:

1. To strengthen the organisational capacity of CSOs across 14 states and regions in Myanmar and support them to implement programmes on issues that affect their communities.
2. To contribute to an enabling policy framework and environment for civil society in Myanmar and strengthen their capacity to engage with different power holders.

The theory of change within the SPACE project was that through strengthening horizontal foundations for civil society and through building vertical influence, the actions of CSOs would 'institutionalise the engagement of poor and marginalised communities with power holders and governance structures for securing their rights'.⁵ In this way, the SPACE project intended to impact the marginalisation and underdevelopment that affect local communities, to strengthen their voice, and to influence policy making and implementation in Myanmar. This should ultimately enhance the ongoing processes of fostering a democratic and pluralistic society in Myanmar.

The focus of the report therefore is to provide a brief assessment of good practices and lessons learned with regard to the capacity development of civil society and, in turn, their ability to empower their respective communities, embedded in Myanmar's changing political landscape.

Scope and limitations

This report is primarily based on field research that was carried out within a short time period, predominantly relying on interviews from 10 civil society partners in the SPACE project. It builds on a limited number of published resources that assess the usefulness of and lessons learned from civil society projects in Myanmar.

In the SPACE project, CSOs were defined as: 'non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) including networks of key demographics, eg, youth groups and women's groups, networks of NGOs, civil society/people's movements, and other associations such as farmers' groups, religious and media organisations, self-help groups and professionals, eg, lawyers, journalists.' This is a broad and inclusive category, and as other studies have pointed out, a distinction needs to be made between *civil society* and *civil society organisations*, as elaborated in chapter 3.

Civil society in transitional Myanmar – a brief assessment

'The government is like the branch of a tree, while civil society are the rods that support the branches. We need strong supporting rods, in order to have a functioning government'

Government Minister, Kayah State

Against the backdrop of Myanmar's political transition, it is important to understand how the new political dynamics are impacting upon the space for civil society, and how these changes affect how supporting organisations provide relevant and effective support. Since the change in government administration in 2010, and particularly since the NLD assumed power in 2016, available literature and interviews suggest mixed opinions and experiences with respect to the narrowing or opening of space for civil society in Myanmar's changing political landscape.

'In this new political context, the role of civil society is very important: civil society acts as bridge to bring community voice to government and parliament. Parliament is now very busy, so civil society is key to raise the community voice and make sure the government is responding to community issues'

Director, Mawkkon Local Development Organisation

A peace process between the government and Myanmar's multiple ethnic armed organisations was initiated, with ongoing negotiations to establish a federal union. Communal and sub-national conflicts continue to impede prospects for peace and development in communities.

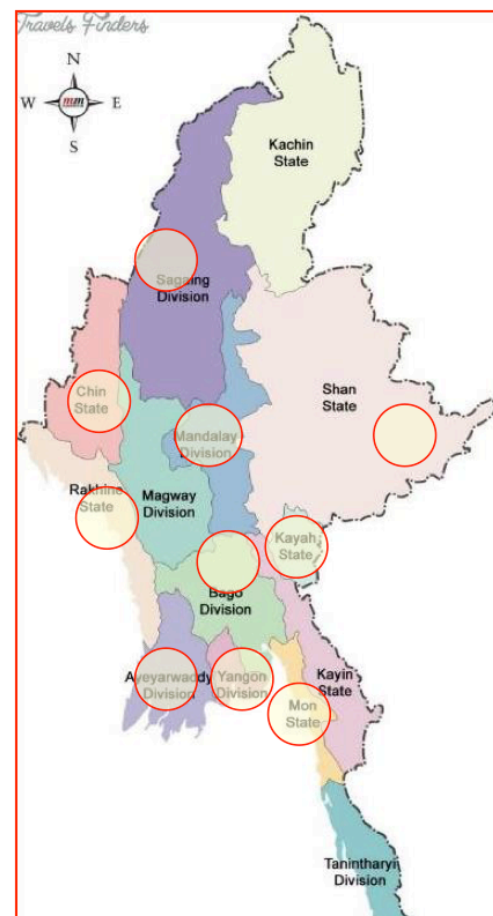
More than half of the civil society partners interviewed for this study reported an improvement in their freedom to operate in Myanmar, though some expressed new and nuanced challenges. One key issue is the changing relationship between civil society and the legislative and executive branches of government. SPACE civil society partners described an increase in avenues to communicate and engage with the government since the 2015 elections, through working with the legislative branch and elected MPs.

A negative shift was described by some civil society partners because of recent restrictions on accessing MPs at the local and state level, including those with whom they have had long-standing relationships.⁶ The relationship with the national executive branch of government has been increasingly difficult, particularly for CSOs that are unregistered or engaged in politically sensitive work. This was often described as related to the changed perceived legitimacy of the government (by both the public and the government itself) – with the government perceived as legitimate representatives of the public voice, some CSOs have experienced increased difficulties in engaging government ministries. This led to a majority of civil society partners viewing their role as more important than ever in monitoring and holding the government accountable for its actions – an essential part of a democratic state. Several civil society partners believe that they have to work harder in the present political context to prove their legitimacy and credibility to both the public and the government.

Registration for CSOs was another issue raised. Previously this had been described as less of a constraining factor. However, there have been more limitations on some unregistered CSOs engaging with legislative and executive branches of government at the state/regional and national levels. While the historical mistrust in political institutions has resulted in some civil society refusing to register with the government, partly to avoid falling under political control, others have urged civil society peers to register because it will facilitate a working relationship with the government.

The difference of opinions on how to engage with the government has led to some divisions among civil society. The trend among donors to partner and fund government directly in this new transition, compared to partnering with civil society previously, has further left a sense of discontent and reduced trust among some civil society towards political institutions.⁷ Recognising and responding to this dynamic space is a condition for supporting organisations to expand and enhance the role of civil society in Myanmar's quasi-democracy.

Below: Map of Myanmar's states and regions (divisions), with highlighted areas depicting the location of civil society partners interviewed for this report.



2. Strengthening civil society organisations: effective capacity building

‘Apart from small grants, what is mostly needed to develop civil society in Burma is support to strengthen local organisations and their staff. Although civil society organisations often have committed staff and are able to reach local communities better than international agencies, they usually lack technical skills (eg, financial management, project management and project reporting)’

Tom Kramer, *Civil Society Graining Ground*⁸

A key objective of the SPACE project was to strengthen the *organisational* capacity of CSOs. This section explores the approach utilised within the project to address this objective, and what lessons may be learned.

Broadly speaking, capacity building of CSOs entails two elements, institutional (or organisational) development and technical support, and financial management skills. During a two-day learning and sharing workshop – a key activity organised as part of the SPACE project – civil society partners noted their two top recommendations for supporting civil society as continuing financial support and further enhancing technical and organisational development.

Reflective organisational development

‘Capacity building is really about the reflection process and learning from experience’

Project Manager, Paung Ku, Yangon

It was evident from this research that institutional development involves more than training. For Paung Ku, *reflection and learning* – whereby the organisation is given the space to reflect on their own experiences – is a key tool enabling civil society to develop organically.

Paung Ku presently partners with more than 100 CSOs, with funding being a minimal priority.⁹ The civil society partners that Paung Ku supports are immensely diverse in terms of their scope of work, geographic location and functional capacity. The emphasis of support is therefore on a reflection and mentoring approach tailored to specific groups and networks, where civil society partners have room for reflection, monitoring, development and action to apply their learnings – each to their specific context, objectives and capacity. Several CSO partners interviewed during this research found it difficult to explicitly identify the factors that would enhance their work as a CSO, therefore this approach could help CSOs recognise their strengths, weaknesses and priorities for development.

‘It is important to reflect and learn from our projects and programmes. The experiences, insights and deeper understanding gained not only helps the partners but also us as INGOs and influence our strategy and programming’

Country Director, Christian Aid

Below: Union of Karenni State Youth reflect on the impact of the SPACE project.



This approach has similarly been utilised by the Three Millennium Development Goal Fund (3MDG) project in consortium with Pact, where the implementing agency ‘walks partners through an intensive period of self-reflection which considers organizational, programmatic and relational capacity’.¹⁰ From this reflective process, a tailored support package is provided in a range of areas that considers partners’ operational, social and political contexts. The benefits of supporting organisations working through an in-depth reflective process instead of a pre-designed set of trainings, is the opportunity to implement needs-based and relevant support, which extends beyond ‘strategic support on how to get more money’.¹¹

Several SPACE CSO partners were able to highlight how internal reflection supported the development of a clearer organisational structure, more efficient internal policies, and prioritisation of capacity needs. This led to easier cooperation with other civil society partners, and the ability to apply for and manage additional funding. However, time and funding for capacity building was not integrated directly into the small grants projects. This meant CSO partners were not able to allocate resources for additional training or capacity building needs that arose during project implementation.

Good practice

Utilising capacity assessment tools

Several variations of capacity assessment tools have been used by supporting organisations in undertaking initial and final line assessments. The tools are used to monitor and prioritise elements of capacity strengthening for different civil society partners.¹²

Paung Ku utilises a matrix and assesses its partners against six main domains:

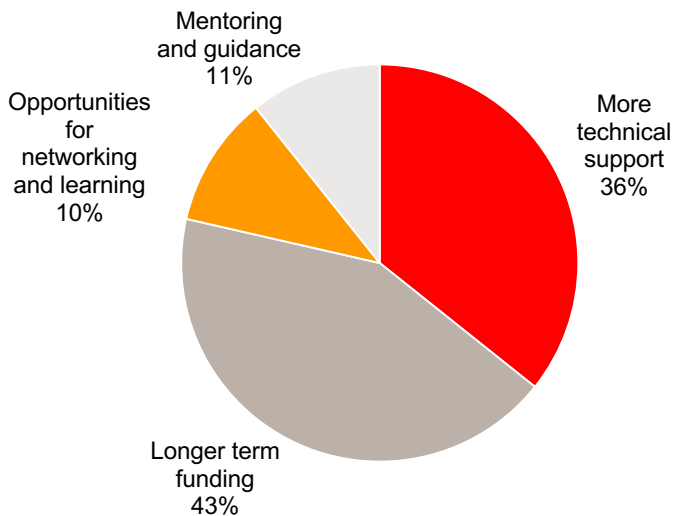
- leadership and decision making
- systems and resources
- participation, accountability, and inclusiveness
- knowledge, skills, and learning
- advocacy
- networking.

Pact and 3MDG note eight key areas of capacity development interventions:

- mission and strategic planning
- human resource management
- programme management
- financial management
- advocacy
- administrative and logistic support
- fundraising strategy
- monitoring and evaluation.

Capacity assessment tools enable a prioritisation of capacity development interventions, which are tailored to the needs of different partners and do not simply focus on financial management.

Figure 1: Key areas of support requested by SPACE CSO partners



Lessons learned

- Training is only one element of capacity development.** Trainings on specific technical or functional issues are important to increase organisational capacity, but these require sustained follow-up mentoring and support in order to solidify knowledge and ensure application of skills learned. Working through a reflective and needs-based approach with each partner, rather than a set menu of trainings for all partners, allows tailored support that is targeted to the context and needs of individual partners.
- Organisational development should be integrated into project design.** In order to nurture capacity strengthening, time and funding should be allocated during a project to ensure capacity development is prioritised as a core component of programming, instead of being marginalised as a check-box component at the start of the project. This would instil a greater sense of ownership in the partners for their own capacity development.
- Patience is a virtue, as building staff capacity requires time.** Several SPACE CSO staff members expressed the need for donors to understand that local CSOs may have limited technical and financial management capacity, but their staff are often from the beneficiary communities, which adds value to the work through their grounded understanding of the context and key issues.
- Build and sustain long-term relationships with partners.** Strengthening civil society is a process of change that requires consistent time and effort. While results may not come immediately, building and maintaining relationships over a consistent period enables supporting organisations to foster trust and understanding with local partners – to seize opportunities for collaboration and partnership when the time is right.
- Prioritise mentoring and field visits for partners.** The majority of SPACE CSO partners noted that a close relationship with supporting organisations, through frequent communication and

‘Trainings, trainings, trainings are not enough. This is not capacity building alone. You have to learn from the work, and reflect’

Programme Manager, Paung Ku

Case study

Internal change through institutional development

The Mon Youth Progressive Organisation (MYPO) was established in 1999 and remains unregistered. Although MYPO had previously been connected with Paung Ku for other short projects, it did not describe this as an in-depth relationship. However, having stayed connected, Paung Ku informed MYPO about the SPACE project small grant opportunity.

Prior to submitting the concept note for SPACE, Paung Ku fully supported MYPO with the development of a project proposal, including a review of its organisational structure and processes. This involved improving MYPO’s human resources policy and financial procedures, which both existed previously, but were ‘not so formalised and well structured.’¹³

Partnering with Paung Ku under the SPACE project provided MYPO with the space to strengthen its internal working structures and policies. This yielded several positive outcomes – coordination and cooperation with other partners has become easier; greater capacity to apply for further funding; clearer internal working structure; and greater organisational credibility. The credibility is important for objectivity, as a staff member explained: ‘Without the policy, if there were problems, people would think our director is biased; the policy makes us more objective.’

field visits, was an important factor that facilitated trust and, in turn, resulted in their development.

Efficiency in financial management

‘The grant taught us to work systematically. Sometimes we have ideas, but no system; working with Paung Ku taught us to work professionally’

Core member, Democratic Education Corner, Yangon

Funding was a key component of the SPACE project. Because the EU has stringent and extensive financial policy and compliance regulations for sub-grants, it was necessary to support the civil society partners with financial management and reporting to implement the grant.

A major area that SPACE civil society partners cited as an area of support from Paung Ku is the financial management and reporting process for their small grants. While Paung Ku’s approach focuses on holistic capacity development, much of the feedback from partners on ‘internal change and impact as a result of working with the SPACE project’ or ‘key areas of support provided by Paung Ku’ involved development of financial policies. As a result, two-thirds of partners interviewed cited improved financial management and financial policies as key impact areas. While cited as difficult and time consuming by partners in the initial phase of the partnership, it was further positively associated with ‘efficiency and accountability’ as a CSO, which supported CSOs to grow in the long term.¹⁴

However, one easy pitfall – as described by another study with consensus from 17 CSOs – is for the main objective of organisational development support from funders and NGOs being to help CSOs become more ‘donor-ready’.¹⁵

‘Only with the SPACE project did we develop better financial policy, which will support our future applications for grants and activities’

Mi Rot Chan, Mon Youth Progressive Organization

Lessons learned

- **Internal financial policies should not be driven by donor requirements.** As highlighted in the interviews, most donors have different financial policies and compliance regulations, making it extremely difficult for a CSO to have a consistent internal financial policy that meets all donor regulations. Several civil society partners requested donors meet partners ‘in the middle’, noting that top-down regulations often do not consider contextual nuances between partners that impact financial management.
- **Financial management should not be limited to donor compliance.** While strengthening the capacity of civil society partners on financial management to ensure compliance with donor regulations is a necessary component of managing a grant, this does not translate as internal financial management. Strengthening financial management should extend beyond the lifespan of a donor project, to allow partners to develop their own internal policies, procedures and systems that are aligned to the organisation’s needs and sustainable in the long term.

- **Flexibility is essential in managing finances.** The unpredictability of Myanmar's changing context means that CSOs are not always in a position to implement activities and objectives as laid out in their proposals. A key strength of CSOs is their inherent connection to communities and responsiveness to community and context dynamics. Those supporting organisations should recognise the need for flexibility – particularly with managing finances – to enable more effective impacts.

Good practice

Easing financial burdens

To ease the burden of civil society partners in meeting the compliance and regulations of the EU sub-grant, Christian Aid and Paung Ku summarised the EU's very elaborate financial policy manual at the beginning of the project to avoid any misinterpretations later.

The CSO partners were provided with simple, key information on meeting financial compliance. Thereafter, they were given consistent mentoring throughout the lifespan of the project, and accessible and responsive communication channels to clarify ongoing queries, which was particularly appreciated by the partners. This allowed them to prioritise their focus on project goals and activities, rather than compliance.

3. Strengthening civil society: sustainability and funding

‘If we [civil society] partner together and help each other, then our work will be more sustainable. Money is simply an added value. But at the core, it is about the movement and the vision that makes civil society sustainable’

Thu Thu Mar, Democratic Education Corner, Yangon

Several recent studies have explored the meaning of capacity building for civil society *organisations*. Yet the civil society *space* in Myanmar extends beyond organisations and encompasses networks, CBOs and groups, labour unions, faith-based organisations and others – this a diverse space. When discussing strengthening civil society, a key debate is whether to ‘institutionalise’ or not.

As one partner put it: ‘There is a differentiation between civil society organisations and civil society in Myanmar. In order to have a strong civil society, we need to have strong support from civil society organisations.’¹⁶

Noting a recent study on CSO sustainability,¹⁷ this report builds on understanding what strengthening capacity means beyond internal organisational development.

Sustainability is not simply about funding. Indeed, funding is only one aspect of sustainability, with social, environmental and policy impacts being additional influential factors. Individual consultations with 11 other civil society organisations highlighted four top priorities that CSOs seek to sustain – mission, constituency, networks, and community capacity and leadership.¹⁸

This is consistent with the findings from this research study. Apart from the provision of small grants, SPACE CSO partners noted the following as the **most useful components** of the SPACE project,¹⁹ based on horizontal and vertical foundations:

1. Provision of small grants
2. Creating linkages and networking among CSOs
3. Supporting advocacy initiatives
4. Mentoring
5. Creating wider public awareness on the role of civil society
6. Providing learning and exposure opportunities
7. Organisational capacity assessments.

‘Some say the stronger the [civil society] institution, the better the democratic reform. Others think there should be a loose structure for civil society, which relies on mobilisation and movement to function. But this ultimately depends on the purpose that the civil society is trying to achieve. There is no one right way’

Member, Democratic Education Corner

Supporting bottom-up community empowerment

In 2013/14, the Mon Youth Progressive Organisation (MYPO) received its first micro-grant from Paung Ku to roll out English and political training for university youth through its Youth Capacity Building and Leadership School, opened in 2012. For several years, MYPO had been implementing short trainings on human rights, rule of law and civic education. Although useful, the short-term nature of the trainings meant that they were less effective for participants to develop the capacity to utilise the skills learned and there was minimal long-term change.

MYPO explained: 'With the political context changed since 2010, youth now have more chances to speak out and tell the government what they need. But youth need the skills; there are so many issues youth want to address, but they do not know how. Basic training is no longer enough. They need to be trained on advocacy, public speaking, leadership, campaigning in order to speak up to leaders and decision makers, to make their voice stronger and louder.'



MYPO decided it needed to provide longer-term, sustained training that would be immersed within the community. The idea was then generated into action through applying for the SPACE grant. Paung Ku supported the proposal development and further developed the idea, which created the opportunity to deepen the relationship with MYPO. The result was a two-level impact.

Confident youth leaders who had participated in MYPO 'Creative Advocacy Training': Rather than working only with MYPO members, for this project, MYPO trained community-based youth over an eight-month period, providing creative advocacy skills in documentary making and forum theatre. The advocacy campaigns were based on consultations and interviews with community members to identify key issues.



The young people say they now feel confident and empowered to speak directly with community leaders and state MPs. One student formed a youth group in his community to work on drug-related issues. The community is in an area that is not controlled by the government, making it difficult for those outside the community to gain access and acceptance to work there.²⁰ Having gained skills and confidence from the training, the young man formed a community group without funding. Because he was from the community, he could garner support from key state and non-state leaders to establish a public rehabilitation camp.

Empowered community members: the students led creative advocacy campaigns in their communities to build knowledge around key issues, including the human rights and environmental impact of a large dam construction, and drug issues.



A community member explained: 'Because of this awareness, the villagers are aware of their rights, and able to take action to protect their land and rights. There is a village that was scheduled to be relocated by the government, but following the awareness activities, the villagers learned the negative impact of this, and their rights. They took action and sent a petition to the government. The village was not moved; the government heard our voice. If there was no awareness, the village would have been moved.'

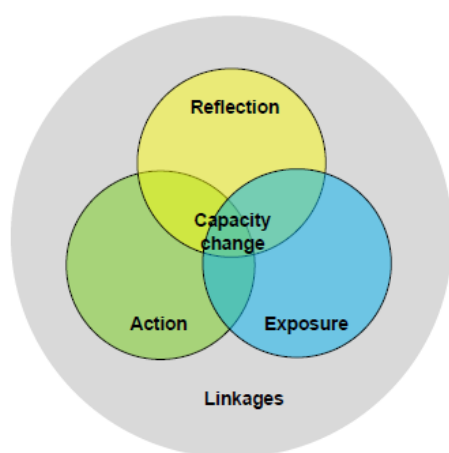
Building horizontal foundations

‘There are now so many CSO forums and networks; there is a large quantity, but not necessarily quality collaboration. It is a challenge to be together with such diversity. But if we have a common issue to speak to the government and advocate, then we should work together and have a collective voice to be heard’

Nay Lin Soe, Founder and Executive Director of Myanmar Independent Living Initiative, Yangon

CSOs have proliferated since the political transition began in 2010. Supporting organisations are uniquely placed to facilitate bridges, networking and connections among civil society. Paung Ku’s ‘action–reflection’ model encapsulates and prioritises the strengthening of horizontal foundations.

Figure 2: Paung Ku’s action–reflection model for capacity strengthening



Connecting civil society – through thematic and/or regional similarities – was cited as an important tool that provides opportunities to enhance cooperation, collaboration, learning and sharing. Noting the shifting public and government perceptions towards the legitimacy and role of civil society in Myanmar, enhancing community participation and building public awareness regarding the role of civil society were cited as critical elements to strengthen horizontal foundations, allowing communities to address their own needs.

Building on Paung Ku’s experience and approach, the SPACE project defined horizontal foundations as:

- Accountability and transparency towards communities and stakeholders.
- Diversity and inclusiveness of vulnerable and socially excluded groups.
- Community ownership and participation, promoting leadership to address the communities’ own challenges.
- Innovation, learning and adaptation, by reflecting on actions to learn from them and adapting approaches based on this learning.

Case study

Generating a multiplier effect

Inspired by the sub-grant approach, which enables a wider reach of civil society, one CSO sought to expand its outreach to CBOs that might not normally receive support.

The CSO explained: ‘In Myanmar, CSOs and CBOs are different. CSOs are structured organisations, but CBOs, like youth groups, are fluid and not stable. They work best in mobilising around key issues, but they are not consistently active.’

Funding for CBOs often comes from the members themselves, for example, by contributing membership fees. This civil society partner wanted to support youth-led CBOs by providing them with the resources and tools to expand their community work.

The CSO partner said: ‘To be more sustainable, you have to work directly with the villagers. If you come with just money but no understanding, “what you do will be done”, meaning you may get your short-term result. For long-term sustainability, you need to include the community in decision making – this is where the CBO is closest [to the community].’

Through working with CBOs directly, more institutionalised CSOs can strengthen the knowledge and capability of CBOs to enable them to implement actions that address community needs.

- Strong linkages with other civil society to increase cooperation, access to resources and learning from each other.

Lessons learned

- **Networking facilitates connections, but not necessarily collaboration.** Paung Ku's network and connections, fostered over many years with both national and international stakeholders, enable Paung Ku to recognise and support useful connections to build bridges between civil society, as well as other stakeholders. However, collaborations are more likely to evolve if civil society is connected based on a thematic objective or regional focus; this enables synergies towards a common agenda rather than competition, which was cited as important to sustain the work of civil society. One CSO partner in Yangon commented on the importance of collaborating with other CSOs: 'I realise that there can be other CSOs who have the same mission and goal, and so we should have partnership, rather than competition.'
- **Exchange and learning platforms are useful entry points for collaboration.** Several SPACE civil society partners recommended supporting organisations to continue harnessing their connection with multiple CSOs by providing continuous platforms for civil society to meet and engage with one another, including the presence of donors and supporting organisations. Providing platforms for civil society and donors to connect provides opportunities to learn from each other about new approaches to address community issues or engage with policy processes, which may lead to collaboration in the future. Learning platforms come in several forms, including sharing workshops, forums and exposure trips within Myanmar.
- **Empowering communities requires knowledge dissemination as a first step.** Providing community members with access to knowledge regarding rights, thematic issues, and legal procedures was emphasised by both community members and civil society as a key first step in mobilising communities and their engagement with power holders. Knowledge was linked to a decrease in fear and increase in confidence to engage with political decision makers. However, guiding communities with where and how to implement their knowledge into action was the key next step.

Good practice

Enhancing community participation, from knowledge to action



Mawkkon Local Development Organisation (MKLDO) used the grant and technical support provided by the SPACE project to raise knowledge and awareness of land rights in eastern Shan State.

While knowledge of land rights was an important first step, Paung Ku also connected MKLDO to technical resource people, particularly lawyers. The resource people provided practical explanations to community members on putting their knowledge into action, such as how to submit complaint forms related to land issues to relevant ministries. This connected the gap between knowledge and action for communities to address issues important to them, have their voice heard and exercise their rights. Community members highlighted this technical support as an important concrete method to engage with power holders.

Enhancing vertical influence

‘The newly elected MPs are ready to hear what we have to say but we do not know how to talk to them, so we need those kinds of skills’

Staff member, MYPO, Mon State

Alongside building horizontal foundations and internal capacity strengthening, vertical influence focuses on generating an enabling *environment* for civil society, as well as fulfilling their mandate of driving ‘positive social change’ – both in terms of representing their communities’ voice and driving change in policies, laws, practices through engaging power holders.

While accessing MPs has proven more difficult for several civil society partners since the NLD assumed power in 2016, others have reflected on increased space for *change* – there are greater numbers of laws and policies that have sought civil society input. For both well-established and newer CSOs, there is a sense of urgency to enhance their dialogue skills and build evidence bases that will facilitate advocacy to guide policy makers towards positive social change.

The SPACE project aimed for vertical influence, which was measured against the following:

- **Access to state power holders**, including state actors and non-state agencies, involved in governance processes.
- **Confident, skilled and capable members** engaged in development and rights initiatives.
- **Credibility** through evidence-based approaches.
- **Mobilised citizens**, through access to information, capable and motivated to take action.
- **Strong linkages** with other actors, including other CSOs, donors and the private sector, to strengthen collective action and influence.
- **Strong voice** to advocate and to hold the state accountable.

‘If this centre [Taunggoo Community Centre] didn’t exist, we could not be able to meet and we would have a huge informational gap. This is the only centre where can discuss political and peace process issues. The civil society can connect with different stakeholders through this meeting space’

Chairman, Myanmar Indigenous Network, Taunggoo

Scaling-up policy influence through research and advocacy



Myanmar China Pipeline Watch Committee (MCPWC) is one of Paung Ku's long-term partners. Formed in 2012 with the support of Paung Ku and the Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability, MCPWC has one specific purpose – to watch and report on the impact of the Myanmar–China Oil and Gas Pipeline Project on local communities in 21 townships.

MCPWC has built relationships with local communities and has become a bridge between communities and power holders, acting as an information source for parliament and government on community concerns and issues surrounding the pipeline construction.

Having a strong understanding of the local context, MCPWC has gained legitimacy among communities and power holders to engage in advocacy work.

In 2015, supported by Paung Ku and another donor (the Natural Resource and Governance Institute), MCPWC conducted a research project and surveyed 100 villages to produce an extensive report, *Myanmar–China Oil and Natural Gas Pipeline Construction Project: Assessing Transparency and Accountability with Regards to the Social Impact of the Affected Local Population*.

The report's findings were used by MCPWC to conduct advocacy at the state and national levels, in both parliament and government ministries. MCPWC described the positive interest and response from state and national MPs and government. Encouragingly, complaints and rights violations reported in the study have been investigated by the government, and feedback has been provided to MCPWC and relevant private companies. Furthermore, MCPWC has been invited to China to share the report findings with Chinese oil and gas companies, propelling the community voice to an international level. MCPWC's connection and strong coordination with local communities will continue to be maintained following the SPACE project.

Lessons learned

- **Perceived legitimacy of civil society matters for policy engagement.** As expressed by both power-holders and civil society, the perceived legitimacy of CSOs is an important precondition in engaging policy makers and undertaking advocacy work. Often the civil society partners that were able to engage power holders were those perceived as committed to their constituencies, and who developed trusted relationships with power-holders through consistent dialogue. Strengthening CSOs' accountability to their constituencies, therefore, would be critical to enhancing vertical influence.
- **Evidence-based advocacy is crucial to influence power holders.** The flexibility of the SPACE grant allowed for inclusion of research to promote evidence-based decision-making among power holders. Several research reports were produced during the timespan of the project, which provides civil society with entry points to policy and decision-makers. For example, the Ninu Women in Action Group produced a research report on Chin customary law and its impact on women, and the Karen

Environmental and Social Action Network produced a report on human rights violations surrounding the construction of the Asian Highway.²¹

- **Media is an important avenue for civil society to sustain their space.** The changing media landscape has led to CSOs increasingly utilising press conferences and media outlets to promote policy messages and campaigns. An increase in media attention as a result of the SPACE project was cited as an important impact for several CSO partners. Social media, especially Facebook, is playing an increasing role in facilitating awareness raising with the public on the role of civil society in Myanmar.

Funding approaches

‘Before 2013, donors would come with a criterion; if the organisation fit it, they would get funding. If your organisation doesn’t fit criteria, it wouldn’t get funding. Now, donors are starting to understand that civil society will not always have the existing capacity that donors expect them to have. What changed? Donors started to visit partners more, to listen to them, to collaborate and interact more warmly, leading to greater understanding’

Executive committee member, Union of Karenni State Youth, Kayah State

While sustainability extends beyond funding, financial support enables civil society to expand their activities, and advance their vision and objectives. In a shifting donor landscape with greater investment in capacity strengthening for civil society, funding increasingly comes as part of a package of support.

Although there has been a proliferation of civil society since 2010, there continue to be limited numbers of national CSOs that have the organisational and financial structures to absorb large sums of direct donor funding. Several funding approaches have evolved as a result, ranging from direct funding from international donors to local civil society, consortium/partnerships between national and international organisations, and sub-granting mechanisms. The SPACE project was a mixture of both co-partnership and sub-granting.

The Paung Ku–Christian Aid partnership provided Paung Ku with the space to focus on supporting civil society partners with capacity development, while Christian Aid took responsibility for financial management and compliance with the EU grant. While Paung Ku had previously provided micro-grants, the size and length of the SPACE small grants were the largest Paung Ku had provided to partners. Hence capacity development for financial management was provided on two levels – from Christian Aid to Paung Ku, and from Paung Ku to civil society partners. To support financial management of the small grants – but in particular to increase ownership and accountability of resource allocation with civil society – one unique aspect of the project was the implementation of a civil society small grants committee, as explained in the box overleaf.

‘It is realised that there is lack of trust between some of the civil society and current government. The current government has been behind closed doors since it took over administration; this situation has hurt the sentiment of some civil society leaders. SHANAH organised informal dialogue between government and civil society leaders. The impact of the dialogue is that it paved the way for both sides to collaborate and created mutual respect’

Director, Supporting Harmonious Actions and Nurturing for Advancing Hope (SHANAH)

‘Different models of funding need to be adopted, ensuring that smaller groups also get opportunity to access resources and enhance their capacities. For us, it is essential that we work closely with our partners and invest in institutional building of the local CBOs and NGOs’

Country Director, Christian Aid

Grants committees: providing civil society with greater resource ownership

Enabling stronger civil society ownership of decision making processes around resource allocation was a key objective of the SPACE project. An innovative approach to the selection of the small grants recipients was taken through the development of a voluntary civil society small grants committee.

For both rounds of grant allocations, a nine-person grants committee was formed, with experienced and respected civil society leaders from across the country, who have expertise in different thematic, regional and development sectors. The grants committee had final decision making power over selecting grant recipients, with the aim of providing civil society with greater accountability and ownership of resource allocation from international sources.

Apart from the challenge of availability of committee members, feedback from committee members highlighted the positive impact of this approach, which included stronger collaboration and connection

between civil society leaders, greater sense of funding ownership, and the ability to fund projects that addressed positive social change and community empowerment.

An objective ranking system was used based on pre-established, transparent criteria, which included contribution to positive social change, being cost effective, advocacy component to influence policy, participation from community, and sustainability (longer term impact beyond period of project). This allowed grant committee members to be transparent and objective in their selection process.

However, greater accountability from the SPACE project to the committee members could have been supported in the form of a feedback loop by following up and sharing project outcomes and the progress of the selected civil society partners.

It is important to emphasise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to funding. The approach to funding civil society should be dependent on the type, mandate, scope, goals, and intention of the organisation. **For smaller, local CBOs**, funding distribution via an agent, such as a larger CSO or NGO, was emphasised as preferred, because it reduces the burden of financial compliance and reporting requirements, which diverts energy from activity implementation.

One SPACE CSO partner explained: 'For local CSOs and CBOs, it is better to get funding via a larger organisation or community centre; otherwise the challenge to draft proposals and reports becomes a barrier. A sub-grant is easier and more flexible than to apply directly.' Too much financial responsibility was cited as a pressure and a demotivating factor for CBOs, whose members are from communities and prefer to focus on needs-based activities rather than funding. The partner added: 'Some [CSO] members do not want to work any more. We do not have the financial skills; the work now is not focused on activities but funding.'²²

For larger local NGOs and CSOs with full-time staff and an organisational structure, direct funding was preferred in order to access larger sums and have greater control over budget and expenditure. The SPACE project provided the opportunity for CSOs that had already received smaller grants and demonstrated existing organisational capacity to further develop through managing a larger sum. Hence, a direct grant can be a useful approach for continued capacity building.

'Some donor organisations are patronising. But good support is through partnership, to facilitate our work'

Director, MKLDO

Lessons learned

- **Fund the vision, not just the project.** Funding projects based on donors' implementation of a top-down agenda is not conducive to an organic and sustainable approach to strengthening civil society. Grants focused on a continuation or expansion of existing work, rather than new projects, enables the organisation to further develop strategic visions to address community issues – so that funding becomes 'an added value'.²³ The SPACE project was not implemented as a separate project for Paung Ku, rather the EU contributed to supporting an existing programme.
- **Partner rather than simply fund.** Civil society organisations place an emphasis on partnership and working with supporting organisations that engage them as partners rather than 'project implementers'. For supporting organisations, there should be clarity in whether capacity development is focused on delivering and reporting on the project, or on the future viability of the CSO.²⁴
- **Duration of funding is more important than the amount.** The unreliability of donor funding makes the planning and momentum of civil society work difficult. Small organisations in particular value longer-term, small funding over larger grants, which support organisational development and strategic planning.
- **The funding modality should depend on the capacity of the civil society organisation.** Prior to a funding approach being selected, supporting organisations should consult and assess the capacity and current donor landscape of potential partners in order to make effective judgements on which funding mechanism would be most suitable for the partner.

Good practice

Funding vision, rather than projects

The SPACE project followed a consistent, transparent criterion in selecting civil society partners as beneficiaries of small grants. The selection focused on choosing proposals whereby the funding would feed into, and contribute to, existing programming rather than become a separate project. Most of the CSO partners already had some external funding, but were ready to expand and upscale their work. The project also included other civil society who had not previously received funding, but had strategic long-term objectives. The reasoning behind selection decision lied in the fact that the small grant project duration was short term (minimum 6 months and maximum 1 year). This approach encouraged minimal dependency on a one-year sub-grant, and instead supported partners in implementing a longer-term vision. This supports civil society to work sustainably and consistently over time, as opposed to fluctuating with the changes in donor funding.

Conclusion

The new challenges facing civil society actors, particularly in their engagement with executive and legislative branches of government, confirm that continued attention needs to be given to expanding the space, role, and capacities of civil society in Myanmar's nascent democracy.

Strengthening the capacity of civil society actors in Myanmar's transitional and dynamic socio-political context requires a prioritisation in understanding the nuanced variations between different civil society partners, including their history, scope of work, and the political landscape in which they navigate.

There is no singular best approach for strengthening civil society. Based on the experiences of the Christian Aid-Paung Ku SPACE project, working through a reflective process with partners has been shown to facilitate a tailored capacity building approach, which adheres to the long-term partner needs and their ability to effectively address community needs.

The SPACE project demonstrated several innovative and useful approaches, particularly in supporting civil society beyond project-based outputs, and towards building broader visions and objectives. This was sustained through building horizontal foundations in connecting civil society partners with one another, and enhancing their vertical influence and advocacy with policy makers through dialogue and issue-based research.

Annex 1

Methodology

The external evaluation on which this report is based was undertaken from October to November 2017. The report is primarily based on research and interviews with civil society partners that received a small grant as part of the SPACE project, and takes into consideration further support provided to civil society partners by Paung Ku.

The study utilised a mixed method approach, composed of the following:

- **Brief desk review** of existing literature on civil society programmes in Myanmar and SPACE project documents.
- **Survey and group discussions** with 18 CSO partners during a learning and sharing workshop in October 2017.
- **Key informant interviews (KII) and participatory focus group discussions (FGD)** with:
 - Christian Aid and Paung Ku staff.
 - Ten of the 18 civil society partners who received a small grant:
 - Democratic Education Corner.
 - Mawkkon Local Development Organisation.
 - Mon Youth Progressive Organisation.
 - Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability, Ayeyarwaddy.
 - Myanmar China Pipeline Watch Committee
 - Ninu Women Organisation.
 - Shwe Minn Thar Foundation.
 - Supporting Harmonious Actions and Nurturing for Advancing Hope.
 - Taunggoo Community Centre.
 - Union of Karenni State Youth.
 - Community beneficiaries of the CSO partners who received a small grant.
 - Power-holders who were targeted through advocacy or involved with activities from CSO small grant partners.
 - Two grant committee members.
 - Donor representatives.

Field travel was undertaken in November 2017 to interview 10 civil society partners in Yangon, Loikaw, Mawlamyine, Mandalay, Patheingyi, Keng Tong, Naga Self-Administered Zone and Taunggyi.²⁵ The map on page 8 depicts the geographic coverage of the partners. While the final evaluation follows the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's, Development Assistance Committee criteria to assess 'relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact', additional questions were asked to understand more specifically the approaches and lessons learned for civil society strengthening and the empowering of communities.

Table 1: Interviews with project beneficiaries

Interviews with project beneficiaries	Number of interviews	Female	Male	Total
CSO partner: KII with manager/director	10	6	5	11
CSO partner: FGD/participatory workshop with staff	6	13	9	22
CSO beneficiaries: participatory FGD with community members	6	15	21	36
CSO beneficiaries: KII with relevant power-holders	3	0	4	4
Total	25	34	39	73

Key questions for the study:

- How has the **context changed** for civil society in Myanmar over the last three years? How has this impacted the role and **operational space** of civil society?
- What are the **factors and processes that led to internal change** and capacity development CSOs?
- What type of **support proved most useful** to develop and strengthen CSOs?
- What approaches are most **effective in terms of funding** civil society activities?
- How does civil society work to **empower communities** in Myanmar's changing context?

References

- Asian Development Bank, *Civil Society Briefs, Myanmar. Civil Society: An Overview*, Asian Development Bank, 2015, www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/154554/csb-myanmar.pdf
- Bächtold S, An eclipse of Myanmar's civil society?, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 5 July 2017, www.boell.de/en/2017/07/05/eclipse-myanmars-civil-society
- Buzzi C, Hayes M, Mullen M, *Education in Transition: a preliminary study of capacity development for civil society actors in Burma/Myanmar*, Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, 2012, www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/Education_in_Transition-IHRP-red.pdf
- Desmond M, Myo S, *CSO Sustainability in Myanmar's States and Regions*, People in Need, 2017.
- Garner S, Nass L, Lwin UK, Moe DM, *Paung Ku: "Leading from behind". Phase 2 evaluation report*, Paung Ku, 2013, <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/paung-ku-leading-from-behind-phase-2-evaluation-report.pdf>
- Kramer T, *Civil Society Gaining Ground: opportunities for change and development in Burma*, Transnational Institute and Burma Center Netherlands, 2011, www.tni.org/files/download/tni-2011-civilsocietygainingground-web2.pdf
- Lahpai Seng Raw, Strengthening civil society and building peace in Myanmar, 7 April 2015, <http://kachinlandnews.com/?p=25586>
- Lanjouw S, Phuah C, Phan L, *The Art of Networking: a study of civil society networks in Myanmar*, Christian Aid, 2017, christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/art-networking-study-civil-society-networks-myanmar
- Lidauer M, Democratic dawn? Civil society and elections in Myanmar 2010–2012, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2012, 31(2), pp87–114.
- Local Resource Centre, *Bridging the Gap between Donor Community and Local Organizations in Myanmar*, Local Resource Centre, 2012.
- Messner J, *Supporting Civil Society with 3MDG Funds. Collective Voices: understanding community health experiences*, The Three Millennium Development Goal Fund, 2015, www.3mdg.org/files/publication_docs/3mdg_funding_for_civil_society_collective_voices_2015.12.18.pdf
- OECD, Support to Civil Society: emerging evaluation lessons, *Evaluation Insights*, 2013, 8.
- Oswald K, *Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to enhance democratisation, decentralisation and local governance processes*, Institute of Development Studies, Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance, 2016, [www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/CSO%20CapacityPracticePaper_FINALAug2016%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/CSO%20CapacityPracticePaper_FINALAug2016%20(2).pdf)
- Three Millennium Development Goals and Pact, *Organizational Capacity Development with 3MDG Implementing Partners – Results Summary*, 2017.

End notes

- ¹ Supporting organisations refer to donors, funding agencies, and local or international organisations who seek to work with or 'support' or civil society in any capacity in Myanmar.
- ² The resources used and cited within this research are listed in Annex 1.
- ³ A lesson learned can be described as a recommendation, based on analysed experience, from which others can learn from in order to improve their performance.
- ⁴ For a brief introduction and background information on Paung Ku, see *Paung Ku: "Leading from behind". Phase 2 evaluation report*, S Garner, L Nass, UK Lwin, DM Moe, Paung Ku, 2013, <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/paung-ku-leading-from-behind-phase-2-evaluation-report.pdf>
- ⁵ As stated in Christian Aid ToR for final external evaluation.
- ⁶ This often referred to the Lower House Speaker of Parliament, who appealed to MPs in July 2016 to seek approval before attending events or activities organised by civil society. See MPs asked to 'seek approval' for civil society engagements, Moe Myint, 26 July 2016, *The Irrawaddy*, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/mps-asked-to-seek-approval-for-civil-society-engagements.html
- ⁷ An eclipse of Myanmar's civil society?, Stefan Bächtold Heinrich Böll Foundation, 5 July 2017, www.boell.de/en/2017/07/05/eclipse-myanmars-civil-society
- ⁸ *Civil Society Gaining Ground: opportunities for change and development in Burma*, Tom Kramer, Transnational Institute and Burma Center Netherlands, 2011, p39, www.tni.org/files/download/tni-2011-civilsocietygainingground-web2.pdf
- ⁹ A partner is deemed to be any civil society stakeholder with whom Paung Ku has a bilateral relationship.
- ¹⁰ *Organizational Capacity Development with 3MDG Implementing Partners – Results Summary*, Three Millennium Development Goals and Pact, 2017, p1.
- ¹¹ SPACE CSO partner, November 2017.
- ¹² See for example *Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to enhance democratisation, decentralisation and local governance processes*, K Oswald, Institute of Development Studies, Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance, 2016, [www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/CSO-CapacityPracticePaper_FINALAug2016\(2\).pdf](http://www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/CSO-CapacityPracticePaper_FINALAug2016(2).pdf)
- ¹³ MYPO staff, Mon state, November 2017.
- ¹⁴ 'Efficiency and accountability' is a term used by several CSO partners, who viewed financial management as a key component of institutionalisation.
- ¹⁵ *CSO Sustainability in Myanmar's States and Regions*, Desmond M, Myo S, People in Need, 2017.
- ¹⁶ SPACE CSO partner, Yangon, November 2017.
- ¹⁷ See note 15.
- ¹⁸ See note 15.
- ¹⁹ Partners were asked to rank the most useful components from 1-7, with 1 being most useful.
- ²⁰ For a recent overview of this subject, see *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development*, Adam Burke, Nicola Williams, Patrick Barron et al, The Asia Foundation, 2017, <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/contested-areas-myanmar-subnational-conflict-aid-development/>
- ²¹ An introduction to Ninu Women in Action Group's research: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnXPiKCNtec
- ²² Local CSO, Taungoo, November 2017.
- ²³ SPACE CSO partner, Yangon. November 2017.
- ²⁴ See note 15, p24.
- ²⁵ Field travel was undertaken to all highlighted areas except for the Naga SAZ, Chin State and Rakhine State, where the partners were met in Yangon.

Contact us

Christian Aid Myanmar

No. 11, Kan Street

(Near Royal White Elephant Hotel)

Hlaing Township

Yangon

rkhosla@christian-aid.org

christianaid.org.uk/myanmar

