Let’s THINK,
Let’s Change:
PROMOTING DIVERSITY THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE
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This report contains findings from a rapid conflict assessment conducted in the third week of November 2016 in Lashio (Shan State) and North Okkalapa (Greater Yangon), Myanmar. The assessment focused on a rapid analysis of the key driving factors for peace and conflict, and the dynamics and the actors in each of the target areas. It was conducted as part of Search for Common Ground’s (Search) 12-month “Let’s Think, Let’s Change: Promoting Diversity through Popular Culture” project, aimed at addressing rumors that contribute to an enabling environment for violence in Myanmar. The report includes a relevant literature review, however, its main focus is on the primary data generated by the assessment, which relied on Search’s conflict scan approach.

The rapid assessment – conducted to inform the ongoing project - was led by an external consultant with key project staff from Search, including the Project Manager and DM&E Coordinator. In addition, key staff from partner organisations at research locations were involved in the selection of target interviewees and the implementation of the research due to their knowledge of the context and local networks. In total, 16 key informants interviews and 12 focus group discussions were held. Key informants included religious leaders from Buddhist and Muslims communities, community leaders, teachers, lawyers, doctors and political leaders. Focus group discussions were held for youth and guardians. While all attempts were made to reach the widest range of respondents, the majority were Buddhist.
In Myanmar, armed conflict between central government forces - the Tatmadaw - and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) is well-documented, with its history tracing back to the politics before and after independence. Inter-communal conflict, while not new – the country's modern history is punctuated with various riots and protests against Muslims and people of Indian and Chinese ancestry - has re-emerged as an important governance challenge in step with the political transformation of the country, which began in 2011. Decades of policies enacted to protect the Burman Buddhist identity – i.e. the so-called national identity – have resulted in the institutionalised discrimination of those whose identity does not conform to the desired norm.

Lashio is the largest town in Shan State. It is home to 323,405 people, 209,137 of whom are between 15-64 years of age. Buddhist and Muslim Shans, the Wa, Ta-aung, Chinese and Burman peoples, amongst others, live in Lashio, an area which saw anti-Muslim riots in 2013 when a mosque, an orphanage, and Muslim-owned shops were burnt. The city hosts migrant workers from central Myanmar and other parts of Shan State, as well as internally displaced persons due to armed conflict between EAGs and the Tatmadaw. In addition, Lashio is the center of the Tatmadaw's North-East Command - its main base in Northern Shan State – resulting in a large army population. In 2015, Ma Ba Tha a Buddhist Nationalist Organisation with offices in Naung Pain, a town on the road from Lashio to Mandalay and where the population is predominantly Muslim, had some 5000 members in Lashio alone.

North Okkalapa is a township comprising 19 wards. Built in 1959 as a satellite city to Yangon, it was integrated into Yangon municipality after 1962. Today, it is home to 333,293 people, 242,616 of whom are between 15-64 years of age. In 2007, many of the townships’ monasteries were raided and monks were arrested in retaliation for anti-government protests called the 'Saffron Revolution'. On July 2, 2013, in recognition of inter-religious conflicts threatening rural and urban centres in Myanmar, Buddhists, Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders in the township's Ward 1 organized a 'Peace and Unity for all Religious Groups of North Okkalapa Township' Meeting1. The rapid assessment was unable to confirm whether these meetings continue. The rapid assessment was also unable to cover all 19 wards of the North Okkalapa Township. Unless specified otherwise, the majority of findings in this report come from Ward 2, where the local partner of Search for Common Ground has offices, and where the majority of the population is Buddhist.

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FORCES AGAINST PEACE

• **The lack of public spaces where people can be away from work, duty, and family**

  In Lashio and North Okkalapa, the lack of sidewalks, sporting grounds for both women and men, parks, squares and related public spaces where people can enjoy free time without having to pay are almost non-existent. People spend time at gendered and ritualised spaces such as teashops, religious facilities or the stretch of the street before their homes. As a result people have limited contact with people outside of their immediate community and are exposed to a very limited range of views and behaviours.

• **The lack of non-religious, non-charitable community-based activities for young people**

  The majority of respondents involved in community activities indicated that those were predominantly blood donations or fundraising either to help one’s own community in religious celebrations or rites or to help another community’s poor members. Such activities, while well-intentioned, remain religious and charitable in nature, and do not shift focus from religion to common interest or help to expose people to alternative views and perspectives.

• **Institutionalised discrimination**

  The policies of ‘Burmanisation’ dating back to the 1960s have resulted in non-Burman/Buddhist people born and raised in Myanmar facing routine discrimination when applying for identity cards, higher education or jobs. The non-Burman/Buddhist communities, in particular the Muslim community, continue to face institutionalised discrimination that prevents them from accessing basic services, denies them basic civic rights and reinforces dividing lines.

• **Discriminatory reporting practices by the media**

  Crime reporting is on the rise and popular with the public in Myanmar. This has created a lot of fear in the communities that are convinced that crime is on the rise. The media commonly reports the identities of alleged criminals, focusing on their religion and ‘origins’, thereby creating a narrative where certain crimes, like rape, are associated with a specific group of people, typically Muslims, rather than the individual accused of committing it.

• **Social media**

  The use of social media, especially the sharing of information on Facebook, is driven by the need to share one’s feelings or thoughts, which cannot always be expressed in person. When shared online, local matters become regional or national and people feel justified in their thinking when they find support from others on the Internet.
FORCES FOR PEACE

• People’s ability to form friendships and relationships with people from different socio-cultural or religious communities

People are able to forge friendships and mutually beneficial relationships with people beyond their group/community. It would appear that differences encountered through day to day interactions and in small doses can be tolerated and even respected because they are non-threatening.

• The history of co-existence and resulting community ties

While further research is needed to understand the root and contributing factors in those cases, there are examples of communities where people can see beyond differences even in times of hardship.

• People’s desire for peace

People from across dividing lines share a common desire for peace, which they described as a life of opportunity and plenty, free of discrimination, fear and insecurity.

• Ability to read between the lines

The assessment found that people are wary of rumours. Today, the proliferation of various types of media sources and the spread of social media have oversaturated the market for credulity. In both Lashio and North Okkalapa, the respondents indicated that they had difficulty trusting private media - apart from the Democratic Voice of Burma - and many indicated that they trust state media, especially MRTV1, more than other outlets.

ACTORS

• Ma Ba Tha

Ma Ba Tha is a Buddhist Nationalist Organisation that is known for its anti-Muslim platform. The recruitment and crowd-raising methods of Ma Ba Tha include paying poor people to attend rallies. Poor areas of Lashio and most of North Okkalapa – with their communities of internally displaced and marginalised people – are vulnerable to Ma Ba Tha’s tactics and incendiary speech, resulting in the deepening of dividing lines.

• Parents

Parents are key influencers in both the target communities. The majority of the respondents mentioned their parents as an authority when it came to news verification, rumour checking, and decision making. The majority of the young said they revert to their parents with any questions. While parents are understood to be “keeping children out of trouble”, their overbearing manner impacts youth’s ability to take initiative and deeply influences their attitudes and perspectives.

• Local authorities

Local authorities play an important role in preventing minor conflicts from escalating. Unresolved grievances among neighbours and community members create a justice void, which is an obstacle to peace. Disputes, which appear innocuous on the surface, can turn into serious inter-communal cases.

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1 It is possible that many respondents indicated MRTV as their trusted media source because they knew that Search is working with MRTV on youth programming. Another reason, however, is that MRTV is free and easily accessible. What is more, people appear to have re-gained some trust in public media, following the various media reforms, which began under the government of Thein Sein (2011-2016), and the elections, which brought the NLD to power.
RECOMMENDATIONS

“Let’s Think, Let’s Change: Promoting Diversity through Popular Culture” project

• Design programming that targets both young people and their parents. Rather than ‘youth’ activities, ‘family’ activities should be designed bearing in mind the constraints that parents may face – e.g. gender roles, professional obligations.

• Raise awareness of relevant discriminatory policies and their effects on those who do not conform to the Burman/Buddhist identity norm.

• Engage the public in a conversation about the need for public spaces where youth from various communities can come together in play and creative activities.

• Explore the meaning of peace, the process of peacebuilding and the various manifestations of peaceful societies around the world to help people challenge and broaden their definition of peace and realise their role in building a peaceful society.

Donor Community

• Programming that fosters trust between communities and local authorities, including the ward representatives and the police, could be a welcome contribution to transforming conflict dynamics in target areas, potentially reducing people’s reliance on religious authorities in some cases. The first activities should be useful and focus on practical skills, like first aid training for wardens and community members, helping to build relationships before launching activities focused on discussions and comprise, which require trust.

• The lack of consistency in state media reporting, as indicated by respondents in the assessment, undermines people’s faith in the broadcaster’s intentions and ability to deliver quality reporting. This issue could be raised during the training of media professionals with the aim of setting a ‘gold standard’ for reporting.

• Trainings that address discriminatory reporting practices, especially those identifying individuals by their names, religion and/or ethnicity. Victims and suspected perpetrators need to be addressed during ethics training for Myanmar journalists and social media users.

• More research into the dynamics between Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus as well as less numerous denominations is needed for a better understanding of the intersection between religion, ethnicity, gender, and class.
INTRODUCTION

The report contains findings from a rapid conflict assessment, which was conducted in the third week of November 2016 in Lashio (Shan State) and North Okkalapa (Greater Yangon). The assessment, which focused on a rapid analysis of the key driving factors for peace and conflict, and the dynamics and the actors in each of the target areas, was conducted as part of the 12-month “Let’s Think, Let’s Change: Promoting Diversity through Popular Culture” project, aimed at addressing rumors that contribute to an enabling environment for violence in Myanmar. Funded by the Peace Support Fund, the project combines community-based work led by youth leaders with a multi-media campaign, television public service announcements (PSAs), and a radio talk show in collaboration with Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) - Myanmar’s state-owned and most widely accessible television and radio stations.

In fulfillment of the project goal’s overall objective, which is to promote the acceptance of diversity as a social norm in Myanmar and to reduce enabling environments for inter-communal violence and public unrest, Search partnered with MRTV to create a 12-epidose radio talk-show, which engages national celebrities and local communities, highlighting themes and stories that explore the impact of negative stereotyping with the aim of encouraging listeners to question and challenge rumours and negative biases that prevail in society. Findings from the rapid conflict assessment build upon Search’s learning and analysis in six ethnic states and two divisions country-wide, and across three large inter-related projects, and were fed into the talk-show content development to ensure relevance.
In Myanmar, armed conflict between central government forces - the Tatmadaw - and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) is well-documented. The root causes may be found in the colonial period, events leading up to independence – such as the 1947 Panglong Conference - and events following Myanmar’s independence in 1948. Emerging as a democratic and federal ‘nation-state’ in 1948, Myanmar (then known as Burma) became a one-party state in 1962 after General Ne Win took power in a military coup that abolished the federal system and inaugurated “the Burmese Way to Socialism”[1]. Despite the economy undergoing reform in the early 1970s with some of those responsible for promoting rigid state control being moved aside, what followed were decades of military rule, discrimination against non-Burmans, insurgencies, and the suppression and persecution of political opposition and movements.

Inter-communal conflict, while not new[2], emerged as an important governance challenge during the political transformation of the country, which began in 2011 under President Thein Sein. Decades of policies enacted to protect the Burman Buddhist identity – i.e. the national identity – have resulted not only in the institutionalised discrimination of those whose identity does not conform to the desired norm but also in their demonisation. In an article on ethnicity and Burman privilege in Myanmar, Matthew Walton argued that such policies resulted in ‘Burman-ness [becoming] a form of institutionalised dominance similar to Whiteness’ and that ‘the inability of Burmans to recognise this privilege and to actively work against it inhibits efforts to forge ethnic unity in Myanmar’[3]. Indeed, research has shown that changes

brought about since 2011 intensified ‘the desire to protect the Burmese Buddhist identity’.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) argues that President Thein Sein’s government ‘had considerable early success towards the peace process, agreeing on bilateral ceasefire agreements with fifteen armed groups between 2011 and 2013, generating a conversation towards a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)’. The initially enthusiastic discussions stalled when concerns about inclusivity arose, and on October 15, 2015 eight of the original 18 ethnic armed groups signed the NCA leading to tensions between signatories and non-signatories.

During his term, his government received mixed reviews with some criticising it for ‘its brutal military offensive against the Kachin rebels in northern Burma’ and for ‘failing to protect Muslim minorities during waves of attacks by Buddhist mobs in western and central Burma that have occurred several times since June 2012’. At the end of his term, one activist said that ‘all the good things he did in the first two years were overshadowed by the bad things that followed later’ and Human Rights Watch stated that despite his achievements ‘his legacy will be permanently tarnished by his government’s active undermining of fundamental rights and freedoms [...] the continued crackdown on activists [...] and the systematic persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine’.

The NLD-led government took power on March 30, 2016. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who is barred from the presidency by the 2008 Constitution’s article 59 (f), assumed the role of the State Councilor and reportedly made peace her priority. The ICG argued that by then ‘the peace process essentially was in stasis [...] meanwhile the situation on the ground remained volatile, with fighting continuing to break out sporadically, and often unexpectedly, in many different parts of the country’. Since her term as State Councillor began, she has come under frequent criticism for her handling of the peace process - starting with the less than inclusive 21st century Panglong Conference in 2016 and - her apparent silence on the human rights abuses and alleged genocide in Rakhine State.

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4 Rachel Blomquist, Ethno-Demographic Dynamics of the Rohingya-Buddhist Conflict, Fall 2016, Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs, pp. 95-117, p. 96; see also Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, National- ism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar, Honolulu: East-West Center, 2014
5 The International Crisis Group has argued that the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement – the first step towards a peace agreement – is neither a ‘classic ceasefire agreement’ nor ‘a full political agreement’ and that ‘This hybrid status reflects its genesis, the diverse actors and priorities around the table and political constraints’. See: International Crisis Group, Myanmar’s Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue, Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°149, Yangon/Brussels, 19 October 2016
7 Swe Win, As Thein Sein exits, his reform legacy gains mixed reviews, Myanmar Now, April 3, 2016, accessed on January 10, 2017 at http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/ch/index/id=d3018704-34c4-4169-8677-4e331e2795fo
8 It is widely believed that article 59 (f), which prevents anyone with family members who hold foreign citizenship from assuming the presidency was written to prevent Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was married to a British national and whose two sons are British citizens, from ever becoming president of Myanmar.

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND
YOUTH

In Myanmar, there is no consistent definition of youth. On the one hand, the 1993 Child Law, which is currently under review, defines youth as those between 16-18 years of age. On the other hand, in November 2016, The Myanmar Youth Forum, which together with the National Youth Congress and the National Youth Network claims to represent all youth in Myanmar, defined ‘youths as people between the ages of 16 and 35’⁶. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement began developing the National Youth Policy in April 2016 with the contribution of youth representatives as per the agreement that was reached during the 4th Myanmar Youth Forum meeting in Sagaing Division in June 2016.

The lack of consensus on the definition of youth exists on the international level too. The 2015 United Nations Security Council resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security, which represents ‘an acknowledgment of the urgent need to engage young peacebuilders in promoting peace and countering extremism’ defines youth as those who fall into the 18-29 age range. This definition differs from those of the General Assembly (A/RES/50/81 and A/RES/56/117), which consider youth to be between 15-24 years. For the purpose of this project, the definition of youth encompasses 18-35 year olds.

The main challenges faced by Myanmar youth are poverty, unemployment and a lack of affordable and adequate education⁴. These challenges, especially those stemming from poverty, hinder youth’s ability to participate fully in the development of their communities and beyond. The obligation to help their families financially and the restrictive social norms, like those which do not allow young women to leave their homes in the evening until they reach a certain age, are formidable obstacles to youth’s public engagement⁵.

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This does not mean that young people do not want to be involved in matters affecting their communities and country, especially the peace process. Indeed, since boycotting the “Rangoon University Act” in 1920, university students have long been at the heart of political movements in playing a role in all major political events in [Myanmar]⁶. Yet more recently, the country’s youth have played only a marginal part in the peace process despite having made repeated calls for a more prominent role in the peace talks.⁷ A significant initiative in this area was undertaken by the Ethnic Youth Conference, which brought together some 800 youth delegates in August 2016⁸. The summit resulted in the creation of the Ethnic Youth Alliance, whose aim was to have youth voices considered at the 21st Century Panglong Conference.

The majority of organisations working towards peace in Myanmar, however, tend to focus on civil society’s role in the process and civil society’s duty to include youth in their peace-related activities.⁹ Research efforts to explore the role of youth in peacebuilding are underway, exploring a variety of issues ranging from peace education for youth to the latter’s ability to contribute to peace¹⁰. The United Nations Peacebuilding Fund has shown consideration for youth in its support of the Myanmar’s peace process. Between 2013-2015, the Fund provided $1.5 million to a project that contributed to the Myanmar peacebuilding process in Mon and Kayin states by engaging women, youth and media as critical stakeholders for peace¹¹. In 2016, the Fund launched its first Youth Promotion Initiative (YPI), to demonstrate ‘its commitment to inclusive peacebuilding, recognizing the role of young people as central to the relevance and effectiveness of PBF’s overall peacebuilding portfolio’¹². Myanmar was one of the 15 countries eligible for youth-inclusive peacebuilding funding.

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¹¹ In late 2016, The Peace Support Fund commissioned research ‘to establish a deeper understanding of the roles of youth in Myanmar’s peace process to date, and to identify and analyse the barriers and opportunities for youth engagement in the peace process and peacebuilding in Myanmar, in order to create a youth, peace and security framework’.
MEDIA

The government of Thein Sein made reforms that transformed Myanmar media. The most significant reforms included ‘the 2014 Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law (PPEL), which officially abolished prior censorship and allowed newspapers to become editorially independent from the state; the Broadcasting Law of 2015, which enables private, public and community media to flourish, [and the 2015] establishment of the Myanmar News Media Council’13. In addition to these changes, in 2014, Telenor and Ooredoo entered the telecommunications market, providing access to affordable SIM cards and mobile internet connections.

The results of the media reforms have been mixed. The 2016 Freedom House report on Myanmar ranked the country’s press as ‘not free’. The reasons for this ranking include the fact that ‘the media is deeply polarized along political lines, and the government maintained tight control over the media sector through various methods, including the employment of harsh laws dating to the era of military rule that remains on the books’. In addition, media workers face threats, violence and even death while investigating news, and independent outlets struggle to survive due to the structure of the media market in the country.14

The 2015 Freedom House report on Myanmar ranked the country’s Internet freedom as ‘not free’. The organisation found there to be intimidation of social media users during protests, arrests of internauts whose views were found to be offensive, the rise of religious nationalism and associated hate speech, predominantly aimed at Muslims, and political polarisation – especially in the run-up to the 2015 elections.15

The spread of hate speech on social media in Myanmar garnered a lot of attention in 2016. While ‘the advocacy of hatred based on nationality, race or religion’ has a long history in Myanmar, reaching into colonial times when Indians and Muslims were vilified, and continuing through the decades of military rule, ‘the advent of explosive internet connectivity has meant an unprecedented new reach’.16 According to Jes Pedersen of Phandeeyar – a Myanmar tech community organization – by mid-2016, there were 45 million active SIM subscriptions - up from only 3 million or 4 million in 2014 - and 60% to 80% of those for smartphones17.

Media experts, international and national non-governmental staff and anti-hate speech activists have been quick to blame the spread of hate speech on the public’s ‘low media and information literacy rate’, the lack of a discerning eye and the inability to distinguish fact from fiction.18 Yet, as research around the world has shown – e.g. during the course of the 2016 US elections – personal bias, prejudice and the desire to find confirmation for one’s thinking may be greater drivers of the spread of false and misleading information, rumours and hate speech.19

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METHODOLOGY

The rapid conflict assessment was conducted using a qualitative methodology comprised of desk and field work. It relied on Search’s conflict scan approach. This approach prioritises the gathering of information about what has happened in the last three months in a given location, builds upon other deeper analyses, and generates information which allows program staff and partners to design conflict-sensitive programmes and activities with recent conflict dynamics in mind.\(^{20}\)

Desk work included the review of relevant writings on Myanmar’s political context, the role of youth in peacebuilding, the state of media and the presence of hate speech in social media, and the design of question guides for semi-structured key respondent interviews (KRIIs). Field work included 16 key informants’ interviews (KIIIs) with persons representing social and/or political authority in their community such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ward administrators. The majority of them were Buddhist. The work also included 12 focus group discussions with Buddhist and Muslim youth and parents and guardians.\(^ {21}\)

The fieldwork was managed by an external consultant, who designed the methodology and was supported by Search’s Project Manager, Project Officer, and DM&E Coordinator as well as by local partners. In North Okkalapa, the external consultant conducted all the interviews and focus groups discussions. In Lashio, they were led by Search staff. At both locations, Search’s partners were instrumental in the selection of respondents and the provision of safe spaces for interviews and focus group discussions. Interview protocol sheets, which aimed to capture interview dynamics were used to record certain details, like the number of persons present during an interview. Only hand-written notes were taken during KIIIs and FGDs to ensure candour.

Specific attention was paid to the way in which questions about conflict were asked - with tact, in a non-threatening manner and in consideration of who the respondent was and the sort of risk she may have been exposed to by participating in the research, both risk from others and possible risk of re-traumatisation if the respondent had been a victim of any violence as a result of armed or inter-communal conflict.

Partners who assisted Search in the identification of enumerators and respondents were trained on the basics of qualitative research, including ethics, logistics, and sampling. Two non-probability sampling methods were used in this assessment.

Snowballing was used to identify respondents for KIIIs. This technique is useful in accessing relevant people who may not be known outside their communities and facilitates reaching people who may not otherwise agree to an interview. The bias associated with this method is that people may recommend friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who share the same ideas and opinions, which can lead to quicker saturation.

Volunteer sampling was used to select participants for FGDs. Volunteer sampling ensures that focus group discussion participants are well informed about the research topic and methods before making a decision to participate. The bias associated with this method, mostly problematic in large opinion poll studies, is that voluntary participants may have a pre-established opinion or interest in the research topic, and they want to share it publicly. Their views do not necessarily represent those who choose not to participate in the FGDs.

\(^{20}\) See Search for Common Ground, Conflict Scans – Guidance Note for the Conflict Scan Methodology: A Quick and Actionable Approach to Conflict Analysis, March 2015

\(^ {21}\) The assessment was conducted alongside a survey, the objective of which was to gauge young people’s media consumption patterns and habits, i.e. TV viewership, radio listenership and social media usage
RESEARCH LOCATIONS

The criteria for choosing the research locations - Lashio and North Okkalapa - were identified through Search’s and MIDO’s research in the Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence Project Inception Report in January 2016. These criteria included divided ethnic, religious and social communities disposed to trust deficit, negative stereotyping of the ‘other’ and hate speech.

Lashio is the largest town in Shan State. It is home to 323,405 people, 209,137 of whom are between 15-64 years of age. Buddhist and Muslim Shans, the Wa, Ta-Aung, Chinese and Burman peoples live in Lashio, which saw anti-Muslim riots in 2013 when a mosque, an orphanage, and shops were burnt. The city hosts migrant workers from central Myanmar and other parts of Shan State, as well as internally displaced persons due to armed conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw. In addition, Lashio is the center of the Tatmadaw’s North-East Command - its main base in Northern Shan State — resulting in a large army population. In 2015, Ma Ba Tha, with offices in Naung Pain, a town on the road from Lashio to Mandalay and where the population is predominantly Muslim, had some 5000 members in Lahsio alone.

On November 20, 2016, while Search staff were conducting the rapid conflict assessment in Lashio, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Arakan Army (AA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – otherwise known as the Northern Alliance - attacked the Tatmadaw in Northern Shan State. All four are non-signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Military helicopters were spotted over Lashio and fears over army attacks increased, becoming the dominant concern expressed by the interlocutors.

North Okkalapa is a township comprising 19 wards — i.e. administrative divisions. Built in 1959 as a satellite city to expanding Yangon, it was integrated into Yangon municipality after 1962. Today, it is home to 333,293 people, 242,616 of whom are between 15-64 years of age. In 2007, many of the townships’ monasteries were raided and monks were arrested in retaliation for anti-government protests during what became known as the ‘Saffron Revolution’. On July 2, 2013, in recognition of inter-religious conflicts threatening rural and urban centres in Myanmar, Buddhists, Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders in the township’s Ward 1 held the ‘Peace and Unity for all Religious Groups of North Okkalapa Township Meeting’. It is not clear whether these meetings continue. Unless stated otherwise, research findings in this report come from Ward 2, which has a population of 28,571 and where the majority of the population is Buddhist. There are no mosques in Ward 2. The closest mosque is in Ward 1.

In May 2013, in Lashio, following a riot between Buddhists and Muslims, Buddhist ‘mobs’ reportedly set on fire Muslims homes and engaged in indiscriminate killings. In addition, ‘Buddhist gangs armed with knives and petrol bombs attacked the major mosque and burnt it down’. The violence appears to have been orchestrated — it was not generalized — especially given the town’s lack of inter-communal conflict in the past. The 7 Daily News reports that the Buddhist monk U Withuta sheltered several hundred Muslims in his monastery despite the pleas of apparent assailants stationed outside.
LIMITATIONS

The rapid conflict assessment experienced a number of limitations. First and foremost, the time available for the assessment was short, which increased Search's reliance on local partners. In Lashio, where Search had worked previously and was known in the community, this was less problematic. In North Okkalapa, however, where Search is only beginning to work and where high levels of mistrust between community members and perceived outsiders exist, the local partner's presence and network were necessary to enable the fieldwork. At both locations, the local partners' assistance in the selection of respondents ensured feasibility and efficiency.

Their assistance, however, also introduced a bias into the process whereby selection of research participants was done by relying predominantly on the partners' established network members. This resulted in the majority of interlocutors being Buddhist and/or from trusted circles, reducing the scope of the research. What is more, conflict is a sensitive issue and years of surveillance have rendered people apt at self-censorship, especially people who feel marginalised or threatened, such as Muslims.

In Myanmar, evidence-based policy making is in its early stages while years of governmental control and spying on citizenry has instilled distrust of people asking questions, especially those related to government or anything political. A common way in which people 'protect' themselves from researchers is by recording their own interviews – as was the case with one politically-active respondent in North Okkalapa. Members of Ma Ba Tha – a Buddhist association led by U Wirathu, well known for hate speech against Muslims in particular, are known to photograph and/or video record interviews and discussions in which they participate.

Additionally, young people in Myanmar are not encouraged to express their opinions. In schools, where rote learning is common26, students are expected to receive lectures, memorise lessons and are discouraged from asking questions27. At home, obedience and respect for one's elders preclude discussion. What is more, having an “important opinion” is associated with being well-educated - that is “not ignorant”, and people without a higher education, or in a socially inferior position do not feel that their opinion counts. Indeed, many respondents labelled the poor, the displaced, and the uneducated as “ignorant” and therefore part of the reason for conflict or social unease. The idea that an educated person – i.e. a person with high academic qualifications, regardless of what they are, can be wrong, bigoted or racist was not entertained. The fear of appearing “ignorant” and therefore aligned with those responsible for society’s ills is real and impacts what and how people say what matters to them. Given the prevailing norms that discourage young people from openly expressing their opinions, it is likely that some perspectives were not shared.

The findings in the current report are a partial rather than an exhaustive interpretation of conflict dynamics in the studied locations. The short time frame, relative lack of trust between the researchers and the communities, limited focus, language interpretation during the interviews, the translation of interview notes and the researchers' personal and professional experiences among other factors all impacted the amount and quality of collected data as well as the subsequent analysis of it.


27 It is important to note that between 2012-14 the Government undertook a Comprehensive Education Sector Review. This resulted in numerous reforms including the extension of the Child Centred Approach (CCA) to all townships to improve thinking skills and creative skills of each student. The reforms are ongoing. See: http://www.cesrmn.org
FINDINGS

The findings in following section are based on the analysis of information provided by Buddhist and Muslim respondents. The relatively low number of Christians and Hindus in the studied locations and the short nature of the assessment made it difficult to reach those groups. What is more, Christians and Hindus were not victims of inter-religious violence in Lashio, and are not at the centre of religious tensions, unlike the Muslims28.

The feeling of insecurity, linked to local, regional and national incidents of crime and armed violence, was found to permeate social relations in both Lashio and North Okkalapa. In Lashio, the 2013 violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, the current armed conflict in the vicinity of the city, and drug abuse emerged as the main drivers of distrust and fear. In Yangon's North Okkalapa, drug abuse, violent crime, gender-based violence - especially the rape of girls - and poverty resulting in internal displacement emerged as the main issues of concern. In North Okkalapa, displaced people, mostly poor Buddhists from the area displaced from their homes due to speculation, and immigrants, are considered more problematic than known people from the area who are “different”. At both locations, religion did not emerge as the only dividing force.

Drug abuse, especially in Lashio, was listed as one of the most serious social ills affecting young people. Lack of opportunities, poverty, the availability of cheap drugs, discontent and malaise were all listed as contributing to rampant drug abuse. Respondents in both locations worried that drugs rendered youth aggressive, prone to negative influence, and potential instruments for violence. Drugs, which are understood to inflict resignation and cause unpredictable behaviour are also seen to represent young people's moral failure. The respondents did not express compassion for drug addicts and did not speak of any initiatives to help youngsters avoid drugs - the onus appears to be on the parents. Indeed, stigmatisation is high, which may push drug users to the margins of their communities, rendering them vulnerable to violent ideologies and other dangers.

Conflict is a difficult topic to discuss since it requires people to examine their thoughts and actions. In both locations, people found it easier to speak of conflict in non-direct terms that did not implicate them in any way. While in Lashio the presence of armed conflict makes the discussion inevitable, as the inter-religious violence of 2013 is understood to have destroyed trust and social ties, but a deeper analysis of why that was possible - beyond pointing the finger at external actors - does not appear to be taking place. In North Okkalapa, the conflict in Rakhine State is used as an example of problems, or the probability of problems between Buddhists and Muslims although interlocutors were quick to state that such problems did not exist in North Okkalapa.

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28 The differentiation between religion and ethnicity is not necessarily applicable to the Muslims in Myanmar, yet the country's Muslims have many differing ancestries, which determine or impede their ability to claim belonging. It is Muslims of South Asian origins – Indian, Pakistani and Bengali - whose ancestors migrated to Myanmar during colonial times who are the main target of bigotry and racism. Muslims who trace their ancestry to the arrival of the Arabs centuries ago may enjoy a certain level of acceptance in society, however, even they find that their religion precludes them from being fully accepted into Myanmar's society/ies. One Muslim interlocutor who enjoys high esteem in his community in North Okkalapa due to his ancestry, profession and political dedication spoke of his son, who despite being an accomplished pianist was asked to renounce his religion if he were to represent Myanmar in an international musical event.
FORCES AGAINST PEACE

THE LACK OF NON-RELIGIOUS, NON-CHARITABLE COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Religious institutions, Buddhist or Muslim, appear to dominate people's lives in Lashio and North Okkalapa, and religion - and its tenacious link to national identity and citizenship - is never far from people's minds. The majority of activities in which youth participate are sanctioned by religious authorities or considered safe and humanitarian, e.g. blood donations and free funeral services. Buddhists gave examples of collecting donations or fundraising either to help one's own community in religious celebrations or rites or to help another community's poor members (e.g. Muslims collecting money to fund novice celebrations of poor Buddhist boys). Such activities, while well-intentioned, remain religious and charitable in nature, and do not shift the public's focus from religion to common interest.

Schools do not offer an adequate platform for youth from different backgrounds to meaningfully interact with one another. Their main focus is to impart state-sanctioned knowledge. Teachers in government schools, who are notoriously underpaid29, coerce students into paying for private tutoring, usually at their homes by withholding elements of the curriculum30. This puts poorer students at a disadvantage and results in many not being able to complete their middle or high school educations. It also forces students into a cycle of perpetual study, resulting in students having little time for anything else. Teachers, then, exert a lot of power over their students but there is little proof of them taking an active interest in their students and their non-scholastic interests. Rather than being places of learning and change including civic education, schools maintain the social status quo, which includes institutionalised discrimination against minority students. In addition, state schools impose an acceptable version of national identity onto its students, starting with a Buddhist name31.

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT GRIEVANCES BECAUSE I AM TEACHER AND ALMOST ALWAYS AT SCHOOL.
FEMALE TEACHER, LASHIO

I ONLY TEACH MY STUDENTS. WE CANNOT TALK ABOUT WHAT IS NOT IN THE BOOK. THERE IS NOT TIME AND THE STUDENTS NEED TO STUDY FOR EXAMS.
FEMALE TEACHER, NORTH OKKALAPA

29 Research by the Credit Union Foundation Australia (CUFA) shows that government school teachers earn around USD 90 a month, often struggling to make ends meet. In monastic schools, where teachers rely on community donations, teachers are often unpaid, underpaid or in need of loans. See: CUFA: Myanmar Teachers’ Project, 2014, accessed on January 12, 2017 at https://www.cufa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Myanmar-Teacher-Project-Small-Size.pdf


31 Abu Nusaybah, My name is Mohammed but now I have a Buddhist name, Human Aid, August 21, 2014, accessed on January 9, 2017 at https://www.human-aid.org/my-name-is-mohammed-but-now-i-have-a-buddhist-name/; anecdotal evidence suggests that the adoption of a Buddhist (Burman) name is common among all minorities and it is common to meet people with various names, e.g. a Christian Kachin may have a Kachin name, a Christian name and a Burman/Buddhist name.
THE LACK OF PUBLIC SPACES WHERE PEOPLE CAN BE AWAY FROM WORK, DUTY, AND FAMILY

In Lashio and North Okkalapa, the lack of sidewalks, sporting grounds for both women and men, like parks, squares and related public spaces where people can be away from work, duty, and family without having to pay are almost non-existent. People spend time at gendered and ritualised spaces such as tea-shops, religious facilities or the stretch of the street before their homes. This results in people remaining close to the same people and enhances their ability to influence their views and behaviours. Religious and ethnic identities are solidified by such spatial constraints.

I DON’T HAVE THE FREE TIME BECAUSE I NEED TO STUDY AND HELP MY FAMILY BUT EVEN IF I HAVE THE TIME I CANNOT GO ANYWHERE BECAUSE IT IS NOT SAFE AND SOMETIMES THE WEATHER IS HOT.
Buddhist woman, interview, North Okkalapa

“IT IS NOT IN OUR TRADITION TO GO FAR FROM OUR HOME. IT IS NOT SAFE BUT ALSO I HAVE TO LOOK AFTER MY BUSINESS SO I NEED TO STAY CLOSE EVEN WHEN I CLOSE MY SHOP. SO I RELAX WITH MY FRIEND IN MY SHOP AT DAY OR AFTERNOON WHEN IT IS NOT BUSY”.
A Muslim bike repair man, interview, North Okkalapa

When asked where people relaxed and what they did, most respondents said ‘at home’ watching TV, talking to family or friends, or using FB. Young men said they went to teashops to discuss with their friends or to watch sports on TV. Women, of all ages and backgrounds, said they could go to the market or to run an errand, usually accompanied by other women and during that time they could talk. Their gender roles and associated chores, however, made it difficult to find idle time.

“MY CHILDREN- I HAVE THREE - CAN PLAY IN THE STREET BUT NO ONE TEACH THEM ANY GAME, ONLY THEY PLAY AND PROTECT EACH OTHER. WE ARE WORRIED BECAUSE OF THE CARS SO SOMETIMES WE WATCH FROM THE WINDOW AND THEY NEED TO STAY NEAR TO HOME AND CANNOT PLAY WITH PEOPLE WE DON’T KNOW.”
A Muslim woman/mother, interview, North Okkalapa

Research has shown that investing in public spaces can create ‘prosperous, livable, and equitable cities in developing countries.’ This is especially the case in places where people live in cramped spaces with limited facilities and access to greenery. The US-based Project for Public Spaces, which has pioneered the process of ‘place-making’ - ‘the art and science of developing public spaces that attract people, build community by bringing people together, and create local identity’ - has identified area attachment, community-building, economic growth and environmentalism as the main trends emerging from public spacing making.

In North Okkalapa, the ward authorities appear to be aware of the lack of such spaces in their area, especially for youth and indicated that plans had been made for the construction of sporting facilities on public land. Issues surrounding land ownership, speculation, and possibly the lack of political will at higher levels, have stalled this project, which is estimated to cost USD 200,000.

33 Project for Public Spaces, Why Public Places are the Key to Transforming our Communities, May 13, 2014, accessed on November 28, 2016 at https://www.pps.org/blog/why-public-places-are-the-key-to-transforming-our-communities/
34 Project for Public Spaces, Why Public Places are the Key to Transforming our Communities, May 13, 2014, accessed on November 28, 2016 at https://www.pps.org/blog/why-public-places-are-the-key-to-transforming-our-communities/
35 Data derived from an interview with a member of Ward 2 authorities
INSTITUTIONALISED DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination - especially discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities - is a governance tool in Myanmar. It is not something just practiced by unscrupulous individuals. The policies of ‘Burmanisation’ dating back to the 1960s have resulted in people born and raised in Mya Villa Duang Champa Villa Duang Champa nm facing routine discrimination when applying for identity cards, university entrances or jobs.

A number of Muslim respondents spoke of their inability to secure national registration cards (NRCs), which are essential to establishing citizenship, obtaining a passport, being able to graduate from university, travel freely in Myanmar and abroad, and secure jobs.

‘IF YOU DON’T HAVE THE PINK CARD [NRC], LIFE IS VERY DIFFICULT. YOU CANNOT ACHIEVE. BUT TO GET THE CARD IT IS ALSO DIFFICULT AND SOMETIMES YOU CANNOT HAVE IT EVEN IF ANOTHER PERSON IN YOUR FAMILY HAS IT.’

A MUSLIM WOMAN IN AN INTERVIEW IN NORTH OKKALAPA

‘SOMETIMES ON THE BUS I CANNOT SIT BECAUSE I WEAR HEADSCARF. BUT SOMETIMES THE BUS CONDUCTOR IS GOOD AND SAYS EVERYONE PAY THE SAME AND EVERYONE CAN SIT IF THERE IS SPACE OR TO BE FAIR.’

A MUSLIM WOMAN IN A FDG IN NORTH OKKALAPA

In North Okkalapa, Muslim women described being harassed on public transport throughout the city because of their headscarves. A young man told of his inability to find a job because many companies have the unwritten or expressed policy - sometimes dictated by shareholders - which prohibits the hiring of Muslims. One Muslim respondent spoke of the ridicule that Muslim men experience, like being called “brides” due to their religious dress. One Muslim woman spoke of her religion as an impediment to a political career, upon which she would like to embark.

Buddhist women and men did not speak of discrimination in the same terms as Muslims. In both locations, Buddhist women felt their movements and ability to engage in political or social activities is curtailed by their gender, e.g. unmarried women are seldom allowed to leave the house in the evening without a relative, preferably male, companion. Authorities – national and regional – are also perceived as an obstacle to one’s ambitions, as they are seen to enforce traditional gender roles.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities, like the Shan, on ethnic rather than religious grounds exists, however, the current assessment did not delve into its dynamics. The armed conflict taking place between ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw in Northern Shan State is partly a result of this decades-long discrimination, which has left ethnic populations, such as the Shan, aggrieved.


See Research Limitations

Minority Rights Organisation, Myanmar/Burma Shan Profile, accessed on November 28, 2016 at http://minorityrights.org/minorities/shan/
DISCRIMINATORY REPORTING PRACTICES BY THE MEDIA

Discriminatory reporting practices in the media were identified as problematic. The respondents did not indicate whether private or public media were more likely to engage in problematic practices and showed little knowledge of international media sources. In Myanmar, where legal procedures are not aligned with internationally sanctioned standards - e.g. the right to petition for a writ of habeas corpus39 exists on paper but not in practice - many alleged criminals’ identities are released by the media, especially their religion and/or ethnicity in cases of sexual crimes. Such practices encourage new and reinforce existing stereotypes about entire religious and/or ethnic communities. Muslim respondents in North Okkalapa pointed out that this practice affects Muslims the most and noted that outbreaks of violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012, followed by Meikthila and Lashio in 2013, Mandalay 2014 and Bago in 2016 were all linked to the spread of information - which in some cases turned out to be false - about crimes or disputes involving Muslims perpetrators.

The majority of respondents in Lashio and North Okkalapa revealed a troubled attitude towards traditional media, i.e. newspapers and TV. While many accused private newspapers of spreading rumours, including online outlets, numerous respondents also said that media “corrected rumours”. This troubled attitude revealed itself further when numerous respondents said they trusted state media40 - formerly vilified - over private media due to the latter’s presumed agenda. State television, especially MRTV, was regarded as the most trustworthy of news services41, followed by former exile/private media outlet DVB media (especially among Muslim interlocutors, presumably for its broad, non-politicised coverage of inter-communal violence and conflict in Rakhine), BBC radio service and the newspapers 7 Daily, The Voice and Eleven Daily.

ONE THING IS THAT IT WOULD BE BETTER IF WE HAVE STATE OWNED MEDIA. IF ASKED PEOPLE FROM MRTV-4 TO TAKE NEWS, YOU HAVE TO PAY MONEY. I WANT STATE OWNED MEDIA SPREAD NEWS WITHOUT TAKING MONEY.  
CSO LEADER, LASHIO

‘I BELIEVE MRTV NEWS, BUT THEY GIVE IMPORTANT NEWS ONCE AND THEY DO NOT FOLLOW UP, SO IT IS HARD TO KEEP UP.’  
WOMAN (MOTHER) IN FGD, NORTH OKKALAPA

In North Okkalapa, respondents identified the lack of consistency, bad timing, and dispersion of important news as the main problems of media outlets. During one discussion, Muslim women stated that while state television broadcasts news four times a day, there is the lack of linkages between news stories and no follow-ups on important stories, leaving viewers curious or disappointed. The 6 pm news on MRTV was identified as the best source of information, however, its timing was described as not suitable because most people - especially women - are busy preparing dinner or tending to chores at this time, making it easy to miss this slot, and the news is not broadcast again.

40 The current trust in public media is linked to the political transition in the country. In the past, state media, especially the state newspaper The New Light of Myanmar (today titled The Global New Light of Myanmar) was considered a government’s mouthpiece filled with propaganda.
41 It may be possible that the respondents indicated MRTV as their preferred source of news because they knew that Search for Common Ground was working with MRTV on peace-related programming. It is also possible that the respondents indicated MRTV because it is the most widely available TV and Radio news source, not in the least because it is free.
FORCES FOR PEACE

PEOPLE’S ABILITY TO FORM FRIENDSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS DIVIDING LINES

People’s ability to forge mutually beneficial relationships with individuals beyond their group/community is a practice that can be leveraged and learned from. In North Okkalapa one of the respondents is a well-known Muslim doctor. He is a respected by the community, a medic to the local monks and lay people, a former political prisoner, a recognised patriot and a father of accomplished sons. His nephew was beaten to death during the Meiktila riots in 2013. During his interview, the doctor spoke of his friendships with civil servants, other Buddhist and Muslim political activists, and called for non-violence despite having suffered a family tragedy. He spoke of members of the local community sticking up for him when authorities – in an attempt to find a pretext against his political activism – tried to discredit him by doubting his identity and right to Myanmar citizenship. He enjoys the respect of both Muslim and Buddhist communities and is an active supporter of peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and non-violence.

In another case, a Muslim woman, with a Muslim father and Buddhist mother, spoke of the respect her family and she had enjoyed over the years.

IN MY FAMILY WE ARE MUSLIM AND WE ARE BUDDHIST. MY BROTHERS MARRIED WOMEN OUTSIDE THEIR RELIGION. ONE BROTHER CONVERTED TO BUDDHISM, ANOTHER BROTHER’S WIFE BECAME MUSLIM. THERE IS NO PRESSURE. WE ALL GET ALONG. OUR NEIGHBOURS ALWAYS RESPECT MY FAMILY AND THEY ASK ME QUESTIONS ABOUT MY RELIGION OR WHY MUSLIM WOMEN COVER UP THEIR HEADS AND FACES AND I EXPLAIN TO THEM AND WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER AND IT IS OKAY.
MUSLIM WOMAN, WARD WAI BAR GYI, NORTH OKKALAPA

THE HISTORY OF CO-EXISTENCE AND RESULTING COMMUNITY TIES

One of the most disturbing aspects of the inter-communal violence, which took place in various places in Myanmar during 2012-2014 is that it took place among communities with a history of co-existence. While further research is needed to understand the root and contributing factors in those cases, there are examples of communities where people can see beyond differences even in times of hardship. In one case, a Muslim woman in North Okkalapa spoke of Ward War Bai Gyi, which is comprised of Buddhists and Muslims, who were collectively moved to the Ward from Yangon’s Kamaryut Township in the 1980s following a general fire. While issues exist, such as in the township’s Ward Kagyi where Muslim candle-makers have been ill at ease, the community is known and regarded for its peaceful co-existence through the years. Ways can be found to leverage communities’ history of co-existence to respond to current tensions and lay the foundation for sustained peace.
PEOPLE’S DESIRE FOR PEACE

People from across dividing lines share a desire for peace, which they described as a life of opportunity and plenty, free of discrimination, fear, and insecurity. The difference between respondents in Lashio and North Okkalapa was that in Lashio, people have been exposed to decades of armed conflict and its consequences while in North Okkalapa, where the pro-democratic protests of 1988 and 2007 are now a memory, people have been mostly victims of economic mismanagement, governmental inefficiency, poor infrastructure and other urban ills. People’s shared desire for peace represents a common ground that can be mobilized to bring people from across dividing lines together.

FOR ME PEACE IS WHEN I AM NOT SCARED OF THE GUNS AND THE SOLDIERS COMING. NOW, WE HAVE FEAR THEY WILL COME AND WE HAVE TO STAY QUIET.
BUDDHIST YOUTH, LASHIO

I WISH I CAN GET A GOOD JOB AND HELP FAMILY BUT NOW I AM A MUSLIM AND COMPANIES DON’T WANT TO GIVE MUSLIMS JOBS. SOME COMPANIES HAVE THIS TYPE OF POLICY OR SHAREHOLDERS. THIS IS VERY BAD FOR ME AND I CANNOT BE IN PEACE.
MUSLIM YOUTH, WARD 2, NORTH OKKALAPA

INCREASING AWARENESS OF THE DANGERS OF RUMOURS

The assessment found that people are wary of rumours. In North Okkalapa, FGDs revealed that while gossip is common, especially among families and neighbours, rumours have lost their salience. In the past, due to heavy censorship and the lack of reliable information sources, rumours persisted for months and years and served as cautionary tales, like those about the forced recruitment of boys into the Tatmadaw42.

Today, the proliferation of various types of media sources and the spread of social media have made it harder for people to believe what they see/read. People are aware that text and images can be manipulated, as well as audio-visual files, and that the media outlets might have an interest in spreading one piece of information over another. Indeed, in both Lashio and North Okkalapa, the respondents indicated that they had difficulty trusting private media - apart from DVB - and many indicated that they trusted state media more than they did other outlets, which they thought unprofessional and unethical.

YOU CAN CHANGE THE PHOTOS AND MAKE IT REAL BUT THE VIDEO YOU CANNOT CHANGE. THE TV CANNOT LIE BECAUSE THEY FILM IN REAL TIME AND THEY CANNOT CHANGE WHAT THEY FILM.
BUDDHIST WOMAN, FGD, WARD 2, NORTH OKKALAPA

THERE IS A LOT OF GOSSIP, USUALLY ABOUT CELEBRITY OR POLITICIAN, LIKE THE CHIEF MINISTER OF YANGON WATCH STORY. BUT WHEN PEOPLE DON’T KNOW THEY TALK BUT WHEN THE NEWS IS REAL NO NEED FOR GOSSIP LIKE THAT.
BUDDHIST MAN, FGD, WARD 2, NORTH OKKALAPA

Rumours were said to spread and dissipate quickly. Further, rumours were said to emerge when news was incomplete, inconsistent or particularly damaging to some people. While it may be true that rumours have less salience today than they did in the past, what is important, and what was left unexamined by respondents, is the reason why certain rumours continue to emerge and proliferate.43

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

Intended to inform Search’s ongoing multi-media project *Let’s Think Let’s Change*, aimed at addressing rumours and their contribution to violence, the assessment sought to better understanding how people in each of the project areas gather and share information, including the role of social media.

The assessment found Facebook to be a dominant source and channel of information among the youth in Lashio and North Okkalapa, as it is in other parts of the country. Viber also emerged as a popular platform for chatting and information exchange. Various organisations and government bodies have Viber groups through which they communicate with their members, as is the case with Ward 2 administrators in North Okkalapa.

The FGD participants in both locations showed awareness of the dangers that social media can present especially as it allows people to spread information quickly and in ‘real-time’. The respondents were also aware that information, including images, can be manipulated and that it is necessary to check the veracity of information before believing it, and before sharing it further. When asked how people verified the news, many said they cross-checked information with parents and friends, especially those who were supposedly at a location from which the rumour came. None of the respondents said they checked with the actual source, such as by contacting a media outlet to challenge the information, while some said that they cross-checked the information with other sources, such as a different type of media.

Respondents spoke of some restraint when it came to sharing information that could be untrue. This was particularly true for Muslim respondents who were apprehensive of sharing information about the conflict in Rakhine State for fear of fuelling the violence and of drawing attention to themselves. Indeed, while they spoke of sympathy for victims of the ongoing violence in Rakhine, most were also evasive on the issue and wanted to demarcate themselves from the Rohingya Muslims who are persecuted in Myanmar.

Despite the awareness and restraint demonstrated by some respondents when it came to the sharing of potential news on Facebook - which also emerged as a cheaper and efficient way to reach a larger audience than phoning individuals - the sharing of feelings may be more problematic. Discussions revealed that Facebook allows people to express their feelings, disappointments, and fears while at the same time garnering support for them. What was once a private grievance becomes a public one; what was once a local grievance become a regional or a national one, emboldening other people far and wide.

One example of such a grievance was related to sharing meals with individuals of other religions. Buddhist respondents indicated that in their childhood - when the word of mouth was the information channel of choice - Buddhists would visit Muslim friends’ households and take part in meals. This was not the case when Muslims visited their Buddhist households where they would not eat or drink water, presumably due to religiously-dictated eating practices, which call for Halal meat and forbid the consumption of pork, which is a common ingredient in Buddhist dishes. The Buddhists interpreted this behaviour as a rejection of their hospitality despite knowing that Muslims may be constrained by religious dicta. In the past, such behaviour would be discussed in private or among neighbours without further ado. In the age of Facebook, people are able to express their feelings of offence on Facebook, which then draw attention and approbation, resulting in individuals feeling justified in their annoyance. Rather than leading to open discussions, such expressions and resulting ‘likes’ and supporting comments result in the solidification of an unwelcome stereotype.

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43 NB. The common logic holds that rumours are responsible for causing certain violence and tensions. It may be that the rumours are symptoms of existing tensions. While it is true that leadership and mobilisation are needed to stoke physical conflict, this is made all the more possible when people are predisposed to believing and holding certain ideas. In the case of the studied locations, despite outwardly peaceful relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities, there are deeply held beliefs about “otherness”. Buddhist interlocutors spoke of news of Bengalis being arrested in downtown Yangon, contributing to the belief that a Bengali invasion of Myanmar is possible and maybe imminent.
hurting social cohesion across the country.

The opportunity that social media presents to vent and garner support for one's grievances is more dangerous than the sharing of false news, of which people are becoming warier and the content of which can be discredited. Indeed, it is grievances and other unpleasant feelings which propel people to share dangerous information or false news in the first place. Not unlike in other countries, people will share articles based on headlines or images, which confirm their bias without necessarily paying attention to the content.

The need for eyewitnesses' testimony emerged as a strong imperative for making news “real” or “true”. The majority of respondents said that any news relating to armed conflict or violence was more veracious if it could be corroborated by a friend or relative present at the location where an event occurred. This revealed not only distrust towards official news, especially reporters who were described as “dishonest” or “unprofessional” but also distrust towards authorities providing information to the media. In this climate, friends, and family present at an affected location - whose bias was unquestioned by assessment participants - were the go to people who could confirm information. This thinking reveals a prevailing lack of trust across all layers of society, not only across certain ethno religious divides. Such a trust deficit is a serious impediment to country-wide peace, especially as it encourages people to stick together whether it be with their families and relatives or closely knit communities bound by cultural, religious or linguistic commonalities.

KEY ACTORS

The following section identifies key actors that were found to influence the conflict dynamics in both target communities. Understanding the positions and interests of these actors and their influence may inform Search's ongoing project as well as future initiatives.

- **Ma Ba Tha**

  In both locations, Ma Ba Tha was identified as a threat to peace and security. Described as an organisation that preys on the poor and ignorant, it remains the go-to for people who experience difficulties that are not resolved by secular authorities. Ma Ba Tha was also identified as an institution that people who experienced problems with non-Buddhists sought out for advice and intervention. One respondent in North Okkalapa recognised that Ma Ba Tha was not the best body to solve issues between Buddhists and Muslims, due to the inherent bias of the organisation. However, they were identified as a strong organisation, thereby seducing people with their reported power to act in their followers' interests.

  Anecdotal evidence suggests that the recruitment and crowd-raising methods of Ma Ba Tha include paying poor people to attend rallies. Poor areas of Lashio and most of North Okkalapa – with their communities of internally displaced and marginalised people – are vulnerable to Ma Ba Tha's tactics and incendiary speech, resulting in the deepening of dividing lines.
• **Parents/Family**

Parents are a formidable presence in the majority of Myanmar youth’s lives. The majority of the respondents mentioned their parents as an authority when it came to news verification, rumour checking, and decision making. The majority of the young said they revert to their parents with any questions. Older respondents mentioned parents, spouses or other family members except for children. The only time an older person might enquire with their child was to check the news on Facebook but not to seek an opinion.

Young people require permission from their parents to participate in non-educational activities, leisure outings, membership in organisations (both religious or secular), and dating and visiting friends. In such circumstances, the ability of youth to make decisions and act upon those are curtailed. While the parents are understood to be “keeping children out of trouble”, their overbearing manner impacts youth’s ability to take initiative. What is more, since opposition to parents is perceived as a negative character trait, youth remain obedient even in disagreement if the stakes are high. In this way, parents are able to pass discriminatory, racist or other negative views onto their children, influencing their thoughts and actions.

In North Okkalapa, the majority of respondents said that their mother or father was their hero. The parents’ hard work, struggles for their children, honesty and sacrifice were said to be admirable qualities and youth said they wanted to emulate their parents. Such devotion means that parents are in a particularly strong position to influence their children in a variety of ways and are therefore key actors who should be involved in peacebuilding work.

• **Local authorities**

Unresolved grievances among neighbours and community members are an obstacle to peace. The justice void in Lashio and North Okkalapa, which is present throughout the country, is an issue that needs redress if only to control certain emotions and behaviours, which result from unresolved small disputes, and which leave people aggrieved and begrudged. Disputes, which appear innocuous on the surface, can turn into serious inter-communal cases.

One respondent in North Okkalapa, a Buddhist monk, described an incident in which a known drunkard punched the wall of a house belonging to a Muslim family. The family head complained to an Imam who contacted regional rather than local police resulting in the case being aired beyond the affected area. The police arrested the man and the monk went to plead for his release. The incident resulted in numerous grievances. The monk said the local authorities had ‘lost face’ before their regional counterparts, and this loss was caused by a Muslim leader; the Muslim family did not get much resolution as the man was released; community members, especially Buddhists, felt betrayed because the regional police - who are feared - were called and caused discomfort; and the causes of the incident were never investigated. The Buddhists considered the incident to be caused by alcohol and bad behaviour while the Muslims may have perceived more sinister motives for the man’s actions.

MONK, INTERVIEW, WARD 2, NORTH OKKALAPA

In another case, also in North Okkalapa, a Muslim woman described a dispute between a Muslim candle maker and his neighbour in Ward Kagyi. The candle maker would use space in front of his house to dry his candles, thereby taking up space in the street and interfering with traffic. A Buddhist neighbour - living in front - complained to the man and upon his inaction destroyed the candles. The Muslim man complained to local authorities who did not act upon the complaint. The Muslim man and his son then beat up the Buddhist neighbour and went to the police to turn themselves in. By taking the law into their hands, they were in greater trouble. More importantly, however, the case, which got out of hand, became a case of inter-religious fighting rather a dispute between neighbours regarding the use of ‘public’ space.

MUSLIM CSO LEADER, WARD 2, INTERVIEW, NORTH OKKALAPA
Such incidents, which destroy social ties, create distrust, contribute to malicious gossip and result in aggression and violence, and confirm each group’s stereotypes of each other. These stereotypes see Muslims as aggressive, violent and uncooperative, and see Buddhists as bigoted, racist and unfair. An effective small dispute resolution mechanism would go a long way to quenching people’s desire for justice, or at least to reducing people’s desire for taking the law into their own hands in those moments when they feel abandoned and ignored.

CONCLUSION

In Lashio and North Okkalapa, the assessment identified emotional and behavioural factors that impact peace. These emerge from people’s relationships with authorities and community members, their experience of everyday life, social and family obligations as well as educational imperatives for the youth. Daily disappointments, personal failures and lack of redress for small disputes all combine to generate feelings and behaviours that result in people looking for scapegoats to their problems. The inability of institutions to effectively step in - be they ward authorities, local political parties or the police - result in people seeking help from religious leaders, who may profit from the situation to advance their own agenda or escalate cases beyond local authorities resulting in unwarranted attention and resentment.

With the absence of effective authorities able to resolve small disputes in a timely manner, grievances accumulate and there is a risk that people will take the law into their own hands either by resorting to vandalism, violence or some form of vigilantism. The latter then result in the reinforcement of stereotypes about a particular group’s culture traits and tendencies, solidifying stereotypes and providing justification for discrimination and related behaviours.

State-sanctioned discrimination, which does not appear to have lessened under the NLD government, provides for “Burman/Buddhist privilege”, which operates across all layers of society in a fashion similar to that of white privilege. Buddhist interlocutors are seldom aware of their superior status in Myanmar and are more prone to seeing themselves as besieged and under threat, feelings which justify discriminatory behaviour towards other groups, especially Muslims. It is important to note, however, that while Buddhist fears may seem unsubstantiated, they are real and as such need to be addressed in order to avoid escalation of grievances and misunderstandings.

People are in dire need of reliable sources of information. The lack of trust in some forms of the media and the respect for one’s elders prompts many young people to seek out their parent’s views about the veracity of information, which prevents public discussion. The use of social media, especially the sharing of information on Facebook, is driven by the need to share one’s feelings or thoughts, which they cannot express in person. Local matters become regional or national and people feel justified in their thinking when they find support on the internet.

The assessment found that people are able to see past their differences when they need each other and that they are able to establish meaningful relationships across various dividing lines. The difficulty comes in transferring this ability onto group relations. Group mentality is very strong throughout Myanmar and where people feel threatened or under siege, they stick together, usually with their kin in rural settings, and their ethnoreligious groups in urban settings.

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44 See conflict in Rakhine State where aggrieved Buddhists have been accusing the international community of partiality towards the Rohingya and anti-Buddhist sentiment.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Peacebuilding is a complex process that needs to be dynamic and take time. Trying to get at the root of people’s thinking, feeling and behaving requires a thorough understanding of their social ties, relations, and constraints. Any peacebuilding training needs to include experiential learning. Explaining grievances, injustices and difficulties experienced by various people is difficult because it requires empathy that is not easily tapped through speech, games or audio-visual material.

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• Given the dependence and respect that young people have on their parents, programming targeting both should be considered. Rather than ‘youth’ activities ‘family’ activities should be designed bearing in mind the constraints that parents may face – e.g. gender roles, professional obligations. These activities would need to be flexible enough to allow for the ‘traditional’ Myanmar family power relations and the individual nuances. One such activity could include a ‘Facebook’ day where both parents and youth learn about the benefits and drawbacks of the platform.

• Recognising the limited physical spaces and opportunities for young people to interact with peers from different backgrounds the radio talk show should seek to incorporate diverse guests and stories so as to expose listeners to alternative views and perspectives.

• Activities to raise awareness of relevant discriminatory policies and their effects on those who do not conform to the Burman/Buddhist identity norm. Activities could be designed around a particular policy using a comparative approach by looking at other countries to see how they have dealt with diversity and discrimination. An interesting activity to conduct, albeit following careful security and ethical considerations, could be ‘A day in the life of…’ giving willing participants the opportunity to experience, at least nominally what life may be like in the shoes of ‘the other’.

• Engage the public in a conversation about the need for public spaces where youth from various communities can come together in play and creative activities. Explore the possibility of creating a pilot space in project areas.

• Organize activities that explore the meaning of peace, the process of peacebuilding and the various manifestations of peaceful societies around the world to help people challenge and broaden their definition of peace and realise their role in building a peaceful society.

Donor Community.

• Local authorities were designated as important but often inefficient actors in maintaining calm at ward level, so it could be useful to explore the legally prescribed role of ward authorities – their powers and limits – and design activities aimed at building their capacity in alternative dispute resolution. Nepal, where mediation has become the norm over the past decade, provides for an interesting example of how alternative dispute resolution methods can be applied even in places and times of armed conflict and unclear political circumstances. Programming that fosters trust between communities and local authorities, including the ward representatives and the police, could be a welcome contribution to transforming conflict dynamics in target areas potentially reducing people’s reliance on religious authorities in some cases. Currently, in both Lashio and North Okkalapa the local authorities may be seen as partial agents to a dispute, unwilling to step in lest their reputation may suffer. The first activities should be useful and focus on practical skills, e.g. first aid training for wardens and community members, helping to build relationships before launching activities focused on discussions and comprise, which require trust. Research has shown
that hands-on training such as first aid training allows for people from different groups to interact in a positive way, which can help challenge stereotypes and facilitate cross-group friendships45.

- The lack of consistency in state media reporting, as indicated by respondents in the assessment, undermines people’s faith in the broadcaster’s intentions and ability to deliver quality reporting. This issue could be raised during the training of media professionals with the aim of setting a ‘gold standard’ for reporting.

- Discriminatory reporting practices, especially those, which identify by name, religion and/or ethnicity victims and suspected perpetrators need to be addressed during ethics training for Myanmar journalists and social media users.

- Respondents in both target communities identified drug abuse as an issue of great concern. Explore ways that shared concerns, including drug abuse can be used to bring local authorities, service providers and communities from across dividing lines together.

- More research into the dynamics between Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus as well as less numerous denominations is needed for a better understanding of the intersection between religion, ethnicity, gender, and class.

- Further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of why certain rumours emerge. Understanding the origins of rumours including the unspoken fears that give rise to particular rumours will support the design of more effective and targeted peacebuilding interventions.

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