

**A Rapid Assessment of the
State of Conflict Dynamics and Information Management in
Amarapura, Mandalay Division, and Lashio, Shan State, Myanmar**

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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the research team after conducting interviews and reading related sources, and in no circumstances refer to the official views of Search for Common Ground, the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization, or its funders.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CIMC	Community Information Management Committee
CSOs	Civil society Organizations
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
DM&E	Design, Monitoring and Evaluation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV-AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus - Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ILT	Institutional Learning Team (Search)
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and, Transgender
MIDO	Myanmar ICT for Development.
MINA	Myanmar Interfaith Network on AIDS (HIV)
MK	Myanmar Kyat
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSEAG	Non-State Ethnic Armed Groups
RFA	Radio Free Asia
SP	Special Press
Search	Search for Common Ground
SSA-N	Shan State Army-North
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army

Executive Summary

Introduction

Myanmar has a long history both of violent conflict and of social, economic and political suppression of marginalized groups under former military rule. Conflict dynamics in Myanmar have historically included both armed conflict between numerous ethnic Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) as well as inter-communal violence between religious minorities. Often dynamics of these two distinct types of conflict have overlapped; with issues underlying them interrelated. Despite the military planned political transition that gained momentum since by-elections held in 2012, and the election of the NLD led civilian government in 2015, conflict dynamics remain vulnerable and ethnic and religious tensions continue.

The interreligious violence between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims in 2012 ruptured the fabric of Myanmar society, set off a political debate over who is indeed considered a citizen of Myanmar and gave rise to a social movement advocating for social, political and economic exclusion of minorities, and predominately Muslims. The repercussions are clearly visible, with ongoing violence in some parts of the country at the time of writing. Further, the ethnic violent conflict between NSAGs in Northern Shan State and many other places has persisted.

At the same time, the political transition of Myanmar to a (partial) democracy and the ascent of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to the helm of the government has created some hope among ordinary citizens in Myanmar. Despite the transition rumors and manipulated information presented by various interest groups, including news media, have contributed to aggravating the already vulnerable interreligious and interethnic communal tensions.

In this context, Search for Common Ground (Search) with its partner Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) has been implementing a project “Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence. The project was implemented in Amarapura Township in Mandalay Region and Lashio City of Northern Shan State. This report presents the findings of a rapid assessment that serves as an update to the Community Information Management report from Phase I¹ carried out by Search between October to November 2015 to understand the state of conflict dynamics and information management in these two project locations.

The assessment applied qualitative methods of data collection. A total of 137 people were interviewed in 10 FGDs and 53 KIIs with the help of a checklist developed by the research team. The assessment was done during 17-21 August 2017 in Amarapura Township, Mandalay City and Lashio.

The assessment revealed that the conflict dynamics in Amarapura and Lashio have improved significantly over the last two years. The assumption of power by the democratically elected government, followed by the democratic transformation in the country, has increased political

¹ <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Myanmar-Community-Information-Management-Report.-SFCG.-March-2016.pdf>

awareness among people, increased the sense of communal harmony, and contributed to the positive shift in the overall conflict dynamics in the region.

This assessment shows very little threat of immediate violence in both Amarapura and Lashio, even if some parts of the country are still emerging from recent experiences of intercommunal violence or nearby armed conflict. Despite this, the memory of previous inter-communal violence in 2012-2013 is still fresh in the memory of people and people feel that the threat of religious violence in their communities has subsided significantly.

However, there is still a sense of vulnerability among the community members. They appear to be unaware of how a small trigger can ignite the flames of conflict. There is still a hidden sense of insecurity and a feeling of helplessness among minority communities in both project areas. Further, the ethnic armed violence in the areas surrounding Lashio always reminds people of the vulnerability of communities in the city where a heterogeneous community lives.

The extent of rumors has been reduced compared to two years ago. However, there are sporadic cases of the spread of rumors through Facebook, word of mouth, as well as cases of propaganda messaging seemingly designed to instigate violence.

Teashops and beer stations are the commonplaces for discussing the validity of rumors and news stories, in all cases either dispelling rumors and false stories, or spreading them. However, there have been cases when rumors cause uncomfortable situations between Buddhists and Muslims in Amarapura, that were addressed through civil society initiatives with dialogue and discussion.

Civil society is playing a role in managing rumors and conflicts. However, the nature of their loose network and irregular consultations makes their role less effective, despite having a strong potential to contribute to this cause. Youth also can play a vital role in minimizing rumors and influencing their peers. While the government's proactive work addressing some of the special issues has been appreciated, there has not been a stronger role of authorities in managing rumors.

The assessment provides the following recommendations to produce better results during the second phase of the project. While these recommendations are tailored for the project, these recommendations are relevant for other stakeholders working on similar initiatives in these areas, or similar conflict context areas of the country.

- Search and MIDO need to strengthen and expand the Community Information Management Committees (CIMCs) with enhanced capacity.
- Considering their role, interfaith committees could play a part in promoting religious harmony and managing rumors. Search and MIDO could strengthen their role by equipping them with dialogue and collaboration skills.
- Search and MIDO should work with religious leaders to positively utilize the Islamic Friday Prayers, Christian Sunday Masses, and Buddhist religious gatherings to promote religious tolerance and inter-religious harmony.

- Search and MIDO need to work with youth to positively mobilize them and create a large youth network that works to spread positive messaging.
- The project needs to focus on creating awareness and knowledge on the positive use of Facebook among the younger generation.
- The project needs to work with or coordinate with those working with journalists and social media bloggers, to promote conflict-sensitive journalism and mobilize media personnel as positive agents of peace and social harmony.
- Search needs to collaborate with other international organizations that are already working in information management using similar tools and approaches to create synergy and generate value for money.
- The project also needs to work with the media/journalists and civil society actors to bring them together into a single platform and bridge the divide between them so that the impact of such community-based efforts of managing information can be larger.

CHAPTER - ONE

1.1 Introduction

Myanmar has a long history of violent conflict. British rule highlighted out-group differences among the country's myriad ethnic groups as a trademark policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Burmese military rulers further exploited this during nearly five decades of autocratic rule (1962-2011)². Since independence in 1948, the country has seen some of the longest-running civil wars in the world between numerous Non-State Ethnic Armed Groups (NSAGs) and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military), many of which remain unresolved to date.

Following a referendum in which the 2008 constitution was adopted into law the country has transitioned from full autocratic military rule following a carefully drawn out plan of political and economic reform. The country has a partial democratic government in which three major ministries (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Border Affairs and the Ministry Home Affairs) belong to military appointees. Further, the current constitution provides 25% seats in the parliament to the Military and that gives it veto power to block any amendments to the constitution.

Despite the transition of the country into a partial democracy, and the ascent of the Aung San Suu Kyi Led National League for Democracy (NLD) into power as a result of the 2015 national elections, conflict between the Tatmadaw and many NSEAGs persists and communal violence, often targeting Myanmar's minority, predominately Muslims but also persons of South-Asian origin, has escalated.

Violent conflict in Myanmar has multifaceted dimensions with ethnic, religious, and resource based conflicts dominating the dynamics. Further, increasing crime rates, drug production, smuggling and consumption, crime, land grabbing by military cronies³ and impunity prevalent in the Myanmar's social and political system has continued to deteriorate the lives of poor and marginalized communities, especially minority religious and ethnic groups⁴.

Intercommunal conflict dynamics in Myanmar have been dominated by religious intolerance within the country's dominant Buddhist community influenced by extremist monks as well as political and military leaders who, for decades, have exploited historic tensions between and amongst ethnic and religious minorities. These have been further aggravated by 'divide and rule policies' used by the military for over fifty years, and increased exploitation of natural resources and local populations by military and cronies since international investment spiked following political and economic reform.

² Myanmar was granted independence in 1948, as a democratic nation. Following a coup d'état in 1962, it became a **military dictatorship**. In 2011, the **military** junta was officially dissolved following a 2010 general election, and a nominally civilian government was installed.

³ This is a commonly used English word in Myanmar for business players connected to the former military regime.

⁴ David Keys, 2010. Burma: Why its military dictatorship still survives.

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Myo_Myanmar/publication/307863293_WHY_THE_MILITARY_RULE_CONTINUE_IN_MYANMAR/links/57cfc0bc08ae83b374623f07/WHY-THE-MILITARY-RULE-CONTINUE-IN-MYANMAR.pdf?origin=publication_list

Intercommunal tension, hate speech and associated acts of violence have been an all too common phenomenon in many countries around the world, with many countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America having gone through such conflicts over the last few decades. Myanmar is no exception, and with the opening of the country to the outside world, by the lifting of sanctions and removal of censorship of the Internet, the unique complexities of conflicts in Myanmar have manifold and been influenced in new ways. Ethnic politics and the manufacture of ethnic and religious tension in support of a longstanding policy of 'divide and rule' by the military continues as a key tool by military backed political elite to maintain control, influenced by global conflict dynamics and narratives, these tensions remain as one of the predominant threats to the democratic transition of Myanmar.

Following initial outbreaks of communal violence in 2012⁵, in recent years Myanmar has seen a rise of intolerant and divisive narratives produced by religious, political and influential leaders. There are a number of cases of inter-communal violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, in some cases perceive to be organized, that took place in Mandalay (2013 and 2014), Meikhtila (2013), multiple townships in Pegu Division (2013), Okkan (2013), Hpakan (2013), Lashio (2013), Kantbalu (2013), and townships throughout Rakhine State (2012 - ongoing) to date resulting in displacement, loss of property and possessions, injury and in some cases deaths⁶.

Rumors, hate speech and manipulated information, as well as a spillover effect of the violence to other places (especially in 2013), have played a major role in triggering such conflict⁷. Though there were no major incidences of violence, other than in Rakhine State during 2016-2017, people are still feel a deep sense of mistrust, insecurity, and fear. This has been further aggravated by frequent incidences of hatred, insults, and the spread of false rumors, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims.

As in many parts of the country, the two project locations (Amarapura, Mandalay Region, and Lashio, Shan State) have both experienced intercommunal violence in the last 4 years. After violent outbreaks occurred in each location, various sectors of civil society tried to calm down the situation and it worked well. With the sudden access to the Internet and smartphones, many people did not know how to use these technologies responsibly. Thus, the rapid rise of the use of technology has made it easier for rumors to be spread creating an enabling environment for violence and as a result, there has been an effort in promoting the responsible use of social media in recent years to populations in the responsible use of social media and the dangers that social media could pose to communal harmony.

⁵ There have been bouts of inter-communal violence throughout history. This report refers to those from 2012 onwards.

⁶ "Myanmar: Storm Clouds on the Horizon", Asia Report No. 238, International Crisis Group, 12 November 2012, p. 1 - 3.; "The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar", Asia Report No. 251, International Crisis Group, 1 October 2013, p. 7 - 8.; "Burma Update: Serious Crimes Continue", Alternative ASEAN Network of Burma, BN 2013/1097: September 28, 2013.; Monthly Bulletins of 2012 and 2013, Alternative ASEAN Network of Burma.; "Easy Targets: The Persecution of Muslims in Burma", Karen Human Rights Group, May 2002. Crisis Group. 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>

⁷ <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Myanmar-Community-Information-Management-Report.-SFCG.-March-2016.pdf>

Complicating matters further, during 2017 in the surrounding areas of Lashio, Shan State there have been clashes between two NSAGs in Shan State: the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) who have been historic allies in the region.⁸ Since the last assessment, tensions between these two groups have risen and are impacting on the conflict dynamics within Lashio city.

Despite all of this, according to the respondents in Amarapura Township, Mandalay City and Lashio city, the current political transition in Myanmar has raised some hope among the ordinary population of Myanmar, especially among Muslims and minority ethnic groups in certain parts of the country. The government led by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD since 2014, has been working towards bridging the divide and institutionalizing democracy and building ethnic, religious and social harmony despite many challenges. Since the 2014 election civil society groups, NGOs and international organizations have stepped up their efforts, working to contribute towards stabilizing democracy and promoting a culture of tolerance, harmony and mutual respect in Myanmar society.

Search and MIDO together with Pan Zagar, successfully implemented a pilot initiative "Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Burma" in 2015. The project addressed one of the most significant threats to Burma's transition to democracy and sustainable peace: the impact of rumors and manipulated information on outbreaks of inter-communal violence. The project was implemented in Amarapura Township in Mandalay Region and Lashio City of Northern Shan State. The project ended in June 2016.

Among many other components, the project conducted a comprehensive research entitled 'Community Information Flows to Reduce Intercommunal Violence in Burma in October to December 2015'⁹, which helped shape the strategic direction for the project implementation. Following the successful completion of the first phase of the pilot project, Search and MIDO were awarded additional funding to continue to implement the project in both Amarapura and Lashio to support the work to reach the surrounding areas of both target locations, as had been identified as a need by the CIMC committee members during phase 1. The project started in July 2017 and will end in February 2018.

As part of the second phase of the project, and in order to seek updated understanding of the conflict dynamics, Search recently conducted a follow-up rapid assessment in Amarapura Township, Mandalay City, and Lashio City, between 15th to 22nd August 2017 by a team of seven researchers from Search and MIDO. The rapid assessment was led by the Asia Regional DM&E Specialist of Search's Institutional Learning Team (ILT) and involved 3 researchers each from Search Myanmar and MIDO.

This report presents the findings of the rapid assessment. The assessment is one of the deliverables of the project "Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence: Phase II, and will inform all consecutive phases of activities under the project. The assessment particularly focuses on assessing i) the unfolding conflict dynamics in the two

⁸ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/uncharacteristic-clashes-break-out-between-taang-and-shan-allied-armed-groups.html>

⁹ <https://www.google.com.np/search?q=SFCG+Myanmar+reports&oq=SFCG+Myanmar+reports&aqs=chrome..69i57.5732j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

regions; ii) the state of information management and its shifting pattern, if any; iii) the role of CSOs, religious leaders, local influencers, institutions or networks in spreading/managing rumors in the two locations, particularly after the completion of phase I of the project in 2016. The main question that this research attempts to answer is: what is the state of conflict dynamics, the shifting pattern of information management, and the role of rumor and manipulated information in the post-2015 democratic transition time in Amarapura and Lashio?

1.2 Assessment Methodology

The whole assessment process was guided by an initial assessment brief developed at the beginning of the project. This was followed by a series of Skype calls between the Myanmar-based research team members, Search Myanmar leadership and the Search Asia DM&E Specialist. Once the Asia Regional DM&E Specialist landed in Myanmar, a full day research planning meeting with Search and MIDO was organized on 13 August 2017 to finalize the assessment questions, discuss the field planning and interview scheduling, interview approaches and methods as well as local conflict and cultural sensitivity. This meeting provided an opportunity for the research team members to be on the same page.

Before traveling to the assessment locations, Search and MIDO worked together to identify potential key informants and the focus group discussion (FGD) participants with the help of local community contacts identified by MIDO staff and the key community influencers/CIMC members who have worked with Search and MIDO for the last 2-3 years. All potential respondents were informed in advance about the assessment and the project received their consent for the interview in order to facilitate the interview processes smoothly once the assessment team reached the field.

The assessment applied qualitative methods of data collection and interviewed a wide range of stakeholders (such as local government officials, religious leaders, CIM members, youth leaders, local journalists, political party leaders, civil society leaders, women leaders, local activists, drivers, physically challenged persons, LGBT people and community members across religion and ethnic groups), with the help of local community contacts as well as members of CIM committees, who have been working with Search for the last 2-3 years. There were total 5 FGDs and 26 KIIs in Lashio and 6 FGDs and 27 KIIs in Amarapura Township and Mandalay City (as dynamics from Mandalay City strongly influence dynamics in Amarapura, a number of participants from Mandalay city were interviewed). A total of 137 people were interviewed, of which 53 were interviewed through KIIs and 84 through FGDs.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Myanmar language and were translated back to English with the help of a professional translator. The interviews and FGDs conducted by the Asia Regional DM&E Specialist were done in English with the help of a local interpreter.

1.3 Scope and Limitations of the Assessment

The assessment had a limited scope and timeframe. The interviews were conducted in Amarapura Township and Mandalay City in Mandalay Region and Lashio city in Northern Shan State. This assessment does not cover the communal relationships and violence currently taking place in other parts of Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State, nor does it analyze the relationship between them. However, it is recognized from phase I that national/state dynamics impact each other, which is an area for further study. This is not a full-fledged conflict analysis and should not be read and compared to the state of conflict currently happening in other parts of the country. This assessment was intended to serve the project implementation team for a specific project to be implemented in Amarapura and Lashio city only. It has no further objective of analyzing the conflict dynamics elsewhere in Myanmar.

CHAPTER – TWO

2.1 Assessment Findings

This section presents the overall findings of the assessment divided into three thematic sub-sections:

- i. The overall conflict dynamics in Amarapura and Lashio city in the last two years,
- ii. the shifting pattern of rumor management and impact of rumors in shaping the conflict dynamics in the target locations, and
- iii. the role of various stakeholders (media, state officials and civil society groups and religious leaders) in managing or spreading rumors.

2.1.1. The Conflict Dynamics

There have been a number of political and social changes that have been reflected in the local communities covered by this assessment. Respondents generally noted how they now feel free to speak, they have high hopes from the NLD-led government, and especially from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

While the political rivals of the NLD have kept a low profile after the last election in 2014, they are slowly resurfacing as the people, who have very high and sometimes unrealistic expectations from the NLD, are scrutinizing their work¹⁰. This is a phenomenon every country transitioning away from full autocratic rule faces. How the NLD-led government manages its structural limitations, meets the hopes/expectations of the public and engages with the opposition actors' manipulation of ethnic and religious tension will shape the future of Myanmar.

2.1.2 Latent Negative Peace

The assessment revealed that the level of conflict in areas where research was conducted has decreased in the last two years. Many respondents insisted that the situation in both places overall was peaceful and that there is growing inter-communal bonding and respect amongst diverse populations. Generally, people expressed how they are not worried about unexpected incidences of violence because they believe that there is a strong sense of understanding and local mechanisms that help prevent violent situations from taking place.

However, research showed that the level of awareness about political rights, human rights, and socioeconomic rights are low. In addition, many people's ability to express their voice is also low, and in some cases nonexistent, even amongst some individuals who are affiliated with political parties or those who have been elected to local government offices.

While talking with the community members it was noted that many people, particularly women and persons from marginalized communities, have a sense of "acceptance of what comes their way" and do not have a tendency of looking at things critically, an expected outcome of nearly

¹⁰ Interviews in Lashio and Mandalay

50 years of military rule where the denial of rights to freedom of speech and voice was commonplace.

And while some people shared their concerns about various incidences of conflict and violence taking place in their surroundings, others preferred to remain silent and preferred not to mention those incidences. Some even said that they have not heard of such incidences. Some said that there is nothing negative in their communities and that everything has been fine over the last few years. For example, one of the adults belonging to the Muslim community in Amarapura said that he does not remember any incidences of inter-communal violence in their area for the last few years, which was contradicted, later, by a few other respondents (both Muslims and others) who shared examples of incidences of violence, hate speech and religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims.¹¹

In both Amarapura and Lashio, incidences of conflict and violence have been taking place in areas surrounding these communities. Respondents specifically mentioned about i) clashes between the TNLA and SSA-N in Shan State in Kyaukse Township, ii) riots and the 969/Ma Ba Tha Monk protest in Mandalay city; as well as iii) the 2013 anti-Muslim riots in Meiktila region. There were other incidences shared by respondents in Lashio that had raised religious tensions.

- In Lashio, recently (they could not say the date) the defacement of a Buddha statue by (paid) young (Muslim, as we are told by the respondents) boys¹² almost created religious conflict. When the youth were caught spray-painting one of the Buddha statues, some people were trying blow the incident out of proportion. However, some local residents and civil society groups from diverse communities came together and settled the issue. When they questioned the young boys about who asked them to do the graffiti and why are they doing so, they reported that they were given MK30,000 (Approx. USD22) to do it. However, they said they do not know the person that paid them. They were unable to identify the person who paid them to do so. Then the boys were handed over to police and they were placed in juvenile center/correction home.
- In another incidence, a woman who was rumored to be a Muslim (which turned out to be false) took a Buddha statue from somewhere and was carrying it in her Longyi. When some Buddhist people noticed it, they believed that a Muslim woman was insulting Buddha intentionally, because she “looked like” a Muslim. However, when they caught her and questioned her, it came to light that she was not a Muslim, rather a Buddhist woman with mental illness. However, in the meantime, a rumor spread in the city through word of mouth that a Muslim woman insulted Buddha. There was already a tension in Lashio city. However, when people realized that the woman was Buddhist, they did not find it offensive and asked the women to carry the statue properly and let her go.

¹¹ Researchers suggest that many persons from dominant majority populations are often unaware of violence perpetrated against minority communities and that in many cases in Myanmar persons are most aware of issues that affect their ethnic and religious group directly. In cases where respondents from minority groups affected stated they were unaware of such incidences of conflict and violence targeting members of their own group, it is likely that decades of marginalization and in some cases state sponsored violence have influenced their own feeling of safety discussing such topics.

¹² Excerpts from FGD in Lashio

- Another incident in Amarapura was related to hate speech last year. Two people on motorbikes came to a Muslim neighborhood and told people that the Buddhists are coming to attack them and they need to prepare themselves. However, before they were asked any further questions, they drove away from the neighborhood. However, they went to Buddhist neighborhood and told them that *Kalar* (Muslim) are coming to their village to attack them and they should be ready to counter them. They then drove away from the village. To date, no one knows the identity of these people. Some people said that they were people hired by radical groups to destabilize the Buddhist-Muslim relationships in Amarapura.

The incident worked as a trigger to an incident of hate speech against the Muslim community in Amarapura. A monk spread hate speech narratives nearby the Muslim neighborhood that created tension between both communities. However, it was brought under control without any damage as the CIMC in Amarapura and other civil society actors, as well as religious leaders, worked together to calm the communities. The CIMC members and local community leaders organized a “literature talk program” by bringing external literary experts and members from both communities together in one platform. This collective program brought people from both communities together to listen to some interesting facts about literature from Myanmar and help ease the tension, according to local respondents.

Participants noted that there had been a period of tension, when people from Muslim communities felt insecure to visit Buddhist villages to sell their products, as most of the Muslims are vendors who sell their products all over Amarapura. It directly affected their income during that period.

- One of the respondents in Lashio said that the complex violent conflict among ethnic groups (against each other) and against the Tatmadaw has a significant impact not only on personal lives of people but also on economic aspects. He said, *“This year business has suffered significantly compared to previous years. Life in the city is quite safe, but it is quite difficult in rural areas where the fight actually happening. People who live in rural areas have had to run from their villages as the ethnic armed groups and government forces have been fighting aggressively. One can see government army helicopters hovering over your village and you never know what happens next. Even the taxi drivers have been suffering as they do not get passengers for their taxis. Trading has significantly suffered and there are many social issues as well. Until last year, there was a trading exchange in Muse, Namhkam and Kyaukme between Shan people and Palaung people. However, this year, the situation is different and the Shan people didn’t buy goods from Palaung traders and the Palaung community also reacted by not purchasing from Shan traders. This led to a demonstration against each other. People called for a complete boycott of each other. This had a significant impact on the income of the vendors from both sides and their income went down significantly as their market reach narrowed down.”*
- In Amarapura, a 16-year-old Muslim boy was rumored to be a child kidnapper. He was caught and beaten. However, later this issue was solved with the intervention of civil society groups and administration, which brought the young boy into police protection

and investigated the case. It was found that the whole news story was untrue and the boy was proven to be innocent.

The examples given by respondents show that there are sporadic incidences happening in both the places. Most of these incidences were not based on fact-based information, but rather on rumors spread through word of mouth. However, the improved understanding of the community about the implications of the rumors, and the involvement of active civil society groups, none of the incidences turned violent, according to the people interviewed.

Since, people from all communities have not fully overcome the collective trauma felt in the aftermath of the 2012 and 2013 violence and are constantly reminded by the incidences of violence and hate speech happening in other parts of the country as well as the ongoing violence in Rakhine State. The latent tension, mistrust, and sense of insecurity among minority groups who had been (and still are) targets of hate speech is apparent.

However, the vulnerability cannot be ignored as there is still a sense of insecurity among Muslim communities and others targeted by hate speech. There is a prevailing feeling of helplessness amongst many as revealed by some Muslim, Hindu and Christian respondents who said, *'if we see or hear about any protest and other uncomfortable situation in any specific areas of the town, we try to avoid travelling to the place or keep ourselves away from the situation.'* A Muslim Woman in Lashio said, *"When there is a big festival or events with large gatherings, we do not dare to go there and sell our products as we are afraid of some unruly young people who might come to our stall and attack us, even if the larger population is not aggressive towards us. We prefer to remain on the safe side, even if it means a loss of our income."*

Some respondents from the minority community were not comfortable with discussing issues around inter-ethnic/interreligious issues. Either they told the researchers that they do not like to talk about political and religious issues, other than their own religions (a Hindu respondent in Lashio), or gave very short and general responses (Muslim respondent in Amarapura). During the conversations, the unspoken sense of insecurity and fear of repercussions were visible in their expressions, despite them saying that 'everything is alright' and 'the communal harmony is good'.

The sense of insecurity is also prevalent in ethnic Bamar communities, in areas where they are in the minority. This can be seen from an example given by one of the respondents in Lashio, where she said, *"In Kutkai township, the community is mixed, with ethnic Bamar, Kachin, Shan, and Palaung ethnicity forming the population. However, the ethnic Bamar community members and the ethnic Bamar government employees are hated by other ethnic groups"*.

Besides the latent religious conflict, the outskirts of Lashio has been undergoing an ethnic conflict between Shan army and Ta'ang army for the last few years. The violent confrontation between these groups as well as the increasing tensions between the Tatmadaw and Northern Alliance is also a worrying factor for the majority of people in Northern Shan State. This multifaceted conflict/violence has severely affected the city. The Churches and Monasteries in Lashio are facing the influx of internally displaced people (IDPs). Most of the IDPs are coming from townships in Shan State, such as Kutkai, Muse, Nanthkam, Kyaukme, Namtu, Mansan, Laukkai, Hsipaw, Kyaukme, Nam Hpat Kar, as armed conflict has intensified there in recent months.

China has a long and historical involvement in the social and economic life of Shan state. There are many ethnic Chinese people living in Lashio – those who have lived there for generations and those who have migrated recently. The assessment found that people in Lashio have a general prejudice against them and our first phase of research also showed that people tend to blame the Chinese for all ills in Lashio society. Respondents said that Chinese are quite good at bribing the government officials and getting the national registration cards. Chinese companies have a huge investment in hydropower and other large-scale mining industries in Shan State. Those infrastructure projects have taken away the land of farmers and have not been fully compensated at the time of writing. One such example is described below by a group of respondents in Lashio. *“One Chinese company built a hydropower plant and a dam in Hsipaw and Kyaukme area in Northern Shan State, through land acquisition by the government. The community lost their land and could not even protest, because of the political nexus of the Chinese investor and the military. The electric powerhouse construction company from China was supposed to compensate the farmers but the community hasn’t received any compensation so far”.*

Lashio is the trading hub for Chinese goods and is very dependent on trade with Chinese, which has been negatively affected by the ongoing fight between the ethnic groups as well as with the Government armed forces. Most goods from China go to rest of Myanmar through Lashio. Most of the farmers used to sell their agriculture products to Chinese traders. However, due to the ongoing war in the outskirts of the Lashio-Chinese border transport corridor, farmers in those areas are most affected, as their major source of income, corn, cannot be transported to China, due to the fact that the Chinese traders do not come to buy corn anymore. People are storing corn at their farm are worried as it might get damaged if they must store it there for much longer.

It was revealed that the relationship between Chinese immigrants and traders and the local population is tense. Chinese immigrants also understand this dynamic and do not get involved in affairs other than those concerning their business. People often blame them for social evils among youth, especially referring to drug addiction, drug peddling, and criminal activities. As a result, the ethnic Chinese immigrants are difficult to access to for interviews or conversations and they do not get involved in politics and social events in the city. However, local people also realize that despite all of the negative sentiments against those Chinese immigrants, people know that trade with China is an essential part of Lashio’s economy. The conversations with many respondents revealed that there is a love-hate relationship between the Chinese and local population, particular among the ethnic Bamar people.

2.1.3 Reduction in Influence of MaBaTha/969

MaBaTha¹³ and 969¹⁴ have been always in the limelight, especially, in the religious conflict dynamics in Myanmar. Even if they do not represent the majority of the Buddhist religious

¹³ MaBaTha is a network of ultra-nationalist monks organized by the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). It has been formally active since 2014 when it was established. In 2015, it achieved huge success. Most notable was the passage of all four ‘Protection of Race and Religion Laws’ that the Ma Ba Tha had drafted and lobbied for. Collectively, the laws actively target and discriminate against key tenets of Burmese Muslim society,

fraternity and the larger Buddhist population, they have proven to have a profound influence both on mainstream Buddhist society.. However, behind their hate speech is vested political interests. MaBaTha members have been vocal supporters of USDP, the political party of Myanmar's military. Prolonged conflict in Myanmar, often stoked by MaBaTha (both formally and informally), demonstrates one of USDP's main justifications for continued military control over political processes. The argument is twofold: 1) that the diverse people of Myanmar are unable to live in harmony and need continued military oversight of political processes to maintain a stable union, and 2) Muslims have been and continue to be a threat to the union and a strong military is needed to protect Buddhism and the people of Myanmar from this threat.

During the research carried out in 2015 and the project evaluation carried out in 2016, there was no mention of the (active) presence of the MaBaTha/969 or the USDP in Mandalay City and Amarapura Township, whereas they were active in Lashio and even won the election there. However, the scenario is changing slowly as the current democratically elected government is not yet able to address all of the expectations people carry for the government.

One of the glaring examples is the recent MaBaTha/969 protest in Mandalay City. The protest, which was cracked down on by the government, was focused on protesting against the government, particularly against the Religious Affairs Minister, and not intended to instigate any hatred against any community or religion, according to the respondents. However, considering what is happening in other parts of the country, particularly in Rakhine State, there is high potential that these radical groups could easily use religious sentiment to gain their lost political ground.

Despite all of the efforts of MaBaTha/969 to rejuvenate themselves, all the people interviewed clearly said that they do not believe that MaBaTha/969 will be able to destabilize the social harmony in their communities. They also claimed that they no longer believe the political propaganda and political agenda solely based on manipulating religious emotions. At the same time, many of these same respondents were also completely unaware of how small triggers can enflame a conflict from nowhere at any point in time in a highly volatile and sensitive society like Myanmar.

A few respondents echoed that *'the MaBaTha/969 lost their credibility, even, among the Buddhist population. People understand their vested political interest and do not believe easily when they say something or spread any rumors. People always prefer to verify things before they react'*. However, this seems to be true in normal circumstances but there is ample evidence (as discussed earlier in the examples of recent conflicts) that it is quite easy to play with people's emotions, particularly around religious and ethnic sentiments. Further, there are plenty of smart social and political actors with a vested interest.

and significantly infringe on their religious and social freedoms. These legislative actions are backed by a sophisticated mass messaging campaign that co-opts the various anti-Muslim prejudices latent across society, and packages them into a coherent narrative that has mass appeal.

¹⁴ 969 was created prior to the outbreak of communal violence in Rakhine State in 2012, but came to prominence in the aftermath of it as the leading Buddhist monk led group producing hate speech targeting Muslims. 969 members created MaBaTha and the focus of their efforts shifted to MaBaTha.

2.1.4 Growing Public Frustration towards Government

Though many people are happy with the way the government is functioning, there are also people who are not happy with the progress made by the government so far. Most of the respondents do not understand the way the powers of the current elected NLD-led government are curtailed by the constitution, under which the military-backed members of Parliament hold veto power on constitutional amendments and considerable sway over decision-making. Also, the office of the president has no control over the Home Affairs Ministry, Defense Ministry and Border Affairs Ministry, still controlled by the military and which collectively make many key decisions that influence the lives of ordinary people. Without the approval of these Ministries, the current government is unable to dramatically advance circumstances in Myanmar's economic, political and social sectors.

One of the major concerns raised by some of the respondents is about the economic downfall of the country as measured by their perceived sense of decreasing income level and income generating opportunities. Some respondents said that the corruption involving Union level and State/Regional level Government is concerning. It is important to remember that these are all opinions based on the information provided to them by local leaders and respondents often do not have concrete evidence to explain or justify this argument. Even if they do not have any specific data to support their claims, their feelings and perceptions are real and hold a very strong role in conflict dynamics. There is the potential that the stakeholders who are not happy with the current democratic transformation in Myanmar may play a spoilers' role create stronger public disenchantment against the government that may negatively affect the peace process and the current social fabric.

Further, the case of Lashio is different, where the NLD did not win the local government election. Lashio city is one of the very few places where the USDP has won the election and has elected seats. However, USDP does not agree with the current NLD-led government. Even the USDP leader interviewed in Mandalay City strongly criticized the NLD-led government and accused the government of failing to deliver development to their communities. Exploiting the lack of awareness among people in their administrative territory, USDP also blames the NLD-led government for development failures in the city. One of the USDP leader's remarks reflected the sentiment very well. He said (without being specific), "*If the NLD Government continues to operate in such a manner, it might lead to genocide*". He used a very objectionable word "genocide" as it appeared he knows it has an emotive impact it has in an effort to malign the NLD-led government. Evaluators were uncertain if he really knew what the term genocide means. Other respondents also explained how the USDP and MaBaTha members are critical towards the NLD Government.

Further, some respondents in both Mandalay City and Amarapura also said that the elected NLD-led government is also corrupt and nothing has changed in the development from the last government. They said, "*The elected NLD government could not handle the corruption case and the state of governance remains the same. There are many cases of bribery in the government offices as the entire bureaucracy is the same as the previous government.*"

Some people claimed that the local government has already raised local tax three times (a claim only). The same types of comments were made against the "government" in Lashio also. However, with further probing and discussion, people are referring to the USDP administration in Lashio, who they refer as "Government". Those respondents were inferring that the USDP

government was responsible for the corruption and people are politically divided and make claims of corruption based on their own judgment.

2.1.5 Increasing Incidences of Crime, Drug Addiction, and Alcoholism

In many communities crime, drug addiction and alcoholism are of serious concern for local residents. Many often feel that drugs and alcoholism lead young people down the wrong path, and as there is much drug cultivation in Shan state (as well as other states), and drugs are readily available and cheap, accessible for people from a very young age.

Many respondents highlighted the perception of an increasing incidence of robbery and street muggings in Mandalay City, Lashio and surrounding areas. People said that there is organized institutional involvement in cases of robberies in Mandalay City and people and police both feel helpless to respond. People said that most of the people know who is involved in these cases of robbery but no one dares to mention their name for fear of their personal safety.

According to the respondents, there have been many incidents of people being attacked and robbed by drug addicts in Lashio. One of the respondents said, *“There are incidents when student couples and other residents who go out in the dark have been attacked and robbed of their valuables. In such cases, females are more targeted than males. Women are unsafe outside of their houses.”*

There have been frequent incidences of fights, resulting in domestic violence related to drunken behavior and drug addiction, and involved with crimes and gang fights. These types of violent incidences and crimes are prevalent in both places. Some people even reported that drug addicts in Mandalay City carry out some of the robberies/street muggings.

Many respondents said that both Mandalay and Lashio cities are affected by drug trafficking and addiction, particularly among youth¹⁵. Some respondents claimed that the Chinese traders are controlling the drug market. They also accused the Chinese drug dealers of instigating conflict among young people. While conducting FGDs with CSOs in Mandalay City and Amarapura Township, participants said, *“everyone in Mandalay knows where the drug is available and where the drug is stored, but the police and administration pretend to not know.”*

One of the respondents said that *“There have been incidences of breaking into shops and stores in Lashio city in recent years. The majority of such victims are Muslims and only a few Buddhists,”* without saying in clear terms that people tend to link such incidents to religious tensions, especially between Buddhists and Muslims. However, the attack on people from other religions is also happening in Lashio. According to a Christian respondent, *“There was an incident in Lashio, where one Christian pastor was passing by a youth group on his motorbike. The youth stopped him and stabbed in the back. They stole his motorbike and fled the scene. However, people do not link every single incidence to inter-religious relationships. He could not offer any further detail of the incident and suspected that this particular incident could have been*

¹⁵ There is no universal definition of the term youth. Often, in Myanmar persons who are in their late 20s or early 30s are still considered to be youth. The Myanmar Youth Forum defines youth as persons between the age of 16 and 35.

a random crime and could have been committed by youth under the influence of drugs, without linking those youths to any particular ethnic or religious groups.

2.1.6 Land Conflicts

The issues around land conflict are the legacy of military rule. As ceasefire agreements of the 1990s led to exacerbated land grabs by military and crony companies, so too the current peace process, barring discussion of political settlement on land tenure, has led to a new wave of land grabs occurring at an unprecedented scale.¹⁶ The situation results from the passing of new laws offering incentives to foreign businesses, while providing a framework enabling companies to seize land with greater ease.¹⁷

Echoing longstanding grievances of land grabs by military and crony companies, many respondents were concerned about land grabs past and present. Since the military-led government confiscated the land in the past and the current government is unable to return their land, many people are organizing joint protests for the return of their land. The NLD-led government is trying to compensate people whose land had been confiscated but this has not been an easy task considering the magnitude of the land confiscation and people's disagreement on the compensation package.

For many people the land is not only the foundation of their livelihood, it is also associated with their ancestral domain and cultural identity. They are not willing to exchange their ancestral domain for money, regardless of the amount of money proposed. This has further re-aggravated the land conflict resolution process. Further, most of the land parcels confiscated during the military rule are owned by military cronies or their family members, and under the current political and constitutional set-up, the democratically elected government does not have power to take the land back from those cronies and give it back to the farmers. Under the circumstances, land conflict is expected to be prolonged for years to come.

Another type of land conflict was seen in Mandalay City. There are migrant families who have occupied government land in the bank of Ayeyarwady River and built squatters settlements. They were making their livelihood from the river, but were also polluting the river. The government moved them to a new place called 'New Town' quite far from the river. However, people could not find any economic opportunities to feed their families and they decided to come back to the old squatter settlements and stay, where the government does not want them to settle. Now there is a conflict between that settlement and the local government authorities.

¹⁶ "Access Denied: Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma," Transnational Institute, Burma Policy Briefing Nr 11, May 2013.

¹⁷ An overview of relevant legislation provided in "Land Confiscation in Burma: A Threat to Local Communities & Responsible Investment," Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, BN 2014/2001: 25 March 2013; updated 5 May 2015, p. 2.

2.2 Rumors and False News Stories

2.2.1: Prevalence of Rumors and False News Stories

Rumors, false news stories, and yellow journalism¹⁸ are part of everyday life in many countries and they are even more an issue in countries undergoing political instability and/or violence. Myanmar, including Amarapura and Lashio are no exception. Based on information provided from respondents, the research team found that the sensitivity of the rumors and false news stories has subsided to some extent in comparison to during phase I of the project. However, it still remains a sensitive area and the rumors being circulated through Facebook and 'hate propaganda' and those targeted at individuals, are a cause for concern.

There are a few incidences of such actions (both spread of rumors and hate propaganda) that have worried some respondents from the minority communities.

One such incident of particular impact was mentioned by some of the respondents in Amarapura. As described by one respondent *"There were a few motor bikers (no one exactly knows who they are) who hurriedly came to a Muslim settlement and announced that the Buddhists are coming to attack the Muslim community and they should be ready to face them. After having said this, they fled away from the village. Probably, the same group of bikers came to a Buddhist Village and announced that the Kalar's (Muslims) are coming to attack the Buddhist community and they should be ready to face them. Again, they quickly disappeared from there before anyone could question them or get further information from them. This created an uneasy situation for people in both communities. This was followed by a hate-speech attack (against Muslims) by a Buddhist religious leader, which created further tensions. After the incident, most of the Muslim vendors stopped selling their products in Buddhist settlements (which they used to do as part of their everyday life)".* One of the Muslim respondents said that *"It had a direct impact on the daily income of the Muslim vendors as their business suffered"*. According to the respondents, it took a while for the tense environment to return to normal after the civil society members and religious leaders organized a talk program and discussion by bringing all stakeholders together from across dividing lines.

Facebook remains one of the prominent sources of rumors despite a significant decrease compared to two years ago. People also mentioned various types of rumor spreading through Facebook. Some of the examples of rumors are:

- Land-related rumors in Amarapura: According to interviewees, one government official spread a rumor that the land in a community is going to be taken by the government. When people heard such news, they trusted it and sold their land at a cheaper price. They later found that the rumor was untrue and a group of people spread that rumor to grab the land at a cheap price for their project.
- Another rumor in Lashio was that an illegal group is entering the village and stockpiling weapons. This created a sense of insecurity among people.

¹⁸ Yellow journalism is a form of writing that presents little to no legitimate evidence or reporting and instead uses eye-catching headlines to sell newspapers. Techniques may include hyperbole, exaggeration of news events, or sensationalism.

- There was a rumor that the water level in the Ayeyarwady River is becoming dangerously high. This message created a fear among people living beside the Irrawaddy River.
- There was another incident in Mandalay City, which had an implication on religious relationships. A Buddhist monk was severely ill. The interfaith committee organized a joint prayer to wish for his speedy recovery. However, someone made a video footage of a Muslim leader during the prayer and spread a rumor that he was praying in his own language (which should have been quite okay, even if he did it in reality). However, this was spread in such a negative way that people took it as an offense to Myanmar language.
- In another rumor, some unknown people issued a false statement in the name of a local NLD leader that they want to close down a mosque. However, when the Muslim leaders contacted the concerned NLD leaders, he was completely unaware of it and this rumor turned out to be completely untrue. Someone was trying to damage the image of the leaders and create tension between Muslims and the NLD.
- In another case, a rumor was spread about Muslim youth coming to a high school with weapons for a fight with Buddhist youth. But when the Buddhist youth went to the school, there was no Muslim youth in the school and the rumor turned out to be untrue.
- Similarly, there was another rumor related to fire in a monastery in Amarapura. A monastery in Amarapura caught fire because of an electrical short circuit. However, some people spread a rumor that Muslim people set fire in the monastery and it was severely damaged. Realizing the gravity of the issue, the Monk in the Monastery came out and told people that the fire was because of short circuit and Muslim people has nothing to do with this. He appealed people to keep calm and not to believe the rumor.

The examples show that there are still plenty of rumors spreading in the communities. However, the positive aspect is that people do not immediately trust such rumors and rather try to verify and calm down people through counter-narratives - quite a positive change that has been a common practice since the evaluation was conducted in Phase I of the project.

2.2.2 Ethnic/religious Tension through False Rumors

The inappropriate use of social media (particularly Facebook) is of particular concern. Some respondents shared a perception that this is a particular issue amongst the younger generation. Many times, they have been spreading (“sharing”) insensitive messages/online links without knowing the consequences of doing so. For example, there is a Facebook rumor going around Lashio that the armed groups are stocking arms in Lashio city and they have a plan to bomb the city soon. However, nobody was particularly worried about the rumor, even though some people also thought that it could be true as the Shan army and Ta’ang army have been fighting on the outskirts of the Lashio city for quite a while.

2.2.3 Information and Communication Channels

Word of mouth predominantly passed during teashop and beer station conversations are other means of disseminating all types of news and information among people. Tea shops are popular gathering places for people in Myanmar during the morning and afternoon; beer stations during evening and at night. Many rumors are created at the teashops and beer stations and then spread across communities. The rumors coming out of the beer stations could be more dangerous because people speak there under the influence of alcohol and they do not even realize the implications of such rumors. People discuss all of the news coming from the mainstream media as well as social media in those morning discussions, which are part of everyday life of the community's adults.

Many respondents said that, particularly in Lashio, people receive information about the fight between Shan and Ta'ang groups as well as with the military from the highway truck drivers on Lashio Highway. However, some people in Lashio also said that the local government employees are also involved in spreading rumors.

A number of respondents in Lashio shared that *"four months ago a government official in Lashio distributed a pamphlet saying that the Ta'ang army is coming to the city"*. However, this statement could not be independently verified as to whether this was genuinely true (or the involvement of a local government employee in spreading the rumor) or if it was just a misunderstanding of the people about that particular individual as a result of a rumor.

According to few respondents, there was another rumor that *'some people from ethnic armed groups sent a ransom letter with a bullet (inside it) to big hotels in the Night Bazar of Lashio. People said the hotel owners know the identity of the person but they will not reveal it for some unknown reasons. However, this rumor was refuted by Ta'ang Army saying that it is military propaganda to damage their reputation'*.

Compared to Amarapura, in Lashio respondents are more exposed to local, national as well as international media. Amarapura is a rural township where most of the people are engaged in trading/vending, traditional cloth weaving, wooden handicraft making and farming. People are not much exposed to formal media and also do not have time to sit in front of the TV, to listen to the radio or read newspapers. However, a few people interviewed in Mandalay City said they do listen to international channels.

However, Lashio has a different context as it is a major urban center of Northern Shan State and a trade point between China and rest of the country. Many people reported being exposed to different media sources. Some of the major media sources mentioned by the respondents in Lashio include Lashio News, Radio Free Asia, Democratic Voice of Burma, Voice of America, BBC, Irrawaddy News, Kumudra News, Seng Jaw News, Kachin News, Hukaung Kachin News, and Church News.

Respondents in Lashio credited Lashio News as the most reliable source of information. They even specifically mentioned the name of a couple of local journalists belonging to Lashio News. One of the respondents said, *"If a photo is posted on Facebook regarding Islam, I read the comments and ask the Muslim leaders about it. I also contact the Lashio News and conduct cross verification and confirm the truth of the news"*. He further said, *"Lashio News is always*

accepting and publishing counter-narratives if false news is being disseminated. I always contact Ko Nay Myo from Lashio News.”

Based on the news coverage and other programs they broadcast, people tend to associate news channels with one particular group whether it be political or ethnic. However, this judgment is very subjective and does not have any factual basis. One respondent even branded one of the most popular and credible (according to other majority respondents) news channels as biased and labeled it as a public relations agent of the Union Government. People said that every ethnic group has its own media source and these media sources write/publish/broadcast only that news which pleases their community.

2.2.4 Community Information Management Committees, Civil Society, Government and Media

The CIMCs are still operating in all areas where the research was conducted. The members of such groups are active at the time of writing, despite a lack of funding to support their activities. However, most of the members of CIMCs are also affiliated with other civil society organizations, so sometimes people identify the CIMC members with their other formal organizations rather than CIMC.

There are a few other organizations also active in both Amarapura and Lashio. One of the active networks is the informal interfaith network active in both places, whose members organize monthly meetings to discuss issues surrounding religious relationships and conflict involving people from different religions. In Lashio, the interfaith network also organizes visits to religious places every month that helps people to understand more about other religions. There is also an interfaith youth network (involving 12 youth) in Lashio, which works to spread messages around religious tolerance and organizes discussions about different religions. Actually, there are two interfaith networks in Lashio: one formed by CSO networks, which particularly focuses on spreading positive messages on HIV AIDS, while the government-recognized interfaith network (MINA Network), also focuses on spreading positive messages on health issues. Their potential contribution to peacebuilding and rumor management needs to be further researched. It is important to identify as well as to see whether there may be entry points to bring these two networks together around common issues.

Similarly, the Metta Campaign and 88 Students Group are also active with various interfaith and other activities in Mandalay City. Some independent journalists are also playing a positive role in managing rumors by writing fact-based news only. However, the local respondents and the government authorities interviewed are not aware of the role of CSOs in rumor management and promoting peacebuilding in their communities, as both of these groups failed to mention the formal existence and operation of CSOs, including informal networks, and their work thus far.

Some respondents in Lashio said that they apply **5W 1H Approach** (which refers to **What, Why, When, Where, Who and How**) to verify any rumors they hear. Almost all respondents said that they do not pass along any Facebook messages or information from any other sources without verifying their authenticity. However, such fact checking is very personal and depends on the source of verification. Despite this challenge of fact-checking, this is a good practice that's developing in the community and a significant positive change in the last two years.

Respondents had mixed opinions on the role of media/journalists and government authorities. Many said that the media is quite divided. They write the news and analysis that favors one perspective or another. However, the situation in Lashio is further complicated as all ethnic groups have their own media outlets (print, TV, radio and online media) and journalists, and they write in favor of the interest of the respective ethnic communities or other interest groups. This has contributed to creating a partition and polarization of communities, who do not know the stories and the situation of the 'other' side. However, the majority of the interviewees also said that the Lashio News is the most reliable source of information for most of the people from diverse communities, with few disagreeing on this. One respondent in Mandalay City shared a perception that that the role of media/journalists has not been damaging when it comes to inter-religious relationships in recent years as they are careful in writing news related to the religious conflict. The role of citizen journalists, though, is highly appreciated by respondents from a cross-section of the society.

The respondents have mixed reactions on the role of journalists on managing or spreading rumors. They said that there are different types of journalists and media outlets depending on their affiliation and interest. They identified five types of journalists:

- *USDP/Military backed media/journalists*: They are closer to the former military rulers and the USDP Party, write for them and always criticize the current NLD-led government
- *Media/journalists supporting MaBaTha and 969*: They carry the agendas of MaBaTha/969 and highlight the work and support the interests of MaBaTha.
- *Independent and Democratic journalists*: They are only a few and write independently without much bias. They promote democratic values and principles and highlight people's suffering and plight.
- *Government media journalists*: They are affiliated with government media institutions and mainly highlight government agendas and perspectives. They do not spread propaganda.
- *Citizen journalists*: They work independently and write on people's agendas and suffering from a community-based news perspective.

Many respondents noted how most of the media and journalists are polarized across political lines, and a few of them, particularly in Lashio, across ethnic lines. They have not played major roles in creating religious divides in recent years. However, despite this assessment, media and journalists remain key stakeholders in promoting a positive environment and in managing rumors in Myanmar and this domain require special attention from any stakeholders who wish to minimize the spread of rumors and hate speech in Myanmar.

The government officials, however, are not much involved in this matter. There has been civil society collaboration with Special Branch (SB) in verifying information in Mandalay City. The Vice-Mayor of Mandalay City and two of the Village Ward Administrators interviewed in Amarapura Township said that they are busy in managing their own administration and do not have time to take care of "other things." The Vice Mayor said that "*We publish all our official documents on the government website and people can visit them to verify specific information*

that concerns them. Other than that, we do not have any further activities to curtail rumors related to government works.” Despite the prevalent and potential damage of rumors and hate speech to the Myanmar society, based on information provided from respondents it does not look like it falls in the list of areas of concern of the municipal government.

However, some people have quite a positive outlook on the role of local level government officials in contributing to maintaining law and order as well as social harmony. Around half of the respondents said that the government and the police have been quite pro-active in cases of rumors and other criminal incidents to defuse tension in both places. This shows that the public trust of police and local government officials is relatively good. However, this may be more related to changing attitudes and behavior of the public towards government officials for their development work, rather than an acknowledgment of their contribution towards managing rumors and curbing hate speech.

The CSO leaders interviewed said that the government officials were more accommodating towards communicating with CSOs than previously. Some civil society leaders said, *“Earlier the Government officials did not even pick up their phones when we tried to reach out to them. Now, they are more accommodating and receive and respond to phone calls and meeting requests from CSOs and other individuals”*. The positive shift in the behavior of the government officials was quite evident in the way the Vice Mayor of Mandalay city received our research team when one of the CIMC members brought us to his office for the meeting.

CHAPTER - THREE

3.1 Conclusions

The assessment revealed that the conflict dynamics in Mandalay City, Amarapura Township and Lashio have improved significantly since the final evaluation of Phase I of the project completed end of 2015. The 2015 election win for NLD, increasing political awareness among people, increased sense of communal harmony and enhanced social cohesion in the two regions contributed to the positive shift in overall conflict dynamics in areas where research was conducted.

All the people interviewed feel that there is very little threat of immediate violence, even if some parts of the country are still recovering from recent outbreaks of violence, especially in Rakhine State. With a long history of violence, particularly in ethnic areas, it is too early to expect a major shift in the overall conflict dynamics in the country. Further, due to the aftermath of communal violence spreading throughout the country in 2012-2013 and armed conflict in Shan State violence is very fresh in the memory of people.

However, the political transformation in the last two years has definitely created a sense of hope and optimism among people. So, people are happy that there is little threat of religious violence in their communities and people has a stronger sense of communal harmony and mutual respect, despite sporadic incidents of conflict and rumors making the rounds through word of mouth or social media.

Despite that the threat of violence in target communities is perceived to be very low; though, there is still a sense of vulnerability among community members. The conversations revealed that they are completely unaware of how a small trigger can ignite the flames of conflict. With ongoing hate speech throughout the country and the potential for violence very real, there is still a hidden sense of insecurity and a feeling of helplessness among Muslims and minority religious communities in both places. The conversation with members of minority groups revealed that people are either unaware of the social and political dynamics of the community and the region, or pretend that everything is going well in their community out of a sense of insecurity and helplessness, as well as a way of ensuring their own social protection.

The influence of rumors has been reduced compared to two years ago. However, there are sporadic cases of the spread of rumors through Facebook, word of mouth and propaganda messaging using motorbike riders. Teashops and beer stations are the commonplaces to discuss all kinds of news and are used by local people to discuss politics, economic, social issues along with rumors and false news that they've heard. There have been cases when rumors caused uncomfortable situations between Buddhists and Muslims in Amarapura, that were addressed through civil society initiatives involving dialogue and discussion.

Civil society groups are playing a role in managing rumors and conflicts. CIMCs and other informal networks are not only working to manage rumors but also working as a platform for conflict resolution occasionally, sometimes in an organized manner and sometimes through individual efforts. However, their role is not effective enough and certain CSO groups have a huge potential to manage rumors and conflicts. Youth have been ignored in the whole process of rumor management even if they are the ones who are easily manipulated or influenced by the

content of rumors. However, youth can play a vital role in minimizing rumors and influencing their peers for positive messaging and sharing counter-narratives. Further, journalists are divided across political lines and many represent the interest of NSAGs and ethnic political parties, and other identity lines. However, they have not been active in spreading religious hatred. There has not been a strong enough role of government authorities in managing rumors, but their proactive work addressing some of the special incidents is recognized for its successes and potential.

3.2 Recommendations

Despite the decreasing trend of conflict and reduced extent of rumors, the two project locations are not completely immune to violence and hatred. Based on the findings, the assessment furnished the following recommendations for effective programming. While these recommendations are tailored for the project, these recommendations are relevant for other stakeholders working on similar initiatives in these areas, or similar conflict context areas of the country.

- Search and MIDO need to strengthen and expand the CIMCs so that their work becomes more visible. The research has identified some capacity building needs for the CIMC committees especially on organizational management, network formation and operation (to support both older and younger generations), conflict management and the Common Ground Approach, dialogue facilitation, and collaborative approaches, among others.
- The role of the interfaith committees has a huge potential in managing smooth inter-religious dynamics. Search and MIDO could strengthen their role, to provide some dialogue and collaboration skills and support them so that they can play a larger role in building religious harmony and managing rumors related to issues that manifest as religious tensions.
- The project could also work with respective religious leaders to positively utilize the regular religious platforms like the Islamic Friday Prayers, Christian Sunday Masses, and Buddhist religious gatherings to promote religious tolerance and inter-religious harmony as religious leaders are highly influential in shaping the thinking and attitude of their followers.
- The youth population has been one of the most neglected groups so far. They are considered to be less influential in Myanmar Society. They are highly vulnerable to manipulation by various interest groups. Search and MIDO need to work with them to positively mobilize them and create larger youth networks that work to spread positive messaging or counter-narratives especially among their peers, who are most susceptible to the effect of rumors and false news stories.
- The project needs to work in promoting social media literacy among the target population. Since Facebook is still the biggest source of rumors, the project needs to focus on creating awareness and knowledge on the positive use of Facebook among the younger generation.

- The project needs to design some outreach activities targeting teashops (such as facilitated teashop conversation) to positively shape these conversations.
- In order to promote inter-community relationships, it is important to organize periodic outreach activities that bring diverse community members together to share and discuss issues that help improve relationships. More activities that regularly engage and involved people from across ethnic and religious divides would be helpful in subsiding rumors and promoting communal harmony.
- If possible, the project should work with journalists and social media bloggers to promote conflict-sensitive journalism and mobilize media personnel as positive agents of peace and social harmony.
- The project should organize a regular meeting with government stakeholders so that they will be aware of the project as well as realize the urgency of managing rumors for stronger governance.
- Search needs to collaborate with other international organizations, which are already working in information management and using similar tools and approaches, to create synergy and generate value for money.
- The project also needs to work with media/journalists and civil society actors to bring them together into a single platform and bridge the divide between them so that the impact of such community-based efforts of managing information can be amplified.

Annexes

Annex 1: List of People Interviewed

KII Participants List Mandalay City Amarapura Township

People	Age	Gender	Job	Education
Person 1	22	Trans-Gender	Action Aid Myanmar	BSc. Chemistry
Person 2	42	Female	odd job	Grade=5
Person 3	70	Male/Female	Bali teacher, student	Grade=7, B.A (Myanmar) Third Year
Person 4	57	Male	U Yin Taw Administrator	B.A Myanmar
Person 5	52	Male	CSO. (Metta Campaign)Director. Founder	BSc. Physic
Person 6	43	Male	Real Estate	BA history
Person 7	22	Female	PGDMA	B.Ec
Person 8	43	Female	Textile business	B.Sc. Math
Person 9	38	Female	Dependent	Grade=11
Person 10	39	Male	Actor(NLD communication officer, Village General Administrator	Grade=9
Person 11	25	Male	Segel Program Officer Trainer	Psycho (Dist.)
Person 12	38	Female	World Vision (volunteer)	Grade=11
Person 13	43	Male	Shoes Seller	B.A Myanmar
Person 14	50	Male	Presiding monk	Da Mar Sa Yi Ya
Person 15	59	Male	Clinic ,Musician	Grade=11

Person 16	39	Male	Hundred House Administrator	Grade=8
Person 17	50	Male	Driver	First year
Person 18	38	Male	Hair Stylist	Grade=9
Person 19	22	Male	Student	Fourth year at the University of Dental Medicine
Person 20	36	Male	Projector Officer	B.A Psycho
Person 21	32	Male	Driver	Grade=5
Person 22	36	Male	Trader	LLB
Person 23	29	Male	NA	Final year
Person 24	45	Male	Vice-Mayor(Mandalay)	Engineering
Person 25	24	Male	Weaving machine	Grade=11

FGD Participants List Mandalay City and Amarapura Township

No.	No. Of FGD	Categories	No. Of Participants
1	FGD 1	Women	16
2	FGD 2	Man	6
3	FGD 3	Journalists	6
4	FGD 4	Youth (Amarapura)	9
5	FGD 5	Youth (Mandalay City)	7
6	FGD 6	CSO	7
Total Participants			51

KII Participants List Lashio

People	Age	Gender	Job	Education
Person 1	40	Female	Tailor	
Person 2	52	Male	Doctor	MBBs
Person 3	53	Male	Budget Controller at NLD	
Person 4	31	Female	Admin at SNLD	
Person 5	43	Female	Project Manager at MPG	Graduated
Person 6	Unknown	Female	Staff at Community Home Based Care	
Person 7	45	Female	CIMC member (Lisu Party)	Political Science
Person 8	29	Female	Focal Coordinator at CBI	Graduated
Person 9	33	Male	Monk	Dhammar Sariya
Person 10	47	LGBT	CSO at A Linn Mie Eain	
Person 11	Unknown	Female	Dependent	
Person 12	53	Male	Officer at Muslim Youths	
Person 13	Unknown	Female	Woman Activist	
Person 14	38	Male	Maw La Wi/ Bali Sayardaw	
Person 15	30	LGBT	Project Manager at Lashio Tomboys and Lesbians group	
Person	37	Female	Owner at Tet Nay Htun Express	

16			Car	
Person 17	33	Male	Focal person at Kann Lat	
Person 18	Unknown	Female		
Person 19	29	Female		
Person 20	unknown	Male	Reporter at Myit Ma Kha Media	
Person 21	51	Male	Religious Leader	
Person 22	unknown	LGBT		
Person 23	unknown	Male	work at Car accessories store	
Person 24	23	Male	Student	Eng Final
Person 25	24	LGBT	Leader at Youth Interfaith	Final year(Myanmar)
Person 26	31	Male	CSO	B.Sc. (Chemistry)
Person 27	32	Male	Staff at Christian Religious office	Graduated

Annex 2: Concept Note to Guide the Assessment

Brief note for the Rapid Conflict Assessment in Amarapura and Lashio

Search for Common Ground Myanmar July 2017

As part of the Rumor Management Project, Search Myanmar and its partner MIDO will be helped by Search's Institutional Learning Team to carry out the rapid conflict assessment in Amarapura (Mandalay Region) and Lashio (Northern Shan State). Search's ILT, especially its Asia Regional DM&E Specialist has been closely involved in designing the phase I and Phase II projects, supervising and overseeing the Information Management Research carried out during the Phase I of the project and independently carried out the final evaluation of Phase I of the project. So, he is the best positioned to carry out the rapid conflict assessment for the Phase II of the project.

A short rapid conflict and capacity assessment will be conducted by the project team together with the key community influencers and will include satellite areas outside of the committees' main influence and focus. The assessment will be structured in such a way so that the assessment team members are capacitated in elements of research: facilitation of dialogue and discussion, and analysis through learning by doing. In this case, the assessment will also give Search and MIDO the opportunity to identify any shifts in conflict trends over the time period that the project was not active. Workshops will be held, bringing the CIMCCs together to support exchange and cross-regional learning and to identify regional conflict trends and potential solutions, and will provide opportunities for briefings and sharing among the committees with key influential stakeholders in their areas, potentially at the national level as well.

The rapid conflict assessment will be completed within one month from the date of commencement, which includes 3 days of assessment design, 6-8 days of data collection in the field and 7 days of report writing and 2 days of report finalization. The assessment will basically involve qualitative methods of data collection primarily through document review, literature review, KIIs, FGDs, CIMCs and others relevant stakeholders' workshop (where possible) and field observation. The assessment will also take reference from the CIM research carried out by the external consultant during the Phase I and the final evaluation carried out by the ILT at the end of phase I.

The Rapid Assessment will be guided by a brief inception report, which includes the key research questions and corresponding data collection tools. Some of the key questions (Tentative List) for the assessment are, but not limited to, as follows:

- What is the state of community information management in the two townships?
- What is the shifting dynamics of the Community Information Management in these two townships in the last two years, particularly after the completion of Phase I?
- How do people receive, interpret and react to the information received from various sources, especially the social media?

- What role media plays in managing or sensationalizing the unverified information received from various sources?
- Who are the major stakeholders? Have there been new stakeholders surfaced in the last two years?
- How is the interethnic and interreligious conflict dynamics shaping in the two townships? Has there any specific shift post-Phase I?
- How is the gender dynamics of the conflict dynamics as well as that of information management?
- What are the areas or point of intervention to manage community information locally?
- How is the CIMCs are operating Post Phase I?
- What support do they require?

The inception report will be developed by the ILT members and shared with Search Myanmar and MIDO for their comments, suggestions, and feedback before finalizing it. Once finalized and agreed upon by Search Myanmar, the ILT Specialist will conduct field data collection in Amarapura and Lashio. Once the data collection is completed, the ILT Specialist will develop a reporting template and share with Search Myanmar and MIDO. Once agreed on the content of the template, the specialist will write the assessment report in line with the template and share with Search and MIDO for feedback and comments. After incorporating all comments from Search and MIDO, the report will be finalized and shared with the public through <https://www.sfcg.org/tag/Myanmar-reports>.

Annex 3: Interview Checklists

Interview Checklist for KII/FGDs

Instructions for the interviewer

1. Please introduce yourself, the project and the research and the tentative time required for the interview/FGD.
2. Please ask their consent for the interview and audio recording for the interview/discussion
3. Please tell them that they are free to NOT to answer any questions or leave the interview/discussion anytime if they feel so.

Instruction for the Note Taker

1. Please make sure that you capture the conversation in depth. Please write as detailed as possible.
2. Do not miss out major points highlighted by the participants
3. Please make sure that you capture the stories and examples given by the participants in full detail.
4. Also, capture the facts and figures highlighted/mentioned by the participants as they should not be neglected during note taking.
5. Ask for clarification if required or if you are not clear on what they are saying. As a Note taker, you are not prohibited from asking clarifying questions. Either you can ask directly or you can request the facilitator to ask the follow-up or clarifying the question.
6. Do not write anything if you are not sure or confused. Clarify it before writing.

No.	Questionnaires	Purpose	Example to Use
	Introduction	Introduce the research and why are we doing this. Ask for consent to audio record and recording their name	
	What is your name/Age/Occupation/Place Origin		
	Rapid Assessment Situation of Conflict dynamics		
1	How are things in your community and in Mandalay/Lashio, in general?	Icebreaker/building rapport	
2	What types of conflict have been occurring in your community/place in the last two years? How did they happen? What caused them? Were they repeated? Draw a timeline of the conflicts over the last two years?	To understand overall conflict dynamics in the community based on people's lives experiences	
3	<i>Who were the major stakeholders of the conflict? What was their role in the conflict? Who benefited and who suffered? Who are the most vulnerable groups in your community? Are there any new stakeholders surfaced/re-surfaced in the conflict dynamics in your community?</i>	To identify major stakeholders of conflict and their interaction and relationship	
4	<i>How do men and women react/respond to the conflict? Do they react similarly or differently? If different, How?</i>	To see how the gender role affecting conflict dynamics	
5	How it changed the dynamics within the community?	To understand the impact of conflict on the community/society/group	
6	<i>How these conflicts impact (ed) the lives of people?</i>	To understand the impact at individual level	

7	Do you see any difference in the conflict pattern and its impact on the society or groups or individual compared to the situation two years ago?	To understand the shifting pattern of conflict, if any	
8	How is the level of vulnerability of your locality in terms of conflict dynamics compared to two years before?	To understand if the vulnerability has changed over the years or not. If yes, how has it changed	
9	<i>Is the pattern of conflicts before 2016 and after 2016 has been remarkably shifted? If yes, why it is?</i>	To compare if there is a change in conflict pattern in the last two years.	
10	<i>How are people or groups reacting or responding to conflict situation? What are the conflict prevention mechanism or activities adopted in the last two years? Are there any innovative approaches used? Are there any specific groups playing a constructive role?</i>	To understand community reaction to any specific piece of information	
11	What are the different sources you receive information, in general? Where do you go to talk about news and meet with your friends? E.g. tea shop, beer station?	To understand the receiving and disseminating pattern of information	
12	<i>When you receive new information from any sources, what is your first reaction?</i>	Do	
13	<i>When you hear/receive information (fake or genuine), who /which sources do you usually check it with if you do so? Why you chose that person/source? How do you determine which news is fake and</i>	Do	

	<i>which is genuine?</i>		
14	<i>Can you tell an example of a news/rumor spread in your community that left an impact on the society? How did it impact?</i>	To understand the impact of rumor in the society	
15	<i>Do you know that there are any particular types of information people are more likely to share?</i>	TO understand the societal attitude in different types of news	
16	<i>What are the main types of news sources you trust? Are there certain people that you trust as credible news sources? Who /what are they?</i>	To understand different types of news sources	
17	<i>What sorts of news (fake and real) could make you and people around worried? Why?</i>	To understand the most sensitive types of news	
18	<i>Are there any influencers/leaders who could positive role in bringing positive changes in the society? Within two years, such influencers/leaders are getting stronger or not? Or how do you assess their role in the last two years?</i>	To identify major community influences and their role in community	
19	<i>What role are the religious leaders/ethnic leaders playing in shaping the conflict dynamics? How do they communicate within their religious spheres and How do they communicate across divides? Are there any extremist religious groups working for political gain? What is their role in spreading rumors?</i>	To understand the role of religious leaders	

20	<p><i>Do you know any CBOs/Groups, which are working for information management and countering the hate speech and fake news/rumors?</i></p> <p><i>Do you know who are working in such CBOs/Groups?</i></p> <p><i>Those members are active and are reliable to have authentic news?</i></p> <p><i>Could you please tell us what their activities are and how they are running?</i></p>	To understand the civil society action in info management and identify specific CO groups in this field	
21	<p><i>How important they are and what is the effectiveness of their activities?</i></p>	Do	
22	<p><i>How is the CIMC (Use local name) coordinating with Community people and the Government officials/Local Authorities?</i></p> <p><i>How did you know about CIMCs? How do they communicate with the community, online or offline?</i></p>	TO understand the public awareness and area of influence of CIMCs	
23	<p><i>What is the role of media in managing or sensationalizing the unverified information received through various sources? How do you evaluate the role of journalists?</i></p>	To understand role of media in Info Management	
24	<p><i>In your opinion, what could be the good strategies in managing rumors in your community? Who are the major stakeholders we need to work with?</i></p>	To understand people perception on effective information management	
25	<p><i>How do you assess the role of government authorities/Local authorities in managing conflict (or</i></p>	TO understand the role of government in	

	<i>deteriorating conflict)?</i>	Information Mgt	
	Questions to CIM members only		
26	<i>What activities did you do in the past two years to facilitate the rumor management and conflict resolution?</i>	CIMC Capacity needs assessment	
27	<i>What are you most proud of?</i>	Do	
28	<i>What are your Strong points as a CIM committee or individual CIMC member?</i>	Do	
29	<i>What additional Capacity you need to effectively work as a rumor management/conflict resolution platform. Please list institutional, individual, management, facilitating and any other capacity they mention.</i>	Do	

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