Myanmar Program Overview

Search Myanmar was established in April 2014 to support the peace process at the local level, encourage social cohesion nationwide, and provide opportunities for skills building in conflict analysis and conflict transformation with a multitude of diverse stakeholders. With a 97% national team – made up of ethnically and religiously diverse individuals, and 1 expatriate with a long-rooted history in the country, Search has been collaborating with over fifteen local partners and has built a diverse network of over 10,000 stakeholders across dividing lines throughout the entire country. Its programming has engaged government, ethnic armed groups, and civil society including women, youth and minorities, media (both public and private) and the private sector. Supported by Search’s global experience in participatory processes, Search Myanmar is uniquely positioned to ensure its work is rooted in and driven by local needs. Using both traditional and innovative tools, Search Myanmar works through a three-pronged participatory strategy that tackles core dividing lines between government and public, intra-inter-ethnic tensions, and mitigates enabling conditions for violence by 1) fostering an inclusive peace process, 2) building resilience against triggers of violence and 3) strengthening relationships between authorities and the public to support the democratic transition.

Fostering an Inclusive Peace Process

In Myanmar, the peace process is viewed as elite-driven and does not adequately include the broad range of local perspectives needed to craft an effective political transition. Local populations remain unaware of the aims of the national ceasefire agreement and do not see a role for themselves in supporting the peace at a local level. To raise public awareness of the process as it unfolds and build support and buy-in for the implementation of a final agreement, Search Myanmar began implementing its project “Communicating for the future: building confidence and trust in the peace process” in July 2018. With the support of the Joint Peace Fund, Search is enhancing engagement and dialogue among representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), governments and other stakeholders of the peace architecture around community-based issues to increase understanding and the participation of the general public and divided communities in the ongoing peacebuilding efforts through communication campaigns and cultural interactions in seven target states/regions and amongst the general public. Thus, Search aims to cultivate an inclusive process, support the public as agents of change, and support the realization of shared norms for a common trajectory for peace.

Building Resilience to Violence

Search Myanmar is working not only to address root causes of violence, but also to build resiliencies of local communities and the public to triggers of violence. Starting in October 2015, Search implemented a project to minimize the impact of rumors and manipulated information as triggers of violence. To combat the effect of misinformation, Search Myanmar identified key community influencers and supported them in the Common Ground Approach, media literacy and rumor management. These community influencers then formed Community Information Committees (CIMCs) and passed on their training to over 600 participants across one state and one region prone to inter-communal tensions, reaching over 500,000 people. Empowered

*The more social cohesion knowledge we gain, the more we can apply it. I believe that this knowledge will help us to contribute to the peace processes in Myanmar. Understanding what divides the diverse people sitting at the table is the best way to solve conflict* - Dr San San Aye, Director General, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement
with tools and locally developed strategies, the CIMC members have mitigated local conflict dynamics and are able to question information spread via social media reducing an enabling environment for violence. In addition, Search Myanmar began supporting local organizations in quantifying and demonstrating the impact of their work combating hate speech in June 2017. 23 organizations participated in trainings, contributed to the design of a toolkit and user guide for the monitoring and evaluation of their work and created a platform to learn from each other that can continue beyond the project life.

Search is also supporting positive shifts in attitudes, knowledge and behavior, addressing fears of majority groups, nationalism and extremism, and challenging historical narratives and structural frameworks that exacerbate divides by collaborating with local communities and partners, media professionals, and key influencers to shift social norms. Drawing on Search’s global expertise using media and culture for peacebuilding, “Investing in Popular Culture to Support an Inclusive Transition to Peace and Reconciliation” first started introducing new creative tools for conflict transformation in Myanmar using media, film, and cultural arts in March 2014. Since then, Search has conducted detailed conflict mapping and capacity building trainings for actors and media professionals and produced short films, radio dramas and two TV drama series that bring stories for the ground up, grapple with key conflict drivers and provide positive portrayals of ethnic, religious, and social minority groups.

**Strengthening Relationships**

Search recognizes the importance of mainstreaming social cohesion competencies and conflict transformation skills, among governance officials and citizens alike, in an effort to improve inclusive participation, democratic governance and service delivery. Since January 2015, Search has conducted a series of trainings on social cohesion with high-level national government officials, township planners and civil society. Search Myanmar has also developed a locally built “Social Cohesion Framework” based on these trainings and 10 months of consultations in all states that outlines a Myanmar-owned definition of social cohesion and has provided the basis for future projects and trainings. Currently, this framework is being adapted to the context of Rakhine State, where Search Myanmar will be working to address trust deficits between local authorities and the Rakhine communities, working with both to institutionalize social cohesion in both government and civil society processes for more equitable and conflict-sensitive service delivery. To address the trust deficit between the state and citizens that has contributed to the ineffectiveness of service provision in Rakhine State and contributes to the grievances of the Rakhine, Search is also implementing a project to strengthen CSOs, especially women and youth organizations, in their collaboration with local authorities (LAs) and provision of services to divided communities from March 2018 to December 2020. The proposed Social Cohesion Service Delivery Model will support LAs and CSOs to overcome trust deficits, engage collaboratively, share visions for the state, and address jointly identified needs.

**Looking Forward**

As the conflict context continues to shift and evolve, Search Myanmar recognizes the drivers of conflict across Myanmar’s borders, and is refining its strategy to include engaging with stakeholders from Myanmar’s neighbors—such as Bangladesh, China, Sri Lanka and Thailand—to improve regional cooperation on issues of shared concern, such as countering extremism, forced displacement and the impact of investment on human rights.