

Case Study | Image Credit: Protection metaphor "Like a shady tree for those in trouble" by workshop participant, Kachin state, Myanmar, 2017

# Enhancing Civilian Protection Practices in Myanmar

Research Theme: Society

## RESEARCHER

Professor Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

## THE OVERVIEW

A major challenge of international humanitarian and peacebuilding assistance has been how to develop programmes which are both context-sensitive and needs-based. In Myanmar, even before the recent military coup of February 2021, this was particularly evident. A lack of access, trust and the marginalisation of local voices in conflict zones made knowledge of local contexts and needs difficult to determine. Through collaborative research, Professor Berit Bliesemann de Guevara developed an adaptable, easily applicable drawing method, *DrawingOut*, and explored how it can help capture the everyday effects of violence on communities and better understand context-specific protection needs. Project partner Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) adopted the new method with positive effects on their interactions with protection partners and beneficiaries.



## THE RESEARCH

In Myanmar, 8.3 million people live amidst violent conflict and displacement. Knowledge about these communities' conflict experiences is essential to the needs-based programming of humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) offering unarmed protection. Even during Myanmar's democratic period between 2011 and 2021, gaining this knowledge was difficult due to the Burmese authorities' access restrictions, low levels of trust after decades of military dictatorship and war, and entrenched power dynamics in local communities which can lead to the marginalisation of some local voices. This situation has only been exacerbated by the military coup of 1 February 2021.

In "Raising Silent Voices", a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Professor Bliesemann de Guevara and colleagues explored how local knowledge of conflict-affected communities in Myanmar can be accessed by INGOs to promote unarmed civilian protection.

Working in consultation with the INGO Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), the research team adapted the metaphor-centred drawing method *DrawingOut* to enable users to better capture community experiences in an open and socio-culturally meaningful way.

## THE IMPACT

Adopting the method designed through Professor Bliesemann de Guevara's research enabled NP Myanmar to address problems of limited physical, linguistic and cultural access to beneficiary communities in an effective manner by:

### ENHANCING NP'S CONFLICT UNDERSTANDING AND PROGRAMMING PRACTICE

Implementing the *DrawingOut* method enhanced the INGO's knowledge about the violent conflicts in Myanmar by unearthing deeper, more authentic, and more sensitive information more quickly.

### STRENGTHENING LOCAL OWNERSHIP OF PROTECTION PRACTICE

Adopting the *DrawingOut* method strengthened local ownership of the peace process, improved inclusion and equality, and levelled power differentials in NP engagements with and among partners. The method enabled diverse participants to set the agenda in engagements with NP and each other, which amplified marginalised voices and levelled power differentials.

### ENHANCING TRUST AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN DIVERSE LOCAL PARTNERS

The method enhanced trust and communication between NP's partners, which enabled new local collaborations for protection and peace. NP Myanmar used *DrawingOut* in training and workshops with partners from geographically and ethnically different, and often antagonistic, states and regions. This improved communication and inclusion and offered an opportunity for people to communicate, reflect and discuss difficult questions.

### ENHANCING RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE FUTURE

NP's adoption of the method benefitted members of conflict-affected communities by improving NP's work with eight partner organizations and approximately 170 multipliers among protection and peace workers, civil society organizations and beneficiaries.

While the military coup of 2021 put a halt to both the democratic transition and the peace processes in the country, the relationships enhanced through the method are hoped to continue during this new time of civil resistance and remote protective accompanying of civilian actors in Myanmar.

As the NP Myanmar Country Director observed in 2020 about the future protection and peace work of their Burmese partners:

“Once there's empathy and understanding, it actually becomes the foundation of how people respond in the future. The changes may be very small, but they incrementally make a big difference.”

NP MYANMAR COUNTRY DIRECTOR



Kachin workshop participant printing leaves to reflect on the question "What makes my community peaceful?"  
Credit: Raising Silent Voices - Myanmar research team, 2018.