Reflections on Myanmar Civil Society

In this series of papers, Kepa publishes reflections on the state of civil society in the regions in which it operates (Mekong region and regions around Nicaragua, Mozambique and Tanzania). These reflections, based on Kepa’s own work with its partners, member organisations and their partners in the country, provide an overview and highlight some current issues and developments in the role of civil society organisations.

Civil society consists of many different actors from small informal activist groups to big institutionalised organisations. In these reflections, civil society organisation (CSO) is used as an overall concept to cover all these actors. The term NGO is used only if it specifically refers to registered, institutionalised non-governmental organisations, while CBO stands for community-based organisation. INGO refers to international non-governmental organisations.

Kepa in Myanmar

In the countries of the Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam), Kepa operates from a regional office based in Bangkok. Kepa Mekong forms partnerships with civil society actors to support them in influencing development policy processes in the region. Partnerships are linked to Kepa’s key policy themes: development cooperation, global economic policies and climate justice.

Kepa Mekong does not yet include Myanmar, though many of the issues in the Mekong region do include interventions in Myanmar, which have been followed by the Kepa Mekong office in Bangkok for years.

Myanmar is gradually democratizing and opening up to the rest of the world. That has brought both positive and negative phenomena. On the positive side, there is the increased space and freedom for NGOs and CSOs to operate. But a negative development is rapid influx of foreign companies and development agencies that might use the fairly non-regulated environment to their own advantage.

Historical background

Burma – Myanmar was a brutal military dictatorship for nearly 50 years before it started to change, from 2010 onwards, to be more open and democratic, according to the roadmap the military junta adopted in 2003. Few people, especially in the exiled Burmese community, believed in this roadmap, and therefore the change came unexpectedly. In 2008 at the Asia Europe Peoples Forum in Beijing China the first direct contacts started with organisations inside Myanmar, as well as the first links between exiled community and organisations from Myanmar.

There have been NGOs and CBOs in Burma-Myanmar for many years but they were mainly working in the informal social sector, such as for women, children, and health. The human rights and environmental movement was mostly in exile or working underground.

A very active and diverse Burmese NGO community is in Chiang Mai, Thailand, but many of
them did have contacts inside Burma/Myanmar also during the dictatorship. Many of them are now returning to Myanmar and picking up their work there.

**Main Actors in Myanmar Civil Society**

Prior to the changes of 2011, civil society centred mainly on either religious organisations or some organisations with a leader from the junta's family. The Renewable Energy Association Myanmar (REAM) was established in 1994 by INGOs and was led by retired academics. REAM has a representative currently in the presidential advisory group for renewable energy.

After 2011 the scene changed completely, and many genuine civil society organisations and NGOs were born or brought from outside. Suddenly the NGOs could work openly and address various issues without being afraid of harassment.

In January 2013 the author of this document was able to visit many of the NGOs and they could talk about what they do. A couple of years before we would not have even been able to meet them. Only curious thing is that NGOs have offices in apartment houses, not in office houses openly with an address and a sign than in other Mekong countries.

To find the NGOs we had to call them and let a taxi or motorcycle driver to talk to them to explain where they are. Nowadays NGOs can do advocacy work and challenge the authorities on various issues. Long-time activist Madame Khin Ni Ni Thein returned from Thailand back to Myanmar in 2012 and is currently lobbying the president and the government on green economy issues.

**Government and NGOs**

The law on the Formation of Organisations is from 1988, and in the past the registration of an NGO took a long time and politicians or government staff could not be part of or form an organisation. This year, 2013, the law is being amended to speed up the registration to take maximum 60 days, and the politicians and government people could join and form organisations, if the amendments are passed in the parliament later this year.

**INGOs and Funding of Civil Society**

AusAid is currently funding a civil society capacity building program in Myanmar. INGOs and regional organisations have been important sources for funding for local and other Burmese NGOs during the past years. Now that INGO and governmental development funding is pouring in the local NGOs are very pressured with meeting with several donors every day.

The application of the Paris declaration on harmonizing the procedures and cooperation with various donors is desperately needed, along with other norms and regulations to safeguard the recipient. On the other hand, what the Myanmar NGOs are asking for most are contacts and information on what is happening in the rest of the world, as for many years they have been cut off from news about the world outside. They are less interested in financial support and more on networking and possibilities to see alternative development models.
**Finnish NGOs working in Myanmar**

Many Finnish NGOs are now planning to implement projects in Myanmar. There have been three Finnish NGOs and two foundations with prolonged projects in Myanmar.

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<tr>
<th>Finnish NGO</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Local partner</th>
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<td>Work on Myanmar Peace and Reconciliation</td>
<td>Euro Burma Office, Yangon</td>
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<td>FIDA International</td>
<td>Regional project on coordination and a project on community development in 8 regions in Myanmar</td>
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<td>Finnish Red Cross</td>
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<td>Siemenpuu Foundation</td>
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<td>Finnish Trade Union Solidarity Center SASK</td>
<td>Developing Forest and Wood workers trade union</td>
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<td>VIKES Media and Communication Foundation</td>
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