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Self-protection and survival in southeast Burma

by

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People living in conflict-affected areas of Karen State in southeast Burma rely on courageous and ingenious, but also often harmful, self-protection strategies. Protection stemming from international norms and agents is largely absent for this population. The 'Local to Global Protection' (L2GP) project explores how people living in areas affected by natural disaster and armed conflict understand 'protection' - what they value, how they go about protecting themselves, their families and their communities and how they view the roles of other stakeholders.

Since the Rwanda crisis in 1994, protection has increasingly been debated by aid agencies, which have sought to incorporate protection in their work (as illustrated by the recent drafting of protection indicators as part of the SPHERE project). However, humanitarian organisations tend to have their own ideas about what constitutes 'protection' (usually based on the definition developed by the ICRC & UNIASC, focusing on rights articulated in international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law). In most cases, these notions are imported (or imposed), without examining the views or realities of local people. Although aid agencies may elicit local participation in implementing programs, aims and objectives are usually designed to fit agency headquarters' and donors' requirements. While this may be an operational necessity, opportunities exist to better understand and relate to at-risk people. Such local approaches to protection are particularly important in situations where international humanitarian actors have

limited access, and where the state is one of the main agents threatening vulnerable populations. The L2GP project, which is implemented by a group of European aid agencies, is undertaking research in three such countries: a pilot study in Burma, and work in Sudan and Zimbabwe. This article summarises the key findings of the Burma study.

The Burmese context

Burma's long-running ethnic conflict began shortly after the country attained its independence from the UK in 1948. Millions have been affected, with at least 500,000 currently displaced in the southeast, plus about 150,000 more living in refugee camps in neighbouring Thailand. Another two to three million Burmese earn their living as migrant workers elsewhere in the region, often without documents and in a highly vulnerable position. Many of these people are members of ethnic minorities, including various Karen subgroups.

The L2GP project involved research on both sides of the 'frontline' in Karen-populated areas in southeast Burma: in territory accessible to the Karen National Union (KNU), the main Karen armed opposition group and its affiliates, and in government- and ceasefire group-controlled zones (under the authority of armed Karen groups, which split from the KNU and agreed ceasefires with the government in the 1990s). This is new ground, as most research in this area focuses on IDPs who make themselves available to the KNU, whose experiences may not be representative of the larger Karen community. Much less is known about the situation of civilians living in areas controlled by the government, or under the control of allied Karen militias. Research was conducted by small teams of locals and internationals, working on both sides of the Burma-Thailand border, between mid-2009 and early 2010. As well as some 100 interviews with Karen civilians, discussions were also held with Burmese civil society, political, military and relief and development groups, as well as a wide range of international agencies.

Findings

Civilians living in conflict-affected parts of southeast Burma understand clearly the threats they face, and the identities of perpetrators. They are subject to a range of abuses, by the state and its proxies and also sometimes by anti-government groups including the KNU. Vulnerable civilians often demonstrate great courage, tenacity and solidarity with their fellow countrymen and women. The strategies people employ to deal with difficult situations are often more effective than anything done by protection-mandated agencies or other outside actors. Indeed, except for armed state and non-state groups outside actors are largely absent. Local survival strategies include behaviour which might not be considered 'positive' by external observers, such as paying off power-holders or acquiescing in their demands, including providing labour (or recruits) to armed groups. Karen community leaders are sometimes able to persuade power-holders to change their behaviour, or at least limit the extent of their abuses. Such activities include forms of complaint to the authorities, including direct appeals to Burmese army commanders, insurgent and ceasefire group officers to control their troops.

Local advocacy like this is not well-documented in the extensive literature on human rights issues in Burma. Many rights-oriented organisations document and denounce abuses occurring in the conflict-affected countryside. This approach has some value, not least because powerholders in Burma are sometimes reluctant to perpetrate abuses, out of fear that their activities may be reported to public advocacy networks, causing them problems with their superiors. Furthermore, the documentation of human rights abuses plays important roles in maintaining public interest, as well as in fundraising for aid agencies. It may also be of some value in the future in the context of transitional justice. Nevertheless, greater attention should be paid to local 'behind-the-scenes' advocacy activities undertaken by community leaders.

The notional distinction between protecting 'human rights' and livelihoods does not seem particularly relevant for affected Karen communities in

southeast Burma. Indeed, the rights of particular individuals are sometimes 'sacrificed' by their families or communities in order to safeguard the larger unit's well-being.

When faced with a range of threats, villagers may choose to:

- **Contain or manage the threat** (by complying with demands, and attempting to limit damage - e.g. by paying-off powerholders, providing labour and/or recruits etc; turning for assistance to local authorities, including religious and community leaders, and/or appealing to the good will of power-holders; using various strategies and subterfuges; 'making do' and staying quiet).
- **Avoid the threat** (e.g. by fleeing: either temporarily - or more permanent migration).
- **Confront the threat** (advocacy and/or active resistance; 'weapons the weak').

Often, individuals and families in southeast Burma have to balance the need for a livelihood and food security with the physical risks involved in (for example) farming their landmine-infested fields or migrating elsewhere. The strategies people adopt frequently expose them to new dangers. The decisions people take in terms of migration and other protection strategies depend upon their relationships and available resources. For some villagers (particularly Buddhists), who do not have money or contacts in the Christian-dominated KNU, access to refugee camps in Thailand is perceived as difficult. Such people are more likely to join the illegal migrant pool in Thailand. In contrast, for those associated with the insurgency it can be very dangerous to enter government- or ceasefire group-controlled areas. People with family in the KNU or friends and relatives in border regions are more likely to flee to insurgent-controlled areas, including refugee camps. Those without such contacts, or who enjoy non-threatening relations with government forces, may choose to enter official relocation sites.

When forcibly displaced, villagers may choose to:

- **Hide in - or close to - zones of on-going armed conflict**, with the hope of returning home soon (although often remaining mobile for years);
- **Move to a government- or ceasefire group-controlled relocation site** (if one is provided);
- **Enter a ceasefire area;**
- **Move to relatively more secure villages, towns or peri-urban areas**, including 'behind the front lines' in war zones, in ceasefire zones, and in government-controlled locations;
- **Cross an international border**, to seek refuge - either as a migrant worker, or in a refugee camp.

For international agencies, protection is often conceived of as something which ‘we’ (the aid agency) attempt to do on behalf of ‘them’ (the vulnerable populations). For many Yangon-based actors, local civil society actors are viewed instrumentally, as a means of gaining access to conflict-affected communities. Some Thailand-based agencies provide assistance and undertake advocacy activities in partnership with the welfare wings of armed ethnic groups. They are generally more sensitive to and supportive of local agency. Different armed groups position themselves as defenders of Karen populations, in terms of providing physical safety and secure livelihoods, as well as protecting elements of culture and national identity. Leaders of both the KNU and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (the DKBA, which is allied to the Burmese military) regard themselves as legitimate representatives and guardians of the Karen people. Ultimately, assessments of these different notions of protection depend on the legitimacy accorded to key actors. To the degree that the KNU (for example) is considered a legitimate military/political actor, its activities in the field of protection may be considered positive by some observers and donors. In contrast, if the DKBA is considered illegitimate its ‘protection activities’ are likely to be dismissed. In practice, however, Karen civilians view these organisations as both protectors and sources of threat, depending on the circumstances.

Conclusions

Despite the rhetoric and lofty ambitions of international aid agencies and advocacy groups, protective interventions are largely absent in conflict-affected parts of southeast Burma. In this context, efforts to support the humanitarian wings of armed ethnic groups remain one of the only viable ways of reaching a highly vulnerable population. However, by working with parties to the armed conflict humanitarian assistance becomes part of the political economy of the war. This may or may not be an acceptable risk, but it is an issue which donors and humanitarian agencies have generally failed to address in a systematic manner. Meanwhile, civilians living in

southeast Burma continue to suffer as a result of the ongoing armed conflict.

For many of those interviewed, the distinction between physical protection and aspects of livelihood security is irrelevant. In people's on-going struggle to survive, protection and livelihood concerns are deeply interconnected. Often, people are faced with terrible dilemmas, in which physical safety is compromised in order to feed their families or provide healthcare or access to education. In choosing between the 'lesser of two evils', people are often exposed to new forms of danger - for instance, migration as a coping strategy may bring with it the dangers of trafficking. In such circumstances, it may not be appropriate to talk of 'coping' or even 'survival' mechanisms. The ways in which civilians in southeast Burma seek to contain, avoid and (sometimes) challenge the risks they face may best be described as 'self-protection'.

Such practices can be far removed from the ideals of Western aid agencies. Local civil society networks in Karen and other conflict-affected areas of Burma undertake important work, providing assistance and some degree of protection to civilian populations. However, they can be exposed to danger, and possible suppression by the authorities, through contact with highly visible international agencies. Therefore, international engagement with such actors should be undertaken extremely cautiously. It is important that humanitarian organisations and donors carefully assess the likely impacts of their interventions on the social, political, economic and conflict environments. At a minimum, external agencies must ensure that they do not inadvertently undermine communities' existing self-protection strategies (that is, that they 'do no harm').

While agencies based in Thailand and elsewhere overseas can be forthright in their advocacy activities, groups working inside the country must be more cautious. For those working inside Burma, advocacy is often undertaken in

the mode of 'persuasion' (engaging behind-the-scenes with duty/powerholders, in order to modify or mitigate the impacts of their behaviour), and 'mobilisation' (quietly sharing information with mandated agencies and mobilising human rights-oriented actors and networks). As the information and advocacy activities of groups based in government-controlled areas have to remain low-profile, they tend to be under-appreciated.

Looking at the dire situation of most civilians in conflict-affected parts of Burma, it appears that years of public advocacy campaigns have had limited positive impact on the lives of the victims of abuse. The advocacy community may need to re-examine its efforts. Publicly documenting and denouncing abuses is important, but has a limited immediate positive impact. Can - and should - advocacy groups engage more with the every-day protection efforts of affected communities, often focussed on low-key 'persuasive' modes of engaging powerholders (usually behind-the-scenes), in order to change their behaviour, mitigate the impact of abuse, or at least gain humanitarian access?

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