

# **POWER AND THE PITFALLS OF CAPACITY BUILDING: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LOCALLY- LED STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN EASTERN MYANMAR**

**Sam Moody**

The purpose of this paper is to encourage an open debate about the way that non-local organisations engage in ‘capacity building’ activities with local human rights organisations. The central argument is that unbalanced power relationships between local organisations and their non-local partners affect the capacity building strategies employed by non-local organisations. The result of this is not only that the capacity building activities entrench these unequal power relationships but that there are negative implications to the effectiveness of the local organisations as they seek to support communities that are resisting abuse. Recent developments in Myanmar have meant that non-local organisations have opportunities for engagement in areas of the country that they previously could not reach. One of the implications of this is that local organisations already working in those communities face the prospect of developing partnerships with non-local organisations for the first time. Capacity building activities will likely form an important part of the mechanisms through which these relationships develop in the short to medium-term. This paper illustrates ways in which the greater opportunities for non-local organisations to exercise power can permeate these capacity building strategies. It suggests that the ‘professionalization of resistance’ reflects the power imbalance and is central to notions of capacity building that will be employed. The paper presents a cautionary tale of how capacity building activities can damage the effectiveness of local organisations by eroding their ability to dynamically react to the local community. Recommendations are offered to guide organisations that are constructing capacity building strategies so that the negative consequences can be avoided and local resistance can be strengthened rather than undermined.

## 1. Introduction

For decades, Myanmar's government was widely condemned by the governments of "Western" nations for its perceived lack of democracy, militarisation and abuse of human rights. Recently, government-led reforms have complicated the picture with positive news coverage in the Western media and positive statements by Western leaders suggesting that *things are getting better* (BBC, 2012; Guardian 2012). In an effort to make sure that the continuing human rights abuses of the Myanmar government are not forgotten, human rights organisations are redoubling their efforts to bring stories of human rights abuse into the public domain (Burma Campaign UK, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2013). It is a keen contestation of a narrative; crudely put, one side is saying 'the Myanmar government is getting better...' whilst the other side is saying '...but remember that they still abuse human rights'. It is not the purpose of this paper to pass judgement on the human rights record of the Myanmar government; it is well documented that abuses have been perpetrated over decades of military rule. The limitation of this narrative, however, is that it only mentions one agent that controls the human rights situation in Myanmar: the Myanmar government. Central to the arguments contained in this paper is the realisation that whenever there is human rights abuse in Myanmar, local people are using their agency to resist abuse, and they are often receiving support from local and non-local sources.<sup>1</sup>

In eastern Myanmar, there are a number of locally led organisations that work across a range of different issues, all of which can be said to be supporting villagers as they choose strategies to protect themselves from abuse. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) is an example, and the approach of this organisation with its focus on Village Agency is the main inspiration for this paper (KHRG, 2008). KHRG, however, is not the only local organisation that is supporting villagers' resistance. For example, the Mae Tao Clinic and the Backpack Health Worker Teams (BHWT) offer primary healthcare outside of the structures of the Myanmar government, providing options for villagers to defend their right to health (Mae Tao Clinic, 2013; BHWT, 2013). They have a clear strategic focus on health rather than human rights per se, but nevertheless these organisations are supporting the agency of villagers who are resisting abuse. The organisations sprang from the determination and creativity of people in eastern Myanmar reacting to local concerns and relying on local understanding. They implicitly or explicitly share a belief in the capacity of local people to make decisions that improve the quality of their lives in the face of abuse.

---

1 This paper refers to 'local' and 'non-local' organisations rather than other possibilities such as 'Western organisations' or 'donor organisations'. This is to take into account the diversity within non-local organisations. For example, whilst many of the relevant 'non-local' organisations are based in Western countries, others may be based in Bangkok or Yangon. Although there may well be differences between organisations based in Western countries and, for instance, those based in Southeast Asian capitals, the key distinction is between organisations that emerged out of local-level resistance and those that did not.

All of the abovementioned organisations, and others like them, are supported by partners based outside of the local context. Many of these organisations have enjoyed fruitful, supportive partnerships over a significant number of years and understanding between partners has grown as time has gone on, improving the quality of the relationship and the effectiveness of the work in which they engage. Nevertheless, the nature of these partnerships is such that power is not equally balanced. This is no secret; donor partners recognise the fact that local partners rely on the support of a small number of donors and that this fact partly characterises the relationship. Nevertheless, it is this power imbalance that is the central focus of this paper. With the ‘democratisation’ and the related ‘opening up’ of Myanmar, some non-local organisations are developing their strategy to operate through agreements with the Myanmar government, creating opportunities to reach areas and implement interventions that were previously not possible. With this, comes the likelihood that locally-based organisations that had not previously engaged in partnerships with non-local organisations will find themselves with opportunities to do so. These organisations will need to ‘build their capacity’ to manage these partnerships and the projects that are linked to them. This paper examines this, arguing that the nature of the inherent power imbalance is such that there are pitfalls to ‘capacity building’ activities that can result in dynamic local organisations in eastern Myanmar diminishing their ability to react effectively to the local situation and support villagers as they seek to protect themselves from abuse.

The paper begins by looking more deeply into the power dynamics within local to non-local partnerships, showing that in relation to both the direct and the indirect exercise of power, the relationship is skewed in favour of non-local organisations. When considering the indirect exercise of power, it is argued that there is a ‘professionalization of resistance’, which is an important part of this unequal power dynamic. Following this, the paper describes the current context in Myanmar and the practical implications of this to the work of organisations to support villagers to resist human rights abuse. Building from this understanding is a description of how in this context new partnerships are likely to be established between local and non-local organisations and that this will give rise to ‘capacity building’ activities. The paper then goes on to illustrate that if these capacity building activities are not carefully managed, they will endanger local organisations’ connection to the local dynamism and creativity that had previously been a core strength. This is a pitfall that arises out of the nature of the power dynamic and in particular the ‘professionalization of resistance’. Following this description, some recommendations are given so that this pitfall may be avoided and that local to non-local partnerships can be as effective as possible in supporting local communities as they seek to defend their human rights.

## 2. The power dynamics of local to non-local partnerships

### 2.1. Theoretical framework of power

The concept of power is intrinsically linked to human rights. However, the consideration of power is most often crudely focussed on the power relationship between ‘perpetrators’ of abuse and its ‘victims,’ ignoring the way that power relates to other relationships that affect the lives of marginalised communities that struggle against abuse. Central to this paper is an account of how power imbalances inherent within relationships between local and non-local actors affect capacity building activities. It is important, therefore, to briefly set out the theoretical framework that underpins the claims made. There are two key points relating to power that are central to the analysis of capacity building in local human rights organisations in eastern Myanmar that follows in later sections of this paper:

1. Power is characterised by a complex interplay between structures and agents.
2. The exercise of power can be through direct influence but it can also be exercised indirectly to great effect.

We will approach these two points in turn, before applying them to an analysis of the nature of power relationships between local and non-local actors.

The ‘structure/agency’ debate is one of the central debates within the discussion of power. At the basis of the debate is the question of the extent to which power is located in the people who exercise it as they see fit, and the extent to which it is located in the contexts within which it is exercised. Of course, within this, there are many sub-debates. For example, when we discuss agents, are we talking about individuals or communities? (Connor, 2011). Equally, when we discuss structures, are we talking about economic structures, political structures or even social structures of norms and values? (See for example Doyle, 1998 and Marx, 1887). The structure/agency debate, however, is not characterised by two opposed camps; namely those that emphasise structure and those that emphasise agency. It is largely recognised that there is a complex interplay between structure and agency. To set out a detailed framework of the varying significance of different structures and their interplay with different actors would go far beyond the bounds of this paper. However, it is important to identify some pertinent aspects that are important to the analysis that follows.

The first important facet is that there are bidirectional links of influence between structures and agents (Brass and Burkhardt, 1993). Agents always have a choice of action, but the options open to them and also the decisions that they ultimately make, are influenced by structures. At the same time, the relevant structures are developed and maintained by agents and are therefore not constants in the equation. What this means is that structures skew the distribution of power so that some agents have more options open to them than other agents. Nevertheless it must also be recognised that the fact that power is unequally

distributed does not mean that in any relationship, power is held by only one actor and not the other. In short, power is *unequally distributed* rather than *completely monopolised*. The second important facet is that structures can include more than just the formal, open systems that are designed to influence behaviour (for example, systems of law that formally penalise certain actions). Structures can also include less concrete aspects of social organisation such as the narratives that contain value-information about what is desirable and what is not (Lukes, 2005; Ransome, 1992 and Reddy, 2000). Decisions are influenced by efforts to control the feelings and ideas that people have towards their situations.

This brief illustration of the varying nature of the relevant structures leads us onto the second key point that underpins the analysis in this paper. Power can be exercised directly but it can also be exercised indirectly. We can illustrate this using examples from human rights in Myanmar. When the Myanmar military shelled villages in the non-government-controlled area of Karen state, it was a clear action intended to influence the villagers to re-locate to government controlled areas (KHRG, 2008 and 2011). Violence and the threat of further violence is one of the crudest ways in which power is exercised. It is an attempt to influence decisions by skewing the cost-benefit analyses such that rational actors will choose one option over another. However, we can also see that the Myanmar government has also used their power to constrain the options that people recognise as open to them. For example, the government's controls over what is discussed in the media are part of an effort to suppress debate about the government's actions, including the military activities in Karen State (Crispin, 2011). This second example shows that power can be exercised not only directly by openly controlling the implications of certain decisions; in this case, power is exercised indirectly as part of a strategy to stop people making decisions about certain issues or even to understand that such issues exist to be decided upon. This is an important element of power that should be taken into account when discussing power's application.

To summarise the understanding of power that underpins the arguments made in this paper, we can say the following: society is characterised by unequal power relationships that are perpetuated by structural inequality and also by the actions of individuals and groups of individuals. Although in all cases, agents of all sides of the power relationship have the ability to make decisions that affect their situations, those agents that hold more power are more able to influence these decisions. They can do this directly, by constraining the practical options available to those with less power and also by presenting risks related to undesired behaviour and by presenting rewards for desired behaviour. Crucially, they can also do this indirectly, by controlling the narratives relating to circumstances in order to influence thoughts and beliefs towards the unequal power relationship.

## **2.2. The power relationship between local organisations and non-local partners**

Using the understanding of the dimensions of power described above, we can examine the power relationship between local organisations and their non-local partners. We saw that

the exercise of power in a two-party relationship can relate to differing abilities to exert direct influence over the other party. We also saw that there are more subtle nuances to power balances, where influence can be exerted indirectly. Both of these aspects of power can be examined in relation to local organisations and non-local partners.

In terms of direct influence, there is a clear bias in favour of non-local partners. Relationships are often financial, with local organisations receiving grants from non-local partners. In many cases, local organisations come to rely on the funding that they receive from their donors; without this funding, they would not be able to pay core costs including salaries, and rental of a premises. Funding can give activists the opportunity to focus full-time on their work supporting local communities, and the resources to scale-up the impact of their work. If a major donor decided to stop funding work in a region, it can have a devastating effect on local organisations that do not have adequately diverse income streams. Donor organisations also rely on their local partners, recognising the fact that if they do have a real commitment to making a practical difference in specific local situations, then they require assistance from local actors. The relationship, therefore, is one in which both sides can benefit and so both sides hold some direct influence over the other. Nevertheless, the reliance on the financial resources provided to local organisations by non-local organisations means that the costs of terminating the relationships will be felt much more keenly by local organisations. This indicates that the power relationship is unequal.

Turning to the indirect exercise of power, this paper puts forward the theory that a phenomenon of the more subtle dimensions of the unbalanced power relationship can be identified: the 'professionalization of resistance.' As has already been described, in eastern Myanmar, organisations that support villagers to resist abuse have grown out of the efforts of locally-based people using locally-relevant strategies. Moreover, the villagers that use their agency to resist abuse are in large part using strategies that were developed at the village-level. This is resistance, and its place in the pantheon of human rights defence is a legitimate as the letter-writing campaigns of Amnesty International or cases brought to the European Court of Human Rights. Despite this, the language of resistance is dominated not by local actors but by non-local actors. Effective local actors use information available to them to decide on strategies of resistance that they believe to be most appropriate. The practical work of doing this, however, has been professionalised, with technical language being attached to it. For example, a human rights professional might use the phrase 'project planning is a fundamentally important element of project-cycle management. A baseline survey must be carried out and SMART objectives must be set'. Suddenly the intuitive, accessible logic of understanding the situation and deciding a strategy based on that understanding becomes a complicated mass of technical terms.

The use of such technical language is esoteric, and the legitimacy of the resistance work of both local and non-local actors is in part defined by their ability to master these terms. It is here that we can identify the further power imbalance. Local actors do not have the

same opportunities as non-local actors to shape the language around resistance. Whereas local actors are assessed, both formally and informally, on their mastery of the constructed narratives of ‘professional’ resistance, local actors are not in the position to question the legitimacy of non-local actors who do not recognise the narratives used by those engaged in locally-based resistance. The nationally-recruited professionals that hold important positions within non-local organisations are more likely to be members of a relatively privileged, educated urban elite than they are to be villagers who have resisted human rights abuse themselves. This is in large part because their greater access to education gives them the skills they need to master the technical narratives of resistance. What this means is people that are already relatively privileged are more likely to occupy highly paid, influential positions in human rights resistance. This is an example of the perpetuation of power imbalance and, as such, local actors have far greater inducements to conform to narratives controlled by non-local actors than non-local actors have to conform to narratives that they do not control.

It is here that we can bring in the focus of this paper, which is ‘capacity building’. ‘Capacity building’ refers to activities that are ostensibly aimed towards building the effectiveness of organisations. It takes as its basis the intuitively defensible point that it is desirable for those that intervene in the lives of marginalised people to seek to improve their ability to bring about positive change. In practice, however, ‘capacity building’ is the name given to activities whereby non-local organisations engage with local organisations in a bid to influence the working practices of that organisation. The very fact that the direction of capacity building activities is most often local to non-local rather than vice versa is an indication of the unequal power relationship described above. Furthermore, we can link capacity building activities to both the direct and the indirect exercise of power.

When we consider capacity building in relation to the direct exercise of power, it is important that in many cases capacity building activities focus on project cycle management. It is no coincidence that funding proposals, interim reports and evaluation reports gather information based on three stages of project cycle management: planning, monitoring and evaluation. As such, capacity building activities are explicitly linked to the processes by which decisions are made relating to the provision of financial resources to the local organisation. Because of this, local organisations will recognise that conforming to the lessons provided in the capacity building activities has implications to their ability to continue to receive vital financial support. In terms of the indirect exercise of power, it is argued above that organisations are formally and informally assessed on their mastery of a ‘professionalised’ narrative of resistance. Capacity building can entrench these narratives, strengthening the impression that ‘local’ strategies are less sophisticated and less likely to succeed than the ‘professional’ methods outlined by non-local actors during capacity building activities. We can see therefore that capacity building activities, whilst ostensibly seeking to build skills that local actors will find useful, can in reality be affected by, and in turn entrench, power imbalances. This is clearly a negative phenomenon and one that can be avoided, as will be discussed in recommendations provided later. However, as this

paper will further show, these capacity building activities risk not only the entrenchment of unequal power dynamics but can actually damage the effectiveness of local organisations by undermining a core strength.

### **3. Recent developments in Myanmar and the opportunities for engagement**

It is well documented that Myanmar has been going through a process of political reform in recent years. The elections of 2010 were widely regarded as neither free nor fair, with Freedom House accusing the Myanmar military government of “thoroughly rigging the process to ensure a sweeping victory for the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party” (Freedom House, 2011). Nevertheless, the USDP-dominated government led by President Thein Sein surprised many by bringing in reforms that could have a tangible positive effect on the human rights situation within Myanmar. Many of the most widely-reported reforms will have a greater impact on life within urban centres than in eastern Myanmar. For example, in August 2012, the government reformed media censorship laws (Raybould, 2012). However, in eastern Myanmar where decades of war and a lack of basic infrastructure have meant that villagers’ access to the news media has been limited, this reform will have a much less notable effect than in Yangon. Nevertheless, the signing of initial ceasefire agreements, such as the one that was signed with the Karen National Liberation Army in 2012, has had a wide-ranging effect on the situation in eastern Myanmar.

Because of the specific situation in eastern Myanmar, it was very difficult for organisations to support villagers struggling against abuse. Villagers who remained in hiding sites, refusing to move to government-controlled areas were subject to violence from the army when their villages were discovered (KHRG, 2008, 2011b). Any organisation supporting these villagers did so at great risk and without the acquiescence of the government. Organisations like the Karen Human Rights Group, Back Pack Health Worker Teams and the Free Burma Rangers brought assistance to these villagers within Myanmar, whilst establishing bases outside of the country, unable to operate freely from within. It was unthinkable that these organisations could register as organisations with the Myanmar authorities, openly establish an office within the country and begin bringing assistance with the full knowledge of the Myanmar government.

Because of the harsh restrictions on activities, many non-local organisations were unwilling to focus their attention on activities under agreements with the Myanmar government, preferring instead to support organisations administered from other countries. The reforms in Myanmar have caused organisations both local and non-local to re-assess this approach. The majority of the local organisations that have been administered from other countries have yet to move inside, having weighed up the risks and opportunities presented by recent changes. Non-local donor organisations, however, are presented with a different set of risks and opportunities and more financial support is being targeted at organisations that operate under agreements with the government. This has created the likelihood that a



number of new initiatives will be established, reaching areas of eastern Myanmar that were previously unlikely to be reached. The shift in focus is due to a number of factors: the improved security situation resulting from the ceasefire; a perceived increase in freedom to operate; a decrease in pressure from the Western media and public to refuse to engage with the government and, perhaps most crucially, an increase in opportunities to gather large grants from Western government donors who have themselves shifted focus towards engaging with the Myanmar government.

The effect of this is that it is likely that local organisations in eastern Myanmar that had previously operated within villages with little or no support from non-local partners will have an increased opportunity to enter into partnerships with those organisations that have shifted focus to working under agreements with the government. Local organisations may quite suddenly be faced with the possibility that they can access significant amounts of money in grants as donors take advantage of new access to the areas in which the local organisations work. This opens up the prospect of a considerable strengthening of local civil society, with organisations having the financial means and the support to continue and build on their work. However, whilst many local organisations that had operated from outside Myanmar have had long experience of establishing and managing relationships with non-local donor organisations, in many cases the local organisations who are now finding new opportunities from within Myanmar will have limited experience with these relationships. In this situation, non-local organisations will often seek to ‘build the capacity’ of their new local partners in an attempt to make up for this lack of experience. The remaining sections of this paper engage with the danger that these ‘capacity building’ activities will in some important respects *weaken* local organisations rather than *strengthening* them.

#### **4. Damage caused by poor capacity building**

In a previous section, it was shown that non-local organisations have a greater ability to exercise power both directly and indirectly over local organisations than vice versa. The effects of this power imbalance can be seen within capacity building activities undertaken by non-local organisations. This section will show that these same effects do more than just entrench unequal power dynamics but also can have a damaging impact on the practical work of local organisations.

Relationships between local organisations and non-local organisations can be very beneficial to both groups. Because of this, they can also be beneficial to the local community that are the targets of their activities. As noted previously, capacity building activities aimed at local organisations can strengthen their ability to provide effective support to communities resisting abuse. However, we have also seen that capacity building can reflect the power-imbalance between local and non-local actors. In this section we will look more practically at how capacity building strategies can be detrimental not just in regards to whether they reflect and entrench unequal power dynamics, but also in regards to the danger that they

can actually decrease the effectiveness of the local organisation. If local organisations act as bridges between a local community and non-local actors, heavy-handed capacity building strategies can strengthen the link between the local organisation and a non-local partner, whilst actually *undermining* the local organisation's ability to link to the local community. This section will show that in such cases capacity building does not so much improve the effectiveness of the bridge; in reality it moves the bridge closer to one side and further away from the other.

#### **4.1. Fictional case study: the BHRC and the GHRI**

A local human rights organisation, over a number of years, has engaged in a set of dynamic activities which respond to the needs of the local community. These activities are varied; they distribute leaflets among the local community which include information about their human rights, they conduct trainings with villagers about how to make use of local mechanisms when their rights are abused, and they facilitate advocacy by members of the local community towards local and national decision-makers. These activities are largely ad hoc, undertaken when a specific opportunity arises. They have a significant degree of success because they are able to react to local needs and local opportunities quickly. We shall call this organisation 'Burma Human Rights Centre' (BHRC).

An international human rights organisation becomes interested in the work of the BHRC. We shall call them 'The Global Human Rights Initiative' (GHRI). GHRI have become concerned at the situation for members of a local community within Myanmar. They are cognisant of the fact that they are unable to carry out grassroots projects themselves within this community and so look for a local partner with whom they can cooperate to deliver effective activities. During a fact-finding mission, they meet a member of staff from the BHRC, recognise their shared commitment towards human rights in that community and are impressed by their ability to carry out activities within the local community. The two organisations agree to a formal partnership. This exists around a proposal for funding document that the BHRC submits to the GHRI. GHRI staff award funding to BHRC and enter into an agreement with them because they recognise what the BHRC can deliver to the partnership. Nevertheless, they are disappointed with the quality of the project plan, as evidenced by the proposal. Furthermore, as the grant cycle progresses, they are even more disappointed with BHRC's ability to identify and describe the progress and impact of their project, as evidenced by the reports that they submit.

GHRI's grant for the BHRC originates within a much larger grant that was made by the foreign aid department of the government of a Western state to the GHRI. The GHRI has a heavy burden in terms of the reporting requirements for this grant and the information submitted to them by the BHRC is not as helpful as it could be. The GHRI worries that if they are unable to prove that the project is successful under the harsh measurement criteria that their institutional donor mandates, then they will lose the funding. However, they still value the partnership with BHRC. For this reason, instead of deciding to end

their relationship with BHRC, they decide that it would be better for all parties if they engage in capacity building activities with them, teaching them the type of project-cycle management skills that will allow them to submit much better proposals and reports. If they do this, then it is expected that it will in turn improve GHRI's reporting to their Western donor and increase their chances of receiving further large grants from them.

GHRI's programme officer travels to eastern Myanmar to carry out capacity building activities with BHRC. When he arrives, he gives a training presentation that explains how to gather baseline data, which includes some reference to qualitative and quantitative data gathering. He also describes what makes a good objective, making use of the 'SMART' acronym ('objectives should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound').<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to talk about how progress should be monitored, again making reference to techniques of gathering data. Finally, he talks about the requirements for proposals and reports, explaining that making use of the information provided in the training would improve the quality of the BHRC's proposals and reports and improve their activities. The programme officer is friendly, intelligent and professional and clearly has a commitment to improving the lives of those resisting human rights abuse. He leaves Myanmar satisfied that the BHRC understood his training.

A few months later, the time arrives for the BHRC to submit a new proposal to GHRI. They have come to rely on the money that they receive from GHRI and are determined to receive a new grant. They are also proud of the recognition that their partnership with GHRI represents and are excited about the prospect of their increasing professionalism. When it comes to writing their new proposal they attempt to put what they have learned from the capacity building training sessions into practice. Unfortunately, when it comes to the way they had worked in the past, identifying local opportunities and responding to them quickly, they are unsure how to apply their learning. Because their activities were varied according to the local situation, they find it hard to define exactly what kind of baseline data they should be gathering. Equally, when they try to imagine objectives that would allow the kind of varied activities that they have found to be so effective in the past, they cannot think of a way of wording them so that they meet the 'SMART' criteria. Furthermore, they are not sure how they will monitor such activities in the future as some of their activities represent just one contribution in a complex context and they do not feel confident that they will be able to accurately map the direct impact of what they have done.

Faced with this difficulty, they recognise that it is much easier to apply their learning from the capacity building workshops to *one* of their core activities. They realise that with their training workshops, they are much more confident. They can interview a sample of community members to understand their current understanding of their human rights, and this will fulfil their requirement to gather baseline data. When it comes to setting 'SMART' objectives, they understand that they can write an objective for the workshop

---

2 Many organisations use this tool as a way of setting useful objectives (See for instance Ambler, 2010).

that satisfies the criteria, and set the following objective: '400 members of the local community, including at least 200 women, understand their rights under national and international law.' They also feel confident to monitor this as they can easily count the number of workshop participants (disaggregated by gender), and hand out a follow-up questionnaire to participants to find out how their knowledge has changed. Thus, BHRC decide that these workshops will become the basis of their next funding proposal to the GHRI. When GHRI receive the proposal, they immediately see it as an improvement on the previous documentation received from the BHRC, and recognise it as evidence of their increased capacity. They quickly agree to further funding and heap praise on the BHRC for their improvement. The BHRC and GHRI are both happy throughout the next year, implementing the human rights training workshop project.

#### **4.2. The erosion of responsiveness to the local community**

If both the local organisation and their non-local partner are happy and the partnership moves forward, then what is the problem? The problem is that in their desire to respond to the capacity building training provided by the GHRI, the BHRC actually limited the scope of their activities in the coming year. When we consider the fact that their strength came from their ability to respond to the rapidly evolving context in Myanmar and the needs of the community, then we can question whether what the BHRC has gained is worth what was lost. The BHRC was dynamic; the fact that they engaged in many ad hoc activities meant that there was a significant chance that some of their activities would be less effective than others, due to their haste to respond quickly. However, their previous approach also allowed them to make some very creative and effective interventions. The problem is not that the trainings that they have committed to providing are not valuable, and in fact they can be very effective. The problem is that previous to BHRC's capacity being 'built,' they engaged in creative, responsive activities designed largely through an understanding of evolving community needs. After their 'capacity building' they engage in activities that, whilst useful, are essentially conservative and yet both the GHRI and the BHRC do not recognise the damaging implications of this development. If the BHRC is a bridge between the local community and non-local actors, they have undeniably improved their ability to connect to non-local actors. However, in doing so, their ability to connect to the local community is undermined. The 'capacity building' from the GHRI could actually be said to have damaged the effectiveness of the BHRC, hollowing out their greatest quality.

Underpinning this is the unbalanced nature of the power dynamic. The decisions made by the BHRC that led to the erosion of the organisations' responsiveness to the local context were clearly influenced by the GHRI's greater ability to exercise power both directly and indirectly. The BHRC considered the fact that they relied on the financial resources provided by the GHRI and believed that changing their programming in response to capacity building would improve their chances of maintaining this funding. The BHRC also looked to the GHRI for legitimisation, recognising that they were being assessed on their use of the narratives of professionalised resistance that the GHRI routinely

employed but that were new to the BHRC. Their programming was changed partly in relation to how easy it was to articulate the projects using the narratives learned through the capacity building activities. This fictional case study, therefore, illustrates the negative practical implications to effectiveness that capacity building activities can have, if those activities reflect the power imbalances inherent within the relationship.

## 5. A Model for Effective Capacity Building

Non-local actors wishing to engage in capacity building should recognise the effects that such capacity building can have. They must understand that being too focussed on teaching technical skills related to project management can have unintended consequences when it comes to connecting effectively with the local community. If a local human rights organisation has strong links with the local community, then this strength should be recognised and safeguarded when a capacity building strategy is designed.

### 5.1. The way forward

At all levels, interventions have the opportunity to improve people's lives but also have the power to bring even more harm. All organisations that claim a mandate to intervene in the lives of those that are affected by human rights abuse have a responsibility to continually seek to improve, and this is equally true whether they are local or non-local. This is also true regardless of what the established orthodoxy of professionalised project management says about the way projects should be designed and implemented. When non-local actors engage in capacity building activities with local organisations, they should not seek to improve project management for its own sake. The focus should be on practical skills to improve interventions. There is, of course, a link. Theory on how best to manage projects in development and human rights has moved forward largely with a focus on how to ensure the greatest positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries. If an organisation consistently and systematically achieves success in its activities, then it can be said to be strong in terms of project management, regardless of how easily they use the language and technical processes of professionalised human rights resistance. When a local organisation is already effective then when it comes to donor documentation they simply need to ensure that they are able to clearly articulate what effect they have had and how.

As explained previously, at the centre of good relationships between local and non-local actors is a common desire to improve lives within a community. This should be understood by all parties and is the common ground upon which capacity building should be based. There are simple steps that organisations that want to bring positive change to a local community should go through as they make interventions, and their skill at going through these steps will in part determine whether they are successful. Vitaly, these simple steps follow a clear logic that is equally accessible to local and non-local actors and is not the exclusive domain of technocratic Western-developed project management. Understanding the simple logic, it is not the place of non-local actors to 'build' the capacity of local

organisations. Instead, it is important to engage in an open discussion about how the organisations plan to go through these logical steps and articulate the information that emerges from going through them.

Any organisation that is likely to be able to implement an effective strategy should have strong knowledge of the following:

- The issues faced by the local community, their causes and their effects
- The change that they want to make, based on the causes that they have identified
- The practical steps that they can take to make the changes that they have targeted, based on a practical understanding of the capacities within the organisation

Likewise, as organisations and the individuals within them gather experience of implementing a strategy, they should have mechanisms for recording the following:

- What happened as a result of the activities, and whether activities are having the planned effect.
- What was successful and what was unsuccessful.
- What could be done to be more successful in the future.

Organisations should have systems for generating and recording this information. In many cases, local organisations do know all of these things, but are not systematic in the way that they gather and use that information. Non-local actors should engage in a discussion with their local partners about how they can develop strong systems so that they can make sure that they have gone through the steps that will give them the best chance of bringing about change within the local community. Non-local actors will find that if their local partners go through the steps effectively, then they will be in a much better position to create good proposals and reports. This, however, must be a secondary consideration, otherwise the discussion will no longer be about how best to serve the local community, but how to navigate donor requirements; the end result will be very different.

It is very important that capacity building comes through discussion. Whilst it is vital for local organisations to have strong systems for going through the key stages of designing their strategy for intervention, these systems cannot simply be taken from a different context and handed to a local organisation. A mistake that non-local actors often make is that they have seen a group of planning tools being used effectively by one local organisation and assume that another local organisation would use them in the same way. In reality, every local organisation is unique and they must be given the opportunity to design the systems that they feel would be most useful to them. Even if the systems that they design are not as sophisticated as they could be and could even legitimately be said to require improvement, local organisations will be well-placed to deliver this improvement. If the local organisation is trying to make use of a system that is alien to them, then they may well be reticent to change it to make it more useful to them. If they are using a system

that they themselves designed, then they are much more likely to have the confidence to make changes to the system to improve its effectiveness. Capacity building activities should not attempt to deliver perfection immediately. Through encouraging and facilitating discussion based around an easily-accessible logic, the capacity building achievements can primarily be said to have been delivered by the local organisation rather than a non-local partner. Ultimately, this is much more sustainable and the result will be more effective interventions for the local community.

## 6. Conclusion

Human rights and power are fundamentally interlinked; wherever one can identify the instance of human rights abuse, it will not take long to recognise that power imbalance has been central to that occurrence. However, as this paper shows, the power imbalances that permeate human rights abuse can also be identified as occurring within the world of human rights resistance. Those working within human rights resistance often do not recognise how power imbalances are affecting their day to day work, and this has implications to the effectiveness of this work at bringing about real and lasting change at the local level. This paper has focussed on ‘capacity building’ activities as an example of how this can happen.

It is important to recognise that any actors that claim to have a mandate to intervene in the lives of people struggling against human rights abuse must critically analyse their strategies to ensure that they are as effective as possible. Organisations that have emerged at the local level, and have sprung from the same community as those struggling against human rights abuse, are *not* exempt from this. They must go through processes of reflection and self-criticism, recognising where they can improve and taking practical steps to make these improvements. Any organisation that is not able to do this can legitimately be said to lack capacity, and in such circumstances practical action should be taken to build that capacity. ‘Capacity building’, therefore, has a potentially vital role to play in effective local level human rights resistance. However, this description of the essence of capacity building does not take into account the effects of power imbalances in the practical processes of capacity building as it occurs in the world of professional human rights resistance. In reality, power imbalances can skew the capacity building activities, having a detrimental effect on local organisations’ effectiveness in supporting local responses to human rights abuse.

There is a diverse array of local organisations working within eastern Myanmar. However, the situation of conflict, repressive laws and a lack of infrastructure has meant that many organisations that have sprung from and work at the local level have had to go about their work with little support from outside. More recently, reforms within Myanmar have changed the context to the extent that non-local organisations are moving to engage in areas where they had previously not be able to engage. This brings about the prospect of new partnerships between local and non-local actors. The new relationships with non-local partners can be the basis of great benefits for local organisations that may have increased access to resources that allow them to improve the impact of their work. However, many

of the local organisations will lack experience of working with non-local partners and will work in ways that make sense from the local perspective. In this situation, non-local partners may seek to 'build the capacity' of their new local partners in a belief that it will be mutually beneficial.

We can see therefore, that the issue of local organisation capacity building is pressing in the current situation in eastern Myanmar as new partnerships are established and developed. This paper describes how the unequal power balance that characterises these relationships can affect the practical strategies of capacity building. This can be related to imbalances in the opportunities to directly exercise power, with a focus on the financial component of relationships. It can also be related to imbalances in the opportunity to indirectly exercise power, with a focus on the 'professionalization' of resistance. The fictional case study is a cautionary tale of how the capacity building activities can have the consequence of influencing local organisations feel under pressure to change their working practices in response to capacity building activities because of they recognise the financial implications of not doing so and also to seek legitimacy in the eyes of non-local partners by conforming to the professionalised narratives of resistance, and the systems that link to them. This can ultimately have the effect of making the local organisation less responsive to local need and less able to support the efforts of local people to protect themselves from abuse.

The aim of this paper is not to frighten local and non-local organisations away from 'capacity building' as a concept. Rather, the paper seeks to draw the possible effects of power imbalances on capacity building activities into the open so that they can be discussed and taken into account in the development of capacity building strategies. Just as local people have the agency and creativity to decide strategies to protect themselves from abuse; local organisations have the potential to understand the need for critical reflection on their performance. Encouraging them to build and strengthen systems to do this is important and can be done by appealing to a logic that is universally accessible. On the other hand, doing so by emphasising the importance of professionalised skills in resistance may actually entrench the power imbalances that underpin the human rights abuse that the organisations claim to be attempting to end.



## References

- Ambler, G., 2010. "10 Steps to Setting SMART Objectives," *ProjectSmart.co.uk*, 8 March 2010. Available at: <http://www.projectsmart.co.uk/10-steps-to-setting-smart-objectives.html> (accessed on 15 August 2013).
- Backpack Health Worker Teams, 2013. "Executive Summary of BPHWT," *Backpack Health Worker Teams Website*. Available at <http://www.backpackteam.org/?p=195> (accessed on 22 July 2013).
- BBC, 2012. 'Burma ex-general Shwe Mann rides wave of change', *BBC News Online*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19739376> (accessed on 22 July 2013).
- Brass, D.J. & Burkhardt, M.E., 1993. 'Potential Power and Power Use: An Investigation of Structure and Behaviour' in *Academy of Management Journal*, 36(3), pp.441-470. New York: Academy of Management.
- Burma Campaign UK, 2012. "The European Union Must Note Abandon Human Rights Bench Marks," *Burma Briefing*, 22. London: Available at: [http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/EU\\_Must\\_Not\\_Abandon\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Benchmarks.pdf](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/EU_Must_Not_Abandon_Human_Rights_Benchmarks.pdf) (accessed on 26 July 2013).
- Connor, S., 2011. "Structure and Agency: a Debate for Community Development?" in *Community Development Journal*, 46 (2), pp.97-110. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crispin, S., 2011. *In Burma, transition neglects press freedom*. New York: Committee to Protect Journalists.
- Doyle, J. 1998. "Power and Contentment" in *Politics*, 18(1), pp.49-56. Oxford: Blackwell
- Freedom House, 2011. "Freedom in the World 2011," *Freedom House Website*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/burma> (accessed on 23 July 2013).
- Human Rights Watch, 2013. "EU: Ending Sanctions Undercuts Burma's Rights Progress," *Human Rights Watch Press Release*. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/eu-ending-sanctions-undercuts-burma-s-rights-progress> (accessed on 22 July 2013).
- Lukes, S., 2005. *Power: a radical view*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- Mae Tao Clinic, 2013. "Mission Statement," *Mae Tao Clinic Website*. Available at: <http://maetaoclinic.org/about-us/mission-statement/> (accessed on 22 July 2013).
- Marx, C., 1887. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated from German by S. Moore & E. Aveling. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Ransome, P., 1992. *Antonio Gramsci: A New Introduction*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Raybould, A., 2012. "UPDATE 3-Myanmar government abolishes direct media censorship," *Reuters Website*. Available at: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/20/myanmar-censorship-idINL4E8JK35920120820> (accessed on 23 July 2013).
- Reddy, T., 2000. *Hegemony and Resistance: Contesting Identities in South Africa*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing
- The Guardian, 2012. "US to ease economic sanctions on Burma in response to reforms," *The Guardian Online*. 27 September 2012, Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/27/us-eases-burma-sanctions-clinton-sein> (accessed on 22 July 2013).
- The Karen Human Rights Group, 2008. "Village Agency: Rural Rights and Abuse in Rural Karen State," *KHRG Website*. Available at: <http://www.khrg.org/khrg2008/khrg0803.html> (accessed on 15 August 2013).
- The Karen Human Rights Group, 2011. "Toungoo Interview: Saw F---, October 2011," *KHRG Website*. Available at: <http://www.khrg.org/khrg2011/khrg11b47.html> (accessed on 24 July 2013).
- The Karen Human Rights Group, 2011b. "Tenasserim Interview: Saw K---, August 2011," *KHRG Website*. Available at: <http://www.khrg.org/khrg2011/khrg11b30.pdf> (accessed on 24 July 2013).