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GRASSROOTS-INITIATED POLICY ADVOCACY IN A TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACY: A CASE STUDY

CHO MYINT NAING

SIT Graduate Institute

PIM 77

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Sustainable Development at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

December 9, 2019

Advisor: Dr. Udi Butler

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Acknowledgments

The adage, “It takes a village” has never been more apt than to describe my undertaking of this capstone study. Without the participation, support, and encouragement of many people, I would not have been able to complete this case study successfully.

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Last, but not least, all of this would not have been possible without the encouragement of my family. I am forever grateful to my mother’s constant guidance and support.

It has been a long journey, but I hope that along the way, I have contributed to the existing body of knowledge on conducting policy advocacy in sensitive political contexts.

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Cho Myint Naing

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Abbreviations & Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
Metta	Metta Development Foundation
MOALI	Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
RtF	Right to Food
UN	United Nations
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

Abstract

While it is acknowledged that public participation in the policy-making process is a cornerstone of democracy, it is unclear how this takes shape in transitioning democracies. Myanmar is currently transitioning from over five decades of military rule to a civilian-led, democratically-elected government. Consequently, public space has opened up, allowing Myanmar citizens to express their opinions and needs vis-à-vis policies in multiple sectors and to engage with policymakers. The majority of these advocacy efforts has been spearheaded by civil society actors, who have been supporting citizens in expressing themselves and facilitating opportunities for direct engagement. This paper is a case study of a Myanmar civil society organization's ongoing policy advocacy initiative. It aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on how civil society actors work to influence policy in sensitive political contexts. The researcher examined program documents and interviewed various program stakeholders and civil society actors to gain insight into the advocacy context, the advocates, the policy issues, the politics/decision-makers, and the advocacy strategies deployed by the initiative. The evidence suggests initial expectations were high for engagement with the civilian administration. Due to unforeseen changes in the policy-making context, it has been harder to make inroads than expected. This case study indicates one primary factor for success is relationship-building among all concerned stakeholders, particularly engagement with state actors by civil society actors. Furthermore, alliances among civil society actors advance the advocacy agenda further. Finally, citizen voice is important in sensitive political environments, particularly in a transitioning democracy like Myanmar, where civil society organizations are not fully trusted.

Introduction

Civil society's participation and contribution in the policymaking process has long been viewed as being integral to a robust democratic society. However, theory does not always translate well into practice. It is for this reason that I proposed my research project – to examine how policy advocacy takes place in a transitioning democracy. In particular, I wanted to examine civil society's role and contribution to policy advocacy in Myanmar[1], by undertaking a case study of a non-governmental organization (NGO)-led policy advocacy initiative in the policy areas of land, seed, forestry, and private investment.

Myanmar has been transitioning from a military-ruled system to that of a democratically-elected government for the past nine years. With the shift from military-led rule to primarily civilian-led rule, there were expectations that the current National League for Democracy (NLD) government would be the panacea that the country had been desperately awaiting. Both international donors and internal stakeholders expected that the NLD government would be a responsive, democratic regime that is sensitive to citizens' needs. In addition, there was an expectation that there would be greater opportunity for citizens and civil society groups, who had played an active role in the ongoing political transition, to engage constructively with the government. However, these early expectations and assumptions appear to be the opposite of what is really happening. It is within this context that the research takes place.

[1] Myanmar is the officially recognized English name for the country. However, the reader may be familiar with the use of Burma for the country by democracy and human rights activists. The activists claim that the name change took place unilaterally and unconstitutionally by the military junta in 1989, without consultation with the citizenry. There are also various contentions as to whether the name is truly representative of all ethnic groups residing in the country. The reader should note that English spelling conventions for place names in Myanmar are often used interchangeably. With respect to place names in this essay, I will use the recognized convention in general discussion. The name of the country and various places referenced in the study remain unchanged in Burmese and is pronounced the same.

The concept of food sovereignty is broad-reaching as it refers to the rights of people, communities, and countries to determine their own agricultural and food policies (La Via Campesina, 2003). Metta Development Foundation (Metta), the organization which is leading the policy advocacy initiatives in my case study, further specifies that these rights are tied to unique, local socio-economic, cultural, and ecological conditions, and that people have access to both "safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food" and to the ability and resources to produce said food to sustain themselves and their societies (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015). Given that Myanmar is primarily an agricultural country, where approximately 70% of the labor force is working in the agricultural sector (DOP, 2016, p. 11), food sovereignty is an issue of interest to the citizenry. It is, therefore, evident that land and forests, seeds for agriculture, and private investment in the agriculture sector are important policy issues for Myanmar's development. These issues are of even greater concern as the country's economy opens up further to integrate with the global economy, and pressure is being brought to bear on the government to accelerate economic growth and rural development. However, there are inequity issues caused by underlying social and ethnic tensions and fifty decades of mismanagement that need to be resolved.

The focus of the case study is the Right to Food (RtF) project implemented by Metta in three different geographical areas of Myanmar: Kachin state, northern Shan state, and southern Shan state.[2] It is a donor-funded initiative that focuses on promoting the food sovereignty of local communities by supporting local civil society to engage in policy advocacy with local and national policymakers and decisionmakers in the policy areas of land, seeds, forestry, and private

[2] Northern Shan and southern Shan state are part of the larger Shan state, which is the largest ethnic state in Myanmar. However, under the previous military junta, it was divided into three administrative areas – northern Shan, southern Shan, and eastern Shan. While this division has been reversed, the ethnic make-up and geographical scope of Shan state has led Metta to continue maintaining this division.

investment policy frameworks and governance systems. In this project, Metta, a local NGO, is working in partnership with Oxfam in Myanmar, an international NGO (INGO), and numerous local civil society organizations (CSOs). Metta is the funding recipient, with funding coming from the Dutch government through Oxfam Novib, i.e., Oxfam in the Netherlands. The project's theory of change is provided in Annex A. Designed to be a three-year project, it began implementation in mid-2016; it has since been extended for another year, until 2020.

The intended impact of the project was described in the project proposal (see Annex A) as:

> Smallholder farmers, landless and forest dwelling women and men in 90 villages in Kachin, Northern and Southern Shan provinces in Myanmar realise their right to food sovereignty, in-line with Metta's Food sovereignty model and Oxfam International Strategic Plan's commitment on sustainable food. (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015, p. 13)

The intended primary beneficiaries are smallholder farmers, landless and forest-dwelling men and women in these communities. RtF intends to help the project participants realize their right to food sovereignty by building their capacity and utilizing various methods and avenues to influence policy at micro, meso and macro levels. As such, the project is designed to strengthen CSO capacity at the local level to enable rural-based stakeholders, who are often left out of the conversation around project design and project leadership, to affect and achieve policy change. To do so, Metta and its project partner, Oxfam, have worked together to conduct stakeholder analysis and formulate appropriate advocacy strategies. Oxfam's primary role is to provide any technical support vis-à-vis advocacy that may be necessary.

At the conceptual stage, Metta planned to mobilize farmers in communities where it has implemented Farmer Field School[3] and community forestry projects, to raise awareness and

[3] Farmer Field School is a project approach that Metta has traditionally utilized to provide agricultural skills training and input for farming communities with whom it works. Rather than taking the farmer trainees out of

gather evidence from communities to illustrate the necessity for the requested policy changes. Metta also planned to work together with farmer representatives from the three diverse project areas to facilitate building alliances at local, state and national levels, so that their advocacy actions would be more effective.

However, once implementation began, Metta redesigned the project approach to include engagement with local CSOs as project partners. This was because Metta recognized that local CSOs are key actors who can be supported to build a stronger, more robust, and sustainable advocacy platform (Thura, personal communication, December 20, 2018). Further, these CSOs have more traction, interest, and capacity to engage in policy advocacy efforts at local, state, and national levels. Therefore, in addition to leveraging Metta's existing in-depth contact and relations with communities, its partnership with the local CSOs would ensure a more effective and successful policy advocacy strategy.

Thus, this case study is a vehicle to better understand and capture advocacy initiatives being led by CSOs, especially exploring how these initiatives take shape in sensitive political contexts such as Myanmar. It also explores the following sub questions: What are the contributing factors in determining advocacy strategies and targets? What are the results of advocacy actions with respect to their objectives to date? What are the opportunities and challenges for the citizen advocates and the supporting organization? Are there missed opportunities? If so, why? What are the lessons learned and implications for the future, vis-à-vis citizen advocacy.

---

the familiar environment, the trainer, often a local farmer who has received an intensive season-long training, mobilizes his neighboring farmers and establishes a demonstration plot. The farmer-trainer then demonstrates different farming practices and facilitates discussions and hands-on learning.

Conceptual frameworks

In order to address the topics raised by my research question, it is first necessary to clarify the key concepts raised within it. Therefore, this section will briefly summarize the literature review conducted in an attempt to define the key elements of my research: policy advocacy, civil society, and governance. I will also delimit the scope of analysis for understanding policy advocacy.

Policy advocacy

To begin with, it is important to define the term 'policy advocacy'. VeneKlasen and Miller (2008) note that advocacy is a broad term that can refer to different initiatives that involve different groups of people, targets, purposes, and means and can be organized in different forms. However, policy advocacy can be broadly defined as any attempt to influence those with decision-making powers for the benefit of a common collective (Mosley, 2010; Li, Lo & Tang, 2016; Onyx et al, 2010). For the purposes of my case study, Unsicker's (2014) definition of policy advocacy will be applied:

> Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to attain political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions. (p. 4)

With this definition in mind, it is unsurprising that policy advocacy has gained traction among development actors as a vehicle for positive social change and social development. In the 1970s and 1980s, development assistance focused on service delivery, emphasizing needs-based approaches, i.e., meeting the basic needs of the target communities. However, starting in the 1990s and to the present day, the focus has shifted to rights-based approaches, the rationale being

that when individuals and communities are able to access their basic human rights, their needs will subsequently be met as well. Hence, duty-bearers, i.e., those in positions of influence and power, particularly the state, must be held to account and must be encouraged to formulate and implement policies that will facilitate the citizenry's access to their rights, which includes protection of individual rights and delivery of basic public services. This same trend has also been observed in Myanmar. As the political space opened up, international donors have increasingly shifted their focus from direct development assistance channeled through NGOs to encouraging NGO applicants to undertake policy advocacy initiatives.

While it is familiar for those in liberal political systems, at first glance, policy advocacy appears to be an alien concept for civil society and activists in less open political systems. Due to the various nuances attached to the term, it is also hard to translate it into other languages, particularly in the global south, or to convey the essence of what it is in a few, easy-to-communicate words. It is often a concept introduced by Western NGOs to local civil society organizations, especially to initiate campaigns for social justice and political change. This often leads to confusion on the part of the local actors because of problems of translation. One Peruvian activist has noted:

> We're not certain whether we have a translation for 'advocacy' or whether we should just use the word 'advocacy' in English. Part of the confusion has to do with the way the concept was imported from the outside as if it were a new technology – as if we don't already know advocacy… (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2008, p. 17).

This is similar to the experience of Metta staff. When they were first introduced to the concept at the beginning stages of the project, Metta staff discussed what advocacy meant, and in turn, what policy advocacy was. This was followed by a debate about if the term should or could be

translated into Burmese (and other local languages), whether to just translate the term directly, or find an approximation of the concept the two words captured. It was clear from the outset, however, that there was no easy, direct translation. While it is clear what is meant by policy, and the word itself is easily translatable into Burmese, at times the translation failed to convey the idea that "policy" encapsulates a broad array of state instruments that focus on one thematic area (see discussion below on the definition of policy advocacy). It is also difficult to translate the nuances of advocacy because there is no direct approximation. While advocacy is broadly understood in English as an attempt to influence decision-makers, the concept of influencing (when translated directly) can have negative cultural connotations. When combining the two concepts together, it then becomes cumbersome to use the literal/direct translation repeatedly in every day parlance. Due in part to this issue of semantics, Metta continued using the English term in subsequent references. The use of the term in English makes it a more alien concept than it necessarily is, with the result being that it may at times appear to be a more challenging endeavor for advocates to undertake than it otherwise would be.

Civil society

As with policy advocacy, 'civil society' is a term that has been used on a widespread basis in recent decades, particularly in politics and in the development arena. Its exact meaning and essence have been debated by philosophers and political theorists from ancient Greece to the present day. Aristotelian tradition posits civil society as one whose constituents work together to establish common laws and values (Rathod, 2012a). Thomas Hobbes and John Locke carry on this tradition further by defining it as a "legitimate political order based on rights of its members" and is "a coterminous with effective governing institutions embodied in commonwealth" (Rathod, 2012a, p. 1). Adam Smith, G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx extend the concept from a

pure political one, to involving economic dimensions (He, 2012). Over the years, according to Ferguson, the notion of civil society has become one where it functions "not merely as an arena of civic association and free exchange but as a moral sphere and…a space for mutual service, grounded in clearly defined moral principles" (Rathod, 2012, p. 3). Rathod (2012a) notes that it has in fact evolved to somewhat of an aspiration and a fetish but has been useful in understanding "the sovereignty of the nation-state, the meaning of citizenship…and the nature of public sphere" (p. 3). He further notes that "[c]ivil society is a relational term because it has relation with many other interdependent terms" (p. 3). Civil society then reemerged as a popular notion in the wake of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, where the populace played an active and visible role in pressuring their governments to transition to democracy. It came to be understood as comprising entities independent of government control and was closely linked with the promotion of democratic society. It is also the basis for the conventional definition that is widely accepted now: "Civil society includes civic and social associations that are not part of the state, private sector, or the extended family…[which] may be seeking to advance broad social interests, narrow group interest, or even narrower individual interests" (United Nations Public Administration Network [UNPAN], n.d.).

The question which then arises is what comprises civil society. Local and voluntary civic and social groups are easily identified as civil society groups. They clearly have direct representational bases which they can rely on to generate what Putnam calls "social capital" that enables them to garner attention and legitimacy by those in authority and the wider public (Mosley, 2016; Ottaway, 2012; Putnam, 2000). The debate largely revolves around professionalized non-governmental organizations' status as civil society organizations. Ottaway (2012) notes that they generate little social capital and are not truly representative, but they do

"broaden the range of interests expressed in the political process," and also play an important role in the delivery of public services, especially in developing countries (pp. 164-173). Ottaway also notes that civil society organizations' relationship with the state varies and often takes one of three forms – ignoring and avoiding; opposing; or seeking to influence state policies. Finally, she describes civil society as being composed of professionalized non-governmental organizations which were encouraged to "[develop] government by the people and for the people" (pp. 164-173). In this sense, civil society is not politically neutral but is seen as a vehicle for government regime change, popular civic participation, and empowerment. According to Rathod (2012b), "[civil] society offers opportunity to realize freedom, equality, and solidarity in present social and political situations" (p. 263).

Civil society in Myanmar, in the form of civic and voluntary welfare groups, has long been active (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2015). However, during the extended military and quasi-military rule which lasted from 1962 to late 2000s, the ability of civil society groups to participate and contribute to national political processes was severely curtailed. Any existing groups were limited to communal welfare and religious affairs, while other national level organizations were usually government-organized, government-sanctioned organizations. After the agricultural heartland of Ayeyarwady Region suffered widespread devastation from Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the military government of the day tacitly allowed more civil society groups to mobilize and engage with communities directly. State and CSO relations were always uneasy however, as the then government (and successive administrations) viewed CSOs with mistrust as the bulk of their funding originated from international donors. In other words, Myanmar CSOs were often seen as mouthpieces/instruments of foreign interests.

Governance

In order to better understand the importance of policy advocacy and the interplay of civil society within the pursuit of policy advocacy, the concept of governance needs to be clarified. It is derived from Classical Greek and means to pilot steer or direct, but it is now used to refer to "the attempts of governments or other actors to steer communities, whole countries, or even groups of countries in the pursuit of collective goals" (Bell & Hindmoor, 2009, p.2). More specifically, the UN defines it as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences" (UNPAN).

This rather mechanical definition is given normative value when people use the term "good governance." Good governance, often paired with civil society, has become common in the parlance when discussing pathways to development. There are, in general, four attributes to good governance – legitimacy, accountability, competence, and respect for law and protection of human rights (UNPAN). The ideal form of the state (or government) is then seen to be one which is sensitive to the needs, desires, and rights of its citizens, which leads to the rise in popularity of participatory processes in governance. Whereas before governance processes tended to be top-down and policies were prescribed by those in power, they have now shifted to processes which should ideally include informed input from the citizenry and are held accountable by the electorate. This has led to our modern understanding of civil society becoming a condition for sustaining a democracy and the necessity of its role in holding the duty-bearers to serve the interest of their constituents.

Good governance is of particular interest for the Myanmar citizenry given the country's political history. Having endured over six decades of authoritarian rule, where policy decisions were made by top leadership with little to no inputs from technical experts and communities, and where corrupt practices were pervasive, Myanmar citizens are now eager to hold state actors accountable and to participate in, or at least contribute to, policy-making processes.

Analytical framework for policy advocacy initiatives

To understand the different dimensions of the policy advocacy process in my case study, I will utilize Unsicker's (2014) advocacy circles framework (pp. 17-19). This framework is based on Unsicker's (2014) definition of policy advocacy and is designed to help advocates understand the advocacy initiatives they are involved in by considering various interlocking dimensions. There are six dimensions of analysis, five of which are captured in the diagram below. At the center of the analytical framework is an analysis of the *advocates* – the actors working to influence and affect the policy in question – how they are organized and their motivation for being involved in the advocacy. *Context* refers to the political-economic-cultural environment in which the policy advocacy action is being carried out. *Policy, politics,* and *strategy* are the who, what, and how of the advocacy action. *Policy* lays out the parameters of the problem and identifies solutions that the advocacy action addresses. *Politics* identifies the formal and informal systems in which the advocates must operate, including other actors they need to interact with, or account for, in the course of their advocacy efforts. *Strategy* is the plan of action that the advocates develop to achieve their policy advocacy objective(s). *Monitoring, evaluation, and learning* are the final dimensions of the analysis, but are not indicated in a separate circle of their own, because Unsicker notes that these are functions that should be integrated into each of the other five dimensions. Utilizing this framework will be helpful to frame the ongoing RtF

advocacy efforts in Myanmar vis-à-vis conventional policy advocacy lens and address the research question (see page 14).

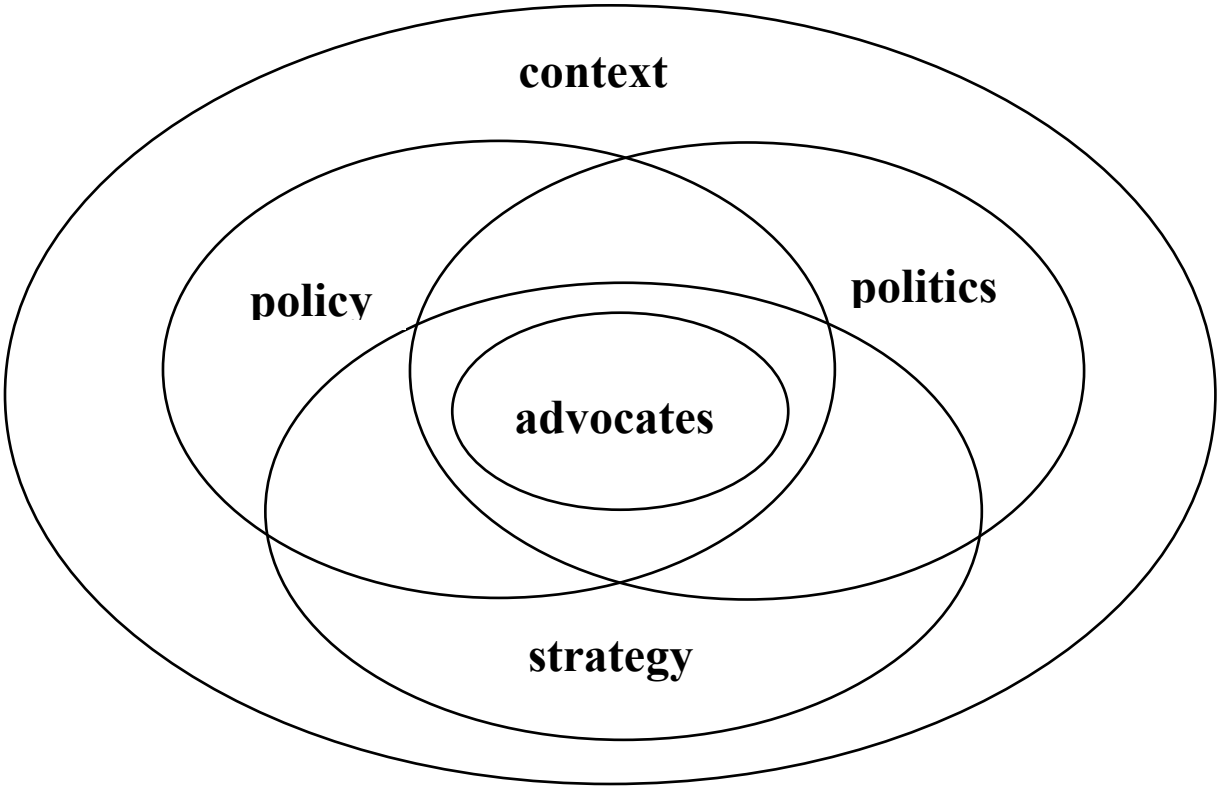

Figure 1: Advocacy Circles from Confronting Power: The Practice of Policy Advocacy *(p. 17), by J. Unsicker, 2014, Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press*

Positionality

As a researcher, my identity is best described as a "halfie" (Abu-Lughod, 1991), as my background and experiences are a blend of different cultures resulting from my upbringing, international education and ethnic heritage. I straddle the "outsider-insider" boundary by virtue of being a citizen of Myanmar and conducting my research within the country and with the organization I have worked for extensively. Yet my perspective is affected by my personal background. I am not a member of any of the ethnic groups living in the project areas, and furthermore, I was brought up and educated abroad during my formative years. I have a close relationship with the Metta senior staff and many other staff members, including project staff,

because I worked there for over eight years. I am familiar with the project and have my own insights into the project's objectives and approach because of my prior involvement with the start-up activities. I leveraged my personal connections with Metta to gain access to the RtF project staff and project partners so that I could collect information. In the process of doing so, I respected Metta's and the individual respondents' sensitivities, by not pushing them to participate in the interviews/discussions or to answer questions that they are not willing/able to respond to. I was guided by the local experts, who are locally based staff members, in identifying interview respondents and structuring the interview questions. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I self-reflected constantly to ensure that my biases were not affecting the quality of information, openly acknowledging my transnational identity and respecting the nuances of the socio-cultural context in which the program has been implemented.

Ethics

The semi-structured discussions were conducted to ensure that the discussants would be able to speak with the researcher openly and honestly. To facilitate this, the discussant(s) were asked to identify a meeting time and place that would be convenient for them. As the issues discussed in our conversations could be sensitive, care was taken to protect the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Consent was obtained from each individual person through consent forms that provided details about the research topic, research approach, interview procedures, promise of anonymity and highlighted the fact that participation is entirely voluntary, with no monetary or in-kind compensation being offered. To protect the respondents' identities, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms in this paper.

Credibility

To the extent possible, I attempted to capture data from different sources and using different means so as to triangulate the data. Therefore, I examined project documentation and official documents, conducted interviews, and observed a similar advocacy event. These different methodologies enable me to present more complete findings.

Methodology

The study has been designed as a qualitative case study of a policy advocacy initiative that is being carried out in Myanmar under the management of a local non-governmental organization (NGO). To inform the research, I have reviewed available project documentation and carried out interviews with project participants and staff, as well as key informants who are able to provide information about the advocacy context and stakeholders.

Data collection methods

The research utilized two data collection methods: review of project documentation and semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. The review of project documentation focused on harvesting salient information about the project rationale, results accomplished to date, and identification of challenges and/or opportunities for the project. The semi-structured discussions were designed to provide information about the advocacy context in Myanmar, insight into stakeholders who affect (or are affected by) policymaking at local, state, and national levels, the policy issues addressed by the project, the advocacy approaches/initiatives employed by the project, and opportunities and challenges as perceived by project participants (see Annex B for list of questions posed during the interviews). While direct observation of project activities was not possible during the data collection timeframe, I did get an opportunity to observe an advocacy event that was hosted by Metta, which served as a proxy

field observation, given that the event was structured in a similar manner to those hosted by the project. This was a public event hosted by Metta in Pathein, Ayeyarwady region, in February 2019, to which regional government ministers, agricultural department officials, CSOs, and NGOs attended. During this half-day meeting, farmer groups working with Metta in the region presented their participatory research findings relating to farmers' rights protection law, pesticide and fertilizer laws, and farmland laws, highlighting their understanding of the rights and protections the law formally offered, gaps in the current legislation and implementation, and presenting their recommendations for the government's consideration.

Site. The study site is Myanmar, with the Right to Food program being implemented in three distinct geographical areas.

Participant description. Interviews were conducted with 14 persons; two focus group discussions were facilitated with Metta project staff as well. The table below is a summary profile of the interviews and focus group discussions.

Interview/Focus Group	**Location**	**Number of Participants**			**Participant Profile**
		Male	**Female**	**Total**	
Metta RtF Project Team					
Focus Group Discussion	Yangon	7	1	8	Senior project staff and field staff
Follow-up interview		1		1	Yangon-based RtF project coordinator
Focus Group Discussion	Southern Shan (Taunggyi)	3		3	Southern Shan-based field staff (note: one respondent also participated in the Yangon FGD)
Telephone Interview		1		1	Southern Shan-based RtF project coordinator
Project Partners					
Face-to-face interview	Kachin (Myitkyina)	1	1	2	Representatives of RtF project partner organizations
	Southern Shan (Taunggyi)	2		2	

	Northern Shan (Lashio)	2	2	4	
Key Informant Interviews					
Face-to-face interview	Yangon	3	2	5	Persons knowledgeable about the current Myanmar political context, civil society landscape, and agriculture sector
	Nay Pyi Taw	1		1	Senior official from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation

Figure 2: Summary presentation of participants involved in the case study

Semi-structured interviews and discussions with the Metta RtF project staff served to provide information about the project implementation. In addition, six key informant interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of Metta's overall strategic agricultural advocacy approach, global advocacy perspective, and the current policy-making context in Myanmar. The respondents included:

- one senior Metta staff member, who is external to the RtF project;
- an expatriate Oxfam staff member who is Metta's program counterpart and is familiar with the RtF program and has had extensive advocacy experience globally, providing valuable insight into Oxfam's rationale for the project, analysis of the operational context, challenges and opportunities;
- an elected Member of Parliament for Yangon Region's Parliament;
- a senior official from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (MOALI);
- a senior staff member of a prominent CSO that is active in civic policy advocacy; and
- an independent political analyst and development consultant.

Data management

Keeping in mind the importance of safeguarding the participants' privacy, I recorded the interviews on a password-protected smartphone. These were then uploaded to a cloud server to

ensure that the recordings would not be lost. For interviewees who declined my request to record the interviews, I took detailed notes during the interviews, taking care not to identify the respondent in the notes. I recruited a professional transcriptionist, who is unfamiliar with the project and interviewees, to transcribe the Burmese interviews. The transcriptionist did not receive any identifying information about the interviewees. Being proficient in Burmese, I was able to analyze and translate the interview data myself.

Limitations and delimitations

One of the limitations of this research project is that the scope of the advocacy initiative is very broad. The RtF project is not one advocacy campaign but is rather facilitating and fostering the growth of community-based advocacy initiatives in Myanmar for the long term. It is also an ongoing initiative. Therefore, a major challenge was that the unit of analysis was ambiguous and not as clear as expected at the outset of the research, nor are all activities complete. Focusing on Unsicker's five policy circles was helpful in containing the analysis, but a long-term research project would have been more effective.

In addition, due to time limitations, I did not get to observe project/advocacy activities directly. However, I did have the opportunity to review project documents and conduct in-depth interviews with project staff and project partners to gain insight into what is being done. I also observed a similar advocacy event in a different part of Myanmar, organized by Metta, that served as a proxy advocacy event, given that it was an advocacy event in the same thematic area and used a similar approach.

Data analysis

My research approach was grounded in the principles of ethnographic research while undertaking a case study of a project currently under implementation. I observed the project

environment directly and interacted with the project participants in their own domains. Furthermore, my familiarity and experience with the project context and approaches informed my analysis.

I first undertook a deductive analysis of the interview data and available project documents. This deductive analysis was framed by Unsicker's five advocacy circles. New patterns and categories that emerged were coded with in-vivo terms, using inductive analysis to frame unexpected information (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The analysis was also informed by additional information from project documentation and personal insights. The insights which emerged have been analyzed and presented in the sections below, categorized under each category of Unsicker's advocacy circles. The *lessons learned* section is an explicit compilation of practical recommendations formulated upon analysis of the information that was collected in my interviews with respondents.

Furthermore, I wanted this research to be a mutually beneficial undertaking for both Metta and I. I did not want to merely extract information from the project, the organization, and the project partners for my own gain. I wanted the exercise and learnings the research generated to be an opportunity for internal reflection and a platform for improving advocacy strategies for the RtF project partners. To this end, I consulted with Metta as outlined above and shared the initial set of lessons learned for their reflection and feedback. This formed a basis for further discussion and reflection, which has enriched the findings I present in this paper. The final product will also be presented to Metta and its RtF project partners upon my return to Myanmar, after having given the capstone presentation at SIT.

Context

As with any case study, it is important to understand the socio-political and economic context in which the advocacy action is being undertaken. The Myanmar context is defined by lagging rural development unequal central-periphery ethnic relations and resource distribution, as well as non-receptive attitudes towards civil society on the part of the government and policy processes that are not wholly transparent and at times contradictory. The complex narratives of Myanmar's economic and political history are briefly outlined in the following sub-sections to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of this context.

Myanmar's economic and political developments (1962-present)

Myanmar was ruled by different military regimes since 1962, when the military staged a coup against the then democratically elected government. Due to mismanagement and self-imposed isolation, the country went from being a center of learning and commerce in Asia to being a pariah state. It endured a long fall from grace – from being known as the "rice bowl of Asia" in the early part of the twentieth century (AFP, 2015), it was classified as a Least Developed Country (LDC) by the United Nations (UN) in 1987 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], n.d.). Moreover, it has endured continuous civil conflict in one form or another since its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1948. In fact, these civil conflicts are among the world's longest-running armed conflicts.

Widespread protests, initially led by student activists, in 1988 culminated in the military government of the time stepping down and appointing another military-led regime in its place, with the promise to hold nationwide democratic elections and the development of a new constitution. However, these efforts were in vain. When it became clear that the main pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), would win a majority of the seats

in the 1990 national elections, the pushback from the military-led "caretaker government" was severe and immediate. The military put the face of the opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, who also happens to be the daughter of Myanmar's independence movement leader, under house arrest, jailed a countless number of activists, and refused to honor the election results. The intervening years saw the country become an international pariah, suffering under many Western-led sanctions. Domestically, the citizenry suffered under draconian rules and regulations, including a law that prohibited any gathering of more than five persons. Government policies were formulated and decided by the generals in charge. At times, policy decisions appeared to be made on the basis of personal preferences rather than rational thinking. There seemed to be little prospect for change, and if not for Cyclone Nargis in 2008, it would most likely have travelled on the same trajectory of continued military rule under different guises.

Cyclone Nargis was the largest natural disaster in modern Myanmar history. The cyclone led to the deaths of over 130,000 people and affected the lives of over 2 million people. The disaster led an influx of international aid into the country. Observers of Myanmar's political and social development have claimed that Nargis was the spark that led to the widening of space for Myanmar civil society (Morgan, 2015; Zin, 2012). Many local organizations and associations were formed and/or mobilized to assist cyclone-affected communities. At the same time, the military government held a national referendum that supposedly ratified the new constitution (reportedly backed by 93.82% of voters). This constitution, while allowing for the assumption of civilian rule, still ensures that the military plays an active role in the governance of the country. Twenty-five percent of all legislative seats are appointed military officers and the Chief of Defense Services, and ministers of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Border Affairs are appointed by the military.

This set the scene for national elections in 2010, which were won by the military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Soon after, Aung San Suu Kyi, the most prominent leader of the opposition, and other political prisoners were released. Foreign dignitaries (e.g., King Harald V, the King of Norway, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, etc.) started visiting Myanmar. The new administration, headed by ex-general Thein Sein, promised to bring about development to the country. It was eager to present and maintain its reformer credentials to the outside world. Consequently, foreign sanctions were relaxed gradually.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the NLD, were once again able to mobilize and campaign. In fact, Aung San Suu Kyi was elected as a member of parliament in the 2012 national by-elections. As widely expected, the USDP subsequently lost the 2015 general elections. The NLD-led government was sworn into power. Aung San Suu Kyi sidestepped constitutional limitations, which prohibit anyone married to a foreigner from being head of state (thus barring Suu Kyi as she was married to a British citizen), by being appointed State Counsellor. She declared that she would be “above the president.” The political landscape is dominated by the NLD, while the military continues to exert its influence through its control of 25% of the legislature and the key ministries. The military-affiliated USDP and smaller, more localized ethnic political parties constitute the remainder of the Myanmar legislature.

Since 2010, Myanmar citizens have experienced greater personal freedoms with respect to mass, public mobilization and expression of opinions. The number of news publications increased exponentially and the censorship requirement for all publications (in place in different guises since the 1962 coup d’état) was lifted in August 2012. Public mass gatherings also became easier to organize. Official registration of NGOs also became streamlined and relaxed

since July 2014. Despite these gains, there has also been a slight contraction in press freedoms and freedom of speech of private citizens under the NLD administration, as evinced most noticeably by the detention, trial, and imprisonment of two Reuters journalists (Fullerton and Goldberg, 2018). The NLD and the military have also not shied away from taking legal action against writers, cartoonists, and CSO leaders who speak publicly, or post or share critical comments on social media (Zin, 2019).

One of the foremost policy priorities for both the Thein Sein and NLD administrations has been promoting Myanmar's development. This has duly been borne out in the various initiatives the governments have undertaken and promoted. As noted earlier, Myanmar has lagged behind most of the world in terms of social and economic development since the late 1960s, being classified as an LDC in 1987 by the UN (DESA, n.d.). It also ranked quite low in the UN's Human Development Index (HDI). It was only in the 2017 HDI report that Myanmar scored high enough across the various social and economic indicators to be deemed a medium-ranked member (145 of 188 countries) (UNDP, 2017). Even so, it still lags developmentally behind its Southeast Asian neighbors (UNDP, 2018). According to the Ministry of Finance and Planning (2018) and UNDP (n.d.), 26% of the population was living below the poverty line in 2015, but the poverty rate in rural areas is much higher – 23% in rural areas compared to 9% in urban areas. Although Myanmar is endowed with a wide range of valuable, high-earning natural resources, such as natural gas and oil, minerals and precious gems, timber and forest-related products, over one-third of the national GDP is still derived from the agriculture sector (FAO, n.d.). Moreover, the primary source of livelihood for 70% of the labor force in the country is agriculture (DOP, 2016). This is unsurprising as the 2014 census reported that 70% of the population live in rural areas (DOP, 2017). Therefore, government policies have focused on

encouraging economic growth and on poverty mitigation strategies. To this end, government policies have focused on industrialization and modernization of the agricultural sector (e.g. efforts to increase yield and focus on export-oriented crops), and inviting private investment to drive these two policy foci forward.

Myanmar's ethnic conflicts in the post-colonial period

Accompanying the need for the country's economic and rural development is the urgent need to bring about peace and stability in the ethnic areas of Myanmar. The government officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups as being indigenous to the country. Most of these ethnic "minorities" live in remote areas, with very limited access to basic social services, i.e. education and health services provision. This is counterbalanced by the fact that much of the revenue for the state originates in these ethnic areas, e.g., jade, teak, hydropower. The Bamar ethnic group has historically dominated Myanmar politics and control of resources. When Myanmar first received its independence from Britain in 1948, Bamar and ethnic political leaders agreed to a federal union arrangement that would ensure equitable representation and access to resources. However, continued Bamar hegemony, as well as instability wrought by left and right wings of Bamar political parties, did not see this agreement realized. As a result, the majority of ethnic groups in the country took up arms against the Bamar-dominated government and much of the country has been engulfed in armed civil conflicts of varying intensities since – making Myanmar home to one of the world's longest conflicts. The main thrust of the ethnic armed organizations' (EAOs) demands has been a more equitable political relationship and access to the wealth derived from the country's natural resources, much of which is extracted from their areas of control. Kachin and Shan states were among the major hotspots of conflict. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and its political organization, the Kachin Independence Organization

(KIO) have engaged both politically and militarily with the Myanmar government since the 1960s. Shan state is demographically more diverse and is thus home to more ethnic militias and EAOs.

In the early 1990s, the military junta (the State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC) engaged in talks with the ethnic armed groups, entering into a broad range of ceasefire agreements which guaranteed a level of administrative autonomy and natural resource extractive rights. The KIO was one of the signatories, and this agreement saw a cessation of armed conflict in Kachin state. Gradually, armed conflict in Shan state also ceased as the various EAOs active there engaged with the government, and were, in turn, granted various autonomous powers. That is not to say that the regions were absent of armed conflict, as smaller ethnic militias were still active and small-scale fighting broke out from time to time. However, tensions between the EAOs and the government of the day still lingered. The central government's position has consistently been to approach the EAOs as operating outside the law and their negotiations have focused on bringing the ethnic armed groups under the military's control. At the same time, only lip service was paid to political representation. This was visibly reflected in the 2010 elections when ethnic political parties loosely affiliated with the EAOs tried to register to contest seats in their areas, but were denied registration by the Election Commission. This has contributed to continued mistrust and reluctance to engage with the central, Bamar-centric government. Pressure had started building on the EAOS to disarm or to integrate their forces with the Myanmar military following the transition to quasi-civilian rule in 2010, but they did not bow to the pressure. Political discussions did not bear fruit. The tensions ultimately led to an outbreak of armed conflict in Kachin state in mid-2012, after which the fighting spread to northern Shan state where the KIA has a presence. This led to government forces engaging in armed conflict with

other EAOs in northern Shan state. This fighting has resulted in over 100,000 people being displaced from their home communities for prolonged periods, even up to the present day (UNOCHA, 2019). Southern Shan state is relatively stable, though there are still pockets of tension.

The Thein Sein government launched an ambitious National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in March 2015, which saw eight EAOs engaging with the government on formal peace talks. Despite a tremendous amount of support (both financial and technical) provided primarily to the government from the international community, the majority of the EAOs remain distrustful of the negotiations (Kumbun, 2017; Weng, 2019). It has, in a way, become a white elephant project because no substantive gains have been made, while armed conflict in the ethnic areas continues. One of the criticisms is that while the EAOs are expected to make a lot of concessions, the military and the central government are acceding few of their own.

The NLD government was welcomed with great anticipation, in part because the ethnic groups believed Aung San Suu Kyi and her party to be sympathetic to their concerns. After the NLD administration assumed power, they continued their efforts to drive the NCA process forward. In informal conversations, I have heard ethnic civil society leaders express increasing disenchantment and distrust of both Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD after 2015 because of their public bias towards the establishment's interest and reluctance to engage with civil society, particularly representatives from ethnic organizations.

NLD government's engagement with civil society and decision-making processes

Myo, a political analyst and development consultant, has noted that the mandate received by the NLD government from the majority of the population has dictated how the administration interacts with other stakeholders (personal communication, January 26, 2019). According to

Myo, the previous Thein Sein administration opened the space up for civil society engagement to counter weaknesses caused by low levels of political legitimacy (as it was still dominated by recently retired military generals, turned civilian politicians). This lack of political legitimacy was not an issue for the NLD government. In other words, he said, "[the NLD government] do not see the [CSOs] as being necessary from the institutional perspective; they already have legitimacy. They don't need [to partner with CSOs]. This was unexpected – by CSOs and everyone" (personal communication, January 26, 2019).

As much as the NLD administration is driving towards improving governance practices, old, untransparent practices remain. In informal interviews with me, civil society actors have mentioned contradictory, unwritten policies in government departments and in parliament, particularly among the political parties, which have thwarted their policy advocacy efforts.

Advocates

The advocates, as described by Unsicker, are those pushing for changes in policy. The advocates for the RtF project can be classified into three sub-groups. Metta Development Foundation, as the project holder and convener of the advocates is, in a way, the main protagonist. However, it has positioned itself as building a platform and providing critical support for the local civil society partners in the project areas. The second group of advocates are the local civil society project partners. The last group of advocates are advocacy actors who are not directly involved with the project but working on similar and parallel policy advocacy initiatives. Profiles of these sub-groups and further discussion of how these advocate groups interact with each other are detailed below.

Metta Development Foundation

Metta is a Myanmar NGO established in 1998 by local peace negotiators and development workers. Its original objective was to engage in community-based, community-led development activities, building local capacity, so as to complement ongoing formal peace processes. It aspired to rebuild the lives of post-conflict communities in northern Myanmar, which was the focal area of its initial projects.

It has since become a dual mandate organization. Metta's work focuses on both development and humanitarian programming. Its current staff strength numbers over 650 people in five branch offices and headquarters. Its annual operational budget averages well over USD 5 million (the 2018-2019 annual budget was USD 10 million). This budget enables Metta to serve over 1,000 communities each year. It works primarily with rural ethnic communities in Kachin, Kayah, Mon, and Shan states, as well as rural communities in Ayeyarwady and Bago regions. It is now one of the largest local NGOs and is well-regarded by both local and international partners. The primary program areas have been agriculture and forestry, early childhood education, water and sanitation, community-based HIV prevention, and community-based livelihood interventions. Its program approach emphasizes capacity building of local community members and supports them to enact their own visions. Metta's latest organizational program strategy seeks to ensure that rural communities have the necessary capacities and resources by building on Metta's prior experience, expertise, and the communities' needs. The refocused priority sectors include food sovereignty and sustainable livelihoods (including agriculture and forestry, as well as land rights and natural resource management), essential services (education and health), humanitarian response, strengthening civil society (capacity building), and research and advocacy.

Metta's projects are designed around the philosophy of empowering the community. Activities normally start with mobilizing community members to come together to identify issues of mutual concern, usually livelihoods and basic services. Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is essentially a research approach that involves participants from the target communities in the research process (from problem identification and situation analysis, to proposing solutions to the community development problem at hand), is the bedrock of Metta's community mobilization activities. Community members then form a project management committee that can plan and manage the community development project activities. Following this, Metta provides the appropriate and necessary technical skills training (be it project management-related skills like facilitation and book-keeping, or directly related to project activities like agriculture, early childhood education or hygiene know-how), along with a small start-up grant and/or materials to complement whatever resources (monetary, labor, or in-kind) that the community itself is able to muster. Through the implementation process, Metta accompanies the community as they manage and implement project activities, providing guidance and encouragement. The activities are monitored and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure timely and quality completion.

Part of the rationale for Metta's support for community empowerment is the recognition that communities have their own vision for the future and understand what resources they have access to, and what further support they require. Any initiative that affects their lives and futures will have a lasting and positive impact only if the community members themselves are involved and invested in the decision-making process. Therefore, Metta has initiated and facilitated various CSO strengthening initiatives since its establishment. Vibrant local CSOs can more effectively champion local interests than proxy representatives who may not be fully aware of

the local context and appropriateness of interventions. In the past decade, Metta has designed and implemented a number of ambitious CSO strengthening projects across its project areas. It has also acted as a fund facilitator – helping channel funding to local CSOs which would not otherwise be able to access international donor funding for their operations and initiatives. The relationships established through these initiatives formed the foundations of the advocacy partnerships that Metta has utilized for RtF.

Metta's latest strategic plan explicitly included advocacy as an area of programming focus. This shift recognized the need for Metta to move beyond service delivery to helping communities engage directly and constructively with policymakers. This was paired with research, whereby Metta improves its learning systems to better document its experiences and systematically approaches community-based PAR research initiatives. The research efforts generate the knowledge and evidence base that can be leveraged for Metta and its community partners' engagement with policy-makers. With this new focus on engaging in policy advocacy, RtF is Metta's first, stand-alone, pioneering policy advocacy project.

Metta project partners

To accomplish the RtF project objectives, Metta convened three networks of advocacy alliances in the three project areas. Metta and Oxfam envisioned that these networks would eventually link up with each other and with other national level advocacy networks to coordinate and cooperate on advocacy initiatives that focus on the program's food sovereignty themes, i.e. land, forestry, and seeds. The fourth project theme, private investment, was not a focus of Metta's policy advocacy actions, as Metta and its project partner Oxfam agreed that strategically, Oxfam was better placed to address the related policy issues. This is due in part to comparative experiences and strengths of Metta and Oxfam respectively. Metta is better positioned to work

with its local CSO partners to advocate with stakeholders on land, forestry, and seeds issues. On the other hand, Oxfam has decades of experience engaging with the private sector on social justice issues. Especially given that RtF was Metta's first pure advocacy project, it did not want to stretch its resources to take on a new portfolio of engaging with both state and private sector actors.

The local alliances are composed solely of locally-based CSOs in each of the three project areas. These CSOs are locally active and share common objectives and common values with Metta: promoting community interests and sustainable community development initiatives, particularly in the agricultural sector and in the three RtF thematic policy areas that RtF. The CSOs include faith-based organizations (FBOs) and local development CSOs, all of which are in engaged in implementing a variety of community development and/or empowerment initiatives including awareness-raising, community mobilization, direct interventions focusing on sustainable livelihoods (e.g. agriculture/livelihood projects), as well as some policy advocacy, vis-à-vis community mobilization, research and data collection, and engagement with local authorities. Most of the partner CSOs are volunteer-based organizations, smaller in scale than Metta. Two of the partner organizations are FBOs, one operating in northern Shan state and one operating in Kachin state. One partner CSO from Kachin state is an environmental-focused local NGO, with its headquarters in Yangon. While these partner CSOs form an alliance with Metta to engage in policy advocacy, some of them are themselves network/alliance organizations composed of different organizations banding together to create a secretariat to pursue policy advocacy interests, particularly one partner in Kachin state. A common feature of all partner CSOs is that their core constituencies are rural communities in the geographical areas they are based, often defined along ethnic, faith, or livelihoods lines. The majority of the participating

CSOs have partnered with Metta in the past, and have received support directly or indirectly from Metta for their organizational development and project implementation. This was a refrain that emerged repeatedly in the interviews with the project partners when asked why they decided to participate in RtF. Seng Bu, a representative of one partner organization in Kachin state, essentially described the partnership with Metta and other RtF partners as symbiotic, saying "what my organization cannot provide, another can do so" (personal interview, February 8, 2019).

At the same time, the nature of the alliances itself is rather fluid. Due to the complex nature of Metta's relationship with a large number of the organizations, it was difficult for the Metta program staff to definitively state that *x* number of organizations were part of the program initiatives. Rather, when questioned, they provided an approximation of the partner organizations and noted that the partners came and went as needed according to the nature of the advocacy action on an ad hoc basis. In some cases, there was no formal partnership per se, but rather partners worked together on specific activities or as the need arose. On average, however, there are seven partner organizations that work together on a regular basis with Metta on RtF program initiatives in northern Shan, seven in Kachin, and twelve in southern Shan. In some cases, the partners indicated that they found the partnership with Metta convenient because it provided them with access to funding that is more flexible than they might have otherwise had access to (Ja Nang, personal communication, February 6, 2019).

Right to Food advocacy partnership

The various CSOs, as much as they focus on community-based or environment/agriculture-based themes, are not all natural bedfellows. It has fallen on Metta, as the convener of the alliances, to cultivate relationships to ensure that a successful and fruitful

working relationship ensues. In fact, Thura, one senior program staff, noted that much of the first project year was spent building trust and mutual understanding between Metta and the partners, as well as among the partners themselves (personal communication, December 20, 2018). He further notes that Metta has had to overcome mistrust and reluctance to engage by local CSO actors due to Metta's organizational size, ways of working, and perceived biases (to the establishment, to various ethnic/faith groups). Kaung, the director of a partner CSO in northern Shan, described the relationship between Metta and his organization as that between an elephant and a mouse, inferring that Metta has organizational capacity and perspective that is significantly greater and wider than his organization's – a fact he suggested could then lead to differences in aims and objectives (personal communication, February 6, 2019). At the same time, the partners all appreciated Metta's role and involvement in the alliance because Metta had the capacity, resources, and reach that no individual member necessarily had (Aung & Maung, personal communication, February 13, 2019; Naw Awng, personal communication, February 8, 2019; Roi Ja & Naw Din, personal communication, February 6, 2019). Aung and Maung, leaders of a southern Shan CSO partner, expressed their appreciation that despite Metta's "seniority," the CSOs were given due respect for their own capacity, as well as autonomy, the opportunity to assume leadership roles, and the resources needed to lead certain advocacy initiatives.

While the RtF project is bound by the objectives laid out in the project proposal (see Introduction, p. 5), the vision of the RtF advocacy alliance Metta formed is not so formally verbalized. The Metta project staff broke down their understanding of the project objectives as "strengthening access to food-related rights, e.g., land, seed, natural resources, for farmers and ethnic groups" – so as to guarantee "people's control over land, natural resources, and seeds" and "to enable communities to design and pursue their own visions of the future" (personal

communication, January 23, 2019) Conversations with CSO partners repeated these themes – community empowerment, creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, and addressing inequities experienced by ethnic groups and rural communities in accessing their rights (vis-à-vis land ownership, access to quality seed, access to and control of local forest lands and resources, etc.). To this end, the partners undertook various initiatives that included awareness-raising, community mobilization, research on policy issues of local concern, and engaging with the Myanmar government and parliamentarians at local, state, and national levels.

In terms of the alliance's leadership and decision-making mechanisms, there are no formally established ways of working. However, Metta is recognized to be the senior actor, given its organizational size and experience, and because of its role as the alliance convener and contract-holder of the project (Naw Awng, personal communication, February 8, 2019; Seng Bu, personal communication, February 8, 2019; Roi Ja & Naw Din, personal communication, February 6, 2019; Nang, personal communication, February 6, 2019). At the same time, Metta is cognizant that it is working together with other organizations towards achieving a mutual vision. Therefore, periodic coordination meetings are conducted to agree on a plan of action and Metta's field staff supports and coordinates the implementation of activities in conjunction with staff from partner CSOs at the local level. However, this is not to say that Metta takes the leading role, as its preferred role and approach is to stay out of the limelight and rather nurture the capacity of local communities and CSOs to boldly engage with the authorities (focus group discussion, January 23, 2019).

Parallel advocacy actors

Understandably, Metta and its RtF partners are not the sole advocacy actors working to promote rural communities' access to food rights. There are several national NGOs, as well as

international NGOs (INGOs) and working groups which have been funded by INGOs/donor organizations, which are also engaging in policy issues on the same themes. Metta has close ties with most of these organizations. As a result, these organizations often participate in and/or support one another's national level advocacy events (and local ones when appropriate). However, at times, these organizations are at odds with the RtF consortium and with each other because of differing strategies and approaches.

Policy

According to Unsicker (2014), policy is defining the parameters and causes of the public problem that the advocates plan to address. It also identifies a solution to the problem. This section will discuss the issues the RtF project seeks to solve and the policy solutions proposed by the CSO actors.

Policy problem

At the heart of the policy issues the RtF initiative seeks to address is the disenfranchisement that rural, agricultural communities, particularly in the ethnic-majority areas, are experiencing with respect to their food security and livelihoods. In other words, the project seeks to restore these rural communities' food sovereignty, so that they are fully entitled to make their own decisions about what food they consume and what and how the food they consume is produced. Accordingly, the issues to be specifically addressed are – access to productive assets, i.e., land and seeds, and the communities' right to decide what and how to cultivate.

As Myanmar transitions from an authoritarian regime, led by the military, to a quasi-civilian-led governance model, the government is under intense pressure to accelerate rural development (to alleviate poverty) and to bring about peace and stability to the country. This pressure has led the government to focus on economic policies that aim to foster economic

growth, particularly through creating a welcoming environment for foreign/private investment. However, these policies are being formulated and implemented without fully consulting and incorporating the voice of the communities they impact. They also do not address socio-economic inequalities experienced by the affected communities. The dispossession and disenfranchisement are especially egregious in the ethnic-majority areas in which the RtF project operates – Kachin, northern and southern Shan states.

The problems that the ethnic communities in the upland regions (as opposed to the flatland agricultural areas in the southern part of the country) have historic roots. Access to land and forests and quality seeds, which are all productive assets for farming households, have been curtailed by laws and policies enacted by successive government administrations since Myanmar's independence. The upland, ethnic communities in Kachin and Shan states have historically observed customary land tenure practices, which emphasizing communal management, shifting cultivation, and relying on surrounding forests to sustainably harvest firewood and non-timber forest products for household needs. The Socialist government, which ran the country from 1962 to 1988 enacted laws that sought to homogenize land management practices and disregard the customary tenure practices in the upland regions. These placed onerous burdens on the ethnic peasantry to achieve land security. They often had to navigate a confusing maze of government bureaucracy, overcome potential language barriers (as the official working language is Burmese), and invest time and money to obtain official approval to continue cultivating their land. Classification of land types has also resulted in further alienation of upland communities from their lands. Upland farmers commonly practice shifting cultivation, often letting various portions of their land lie fallow for a number of seasons immediately following a harvest. This practice has opened up the door for the government to classify these lands as vacant

or fallow, subsequently leaving it open for confiscation by the state or land grabbing by private investors. There has also been land confiscated from ethnic populations who were forcibly evicted by the military for "security reasons" due to ongoing armed conflict in their areas. These confiscated lands were never returned or compensated for, instead being utilized by military personnel for their personal profit or for their cronies.

In the 1960s, the Socialist government also enacted and enforced agricultural policies aimed towards increasing rice production, but this had the effect of further burdening farmers. To meet production quotas, farmers were pressured to cultivate their land every season, and had to navigate price controls imposed by the government. For the majority of farmers, who are smallholder farmers who cultivate less than ten acres of land, this became a burden and led to the deterioration of their farmland, as they could not utilize practices such as crop rotation and leaving fields to lie fallow to recover between seasons, it also required them to invest in farm inputs, e.g., fertilizers and pesticides. Myanmar's self-imposed isolation from the international community after 1962, also generated knock-on effects on the agriculture sector. Access to modern technology was extremely limited and lack of capacity to innovate internally meant that farming in Myanmar remained labor intensive. Access to quality seeds became difficult as government service provision lagged. The government's agriculture extension services were stretched to the limit and did not have sufficient facilities to produce quality seeds.

When SLORC assumed power in 1990, it started opening Myanmar's doors to the global economy. Foreign investment was welcomed and accommodations to entice foreign investors were made. Laws and policies that would be favorable were drafted and adopted. The transition of Myanmar's economy to a market economy exacerbated challenges already faced by the peasantry. Chief among these challenges was an uptick in land confiscation in the name of

national progress – particularly in ethnic areas with access to natural resources. Communal land, often forests, that had been cultivated for years was converted to industrial plantations (e.g. rubber and banana). The drive to grow the economy meant that there was increased pressure to cultivate export-friendly agriculture crops as well. At the same time, a lack of proper trade policies or regulations exposed farmers to risks dictated by the market and weather conditions (Tun, personal communication, January 16, 2019). There were (and are) no proper credit facilities to enable farmers to be able to absorb these risks.

Greatly influenced by the international donor community and development paradigms from the Global North, succeeding government administrations have continued to embrace market economy-oriented policies. Features of such policies include export-oriented agriculture, acceleration of natural resource extraction by private domestic and international investors, as well as developing Myanmar's industrial/manufacturing sector. This has led to declining access to land, forest, water, and productive resources for local farmers (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015). In addition, extractive industries and agribusiness are leaving local communities increasingly vulnerable due to deteriorating environmental conditions, lack of livelihood options, and subsequent associated negative social impacts. Local communities and local authorities are often not equipped to hold these private investment ventures accountable, as they do not have the relevant knowledge. Moreover, Myo, a local non-Metta-affiliated consultant who is conversant in the Myanmar government's political processes and economic policies, observed that the existing legal framework does not have the capacity to address these challenges (personal communication, January 26, 2019); he notes that there are over 60 existing land-related laws, which makes it challenging for any stakeholder to hold anyone accountable or find a workable solution to existing problems.

Proposed policy solution

The RtF initiative addresses a broad range of issues under the food sovereignty umbrella. Jim, Metta's project counterpart from Oxfam in Myanmar, noted that from the outset, the project "had a basket of thematic areas which it could choose from" (personal communication, March 14, 2019). Moreover, each thematic area itself is individually wide-ranging. However, conversations with project staff and partners indicate that the RtF partners embraced a set of basic principles that signal the nature of policy solutions they are seeking. These are also the underlying values of the advocates. The principles are: people-centered laws and policies; an ecological approach in the utilization of natural and productive resources; and ensuring good governance.

The advocates' focus is very much on promoting the voice and interests of ethnic rural communities, who face multiple disadvantages. These disadvantages have long been insurmountable for these communities, including lack of knowledge and awareness about relevant laws, policies and administrative processes, exclusion/lack of representation/consultation in policy-making processes, lack of choice with respect to pursuing stable, sustainable livelihoods, and vulnerability to instability in areas where they live due to armed conflict (which has led to them being uprooted or vulnerable to exploitation by the military and/or ethnic armed groups). The baseline study for the project (2015) also indicates that communities in Kachin, northern and southern Shan states, where the project is being implemented, have low levels of trust in the authorities and that politics (and related matters) are sensitive (in other words considered risky and unapproachable).

Therefore, the advocates are conscious that any policy solution that is proposed and adopted must incorporate the abovementioned principles. This then means that the process of

formulating any laws or policies that affect these rural communities must include consultation with community representatives and incorporation/reflection of their inputs. Elected officials and government officials from relevant departments must also be responsive to address communities' concerns and questions. The administrative processes that these rural residents must navigate in order to safeguard their livelihood assets also need to be streamlined and/or made more accessible and transparent. Finally, the pursuit of national social advancement and economic development should not displace traditional ecological approaches, which have long preserved ethnic communities' natural resources. Doing so discounts communities' collective wisdom and voice and excludes realistic and sustainable measures.

The RtF partners developed these principles partly because they themselves are part of these communities. Their lived experience is their primary source of information and guides their policy advocacy direction. Further, they have been partnering with technical experts to analyze the impact of the existing and/or proposed legislation and policies on communities and identify gaps between theory and practice. In doing such analysis, it became evident that there was a distinct lack of community voice in the laws and policies concerning land and forestry, seeds, and private investment. They also work with communities to facilitate PAR studies on these issues to highlight and produce case studies to present to duty-bearers.

Policy makers are sympathetic to the policy stance taken by the RtF advocates to an extent. Recognizing that these are representatives of civil society, with strong ties to ethnic rural communities and peasantry, who ultimately are their constituents that they must hold themselves accountable to, they have made at least superficial efforts to invite and include them in policy discussions. At the same time, the policy priorities they espouse are shaped by development paradigms that are in turn deeply influenced by donors and pro-market interests. They place a

heavier emphasis on developing Myanmar as a market economy, shaped alongside existing global economies, i.e., growing Myanmar's economy by orienting agriculture production for export markets, developing the industrial sector, and opening up the economy to private investors. For private economic actors – profit maximization is the key principle. Policy makers subsequently rely on hard data, expert opinions provided by technical experts/technocrats, and in doing so, the voice of the community is often subsumed.

Critique

In considering the policy position of the RtF partnership, it is evident that the focus is on raising the voice of ethnic rural constituents. The RtF partners have deliberately adopted the abovementioned principles for this large portfolio of policy issues, which they have grouped under the food sovereignty umbrella, that will move forward their agenda. Considering Myanmar's policy context, and the nature of the project, it is a sensible approach. The principles take on board the needs and interests of the constituents who are being directly affected. If the RtF partnership continues on the same trajectory, the initiative may well be positioned to contribute towards bringing about greater social justice in communities which have not previously had access to their rights and services. This links back to the initial concepts raised when I first considered this case study. However, as long as structural issues are not concretely addressed, which may well be beyond the scope of the RtF initiative, the impact it can have on achieving greater social justice for Myanmar society as a whole will be minimal.

Politics

Politics is defining who the actors are within the advocacy context, specifically identifying who the decision makers are, as well as who are potential allies and opponents. In the section below, I will discuss who the political actors that affect the RtF advocacy efforts are.

This is primarily based on the stakeholder analysis that Metta staff have conducted (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015).

Target institutions

The primary target institutions are actors within Myanmar's legislative and executive branches.

The legislative branch consists of the two houses of Parliament, known as the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives or the Lower House) and the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities or the Upper House). Within these two Hluttaws, the RtF advocates aim to engage with not just the elected representatives, but the committees which are debating, formulating and legislating issues that RtF covers. When the need arises, RtF also endeavors to engage with state level Hluttaws as well (Thura, personal communication, December 19, 2018; Naw Awng, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

Within the executive branch, specific targets are: the President's Office, the relevant line ministries (MOALI; Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation [MONREC]), as well as issue-related, inter-governmental/ministerial committees such as the Farmland Management Body, Central Committee for the Management of Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land, Land Allocation and Utilization Committees, Department for Rural Development, etc. State, district, and township level government departments in the project areas (Kachin, northern and southern Shan), along with any autonomous governing bodies, such as the PaOh self-administration in southern Shan are also approached as needed (Roi Ja & Naw Din, personal communication, February 6, 2019).

The decision-making processes of the abovementioned institutions are very hierarchical, top-down oriented. There is traditionally limited (almost non-existent) external consultation with

community stakeholders. In the present NLD administration, the policy direction is indicated by the NLD leadership, which is generally understood to be Aung San Suu Kyi and, to an extent, the NLD Central Executive Committee. The Members of Parliament (MPs) have limited freedom in proposing or debating legislation in opposition to priorities set by the leadership. Anecdotes from colleagues involved in engagement with MPs, as well as news articles in local news publications, indicate that any "rebellion" or actions seen to be counter to the official party line lead to the MP in question being censured/pressured. RtF partners noted that a sympathetic MP who had raised a question related to land-grabbing issues in a parliamentary session, based on information he had received from the RtF partnership, later faced severe pressure and censure from his party leadership as he had spoken up without official sanction (Thura, personal communication, December 19, 2018; Aung & Maung, personal communication, February 13, 2019).

The policy planning process within the government departments is also hierarchical. These processes are not very transparent. A senior official from MOALI indicated that policy is set by the leadership within the executive branch, with government department officials providing technical advice (Khine, personal communication, March 5, 2019). At the same time, there are indications that there is some movement towards citizen consultation in the legislative processes in certain issues. During the lead-up to the adoption of the National Land Use Policy in 2016, citizen consultative processes were facilitated across the country by national CSOs on the invitation of MOALI (Tun, personal communication, January 16, 2019). This was a first in Myanmar's legislative history. While the resulting document was hailed as being progressive, implementation on the ground is still slow. New legislation, particularly the Vacant, Fallow, Virgin law that is newly enacted in late 2018, could offset any gains (Hirsh, 2018).

Further, as previously noted, there are unwritten rules and policies within government departments and the political parties that external actors are not privy to (Myo, personal communication, January 26, 2019). These unwritten norms block or inhibit any policy change initiatives championed by non-governmental actors.

Allies

There is a broad range of actors who can be considered to be allies to the RtF initiative. The first group of actors are rooted in Myanmar civil society. As briefly discussed in the advocates section, there are a number of CSOs not directly involved with the RtF project directly, but whose policy interests run in parallel. These include national and international NGOs who focus on rural development initiatives. They too are interested in promoting initiatives and policies that promote equity and equality for rural residents. At the same time, they may not be natural bedfellows with RtF or Metta because their underlying approach to engaging with decisionmakers is different, i.e., they may adopt more confrontational approaches as opposed to the non-confrontational approaches that underpin much of Metta's interactions with state actors. Faith-based organizations, Buddhist and Christian in particular, have a lot of influence within their communities and may be undertaking rural development initiatives of their own. Due to their ties to RtF advocates' constituencies, they are also allies of the policy advocacy efforts. Farmer organizations have re-emerged as an active bloc since the democratic transition began, particularly working on land issues, and Metta and RtF partners have linked up with such organizations to facilitate state and national events on a regular basis.

Political parties, particularly ethnic political parties in the project areas, are also allies because they strongly recognize that they must be banner-bearers for the communities they want

to represent at state and national level fora. However, they too may face constraints as described above for NLD MPs.

A final group of potential allies are multilateral and bilateral (aid) agencies, as well as diplomatic missions. These include the World Bank Group, United Nations agencies, the Asian Development Bank, diplomatic missions from the US, UK, EU, and Scandinavia. On the one hand, they are interested in fostering Myanmar's development, but are also cognizant of the international standards and norms that must be observed. Given that they are a major source of funding (and investment) for Myanmar at this time, any pressure brought to bear by any of these actors will be taken seriously.

Opponents

When considering the actors who are in opposition to the RtF advocates or have interests counter to the RtF policy stance, two blocs of stakeholders immediately stand out. The first bloc is the military. The second bloc consists of private companies, which include Myanmar and foreign companies.

The military has long been associated with using their power and military strength to exploit local communities for their own benefit, though they may couch it as taking measures to protect the citizenry and stability of the state. Whenever military units establish their presence in an area, communal land and/or privately-owned land from the local community and residents is often confiscated for their use. Even after the military presence is withdrawn, this confiscated land usually finds its way into the hands of soldiers/officers. This land is not returned. The military, especially through their connections to crony companies, notably the Myanmar Economic Holdings, Ltd., and the Myanmar Economic Corporation, have stakes in mining and a variety of other Myanmar agribusinesses. Therefore, it is in the military's interest to preserve the

status quo, or to support the development and adoption of pro-investment laws, as this will make it easier for their business interests to continue flourishing. Although such blatant opportunism has ceased for the most part nowadays, the legacy of their past actions continues to reverberate negatively with respect to the food sovereignty of the ethnic rural communities.

Foreign companies, particularly those from China, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, which are investing in agribusiness and natural resource extraction are the second bloc of actors which may be in opposition to RtF advocates. Ultimately, RtF policy advocacy measures threaten their bottom line. For those interested in investing in natural resource extractive industries, such as mining or timber, and in agribusinesses, such as rubber and banana plantations, they stand to face more restrictions/tighter enforcement of environmental and social impact measures. Their access to land on which these kinds of activities can be carried out will also become more difficult and burdensome. Companies, such as CP Company from Thailand, that specialize in agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, would also face greater resistance from communities and stricter standards, as existing ones are lax. Regulations around contract farming arrangements could also become more stringent, given that many farmers are being taken advantage of currently.

When considering foreign commercial interests, the geopolitics and economic interests of China in Myanmar has emerged as an important opponent for civil society actors advocating on behalf of rural communities. Through its ‘One Belt, One Road’ (or ‘Belt and Road’) initiative, as well as previous large infrastructure investment projects, e.g., hydropower dam construction at the confluence of the Ayeyarwady River, China has become an influential factor in the development of Myanmar’s economic development policies. Chinese investors focus primarily on the bottom line, while paying convenient lip service to corporate social accountability. In

addition, the Chinese companies have anecdotally proven to be hostile to citizen/community activists who seek to protect existing local natural resources/assets.

Ethnic armed groups could also be in opposition to efforts of the Rtf initiative. In the areas that they control, these actors often engage in rent-seeking behavior, as well as generate income for their armed forces through natural resource extraction, often accessed through land confiscation themselves. Inasmuch as they purport to be engaging in armed struggle on behalf of their respective ethnic groups, they tend to be resistant to progressive social policies.

Strategy

The RtF partnership's plan of action to engage with policy-makers and influential actors is described in the following sub-sections.

Objectives

The Right to Food advocacy strategy is guided by the proposed impact statement given in the project proposal: "Smallholder farmers, landless, and forest-dwelling women and men in 90 villages in Kachin, Northern, and Southern Shan provinces in Myanmar realize their right to food sovereignty…" (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015, p. 12). To this end, the long-term objective of the RtF initiative envisions these rural residents working alongside civil society alliances to "influence government and private sector to adopt and implement fairer and more responsible laws and policies in land, forest, seed, and private investment, therefore ensuring their access and rights to these resources in line with best practice international standards (e.g. FPIC, EIA/SIA, UNGP)" (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015, p. 12). The intermediate outcomes will see civil society's capacities enhanced, private sector actors sensitized to the relevant policy themes, and influencing governmental actors to change and implement improved legal and policy frameworks that would effectively serve the interests of the RtF constituency.

Advocacy approach

The messages that the RtF advocates convey to their targets are shaped by the principles discussed in the policy section above. They are given further coherency and shape by incorporating the communities' needs and priorities and community-based research conducted by the RtF partners and the communities themselves. Any public message that is communicated to stakeholders external to the project partnership is first developed by the RtF advocates based on available information and research and agreed on by everyone involved before being disseminated.

The Rtf advocates' basic constituency consists of the rural, agriculture-based communities of Kachin and northern and southern Shan states, as the initiative seeks to ensure that these communities are able to access their food-related rights. These communities are identified and mobilized by the different RtF partners, based on their existing ties. As the RtF CSO partners are locally based to begin with, they already have pre-existing ties to communities in areas where they work. With assistance from the project, staff from these partner organizations undertake a range of awareness-raising activities at community level. This is the first step to sensitize the communities themselves of their rights and to create opportunities for community members to voice their needs and to identify the solutions they would prefer (so as to present to policymakers). This then helps to solidify the constituency base for the advocacy efforts. Of all the partner organizations, Metta has the greatest presence and most experience of working with communities. Metta also has the established reputation of being a credible organization and relationships with relevant government departments – facilitating initial contact with duty bearers and raising sensitive topics.

For the most part, community mobilization begins with facilitating awareness-raising sessions in communities on topics of concern (particularly land tenure rights, agriculture know-how, community forestry). This is then followed by PAR-related activities which include assisting the community to curate local knowledge and wisdom (which then forms a basis for evidence-based advocacy) and organizing community-based committees (which are the building blocks for the emergence of CSOs in the future). The project further supports capacity building of the community advocates by organizing exchange and exposure visits within and across each project area, so that the farmers can learn and expand their knowledge base and build up relationships for future advocacy efforts. In addition, the RtF project provides financial support needed to make possible the participating communities' engagement with relevant duty-bearers, e.g., travel expenses, recruiting technical experts, expenses for documentation. Subsequent activities are usually identified primarily at the community-level by the communities themselves. Examples of these activities include:

- successful mobilization of local farmers to petition the government for the return of confiscated land to rightful owners in four villages of Kachin state, after most of the farmers had received thorough training in existing Farmland Law and farmers' rights and entitlements (Metta, 2018);
- a successful petition, submitted to the Amyotha Hluttaw, to protect a local water source by six villages in southern Shan state (Metta, 2018);
- formation of the Northern Shan Land and Environment Network in northern Shan state (Metta, 2018); and

- a signature campaign, spearheaded by local CSOs in partnership with farmer unions in northern Shan state, protesting the existing 2012 land laws and the 2017 land confiscation act (Metta, 2018).

The thematic sweep of the RtF policy advocacy initiative requires the partnership to engage in broad-based alliance-building and networking. Metta, as the project lead, is cognizant of this and has invested much of its attention to this end. As Thura noted earlier in discussing the RtF advocates and project partners, Metta staff spent much of the first project year cultivating relationships among project partners, but also relationships with other CSO actors working on the same policy themes. The partnership ensured that they would participate in other alliances/networks' public events and meetings and campaigns, often from behind the scenes. Metta project staff shared in focus group discussions, and captured in the project's outcome case studies, that the RtF participants (CSO staff and community members) have participated in state level and national level events that have been organized by affiliated organizations/networks, such as farmer forums and policy debates.

In general, in advocacy initiatives around the world, media engagement has often been key in mobilizing public support for the policy advocacy efforts. RtF has invited members of the press to public events it has convened, but often the interest by editorial boards is low and subsequent coverage has been low-key. It is also because print media does not penetrate to the community level as much as it does in urban areas, so it has not been a key cornerstone of the RtF advocacy strategy as such. Social media, particularly Facebook, is a key venue for information dissemination in Myanmar nowadays, as it is in much of the world. Therefore, RtF partners in each of the geographical areas have found ways to organize on social media to share and disseminate information – for instance using Facebook pages in southern Shan or Viber messaging in northern Shan (focus group discussion, February 13, 2019). The project has also worked with partners to develop appropriate IEC (information, education, communication)

Figure 3 An informational pamphlet on the 2018 Virgin, Fallow, and Vacant Land Law developed for dissemination in northern Shan state

materials, such as posters, pamphlets, presentations (Kaung, February 6, 2019). A partner in southern Shan also publishes quarterly magazines, containing articles about the environment and locally relevant issues, with support from the project (Aung & Maung, February 13, 2019).

Figure 4 Cover of a quarterly publication published by an RtF partner in southern Shan state

In order to influence the RtF target institutions, the partnership has largely been guided by Metta's underlying philosophy of "non-confrontational" engagement with duty-bearers. This is a soft diplomatic approach, where common ground is established in order to start a conversation that can be steered towards what the partnership would like to achieve. While this has been stifling for some partners, this stance has been respected, especially as there are other advocacy actors who take a more confrontational approach and the partners are not locked into working solely with Metta and RtF. Specific tactics that have been utilized by Metta include

preparing policy briefings using evidence generated by PAR studies at community level, where the community members themselves are able to describe the impact that current legislation and policies have on their livelihoods/rights and recommend direction for future action. The RtF initiative has also facilitated public events where communities and local CSOs can engage with national, state, and local government officials to discuss their challenges and identify solutions. These have been well-received by all concerned – community members because it removes the power distance, and by government officials because it creates a neutral ground where they can be somewhat more informal and engage more freely with the citizenry (focus group discussion, January 23, 2019). A lot of my conversations with government officials in the course of my work and in the course of my research indicate that government officials are eager to engage with communities but are, for a number of reasons, constrained in doing so and therefore these sorts of events facilitated by "trusted" CSOs are opportune. RtF has also facilitated opportunities for CSO partners and community representatives to participate in other policy advocacy debates and discussions spearheaded by other organizations, particularly by providing funding support for travel expenses, because they would not otherwise have been able to represent their constituencies in these important conversations. The partnership has also undertaken signature collection campaigns to pressure the state governments to take action against land confiscation and bad environmental practices. However, although communities were successfully mobilized, this was a massive undertaking. Communities are distrustful of any negative blowback, justifiably, from the government (and the military). At state level, RtF has also indirectly supported local communities in taking legal action against private sector companies, which has seen some success. Moreover, RtF has tried to engage with lawmakers, particularly at the Union level. However, they have had limited success on this front. While MPs may individually be

sympathetic, given that they have to toe the party line, they cannot publicly endorse a lot of what the RtF initiative stands for. There was one notable success that Thura and RtF partners related to me in the course of my interviews – a Union level parliamentarian raised questions during a parliamentary session with regards to the government's proposed legislation on land and private investment. Afterwards, he informed the RtF partners that he faced a lot of pressure and criticism from the party leadership for having done so.

Critique

It has been difficult to properly analyze the RtF advocacy strategy because of its broad-reaching objectives. However, its approach in building alliances to push the advocacy agenda forward is effective in some ways. Having broad community-based support strengthens the messages conveyed by the RtF alliance. The community-led research is also effective, not just as capacity building, but also in shaping the messages into ones that legislators and policy-makers must pay attention to as these are also *their* constituents whom they cannot afford to ignore. Raising awareness at community level through utilization of IEC materials is a smart approach because it enables the RtF messaging to have a broader reach than its initial outreach communities and partners. Supporting communities' efforts to take legal action is also sensible as it empowers these communities who might otherwise have remained powerless.

At the same time, the strategy focus that needs to be strengthened is in working with more legislators. During the interviews, RtF partners repeatedly identified lawmakers and government departments as advocacy targets. Few further details were offered beyond a vague description, e.g., "Hluttaw representatives." The RtF advocates need to be able to identify their policy targets specifically, as well as understanding the circumstances in which allies can become blockers and vice versa. When questioned about who the allies and blockers were for the

RtF partnership, most RtF advocates identified allies within government and claimed that there were no blockers. While this may be true for their current circumstances, the partnership needs to be prepared for the situation to change and identify ways to adapt their advocacy approach.

Finally, the advocates need to consider how to engage more constructively with duty-bearers and develop a more specific plan of action rather than being reactive to the current political climate. There is no doubt that the advocates have an advocacy plan that is largely informed by community needs and priorities. They are also able to leverage connections to further the RtF goals. However, the existing plans appear to be very general and at times ad hoc in nature. While accepting the need for advocacy plans to be flexible to adapt to quickly changing political circumstances, advocates also need to have detailed plans to assist with achieving their aims. Not having such details set out beforehand can prevent clear communication among partners and can potentially result in missed opportunities.

Evaluation

It has been somewhat of a challenge to properly evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the advocacy. This is due in part to the wide-ranging nature of the initiative itself – it does not focus on just one policy theme, but three. Secondly, it is project-bound; although the donor has been flexible in how the project team structures its strategies, there are certain deliverables to which the project-holder, Metta, is held accountable. These do not necessarily link in with traditional advocacy approaches, which are much more fluid and adaptative. The project itself was in its implementation period at the time the interviews were conducted, so the outcomes could not be fully determined. This section will discuss the effectiveness of the Right to Food initiative in Myanmar, especially in terms of its processes and outcomes. My analysis will be based on the advocacy circles framework.

Effectiveness

Metta and Oxfam developed a very ambitious project goal - that state and private actors are influenced so that rural communities will have access to their rights related to food and related productive resources (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015). Admittedly, this is the intervention's long-term impact and not necessarily achievable during the duration of the project, especially given unforeseen external factors. The goals for the intermediate term appear more realistic and achievable within the five-year project period – capacitating civil society, sensitizing the private sector to communities' concerns and rights, and influencing state actors to adopt and enforce legislation and policy measures for the benefit of the RtF constituency (Oxfam in Myanmar, 2015). The community-based approach that is Metta's modus operandi and its strong attention to nurturing alliances with CSOs at the local level in the project areas have contributed to the emergence of a more capable and more vocal civil society at the state level. The second objective was not so much the focus of Metta and its allies; in fact, early strategic discussions (in which I was involved as it was prior to my departure from Metta) with Oxfam, the primary project counterpart, concluded that Oxfam would be better placed and had more expertise to address this objective. The final objective has seen moderate gains. Relationships have been forged with local authorities towards the enforcement of existing land laws, while community voices and CSOs have been mobilized at local level and linked up with national efforts to engage with union policy-makers.

Processes

The RtF alliance clearly understands the policy context in which they are operating and the analyses they have produced are reflective of that. Moreover, they were astute in identifying the key stakeholders they must influence to achieve their desired outcomes. However, they have

been constrained by unforeseen external factors that have limited their success. Of particular significance is that the NLD administration has hardened its attitude towards civil society and has not engaged constructively, but rather views CSOs with a lot of mistrust and wariness (Myo, personal communication, January 26, 2019; Jim, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

Metta and its partners strategically decided to focus the main thrust of their advocacy approach on community-based tactics and focus on changes at the local level. This is a sensible approach in cultivating the growth of a vibrant civil society. As discussed earlier, an active civil society is considered to be essential for a democratic society, and to hold government accountable, so as to promote good governance (He, 2012; Mosley, 2016). In an advocacy context like Myanmar, which is emerging from being ruled by an authoritarian regime for over six decades, it is essential that the citizenry learns what their rights are and how to hold duty-bearers accountable. Therefore, what RtF has essentially been doing is assisting communities in finding their voice. The empowerment efforts include raising awareness about the rights they are entitled to, providing skills for community members to research and compile information about the challenges they are facing (which can then be used in their policy advocacy efforts), and creating platforms for them to engage meaningfully with those in positions of power. At the same time, their efforts may have been even more effective if they were able to leverage the nascent local-level movements into a larger, more active national movement. However, the initiative was limited in this respect because it takes time to raise the capacity and confidence levels of the community members, to raise their interest in becoming involved in such actions, and to assure them that their involvement would not put them further at risk. Perhaps the most significant limitation they faced is that these advocacy actions needed to be balanced with the

community members' daily livelihood activities – their advocacy engagement could not take place at the cost of losing their limited incomes.

Another key feature of the initiative's approach is the conscious building of local CSO alliances. While the initial project design had envisioned direct citizen engagement, Metta quickly came to realize that it would be more effective if local CSOs could be mobilized as well. CSOs essentially act as the bridge between civil society at large and the state; furthermore, professionalized CSOs (NGOs in other words) have become convenient funnels of assistance from donors (Ottaway, 2012). At the same time, they are also considered to be proxies/representatives for communities themselves. Metta and many of its CSO partners are deeply grounded in the communities where they work and thus position themselves as aforesaid proxies for their constituent communities. They are able to approach the communities easily and gain their trust. With funding from the project donor, they are able to engage in capacity building of communities and carry out research for the policy advocacy activities. As the project partners have access to different communities (geographical spread) and different sections of the communities (e.g., ethnic/religious backgrounds), not to mention different technical focus (i.e., some focus on development interventions, while others focus more on rights awareness), they are able to be much more comprehensive in coverage. However, alliance building takes time, as has been acknowledged by the Metta project staff. Where there were no prior relationships, particularly in southern Shan, Metta has had to devote a significant amount time to align ways of working and operational management practices (the latter for donor accountability), and overcome different perceptions to ensure a smooth working relationship. Beyond the alliance building, the decision-making process has had an impact on the speed of implementation of activities. The partnership's decision-making process is horizontal, designed to respect each

participating organization's voice. This often means that each partner must be consulted and brought on board, which in itself is a time-consuming process. This has at times limited and constrained the rapidity with which the initiative could react to new developments or initiate new activities. The diverse backgrounds that the partners hail from has also contributed to a learning curve for the partnership as a whole because some have a more activist bent, while some may be more conservative. Therefore, establishing mutual ground and a common agenda has been time-consuming.

The participatory action research curated by the RtF alliance has also been valuable. On the one hand, it has built up the skills and confidence of the communities involved to articulate their concerns and opinions. More importantly, the resultant research has formed the evidence base for conversations with those in positions of power and other intermediaries who can influence target decisionmakers. Metta and Oxfam have disseminated this information to allies who are in a position to influence policymakers, e.g., diplomatic delegations, donor agencies, and media. Of interest is a research report that the alliance recently produced in Kachin state on banana plantations, which have widespread negative environmental impact but have not been regulated. This has been widely quoted and referenced in media reports and utilized by other advocacy actors.

The advocates have capitalized on opportunities that have opened up as a result of RtF, as have already been discussed. However, the reach of the initiative could have perhaps been greater and more successful if the public was more widely engaged. The lack of a defined advocacy plan of action has limited the effectiveness of outcomes, because they have not been able to offer up concrete policy recommendations. The slow mobilization of the alliance may potentially have caused it to miss out on the more receptive policy sphere – with the 2020

national elections approaching, lawmakers and the NLD may not be as interested in discussing food sovereignty issues. They will be interested in addressing issues of concern to a broader base of their electorate; in other words, they will focus on education, infrastructure development, jobs and livelihoods, health, issues in particular.

Outcomes

As previously discussed, it is difficult to fully determine the effectiveness of the initiative's outcomes at this point. However, examining the achievements in three key areas provides a partial insight into the progress Metta and its partners have made.

The ambitious policy changes have not yet been achieved. Engagements between citizen stakeholders and duty-bearers have laid the foundation for more favorable land, forestry, seeds and investment laws and policies in the future. This is to be expected as it is only three years since the policy advocacy efforts began. However, external developments, such as the ongoing uncertain national peace process, upcoming national elections in 2020, and pressure from private investors/lenders may derail these achievements if the momentum is not sustained.

In terms of governance, the advocates have made in-roads into holding duty-bearers, i.e., local authorities and government department officials, more accountable and responsive. My conversations with a government official from MOALI and a Yangon Regional MP have indicated that these actors welcome engagement with civil society actors. At the same time, they have internal, structural constraints that limit how responsive they can be. This indicates that advocacy efforts alone cannot achieve change but that the duty-bearers must also accompany legislative/policy changes with structural changes to fully ensure proper responsiveness.

The biggest impact the initiative has achieved is in terms of building capacity of civil society actors and the citizenry. The project partners' efforts have seen the creation of more

space in the public sphere for CSO actors to participate in policy debates. The communities are also now more aware of their rights related to food sovereignty issues and possess more confidence to step up and speak out.

Lessons Learned

Based on the experiences of the Right to Food initiative and the research I have undertaken, I have identified the following lessons learned. These lessons may help guide future citizen-based advocacy initiatives, particularly ones spearheaded by CSOs, which are conducted in a politically sensitive context such as Myanmar.

1. **Relationship-building** is a key factor for success. This refers to both relationship-building between civil society actors and state actors (MPs, department officials), as well as among civil society actors themselves. This helps bridge the barrier between the different parties that may exist over misconceptions, philosophical stances, and policy priorities. The increased familiarity cultivates increased willingness on the part of policymakers to listen to and engage with civil society and vice versa, thus creating an enabling environment for genuine dialogue. Amidst having to navigate the complexities of departmental regulations, written and unwritten rules and norms within government departments and political parties, the social familiarity facilitates diverse actors to engage with each other while acknowledging and accepting their differences, yet committing to finding mutual ground to work together.

   Among civil society actors, getting to know each other better facilitates cooperation for advocacy action and knowledge exchange. This factor has in fact been acknowledged by RtF partners themselves in the interviews: when working together, different parties can complement each other through different skillsets/resources that each may possess and

make the initiatives at hand succeed even more (Seng Bu, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

2. **Alliances** are also vital in policy advocacy. As evidenced from the RtF experience, alliance members can fill in gaps in knowledge and expertise others may lack. Alliances themselves may also adopt strategic approaches that will ultimately be complementary to each other. It should be noted, however, that alliance building takes time and does not necessarily form naturally. When building the alliance, all participating parties need to explicitly set objectives for the alliance and allocate roles and responsibilities. Such good governance practices are likely to facilitate communication and coordination.
3. **Advocates need a concrete plan of action, and to be proactive**. While RtF had a vision for what it wanted to achieve, the weakness of the initiative laid in lacking concrete measures that it could recommend to policymakers. By allowing the community to dictate its advocacy agenda, the initiative could not necessarily set out a more specific agenda that may have been more precise and proactive. It was not able to strategically address certain policy issues, which may not have been identified directly by the community. This resulted in the alliance reacting to evolving policy developments. Advocacy objectives should also be concrete; RtF suffered from mission-spread, in that its ambition was to address three broad thematic areas. In doing so, the RtF partners were unable to concretely address and make gains in any of the target policy areas. Kaung, an RtF partner, even recommended that the partnership develop annual work plans (personal communication, February 6, 2019). Ideally, the RtF advocacy action plan should also have included detailed stakeholder analyses that are regularly updated and kept on file for

easy reference by all involved and setting out key messages from the outset; these analyses could have been enriched by information generated by communities themselves.

4. **Civil society must not shy away from engaging with state actors**, even when their historical experience may have shown that government cannot be trusted. State/political actors may be constrained in how they can engage with other actors, but civil society actors are not as restrained. Tun (personal communication, January 16, 2019), a senior Metta staff member, had noted that the military contingent in parliament pays close attention to policy discussions at the Hluttaw level surrounding the RtF's portfolio, but did not participate actively at the local level. Civil society actors also refuse in general to engage with USDP (Nyunt, personal communication, February 18, 2019). While this is understandable given Myanmar's history and USDP's roots, I would argue that leaving them out alienates them even more and provides opportunities for interest groups who are in opposition to the RtF alliance to gain ground. Therefore, by initiating contact with "neglected" political actors, they can effectively ensure that a strong relationship can be built. This also moves them from being perceived as adversaries to being more of an ally as trust is built. At the same time, this is not to say that the RtF alliance must compromise its principles or objectives. Having a relationship in place can create opportunities for the RtF allies to give critical and constructive feedback to these actors.
5. In transitioning democratic contexts, **citizen voice is key**, especially with respect to food sovereignty issues (land, agricultural inputs, and forestry). Part of the success of the RtF initiative can be attributed to its tactic of cultivating the community voice, in that they build up community members' capacity to identify their challenges and identify their own solutions and build up their confidence to engage with those in positions of power. As

much as civil society is acknowledged to play an important role in a democracy, and as much as CSOs can bridge civil society and the state, CSOs can be viewed with mistrust by those in authority, especially in politically sensitive contexts. This has been the case in Myanmar, where the "professionalized" CSOs are not trusted very much by the NLD. On the other hand, individual advocates/community representatives are seen to be more trustworthy and their contributions are welcomed. As a young "democracy", the citizen voices in Myanmar will need to be nurtured. Farmers need to be encouraged and supported to speak up for themselves and present their experiences, highlighting their needs and concerns. Experience around the world has shown that a robust grassroots level movement is critical in furthering the food sovereignty agenda forward.

Just as citizen voice is key, women's role in RtF advocacy needs to be acknowledged. This research did not explicitly address the gender dimension and did not harvest substantial information about women's participation. However, when questioned, a Metta staff mentioned that women's participation has at times transformed encounters with duty bearers from potentially hostile situations to a peaceful end (focus group discussion, January 23, 2019). Metta staff have also acknowledged that because women are in reality in charge of family livelihood activities, they are more willing to be outspoken and speak up for their needs (focus group discussion, January 23, 2019).

6. **Advocacy efforts require long-term investment.** As previously mentioned, policy advocacy as a concept is not entirely familiar to Myanmar CSOs. Organizations need to take time and invest to train its staff to understand advocacy principles and develop effective approaches and strategies. As with advocacy efforts elsewhere in the world, most advocacy initiatives do not see their desired change take place over night. More

often, success comes about only after years of struggle and engagement with different stakeholders. The same allowance needs to be made for Myanmar advocacy efforts as well, particularly grassroots based advocacy initiatives.

7. The Myanmar policy context is complex and layered with seen and unseen practices, norms and policies. Further, duty bearers, particularly government departments which are supposed to be the primary channels through which service is delivered to rural communities, are under-staffed and under-resourced. There are also government staff who are entrenched in "old" practices, which are not amenable to the social changes sought by RtF advocates. This is a clear sign that **structural changes must accompany or at least be in place,** or any advocacy gains will not persist and affect real change.
8. There is a question about the **sustainability of the initiative** beyond the formal project period. This is an advocacy initiative that grew out of a project that Metta and Oxfam formulated with funding from an external donor. Given that the participating organizations are all resource-limited, and have benefited from the support mobilized by the project, particularly financial resources, it is questionable whether the project momentum can be maintained when the financial support ceases. Therefore, it is vital that the RtF initiative fully mobilizes its grassroots base such as community groups and farmers' unions, as it has been doing throughout the past three years, to ensure that these groups can continue the advocacy efforts.

Final notes

The research has shown that advocacy initiatives by civil society actors in a sensitive political context like Myanmar are often shaped by the more professionalized CSOs in response to feedback from communities. These actors have to navigate through hardline political actors, as

well as policymakers who may not be fully equipped or prepared to engage with civil society. However, when a united front is presented, backed up by evidence and with active grassroots participation, the duty-bearers do respond. RtF is an initiative that is nurturing and supporting the emergence of strong civil society representatives and voices and building their capacity to engage with policy makers on policy issues that directly affect their lives. In doing so, RtF is working towards building a civil society in Myanmar which can hold the government accountable, support the democratization process of the country, and encourage good governance practices.

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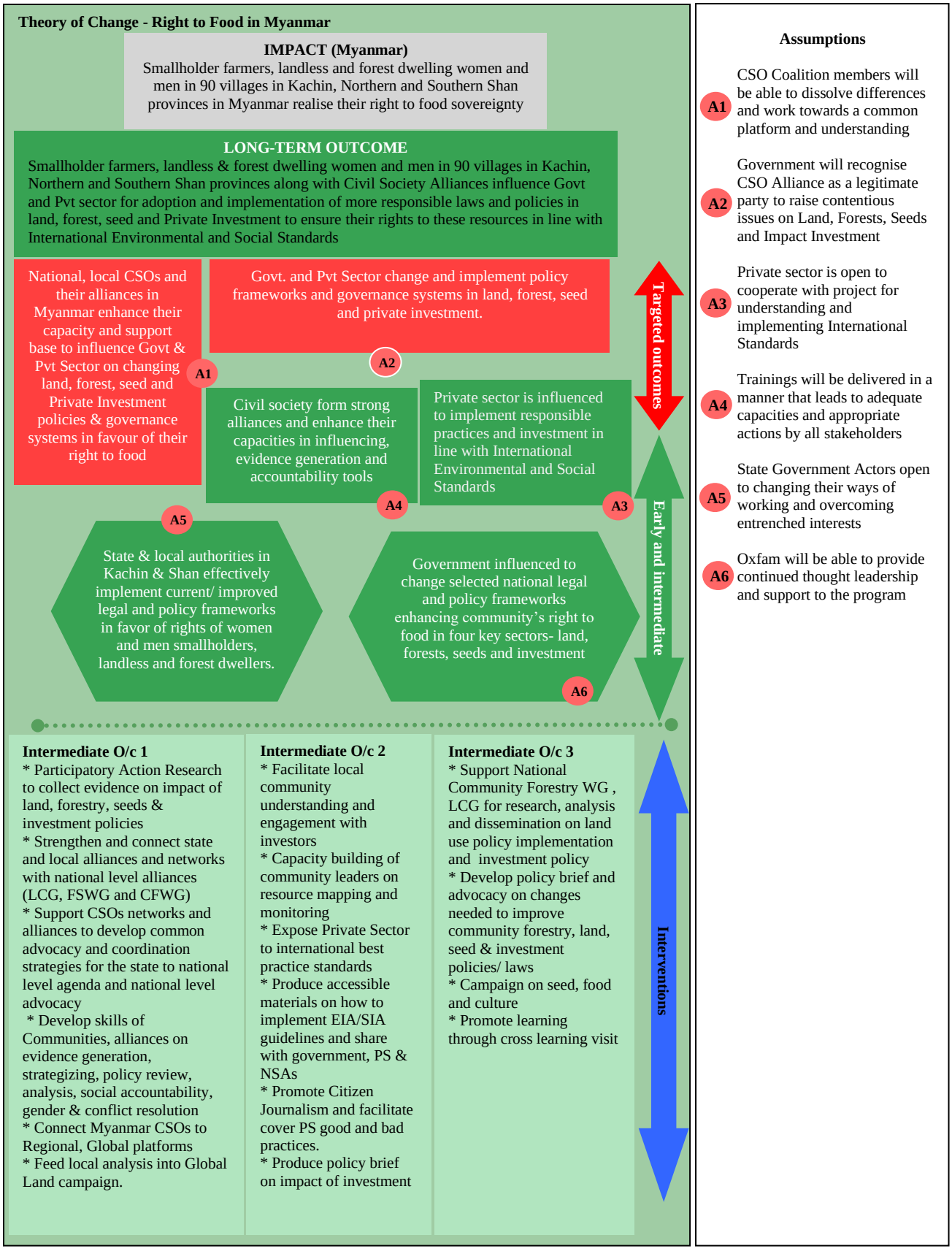
Appendix A


Theory of Change - Right to Food in Myanmar
IMPACT (Myanmar)
Smallholder farmers, landless and forest dwelling women and men in 90 villages in Kachin, Northern and Southern Shan provinces in Myanmar realise their right to food sovereignty
LONG-TERM OUTCOME
Smallholder farmers, landless & forest dwelling women and men in 90 villages in Kachin, Northern and Southern Shan provinces along with Civil Society Alliances influence Govt and Pvt sector for adoption and implementation of more responsible laws and policies in land, forest, seed and Private Investment to ensure their rights to these resources in line with International Environmental and Social Standards
National, local CSOs and their alliances in Myanmar enhance their capacity and support base to influence Govt & Pvt Sector on changing land, forest, seed and Private Investment policies & governance systems in favour of their right to food
A1
Govt. and Pvt Sector change and implement policy frameworks and governance systems in land, forest, seed and private investment.
A2
Civil society form strong alliances and enhance their capacities in influencing, evidence generation and accountability tools
A4
Private sector is influenced to implement responsible practices and investment in line with International Environmental and Social Standards
A3
Targeted outcomes
A5
State & local authorities in Kachin & Shan effectively implement current/ improved legal and policy frameworks in favor of rights of women and men smallholders, landless and forest dwellers.
Government influenced to change selected national legal and policy frameworks enhancing community's right to food in four key sectors- land, forests, seeds and investment
A6
Early and intermediate
Intermediate O/c 1
* Participatory Action Research to collect evidence on impact of land, forestry, seeds & investment policies
* Strengthen and connect state and local alliances and networks with national level alliances (LCG, FSWG and CFWG)
* Support CSOs networks and alliances to develop common advocacy and coordination strategies for the state to national level agenda and national level advocacy
* Develop skills of Communities, alliances on evidence generation, strategizing, policy review, analysis, social accountability, gender & conflict resolution
* Connect Myanmar CSOs to Regional, Global platforms
* Feed local analysis into Global Land campaign.
Intermediate O/c 2
* Facilitate local community understanding and engagement with investors
* Capacity building of community leaders on resource mapping and monitoring
* Expose Private Sector to international best practice standards
* Produce accessible materials on how to implement EIA/SIA guidelines and share with government, PS & NSAs
* Promote Citizen Journalism and facilitate cover PS good and bad practices.
* Produce policy brief on impact of investment
Intermediate O/c 3
* Support National Community Forestry WG , LCG for research, analysis and dissemination on land use policy implementation and investment policy
* Develop policy brief and advocacy on changes needed to improve community forestry, land, seed & investment policies/ laws
* Campaign on seed, food and culture
* Promote learning through cross learning visit
Interventions
Assumptions
A1 CSO Coalition members will be able to dissolve differences and work towards a common platform and understanding
A2 Government will recognise CSO Alliance as a legitimate party to raise contentious issues on Land, Forests, Seeds and Impact Investment
A3 Private sector is open to cooperate with project for understanding and implementing International Standards
A4 Trainings will be delivered in a manner that leads to adequate capacities and appropriate actions by all stakeholders
A5 State Government Actors open to changing their ways of working and overcoming entrenched interests
A6 Oxfam will be able to provide continued thought leadership and support to the program

Appendix B

Interview Guide – Project Participants (Metta project partners)

1. Why are you participating in the project?
2. What have you done with the project (activities, scope, frequency)?
3. What are the challenges you face with respect to food production and agriculture-based livelihood activities?
4. What do you hope to accomplish by carrying out the activities?
5. Who do you work with to carry out the activities? Who do you target for your advocacy activities? Why? Who has helped? Who has stood in your way (blocked)?
6. Have you faced any challenges?
7. What have you learned from taking part in the project?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Socio-economic demographic data:

- Gender, responsibility within partner organization

Interview Guide – Program staff

1. How were participating organizations selected? Who is participating in the activities? Why?
2. Why are you involved in this program?
3. How are the participants organized? Who makes the decisions/take leading roles?
4. What are the challenges the communities face with respect to food production and agriculture-based livelihood activities?
5. What kind of activities have you designed and implemented? What kind of information did you use? From where?
6. What do you hope to accomplish by carrying out the activities?
7. Who do you work with to carry out the activities? Who do you target for your advocacy activities? Why? Who has helped? Who has stood in your way (blocked)?
8. What opportunities have you had that helped with implementation? How? Were there any missed opportunities? Why did you miss out on the opportunities?
9. Have you faced any challenges?
10. What are the lessons learned?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Socio-economic demographic data:

- Gender, role in project (job title, duty location)

Interview Guide – CSO/Government respondent

1. What are the challenges the rural communities currently face with respect to food production and agriculture-based livelihood activities?
2. What are the attitudes/positions of policy makers with respect to these issues?

3. Who are the decision-makers? What are the opportunities and constraints for engaging in advocacy in these thematic areas?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Socio-economic demographic data:

- Gender, job title, organization