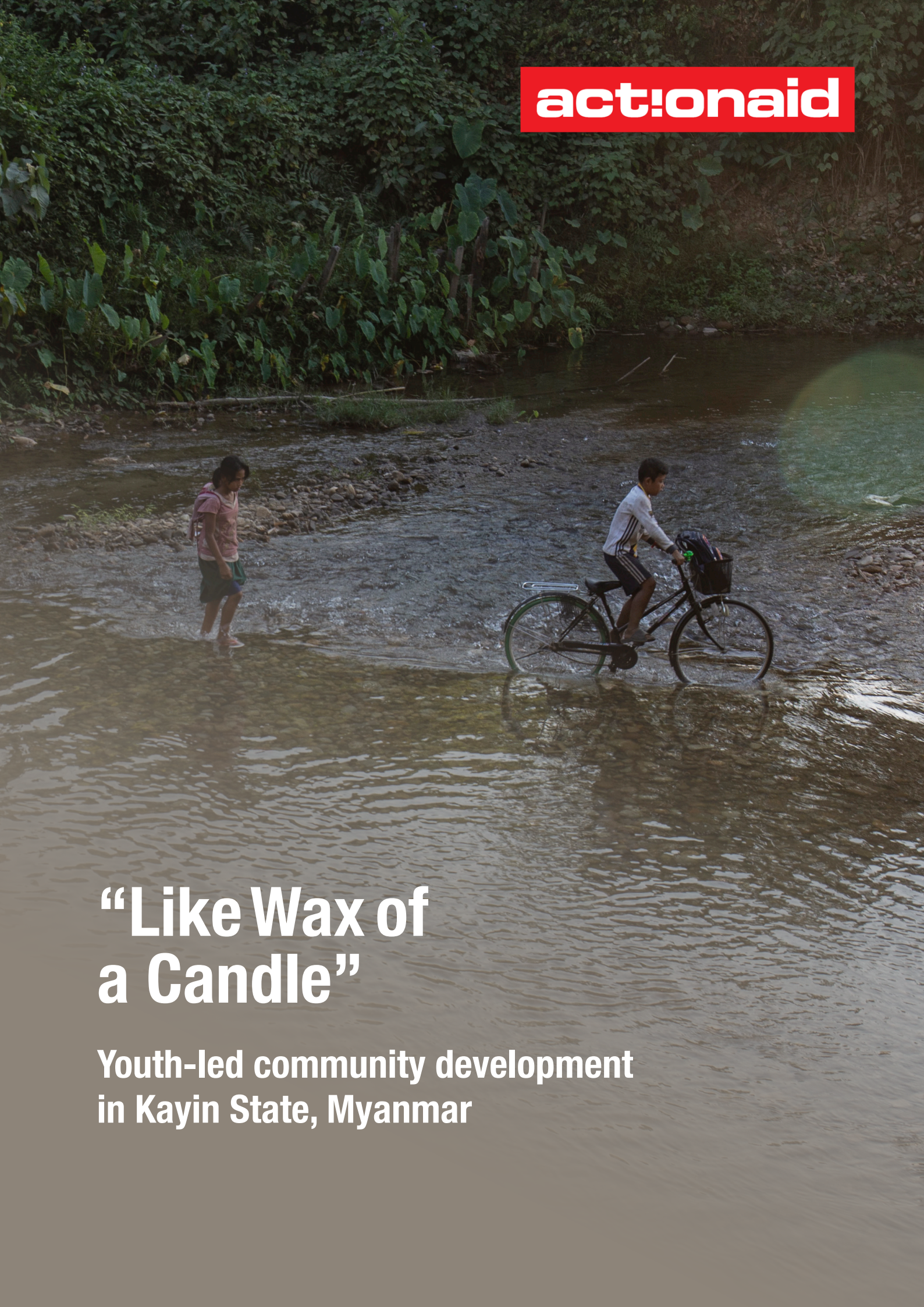

“Like Wax of a Candle”

Youth-led community development in Kayin State, Myanmar

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Yangon, January 2020

Executive summary

The lives of communities in Kayin State have been indelibly marked by what has been characterized as the longest civil war in the world (Federer, et al, 2015). A ceasefire in 2012 between the KNU and Myanmar government and a subsequent Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015 brought more stability to Kayin State (Federer et al, 2015). However, communities in Kayin continue to face militarization, intermittent fighting, and exposure to landmines (HRW, 2016; KHRG, 2019). Villagers in Kayin State continue to have doubts regarding the future.

Since 2010, Myanmar has gone through rapid political and economic changes. (HRW, 2016; Federer et al, 2015). Yet, the people of Kayin continue to face high levels of poverty, lack of infrastructure, as well as limited access to basic services, such as electricity and water. The availability and quality of other essential public services, including health and education are also inadequate. Since access to employment opportunities outside agriculture are limited, many rural villagers, especially young adults, have migrated to more prosperous neighbouring countries in search of better sources of income and quality of life. (Federer, et al, 2015).

To address this situation, ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) through its fellowship programme has trained young women and men called fellows, to facilitate a community-led development process in rural communities throughout the country. Through the work of the young fellows, rural communities have been able to better adapt to the circumstances of the present and imagine and plan for a more desirable and sustainable future (Löfving, 2011; Ferretti, 2010, 2015).

The current project learning and research sought to understand the experiences of young fellows in Kayin State. The study focused on three townships in the area: Than Daung Gyi, Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi. The intent was to investigate how youth in the three townships become fellows, how they experience this process, what kind of challenges they face during the process, and how they perceive their future and that of the communities they serve. The study adopted a participatory research approach and embraced the perspective of Feminist Participatory Research (FPR). In total, 12 fellows participated in the study. Consistent with the tenets of participatory research and FPR, they were involved in the research design, implementation, and analysis of the research results.

Key findings

The study results demonstrate that young fellows play a key role in AAM's community development approach in Kayin State. Like the communities they serve, fellows experience a challenging process of self-definition and self-transformation. From their pre-fellowship programme state of experiencing little responsibility on the public stage of the village, the programme transforms young villagers into fellows who possess attributes that become essential to their villages in the community development process. This transformational process exhibits internal and external manifestations. As young products of the villages that they serve, fellows enter the fellowship programme presenting the intersectional influences that have formed them as young men and women. Their age, gender, ethnicity, language, prior experiences in their villages, and other factors intersect into a maze of layered influences that impact their view of themselves and their worlds. To understand the internal journey of fellows requires accounting for their intersectional formation that allows them to adapt, survive, and succeed as fellows. This transformation requires that they take on the mission of self-transformation that makes them confident and creative village leaders.

As fellows experience internal transformation, they also become important components of a change process that takes place at the village level. By contributing to community development, their work transforms existing power relations, particularly those involving men and women. To do this, the fellows support a planning process wherein women, who used to be considered as not essential to village level decision making, are transformed into important contributors to village affairs. By leading the establishment of Village Community-Based Organizations (VCBOs) and Women's Self-Help Groups (WSHGs), fellows play a central role in a transformational process that results in new structures of self-governance at the village level.

Another important role that fellows play is manifested in the roles that they play as they deal with village chiefs, administrators, governing authorities. As part of their efforts to engage with the village from the beginning of their community development work, fellows seek support from and collaboration with village leaders. The level of responsiveness on the part of village leaders can impede or facilitate the extent that fellows are able to engage villagers in the community development process. Along the course of the development process, the fellows and village leaders develop relationships that focus on village problem-solving that eventually takes the form of a village book.

An even greater challenge arises when fellows must work with representatives of the governing authorities regarding village development process matters. This role has consequences for the internal development of fellows as they face the uncertainties associated with dealing with these powerful interests that critically impact the life of the village. That the fellows find a place in negotiating with governing authorities representatives reflects a structural shift in the management of village affairs. The voice and aspirations of villagers represented in the efforts of fellows as they deal with these entities demonstrates that villager-centric participatory planning holds the potential for influencing the institutional holders of power over the future of villages.

Evidence also emerged in the study regarding the future of fellows and participatory planning/community on the village level that deserves serious consideration. While fellows involved in the study demonstrated strong belief in and commitment to the village-centric community development process, they also offered opinions that question the sustainability of the current model. With family and financial obligations, they made it clear that it is impractical for former fellows to continue as leaders in their villages' participatory planning/community development processes as volunteers. Thus, the basic issue is whether the model promoted by AAM can be sustained on a voluntary basis by the villages and their community-based organizations (CBOs), or is the expertise of and active role played by fellows essential to make the approach sustainable. If fellow-like competence is essential to sustaining the AAM model, how will it be supported?

Key recommendations

Based on assessments and recommendations suggested by the fellows that participated in the study, recommendations are suggested to ActionAid for revision of its fellowship programme in the following areas:

- Provide support for fellows to help them address the internal struggles and fears they face at the beginning of their fellowship journey.

- Address female fellows' childcare and household responsibilities to encourage their participation in activities, especially those that require travel and staying away from home for several days.

- Support them in the establishment of fellow-CBOs

ActionAid's experience in Myanmar provides ample evidence of the success of participatory planning at the village level. With facilitation assistance from fellows, community members have been able to demonstrate in many settings that they have the desire and competence to create sustainable change for their communities. A problem that ActionAid has identified is that this dynamic and effective approach to community development is having questionable impact upon the formal structures and processes on the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar. VCBOs, and WSHGs established by the fellowship programme for instance, have not been incorporated into formal decision/policy-making processes. Nor have permanent bridges been constructed to meaningfully connect village participatory planning to formal governing actors decision-making. The assessment here is that while the current AAM model have been effective in bringing 'proto-governance' to the villages of Kayin State and elsewhere in Myanmar, this approach to village-level participatory planning/community development has not been institutionalised to become part of the formal structures and processes of local and state decision-making.

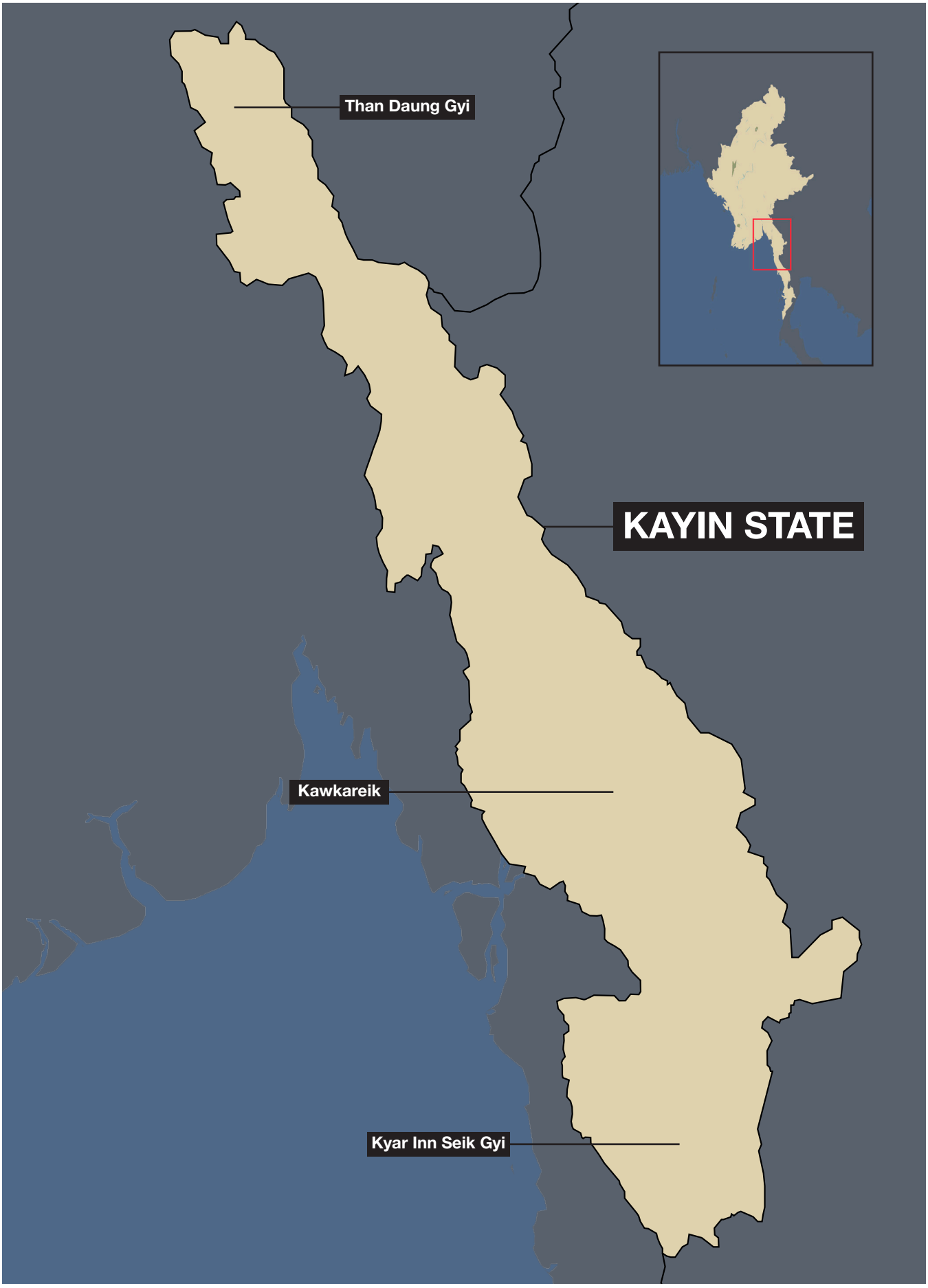
The central recommendation of this study is that AAM, and government actors work through the village participatory planning process in a way that it becomes an integral part of formal governance at the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar, such as the General Administration Department (GAD) reform. As part of this solution, the experiences, opinions, and concerns expressed by fellows also should be addressed and taken into consideration in the search for sustainable solutions.

To address concerns raised by the fellows in this study, a funding mechanism should be found so that the work begun by AAM fellows can continue without interruptions in the future. The present study demonstrates that fellows are invaluable resources for effective community development. As a result, a way forward must be identified to continue – to integrate – this work as part of a permanent local level governance solution at the village tract level. If funding cannot be found to support a 'community development specialist' in every village, a smaller number of these specialists could form a township cadre of permanent employees armed with the fellows' skill set. This township and village tract level cadre of specialists could support continuing volunteer community development processes in the villages. Additionally, either through the use of the township level team of 'community development specialists' or another organisational approach, independent funding for civil society organisations can continue support of the nascent village VCBOs as well as to create a feedback channel for village track administrators.

However, these suggestions will only have enduring meaning if they are part of a new approach embraced by governing actors to integrate village level participatory planning and community development into formal governance structures and processes. The study suggests that AAM, other interested national or international stakeholders, agree to support further GAD reform undertake a project intended to design an effective approach to build an institutionalised bridge between village participatory planning/community development and formal governance structures and processes.

Acronyms

FGD	Focus group discussion
GOM	Government of Myanmar
KISG	Kyar Inn Seik Gyi
KNU	Karen National Union
KWKR	Kawkareik
TDG	Than Daung Gyi


Than Daung Gyi
KAYIN STATE
Kawkareik
Kyar Inn Seik Gyi

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background: Emerging from conflict in Myanmar and Kayin State

Myanmar is a country of great diversity in terms of geography, culture, ethnicity, language, and religion (Gritzelj, 2017). The country is comprised of seven states and seven regions. States and are further divided into districts, townships, village tracts and villages. Each state possesses its own distinct ethnic characteristics. Multiple languages are spoken across villages. As a result, Myanmar's states and regions exhibit great variation in terms of their socio-political contexts. Moreover, the natural environment of the country that ranges from cool, mountainous climate in the north to hot and humid climate in the south also results in inter-regional differences in lifeways (ActionAid, 2012). The socio-cultural diversity of Myanmar has been a key component of a central characteristic of the seven decades since the nation gained independence from the United Kingdom: Intra- and inter-regional conflicts involving ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and governmental entities (Jolliffe, 2014).

Within this context of national conflict, the lives of communities in Kayin State have been marked by what has been characterized as the longest civil war in the world (Federer, Hansen, Khen, & Waa, 2015). For more than 60 years, these communities have learned to survive the violence perpetrated by the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), the Karen National Union (KNU), as well as several KNU splinter groups (Kyed, 2019) operating in Kayin State. A ceasefire in 2012 between the KNU and Myanmar government and a subsequent Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015 brought more stability to Kayin State (Federer et al., 2015). However, communities in Kayin continue to face militarization, intermittent fighting, and exposure to landmines (HRW, 2016; Karen Human Rights Group, 2019c). While some communities are currently under the total control of the Myanmar central government and others are governed solely by KNU, most of the villages in Kayin State can be portrayed as under mixed-control, with the government and KNU in control of some communities (Kyed, 2019). Local governance uncertainty has been further complicated by the emergence of land confiscations

Landscape view of Myapadaingnaing Village, Kawkareik Township, Kayin State.

as a common practice, with those affected left in a state of cyclical displacement. This has resulted in a low level of trust between the government and citizens on the local level (HRW, 2016; Karen Human Rights Group, 2019c; Federer et al, 2015).

Beyond uncertainty associated with their emergence from decades of conflict, communities across Myanmar are experiencing other forms of transition. Since 2010, Myanmar has gone through rapid political and economic changes. Kayin State reflects this as it has become a desirable location for economic development, with growth in sectors including tourism, agriculture, mining and manufacturing (HRW, 2016; Federer et al, 2015). Yet, the people of Kayin continue to face high levels of poverty, lack of infrastructure, as well as limited access to basic services, such as electricity and water. Availability and quality of other essential public services, including health and education are also scarce. While access to employment opportunities outside agriculture are narrow, large numbers of people, especially youth, have tended to migrate toward more prosperous neighbouring countries in search of better sources of income and quality of life (Federer, et al, 2015).

1.2. ActionAid-Myanmar fellows programme

To support community level change in this uncertain situation, ActionAid-Myanmar (AAM) has introduced one of its most effective evidence-based programmatic approaches, its community fellowship programme. AAM introduced community fellows to Kayin State as part of its nationwide commitment to community building.

AAM first piloted the fellowship programme in Myanmar in 2006. Since 2008, it has been implemented through multi-year projects in states and regions throughout the country. The work of the programme focuses on linking youth leadership with a village level, bottom-up participatory development planning process. In this arrangement fellows – young women and men – are trained by AAM to facilitate the participatory planning process that supports remote communities in critically analysing their community needs and resources, identifying priorities, and making concrete action plans to stimulate development at the village level that reflects the perspectives of village residents (Ferretti, 2010; Löfving, 2011).

The fellowship programme reflects AAM's central assumptions and evidence-based programmatic ideas regarding community level problem solving. AAM applies a bottom-up, participatory approach to rural community development, within which three elements come together: Fellows as process facilitators, community members as the main actors of the process, and the production of a village book – a book that draws together the components of the bottom-up development plan of the village. Through this approach community members come together to analyse their situation, define their needs, find solutions, and develop action plans designed specifically to address the context of their village according to their terms. The crucial point in the process is that the information produced in the village book is owned and used by the community. Later, these plans serve as contextually rich documentation of village needs and priorities that can be used to engage with relevant local actors, such as the government when it plans improvements for villages. (ActionAid, 2014)

The work done by fellows in Myanmar has been reported widely (ActionAid, 2012; ActionAid International, 2008; Bro-Jørgensen, 2013; Ferretti, 2010, 2015; Löfving, 2011). To date authors have explored the work of AAM fellows on the national level of analysis. This has included cross state and region analyses. As will be further discussed in the research objectives section below, the premise of the current report is that, to gain better understanding regarding the work of AAM fellows in a country with Myanmar's diversity, there is a need to perform state/region-wise case studies. This approach will support greater understanding of the contextuality of the experience of fellows in different states and regions. This report focuses on the experience of fellows in Kayin State.

1.3. Fellowship programme in Kayin State

In 2011 AAM piloted two fellowship projects in Kayin State. The projects were designed to provide a context specific and sustainable response to the severe lack of public services in the area following decades of armed conflict. By raising people's awareness of their rights and strengthening the capacity of rights holders and governing authorities, the projects made important contributions in terms of strengthening the relationship between local communities and the Kayin State government. As a result, local people gained better access to health, education, and new income sources and the Kayin government made commitments to liaise with communities on service provision.

After these first pilot projects, three additional fellowship projects have been implemented in the region. The Southeastern Infrastructure and Rehabilitation Initiative (SIRP I) that operated between 2013 and 2016, covered 90 rural villages in Mon and Kayin States. The project aimed to empower communities by improving village member access to basic education, water, sanitation facilities, and health care as well as creating improved income sources for them. (EMC, 2015)

Students crossing the stream.

Initiated in 2016, the Empowering communities in Mon and Kayin states (SIRP II) project built on the work of the first SIRP initiative. The project has aimed to contribute to the economic and social development of vulnerable families and communities and provide improved conditions for the voluntary return and dignified settlement of displaced people in Mon and Kayin States. Making use of knowledge gained from the SIRP project, this project has focused on the development of young leaders and the strengthening of community engagement in decision making. The focus of the project has been to strengthen the engagement, training and mentoring of changemakers and other community members to enhance active citizenship skills, increasing support and awareness among governing authorities and regional government, and to increase their engagement in community led development. The project also seeks to increase responsive budgeting and service delivery.

Like the SIRP II initiative, the Changemakers: Empowering communities in Kayin and Chin states was initiated in 2016 and ends in 2019. The project aims to contribute to the economic and social development of vulnerable families and communities in these two states through development of young community leaders as AAM fellows. In the project, fellows and community volunteers are identified by the local partner and trained by AAM. Community volunteers assist fellows with their changemaker responsibilities. They mobilize community members through the establishment of village community-based organizations (VCBOs) in targeted villages that had not been included in the pilot projects.

Landscape view of Kwinkalay village, Kyar Inn Seik Gyi Township, Kayin State.

The fellows and the volunteers support the communities in analysing the causes of their poverty and vulnerability to social, economic, and environmental problems. They ultimately help them to create action plans to overcome these challenges. In response to the lack of young women's participation in decision-making processes, the project also has a strong focus on gender equality and young female leaders' empowerment in the targeted communities. By offering leadership training to young women and by encouraging them to become changemakers and community volunteers, the goal of the project is to increase and strengthen women's voices in village affairs and open spaces for women's active participation in community life.

1.4. Research objective

As was noted under section 1.3, the premise of the current report is that, to gain better understanding regarding the work of AAM fellows in a country with Myanmar's diversity, there is a need to perform case studies within individual states and regions. This approach will assist in understanding how fellows pursue the change process in rural communities. This report argues that the analysis needs to be grounded in fellows' subjective experiences and contextualized within the specific social, cultural, historical, political and economic realities of the communities within which fellows work. An AAM representative reinforced this perspective by stating,

> *All the areas are different. The mindset of the people, their history, their experiences, the context today, how people speak, how people think, how they feel. All that effects the fellow's work. It effects their attitude. When fellows begin their training, they have very different mindsets and attitudes. They are not all the same. Fellows from different areas of the country are very different. Fellows from Chin are different than fellows from Kayin. The situation of the youth is very different in different areas. You cannot generalize . . . (AAM representative interview, Yangon, 24.9.2019)*

Framed by these understandings regarding different experiential backgrounds among fellows and differences among the communities within which they work, the intent of this report is to analyse the fellowship programme in the context of three townships of Kayin State. More specifically, it will consider the contextualized experiences of fellows within mixed-control (control by the government and EAOs) communities located in Than Daung Gyi, Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi townships where two fellowship projects end in December 2019.

While the achievements of the AAM fellowship programme at the community level have been extensively documented, the individual challenges faced by fellows in their placement areas have received less attention. An exception is a 2012 AAM report that focused on fellows' individual experiences and analysed the fellowship programme from the perspective of the fellows themselves. While the analysis of this report includes multiple states and regions in the country, Kayin State was not included. Another report written by Bro-Jørgensen (2013) focused on fellow activities in Kayin State. However, the analysis only considered what fellows have achieved at the community level. The fellows' individual experiences were not considered in the study. The present report will build upon the evidence offered in the 2012 and 2013 reports to consider on an inter-community basis the contextualized individual level experiences of fellows in Kayin State.

In addition to expanding the body of reported evidence on the experience of fellows, the current report intends to provide information that will help AAM in its operation of the fellowship programme. In order for the programme to realise more success in the future and for AAM to improve its internal learning approach for upcoming projects, the challenges faced by fellows need to be examined in greater detail, better understood, and reported upon. Thus, this report aims to illustrate what works with fellows in Kayin State and what does not, why certain difficulties appear in specific situations, and what could be done to tackle those difficulties in the future. Additionally, the report intends to approach analysis of the village development process from the perspective of fellows.

This project learning and research will be supported by three questions:

1. How do young men and women in Kayin State become fellows? This is supported by an additional question:
    a. How do they experience this process in terms of their attitudinal and behavioural adjustment and competency development?

2. What happens when newly selected fellows initiate the community development process in mixed-control communities? This is supported by an additional question:
    a. What kind of challenges do they face?

3. How do fellows in Kayin State perceive the future of their communities and themselves as development process facilitators when the two projects come to an end?

By answering these questions, the study will contribute to ActionAid-Myanmar's internal discussion on fellows by providing new grounded and localised evidence regarding the daily reality of young women and men working as fellows in Kayin State. This should aid the organization as it plans future initiatives that involve fellows. By producing information about youth leadership at the community level, this report's analysis will become part of a discussion built around the role of young people in community development in Myanmar (Gritzelj, 2017, 2018; Gritzelj & Prelis, 2018; Hald & Smith, 2018; Paung Sie Facility, 2019). In so doing, it will offer insights to the global discourse around youth agency in protracted conflict settings (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Vastapuu, 2017; Vigh 2009; 2010)

As will be discussed below in the research design chapter, the generalization value of this study is limited by the small community and informant sample sizes. However, in considering experiences across three townships in Kayin State, the study will add rich in-depth understandings regarding the phenomena of interest that will add to the existing evidence regarding the experience of AAM fellows in Myanmar.

1.5. Outline of the report

The report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 will describe the research methodology, including data collection and management, and analysis approaches. Chapter 3 will describe Kayin State and the three townships considered in the study. Chapter 4 will include an analysis of data on how Kayin State youth become fellows and how they experience the selection process. Chapter 5 includes an analysis of the fellows' work in the context of mixed-control communities in Kayin State. Chapter 6 involves an analysis of fellows' views regarding the future of the fellowship programme in Kayin state. Chapter 7 summarises the study's findings and offers conclusions, discussion, recommendations, and questions for future research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participatory research through feminist lens

ActionAid's research and learning approach is fundamentally feminist (ActionAid, 2019b) and participatory: Within its context as an international service organization, any research that it supports should aim to challenge the binary that exists between the researcher and researched (ActionAid, 2019a). According to this approach individuals and groups that are the subjects of the research are more than sources of information; they also contribute to the generation of knowledge. (Brooks, 2011; GAATW, 2019a). Research conducted by ActionAid also should apply a gender lens throughout the research process and approach the analysis from an intersectional perspective (ActionAid, 2019). All institutions and their social settings are 'gendered' (Hassim & Razavi, 2006). As a result, including gender as a component of the intersectional assessment of the actors in the ActionAid's work is essential. This report relies on qualitative data and the use of feminist participatory research (FPS)[1] as a methodological backbone.

Four precepts provide grounding for the FPS approach as it is applied in this study. First, the report embraces FPS's assumption that research, particularly research that involves social change, is always political, can never be neutral, and should aim for the empowerment of research participants (Gatenby & Humphiries, 2000). Second, FPS emphasises that those whose lives and daily realities have historically remained invisible and whose voices have been excluded from public debate, should be brought to the centre of attention and their perspectives acknowledged (Brooks, 2011). Third, the research reflects the FPS emphasis on including active roles for study participants in the formulation of research questions, collection of data, data analysis, and presentation of the results to those whose everyday realities are studied (GAATW, 2019b). Finally, the current research utilized the FPS emphasis on the ethical consequences of research results: What is learned from the lived experiences of the research participants should be translated into political and social action that influences programming and advocacy in the future (ActionAid, 2019; Brooks, 2011; Cook & Fonow, 1986). The link to meaningful political, economic, and social action is a critical component of the FPS perspective. The purpose of feminist scholarship is to create more equal laws, generate improved institutions, and build more just relationships. That is, the research process and the information that it produces should lead to positive change that takes place not only within the research participants themselves, but also in their surrounding social, political, and economic reality. (Gatenby & Humphiries, 2000).

2.2. Study Design

Supported by FPS, the project learning research, from here on referred to as research was conducted as a participatory study between May 2019 and October 2019 in the three study sites. Preliminary to the field work, a literature review that gave background information for the study was conducted. During the fieldwork the researcher collaborated with 12 youth working as fellows in the three subject townships. Data collection for the study took place between June 2019 and July 2019. Two data collection tools were utilized: thematic interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The research process included four phases that can be further divided into five steps: 1) research design, 2) research training, 3) data collection, 4) analysis of the research data, and 5) identification of challenges that the study encountered.

The study design took into consideration two sets of aspirations. The first aspiration was to explore the AAM fellowship programme in Kayin State's mixed-control areas. The second aspiration was to scrutinise the impact of the fellowship programme on community members' engagement with the multiple governing actors present in Kayin State.

The selection of the research participants was done by the AAM Hpa-an field team together with the AAM programme

1 Feminist Participatory Research (FPR) was applied instead of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) as the research process does not fulfil the requirements of action research process. As Milton-Brkich et al. (2010) demonstrate, when applying action research as a research approach, the research is set to define a concrete problem that exists, determine what the change that is needed to solve the problem, collect data, analyse the data, identify how the change can be realised, act according to the evidence gathered, and finally evaluate the results of the process. Even though this research identified several challenges that exist in AAM fellowship programme in Kayin State and the data collected pointed out multiple ways in which the programme could be improved, the concrete action that is an integral part of an action research was not taken during the research process. Nor were the results of that action evaluated.

team from Yangon. All together 12 fellows took part in the research: four fellows from Tan Daung Gyi township; four fellows from Kawkareik township; and, four fellows from Kyar inn Seik Gyi township. Out of the 12 participants, 10 were male fellows and two were female fellows. While only two out of twelve fellows who took part in the study were female fellows, several female community members took part in the interviews and FGDs conducted by fellows and AAM Lead Researcher. The youngest fellow participant was 18 years old and the oldest was 33 years old. While some had been fellows since 2013, others had started to work as fellows only a little more than a year before the beginning of the research.

The research process followed the ethical guidelines provided by the American Anthropological Association (2012). All the research data was collected anonymously and without revealing any personal or sensitive information about the respondents in the final research report. The anonymity of the participants was protected through administrative procedures and secure storage protocols. The interviewees and the participants of the FGDs were informed beforehand about the intent of the study and the use of the data collected. In the beginning of each interview and FGD, either written or verbal consent was procured from each interviewee and FGD participant. The written consent forms were stored digitally by AAM and the AAM Hpa-an field team. Fellow interviewees who did not want to sign a written consent form but agreed to take part in the study, recorded their names and contact details. At the end of the research process all data collected was securely stored in password-protected files by AAM and the results of the study were used only to prepare this report.

2.3. Research training

The fellows received a four-day research training from the AAM Lead Researcher in May 2019. The training took place in Hpa-an and was conducted in English with the help of three local translators who translated the training sessions to Burmese. During the training, the fellows were introduced to the research objectives and methodology, reflected on general research ethics, ActionAid's ethical standards, ActionAid's Child Protection Policy, and were given opportunities to influence the research design. Preliminary research questions were modified according to the fellows' recommendations. The training gave the fellows an opportunity to practice thematic interviews in pairs and receive feedback on their interview performance from each other and from the AAM Lead Researcher. At the end of the training, the fellows designed the interview and FGD questions for the study and identified the stakeholders who they believed should be informants during the data collection. The training was conducted in a participatory manner, with a series of exercises that included role play, art, reflective group discussions, and presentations. Several of these exercises were derived from ActionAid's Networked Toolbox (ActionAid, 2019) and included examples of various participatory tools and practices specifically designed to be applied at a community level with diverse audiences.

Mid-way through the data collection period a follow-up meeting was conducted in Hpa-an. The purpose of it was to give the fellows a better understanding regarding the meaning behind the information they had collected and help them comprehend how the information can be interpreted. The meeting gave the fellows an opportunity to evaluate the quality of their data and identify ways they can improve the data collection process during the following month. Like the first research training, the follow-up meeting was also conducted in a participatory manner. Fellows practiced thematic interviews and received individual feedback from each other and the AAM Lead Researcher. The AAM lead Researcher also offered the fellows feedback on their notetaking skills and the group reflected together on how interview and FGDs notes could be improved in the future.

2.4. Data collection

The data collection process began in early June 2019 and lasted until the end of July 2017. A research guideline was developed for the fellows to use in the interviews and FGDs. A total of 48 thematic interviews and eight FGDs were conducted by the fellows with stakeholders they identified during the research training.[2] Data collection was divided between fellows and the AAM Lead Researcher. Interviews and FGDs conducted by fellows focused on the change process that has occurred in the villages during the course of the fellowship programme. Interviews and FGDs led by the AAM Lead Researcher were intended to capture experiences related to the fellows' journey and their work with the EAOs and the Government of Myanmar (GOM), as well as community members' and AAM Kayin field staff's perceptions regarding the change process that has taken place in the communities. This included: two individual interviews and six group interviews with fellows; two group interviews with AAM Hpa-an field staff; three FDGs with local community members; and, five individual interviews with AAM employees working with fellowship projects. While

2 A list of these stakeholders is attached as an annex to this report (see Annex 1).

most of this data was collected in Hpa-an, the two individual interviews with fellows were conducted in the town of Mudo in Mon State. AAM employees were interviewed in Yangon.

Throughout the data collection process, several group discussions were also conducted with the research participants and the AAM Lead Researcher. During these discussions fellows and the AAM Lead Researcher reflected on the data collected and analysed it from different perspectives.

During the data collection period, a literature review on Myanmar language was carried out to search for additional information about the three townships where the research was taking place. In addition, a review of English language literature on Kayin State was done, as well as evaluation reports and other written material produced about the AAM fellowship programme. This was supported by a context analysis prepared by an external consultant.

2.5. Analysing the research results

A final research meeting was arranged with the fellows in Hpa-an in August 2019. During the final meeting, the data that had been coded and pre-analysed by the AAM Lead Researcher was further analysed with the fellows. The fellows were given an opportunity to express their opinions regarding the research process and discuss with the AAM Lead Researcher what should have been done differently in conducting the field work. The feedback from the fellows is presented in the next section of this chapter. In November 2019, a data validation workshop was organized in Yangon. Three fellows, one staff member from the AAM Hpa-an field staff, and three AAM Yangon staff members working with fellows attended the workshop. During the workshop, the participants collectively reflected on the main research results and went through the organization of the research report.

2.6. Challenges that the research encountered

Several factors served to complicate and challenge the research design, data collection process, and analysis. A first complicating factor was that male fellow participants outnumbered those of female fellows in the study. Although the Fellowship programme in Kayin State has a strong female leadership focus, only two out of the 12 research participants were female. There were three reasons for this. First, currently, there are fewer female fellows in the three townships than male fellows: Than Daung Gyi has 9 male fellows and 3 female fellows; Kawkareik has 8 male fellows and 3 female fellows; Kyar Inn Seik Gyi has 6 male fellows and 1 female fellow. Second, many female fellows who were asked to participate in the research had other responsibilities that overlapped with the research training and the two research meetings. Third, as participation in the research required travelling to Hpa-an on a monthly basis, some female fellows declined to participate because they had to look after their children and had other household responsibilities. In addition to resulting in a fellow participant sample that does not reflect the fellow composition of the programme in Kayin State, as will be further discussed in the report, this must be identified as a limitation to the generalization value of the study.

A fourth challenge to the conduct of the research involved language barriers among the fellows, the community, and the AAM Lead Researcher. The research training and research guidelines were in English and translated to Burmese. Yet, as most of the local community members speak local Karen languages instead of Burmese, the fellows had to translate most of the interview and FGD questions into local Karen languages before each interview and FGD. The fellows recorded all respondent answers in Burmese. This process prolonged the time required for interviews and FGDs and was stressful for the fellows. Had the questions been developed in the local languages, communication with community members would have much been easier. After conducting the interviews and FGDs, the field notes were translated from Burmese to English. While the translation was done by a local native Burmese speaker, it is inevitable that the translations do not always capture the full meaning of the participants' responses. This challenge to the administration of the research also results in a limitation to the findings.

The timing of the research proved to be a fifth complicating factor. Since the timeframe for data collection was between June and July, the research took place during the harvesting season – the busiest time of the year for rural communities in Kayin State. In communities that rely on agriculture as their livelihood, little time can be easily found for activities other than harvesting during these months. Hence, conducting interviews and FGDs required substantial persuasion from the fellows to get community members to be willing to find time for the study.

The impact of the rainy season was a sixth challenge for the research process. In August 2019 heavy rains caused severe flooding in Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi townships with parts of villages severely damaged due to rising water. As a result, fellows from the two townships had to take part in emergency assistance activities in their communities and the final research meeting had to be postponed for a month. Because of the flooding not all of the fellows from the affected townships were able to participate in the postponed final research session.

3. Introduction to Karen State

3.1. Social characteristics of Karen society

Kayin State (known as Karen State prior to 1989) is one of Myanmar's eastern states bordering Thailand. Comprised of four districts and seven townships, the state is home to myriad ethnic groups, including Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Bwe Karen, Paku Karen, Shan, Pa'o (Pao), Mon, and Bamar (Burmese) (UNHCR, 2014). The two dominant languages in Kayin State used for wider communication throughout Kayin State are S'gaw Karen (or Sgaw Karen) and Pwo Karen (Eastern and Western varieties) (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019). The number of Karen between Myanmar and Thailand is heavily debated, with governmental figures approximating 5 million and Karen nationalists claiming 7 million (South, 2011; Karen Women's Organization, 2010). Although various ethnic communities reside within Kayin State, the Karen are considered the dominant ethnicity, and have received more attention in research and program planning. The Karen are one of Myanmar's 'eight big races' (Gravers, 2007, 4), and despite their typical association with Kayin State, many Karen communities are located in neighbouring states, divisions, and townships (Clarke et al, 2019; South, 2011). However, researchers have noted that assuming a singular, 'pan-Karen' identity is reductive and a by-product of the Bamar myth of the 'common descent of all national races' (Cheesman, 2002).

Karen Social Norms

Karen identity is not homogenous, and includes at least four distinct Karen communities: Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, and Paku (UNHCR, 2014). The Karen live in a variety of areas in Kayin State, including the lowlands of the Ayeyarwady Delta and the densely forested hills near the Thai border (Clarke, et al, 2019). Lall and South (2013) have identified associations between the languages spoken and topography, noting that highland Karen areas speak S'gaw while the lowland areas use Pwo. For Karen settlements located among hills, researchers and officials sometimes refer to these communities collectively as 'hill tribes' or 'highlanders' (Cheesman, 2002; McKinnon, 2005). In comparison to lowland communities, these remote highland communities are relatively homogenous and—according to Clarke et al. (2019), 'tend to practice forms of subsistence livelihoods' (95).

Each Karen community has its distinct origin myth that is passed down to its people (Rajah, 2002). However, researchers have found that across Karen communities there is a consistent belief cantered upon a lost, divine book (Gravers, 2007; Rajah, 2002). This myth has been seen in the practices of Christians, Buddhists, and other religions throughout the state and it has been used to legitimize the influence of foreign Christian missionaries in Karen society. There are several generalisations that are typically applied across Karen populations, such as Karen communities valuing family and education, and often being close-knit and patriarchal (Rajah, 2008). There is a general respect for elders and relatives, and community is highly valued (KHRG, 2006). Shrestha-Kuwahara, Jansky, and Huang (2010) also posit that Karen communities value modesty and consider direct, loud, or emphatic communication as uncomfortable, explaining in part why Karen individuals may initially reject offers of hospitality and why public affection is uncommon. While there are traditional gender roles in Karen cultures that privilege men's mobility, women are often prominent figures in their communities, with them leading cultural village activities and religious support groups (KHRG, 2006)

S'gaw Karen is spoken by over 2 million people and often used in Christian communities and as the language for general communication. Yet, there are at least twelve other languages used within Kayin State, including: Bwe Karen, Geba Karen, Geko Karen, Mobwa Karen, Paku Karen, Pwo Karen (Eastern and Western), Western Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Mon, Pa'o, and Myanmar (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019). Most of the population in Kayin State is at minimum bilingual, speaking S'gaw Karen, Pwo Karen (Eastern or Western), or Myanmar as their second language. Dependent on various factors, including the remoteness of the village and if they have government-run schools, communities may not be highly adept at Myanmar language (Clarke et al, 2019).

Social Context of Kayin

Kayin is a multi-ethnic state in which many villages are ethnically diverse. It is uncommon for villages to be of one ethnicity unless they are extremely remote in the state's eastern hills (Rajah, 2008). The common practice of many Karen communities to develop extra-community relationships for commerce and marriage has resulted in a large proportion of ethnically mixed children (Clarke et al, 2019; Taylor, 2005). Although Karen communities are traditionally patriarchal, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) (2010) suggests that, due to men being abducted or killed during the sustained conflict, electing women to positions of power has become relatively commonplace in rural areas. Researchers have noted that, since the bilateral ceasefire, more men have been elected to positions of power that women once occupied during conflict (SaferWorld & KPSN, 2018).

Family walking on a paddy field.

Economic Context of Kayin State

Kayin State is rich in mineral resources such as jade and gold. The mining industry brings in a significant amount of revenue to the state, though many transactions are 'off-the-books' (MCRB et al, 2018). However, most of the population in Kayin State relies on agriculture for its livelihood, with coffee, rubber, rice, sugarcane, spices, fruits, and vegetables representing the dominant cash crops (UNHCR, 2014). Both men and women work in the fields (KHRG, 2006).

As conflict has declined in the region, in Kayin State as elsewhere in Myanmar, productivity and freedom of movement have increased for farmers (South, et al, 2018). There has been a push by Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to limit black market and drug trading across the border with Thailand (Kramer, 2015; South et al, 2018). While access to electricity in rural areas of Kayin remains low at 21% in 2019, the state government has initiated large-scale development projects such as a coal-fired power plant to develop the state's energy sector (Du Pont, 2019). There has been an influx of international and national development projects within Kayin State centred on improving the livelihoods of Kayin residents (UNHCR, 2014). However, some of these initiatives, such as the Hatgyi Dam project, have led to conflict between EAOs (such as the DBKA splinter group and the KNLA military wing of the KNU) for control of adjacent lands (KHRG, 2019c).

Throughout Myanmar underemployment has been on the rise but is notably higher in conflict and border states and regions. Between 2005 and 2010 poverty in Kayin State increased from 12% to 17%, particularly affecting rural

areas (ADB et al, 2016). The unemployment rate for women is slightly higher than that for men, and, consistent with historic tendencies for gender assignment in employment, women are more likely to be in 'vulnerable employment' as 'self-employed' or 'family workers' (ADB, et al, 2016, 42). Due to the recent conflict, many Kayin residents migrated to Thailand. These migrants send back money to their families in Kayin State and contribute millions in USD to Myanmar's income (ADB et al, 2016). ADD (2014) has reported that a significant percentage of these migrants are youth ages 15 to 24 (30.7%) and are often young men.

Karen Education in Kayin State

Literacy levels in Myanmar are relatively high, with the Asian Development Bank (2014) reporting that the adult literacy level is above 90%. However, the literacy rate varies widely among states and localities (ADB et al, 2016). UNESCO (2015) reports that there is a particularly large proportion of female students enrolled at Myanmar Government Schools at the primary and secondary levels in Kayin State (UNESCO, 2015). A UNESCO (2019) survey for women between 15-49 states that 11% of those surveyed completed primary education. In general, the secondary school retention rate for students in Myanmar is relatively low and, due to the impact of the conflict within the nation, and even lower for students in Kayin (Lall & South, 2013; Lenkova, 2015). UNESCO (2019) notes that, while the primary school completion rate for Kayin State is 68%, the secondary school completion rate is 13%, with secondary school completion at 8%.

Many years of conflict and separatist attitudes in Kayin State have resulted in alternative governance structures to emerge in areas of Kayin in parallel to the Myanmar National Government (Kramer, 2015). This is seen in education, wherein EAOs such as the KNU support the Karen Education and Cultural Department (KED) as part of the Karen State Education Assistance Group (KSEAG), which provides educational services to over 1,500 schools operating in KNU-controlled areas (Lenkova, 2015; Jolliffe, 2014). There are distinct differences between the KED curriculum and that in schools operated by the MoE. The most notable is the KED's mother tongue-based multilingual curriculum (South & Lall, 2016). The curriculum uses S'gaw Karen and Pwo Karen as the medium of instruction, while MoE schools only use Myanmar language or English as the medium of instruction (Lenkova, 2015).

The Karen education system, which existed in isolation from the Myanmar state until the 2012 bilateral ceasefire, diverges significantly from the national curriculum in ways beyond the language of instruction. The KED curriculum focuses on the promotion of Karen language, culture, and nationalism, with only a limited focus on Myanmar language (South & Lall, 2016). While certain Karen Baptist schools have an 'associate status' with the MoE which allows their students to matriculate into higher education, this is not the case for all community-based schools (Lall & South, 2013). The 2012 bilateral ceasefire increased the presence of MoE schools in Kayin State. This expansion has been criticised due to the displacement and demotion of Kayin State teachers (Jolliffe & Mears, 2016). The national government's failure to include local communities in its educational planning has sustained tension and distrust of the central government in Kayin State.

Cultural and Religious Context of Kayin

Although UNHCR (2014) estimates that more than two-thirds of the population in Kayin State is Buddhist, Christianity is also part of Karen identity due to Karen Christians holding prominent roles in the Karen independence movement. Christian Karen communities also have greater access to education and resources resulting from their involvement with foreign missionaries (South, 2011 as cited in Clarke et al, 2019). In particular, American Baptist missionaries have deeply influenced Karen communities, spreading Christianity and expanding literacy in Karen languages (Jolliffe, 2016). Other religious groups in Kayin State include small groups of animists and Karen Muslims (Lall & South, 2013). According to Clarke et al. (2019), S'gaw Karen is often associated with animist and Christian highland communities, while Pwo Karen is generally associated with Buddhist Karen lowland populations.

3.2. Kayin State in conflict

Lower Burma was colonized by Britain in 1825 after the Anglo-Burmese war, but it was not until 1886 that all of Burma came under the control of the British Raj. Colonisation provided an opportunity for Christian missionaries to enter the country, and they found a foothold in Karen communities due to shared values of family, community, and deliverance from oppression (Rajah, 2008). With the close relationship between the Karen and the British, there was an expectation of Karen independence after the war (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008) that threatened the Bamar ruling majority after Burma's independence in 1948.

While researchers have offered evidence that Karen national identity may date back to the 8th century B.C. and Mongolian forebears, Karen nationalism was given impetus in the 19th century by the influence of Christian missionaries and is marked by two important events. The first was the formation in 1881 of the Karen National Association (KNA) (Rajah, 2002). The KNA's main objective was to promote a pan-Karen identity and increase the availability of socio-

economic opportunities for Karen communities (UNHCR, 2014). The KNA evolved to become politically influential and first called for independence from Burma in 1928 (Jolliffe, 2016; UNHCR, 2014). The second event followed World War II and the end of the British Raj when the KNA, Karen Central Organization (KCO), Karen Youth Organization (KYO), and the Buddhist wing of the KNA (BKNA) formed the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1949 (UNHCR, 2014). The KNU, particularly its Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), has opposed the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw (Myanmar/Burmese National Army) since that time. This has included opposition to Karen displacement and the government and Tatmadaw's roles in making the Kayin State conflict one of the longest civil wars in the world (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008; Lenkova, 2015; Rosenthal, 2019).

As a result of the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win, Burma closed its borders to the rest of the world. The resultant international isolation accentuated intra-state conflicts throughout the country, peaking in the 1980s and 1990s (Dean, 2005). In an effort to rebrand the nation in 1989 (Dittmer, 2010; South, 2011), the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed the country's name along with the names of various cities and states. Karen State was renamed as Kayin State.

History of Kayin Protracted Conflict

Conflict between the Karen people and the Bamar is centuries old, dating back to the Bamar and Mon oppressive rule of the Karen (Rajah, 2008; Gravers, 2007; Farrelly, 2014; KWO, 2010). Although there is a significant socio-cultural framing of the conflict, there is also an economic driver: the exploitation of the state's natural resources (MCRB, et al. 2018; Bro-Jørgensen, 2015). Many young men and boys joined the Karen armed organizations during the conflict due to a collective memory of violence and trauma. Human rights groups like the KHRG and UN Security Council (2013) have accused both Tatmadaw and Karen EAOs of forcibly conscripting young boys (Kang, 2012). In 1947, the KNU attempted to reach an agreement with the Burmese government. However, this effort was not successful and the KNU went underground after the Battle of Insein on 31 January 1949, which is now celebrated as Karen Revolution Day (South, 2011). The KNU claims that Kayin State has suffered egregiously at the hands of the Bamar, such that Karen rights, culture, language, bodily autonomy, and memory have been denied or oppressed (KNU, 1998 as referenced in Gravers, 2007; KWO, 2007). Within the past decade the fighting has mostly been concentrated in the highland areas near the Myanmar-Thai border (South, 2011). In an attempt to stifle economic growth and armed activity, Tatmadaw counterinsurgency measures such as the 'four cuts' policy limited civilians' access to food and their agricultural livelihood (Lenkova, 2015; Kang, 2012).

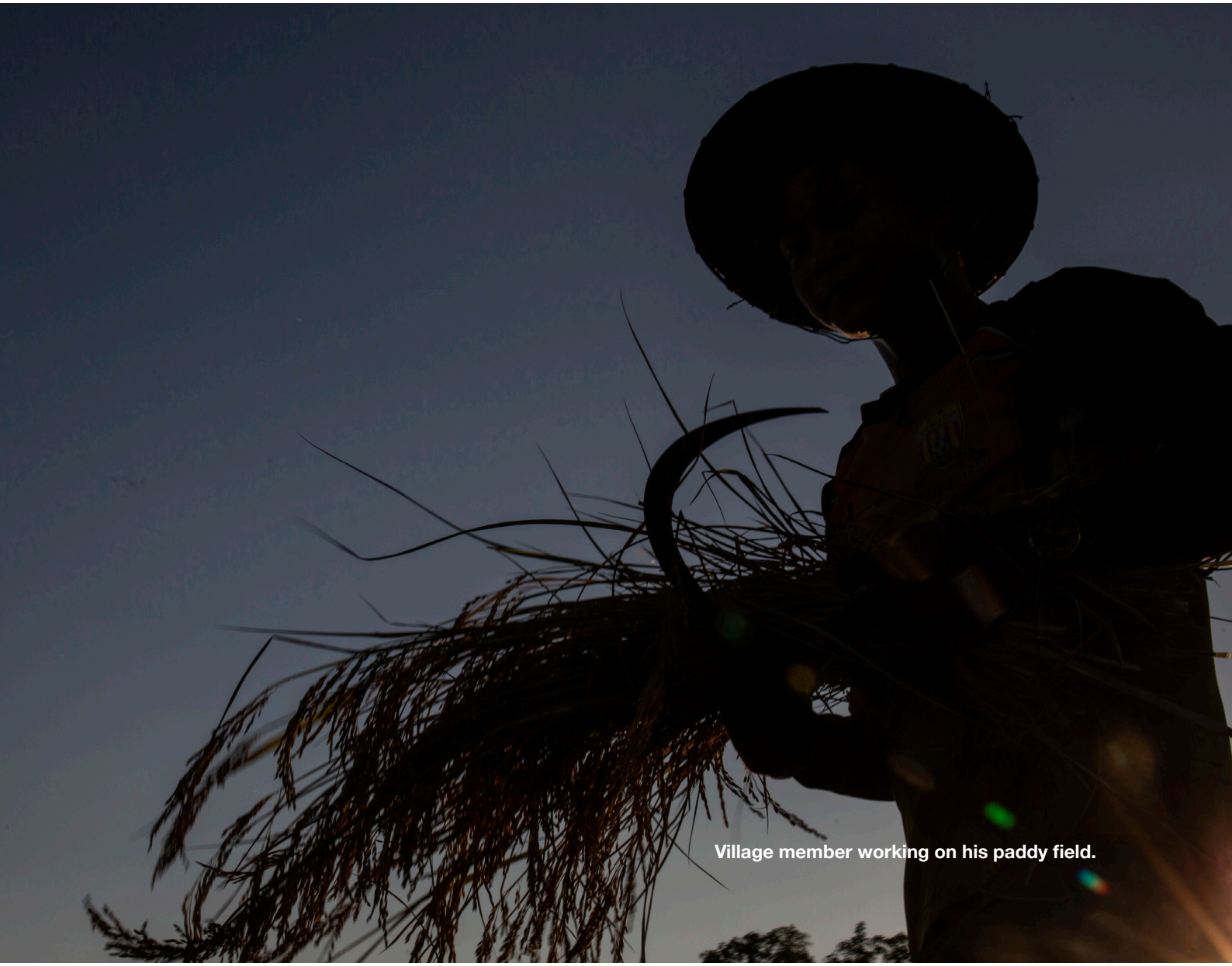
The KNU was the de facto government after 1949 and exerted complete control across Kayin State until 1970 when it lost a significant portion of the territory that it controlled (South & Lall, 2016; South, 2017). According to South (2011), the event that led to KNU experiencing these losses was when hundreds of KNU fighters rebelled to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The DKBA, now named the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, revolted in protest to the Christian leadership of the KNU and it supplanted it as the most powerful EAO in Kayin State (Lenkova, 2015; UN Security Council, 2013).

By the mid-1990s thousands of Karen people were displaced on both sides of the Myanmar-Thai Border. In 1997 a failed attempt at a KNU-SLORC ceasefire led to a devastating offensive against the remaining KNU strongholds, once again displacing civilians across the Thai border. During another round of peace negotiations in 2003 a Karen EAO attacked a Tatmadaw camp, resulting in stalled peace talks for many years (South, 2011). The Tatmadaw engaged in additional conflict in northern and western Kayin State in 2007, again displacing thousands of Karen into Thailand (Gravers, 2007).

IDP Camps

There are approximately 400,000 persons internally displaced persons due to conflict in southeastern Myanmar (The Border Consortium, 2018; IDMC, 2014), and 100,000 verified IDP along the Myanmar-Thai border (The Border Consortium, 2018; South et al, 2018). Conflict is not the only reason for displacement. Increasingly common floods also have driven thousands from their homes in the region (The Border Consortium, 2018; IDMC, 2014). These displaced persons have been living in a variety of circumstances and geographic areas since the beginning of the civil conflict. These include three IDP camps in Myaing Gyi Ngu and another large one in the Hpa-An Township called Ee Thu Ta (KHRG, 2019c; Lenkova, 2015). Grave sanitation conditions including ill-equipped waste management systems and limited access to filtered drinking water, reliable soap distribution, or adequate shower or toilet facilities characterise the IDP camps (KHRG, 2019c).

International and national aid groups such as the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) and Free Burma Rangers (FBR) have worked with Kayin IDP camps to provide nutrition and sanitary aid and medical services (Kang, 2012; Jolliffe, 2014). As the level of conflict has decreased, displaced people have returned to their villages. However, due to unsafe travel conditions and repetitive cycles of conflict, the number that have permanently returned has been limited to about 10% of the total displaced (Lenkova, 2015; KHRG, 2019c).



Village member working on his paddy field.

Children and Conflict

A 2013 report from the office of the UN Secretary-General identified reports wherein the human rights of children in Kayin State have been overlooked throughout the conflict. Children have been reported as abducted and recruited for armed groups and sexually abused by the Tatmadaw after the bilateral ceasefire period. During the conflict, schools and hospitals were attacked, limiting access of children to basic needs and further placing their lives at risk (UN Security Council 2013; 2018).

Gender and Conflict

Many men in Kayin State have joined EAOs or been captured or killed by the Tatmadaw throughout the conflict, resulting in opportunities for women to assume positions of power (KWO 2010). According to the KWO (2007; 2010) and corroborated in other global reports (ADB et al, 2016; Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016; Transnational Institute, 2016; Federer et al, 2015), women also have experienced or witnessed myriad abuses, including rape, gang rape, torture, beheadings, and slave labour or portering. Even when they have held positions of power, women have not been exempted from violence, and have systematically experienced abuse or social exclusion (Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016; Transnational Institute 2016). Of 95 women serving as village chiefs that were interviewed by the KWO (2010), one-third ‘were physically beaten or tortured’ (13).

Mulaei Mountain, Kayin State.

Pregnancy has not prevented violence against women and has been used as another form of extortion to leverage victims to provide intelligence regarding the movements of KNU or other EAO forces (KWO, 2010). For refusing to provide women to Tatmadaw troops for sex, chieftains have been reported as paying fines or having family members raped (KWO 2010). Many other incidents of the abuse, rape, and rape-murder of young girls also have been documented (Federer, et al, 2015). The KWO (2010) and the Transnational Institute (2016) state that these gender-based abuses have yet to be addressed in a comprehensive manner.

3.3. Current peace process

Beginning with unsuccessful talks in 1963-64, here have been multiple attempts at peace negotiations between Kayin State EAOs and the Myanmar/Burmese government (South, 2011; 2017). A ceasefire was signed between the national government and EAOs across Myanmar in 1991, but it did not end the fighting. Focusing primarily on the economic needs of the EAOs and allowing them to keep their arms, these initial ceasefire agreements were not peace treaties (South, 2011). Another round of peace negotiations between Karen EAOs and the Tatmadaw ensued in 1994, leading to the formation of the Karen Peace Mediator Group which facilitated discussions between the KNU and SLORC between 1995 and 1997 (South, 2011). On 12 December 2003, General Bo Mya of the Tatmadaw announced a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with Karen EAOs, which catalysed

A girl herding her cows.

a reduction of conflict but did not stop Tatmadaw and Karen EAO recruitment activities (Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016; UN Security Council, 2013). According to Lenkova (2015) and a report of the UN Secretary-General (UN Security Council, 2013), groups including the DKBA and the KNU/KNLA Peace Council were able to agree to sustainable ceasefires in the mid-1990s and 2000s.

It was not until 2011 when President Thein Sein renewed the peace process with EAOs that a bilateral ceasefire was re-initiated, with a peace agreement signed in 2012 with all Kayin State EAOs (UN Security Council, 2013; 2018). This agreement has allowed greater access for Myanmar and international actors to provide aid to previously inaccessible areas (Lenkova, 2015). In 2015 the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed and designated all signed parties, including Karen EAOs, as 'legal' organizations that could work with international non-governmental agencies (INGOs) (NCA, 2015). Despite the ceasefire, small skirmishes have continued between the Tatmadaw and the KNU/KNLA (UN Security Council, 2018). The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG, 2019a) asserts that peace talks are in a deadlock due to the absence of a transitional justice process that includes accountability for pre-ceasefire human rights abuses in Kayin State. Thus, it is unclear how Karen EAOs and the Myanmar Government will move forward.

Villager working on her paddy field. (The person appearing in the photograph was not part of the research.)

Women in the Peace Process

While some declined to participate in the peace negotiation processes due to their perception of traditional gender roles and values, women have served as negotiators for the Bilateral Ceasefire Agreements in 2012 and the NCA in 2015 for many ethnic communities across Myanmar. Women who participated were either members of civil society groups such as the Women's League of Burma, or experts that advocated outside a perceived women's agenda (Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016). Only four women ultimately acted as signatories to the NCA: 'one of ten government signatories, one in 24 EAO signatories, and two of 21 witness[es]' (Warren et al, 2018, 19). Overall, there are very few women who serve on committees related to the peace process (Warren et al, 2018; Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016). However, there has been a general increase in the political inclusion of women at the state and national levels, and greater participation of women in civil society and peace forums (Warren et al, 2018).

The inclusion of women is the focus of various local civil society organizations (CSO) which conduct training and leadership seminars aimed at capacity building (Warren et al, 2018). Women in leadership roles have worked to promote women's perspectives, serving 'as conduits between women on the ground and leaders' (Warren et al, 2018, 21). Focusing on gender violence, equity, and inclusion, advocacy for women's issues has become prominent within Myanmar (Transnational Institute, 2016; Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016). This advocacy has led to a 30% quota for women participation in the Framework for Political Dialogue (Warren et al, 2018). The NCA also includes three gender-specific stipulations: non-discrimination on the basis of gender; recognition of sexual violence as part of the protection of

civilians; and insurance of women representation in the Union Peace Conference (Muehlenbeck & Federer, 2016).

Continuing Rights Abuses

Human rights abuses are pervasive in Kayin State, perpetrated by the Tatmadaw and Karen EAOs. Some EAOs maintain travel restrictions upon Kayin State civilians. Commerce and ordinary mobility are limited by conflict era landmines embedded in and adjacent to roads. (KHRG, 2019a; UNICEF, 2019; UN Security Council, 2013). There has been arbitrary taxation and extortion of civilians based on ethnicity or religion. While there is improved freedom of expression, individual and group human rights activists still risk arrest for speaking out (KHRG, 2019a). Sexual and gender-based violence remains commonplace amongst women in Kayin State (ADB et al. 2016; KWO 2007; 2010). Children's rights are violated as they (often orphaned or unaccompanied) have been recruited by armed organizations, particularly by the Tatmadaw (UN Security Council, 2013).

Land confiscation is prominent throughout Kayin State, particularly in rural areas (Clarke et al, 2019; KHRG, 2018; KHRG, 2019b). Individuals who escaped to IDP camps and returned to their homes, due to infertile land, inability to diversify their crops and few other economic prospects, face difficulties in sustaining their livelihoods (KHRG 2019c). There remains distrust of the Myanmar Government and Tatmadaw expansion into Kayin State (South et al, 2018). Some villages have reported increased military presence since the NCA signing in 2015, with some claiming live fire exercises near villages and extrajudicial killings and torture of civilians by both the Tatmadaw and KNLA (KHRG, 2018; 2019a). According to KHRG (2019a) data, while a majority of Karen surveyed believe that life has improved since the ceasefire, they do not believe that peace is sustainable.

Next Steps and Prospective Issues

Kayin State communities have slowly developed trust with the Myanmar government after the NCA, and there is an improved access to agriculture, trade, education, and medical services (Kramer, 2015; Farrelly, 2014). The Myanmar government plans new development initiatives for Kayin State, including providing greater access to healthcare (Kramer, 2015). However, similar to capacity and capability problems in other service areas, there is a lack of trained professionals to serve Kayin communities (KHRG, 2019a). In a joint initiative involving the Myanmar national government and UNESCO, the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) plans to provide comprehensive education services to strengthen the traditions and cultures of Myanmar (Lenkova, 2015). Yet, according to Lenkova (2015), there have been no consultations between the Myanmar government and ethnic groups around the country. As a result, it is not clear to what degree the curriculum will be culturally relevant. Moreover, South (2011) argues that international and national actors have prioritized KNU narratives, thus overshadowing other non-KNU Karen perspectives. Still, there are interest groups such as the Karen Unity and Peace Committee that have advocated for peace building through ethnic inclusion in order to embrace Myanmar's diversity (Clarke et al, 2019; Davis, 2016).

3.4. Mixed-controlled communities today

As the KNU and other EAOs lost territory under their exclusive control throughout the conflict (South & Lall 2016), areas of mixed-control between the Tatmadaw and EAOs emerged. In surveys conducted by SaferWorld and the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) (2018; 2019), respondents reported that more social services such as health and education were provided by the government in these areas than by the KNU. But more respondents favoured KNU politically and considered them the ruling authority in these mixed-control areas. The Lead Researcher of the current study was told that whether one area is seen as more under KNU or government control depends upon what type of services that they offer. If the government provides public services in one area, residents might see that the government has more control/power in the area. It was also emphasized that the government has more funding capacity for initiatives such as the CDD project. If residents in a given area identify themselves strongly as Karen, they will assert that KNU has more power. Fellows interviewed for this study emphasized that their community members prefer KNU as provider for health, education, and other services. They identify themselves as Karen and for them KNU is only legitimate governing actor.

In general, there are no clear leaders or boundaries within mixed-control areas (Burke et al, 2017; Lenkova 2015). Village heads often report to both the EAO (most often the KNU) and the national government (SaferWorld & KPSN, 2019). Sometimes if a village head believes the national government's village-level approach is inadequate, they will embrace the KNU justice system (SaferWorld & KPSN, 2019, 26). While in mixed-control areas taxes are paid to both the national government and the KNU (SaferWorld & KPSN 2018), in some areas visiting government officials must inform or ask permission from the governing EAOs before visiting (Asian Foundation, 2017). Most of the respondents in the SaferWorld and KPSN surveys (2018) said that they were at least bilingual, speaking Myanmar along with a Kayin State language. It appears that mixed-control areas are often more diverse than KNU-run areas where there is a Karen majority.

Women from the WSHG working at their home.

Since the bilateral ceasefire in 2012 and the emergence of mixed-control areas, (SaferWorld & KPSN, 2019), there is some evidence that EAOs' parallel governance has been integrated with that of the national government. This has led to challenges due to Karen civil society actors advocating for decentralization and the Myanmar government refusing to accept such (Lenkova, 2015). There is also lack of clarity concerning healthcare in mixed-control or contested areas in terms of EAO versus Myanmar government control (Jolliffe, 2014; ADB, 2014; Kramer, 2015), especially since Karen health service providers continue to advocate for decentralization of health services. However, there have been some Karen initiatives such as the Health Convergence Core Group that work with the Myanmar Ministry of Health to develop comprehensive medical services for parts of Kayin State (Jolliffe, 2014). There has been an increase in cooperative health and sanitation projects, with organizations like the Border Consortium providing health education and clean water to Kayin villages (The Border Consortium, 2018). Kang (2012) has suggested that the emergence of mixed-control solutions has been related to the extent of past human rights abuses perpetrated by government forces, with mixed-control more acceptable where there have been fewer abuses.

Tensions that threaten governing cooperation remain. Instances of conflict between the Tatmadaw and EAOs in Kayin State continue. As noted above, land confiscations by the Myanmar government are commonplace (KHRG, 2019c). These confiscations are prominent in mixed-control rural areas (Burke et al, 2017; KHRG, 2019a; 2019b; Kramer, 2015). The Myanmar Government does not recognize KNU land titles as legitimate even though the KNU and Myanmar Government offer two ways of providing land titles to civilians (South et al, 2018; Clarke et al, 2019; KHRG, 2019a). The Asia Foundation (Burke et al, 2017) suggests

that land confiscations have been related to privatization connected to political objectives of the national government. Relatedly, national and international groups have pursued development schemes in Kayin State without providing adequate monetary compensation to those from whom property has been confiscated (KHRG, 2019a).

3.5. Characteristics of the three townships in the study

As seen in the substantial evidence regarding the historic and current issues that define the Kayin State context, there is no single narrative can be applied across all communities in the state. Based upon exiting evidence produced by many sources, future peace in Kayin State must account for Karen historic identification and future aspirations. The ethnic diversity of the Karen people, the variety of their culture, traditions, and languages defy simple formulations. Processes of transitional justice that assure accountability for conflict era abuses in Kayin State and elsewhere in Myanmar must be introduced to sustain peace (Hansen, 2011). There is a need for community-specific, culturally relevant programming, and language consideration.

To provide more community-specific evidence, this study focuses on three townships in Kayin State: Than Daung Gyi, Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi. Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi are located in the southern part of Kayin State and Then Daung Gyi is located in the north, on the border of Kayah State and Bago Region. All three of the townships are under mixed-control.

Than Daung Gyi

Than Daung Gyi is located a nine to 10 hour drive from Hpa-an. Despite being a mixed-control township, research participants emphasized that KNU, especially Brigade 2, has more control in the area. This makes Than Daung Gyi subject to more EAO control than the other townships studied. The township consists of 341 villages, 59 village tracts and four towns. The township population in March 2018 was 89,721, making it the least populated of the three townships in study. Distances between villages in Than Daung Gyi are great, villages are isolated, and villagers tend to rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Even though the climate in the township is hot and humid, it is cooler and drier than Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi townships. This is due to its hilly/mountainous topography. The main religion in Than Daung Gyi is Christianity. Among some villages, the main ethnic group is Karen and languages used in the area include Karen tribal languages and Burmese. Since the Than Daung Gyi townships had the highest fellow drop-out rate among areas included in the fellowship program, most of the fellows who worked there during the study are new to their work. Currently, there are nine male fellows in and three female fellows.[3]

Kawkareik

Kawkareik is located a three hour-drive from Hpa-an. While it is also a mixed-control-area, as compared to Than Duang Gyi, the government exercises more control over its villages. The research participants of this study stated that KNU Brigades 6 and 7 control the area, but in practice do not intervene in governance matters. The township consists of 260 villages, 53 village tracts and two towns. The township population in March 2018 was 243,679. While distances between villages are shorter than those in Than Daung Gyi, most villages are isolated, and villagers rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Most Kawkareik residents are Buddhist and monks are considered as village leaders and spokespersons. Some monks in the area also act as advisors for some community matters. Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are also practiced in some villages. The weather in Kawkareik is hotter and more humid than that in Than Daung Gyi, with maximum temperatures of 42 degrees Celsius during the hottest part of the year. The township consists of Karen, Bamar, Mon, and Pa-oh ethnic groups. Currently, there are 12 fellows working in Kawkareik, of which eight are male and three are female.[4]

Kyar Inn Seik Gyi

Kyar Inn Seik Gyin is located adjacent to Kawkareik in the southern part of Kayin State, about a three to four-hour drive from Hpa-an. As with Than Daung Gyi, KNU has more control over the Kyar Inn Seik Gyi villages than in Kawkareik, with a district level organization office located in the area. The township consists of 286 villages, 51 village tracts and three towns. With a township population in March 2018 of 246,065, Kyar Inn Seik Gyin is the most populated township in the study. Like Kawkareik, while distances between the villages are not as great as in Than Daung Gyi, villages remain isolated and agriculture is the primary village livelihood. Buddhism is the main religion practiced, but Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are also practiced by some villagers. The main ethnic groups in the township are Karen, Mon and Burmese and most residents speak ether

3 Information in this section was acquired from the research participants as well as from: http://www.kayinstate.gov.mm/sites/default/files/03%20Thandong%20Gyi%20Township%20Data.pdf.(accessed: 25.9.2019)

4 Information in this section was acquired from the research participants as well as from: http://www.gad.gov.mm/sites/default/files/ekaakritt.pdf (Accessed: 25.9.2019).

Karen or Shan. Similar to Kawkareik, Kyar Inn Seik Gyi has a hot and humid climate throughout the year. Currently, there are six male fellows and only one female fellow working in Kyar Inn Seik Gyi.[5]

4. Just another youth from the village?

Youth in Kayin State do not have many opportunities to improve their lives. The secondary school retention rate for students is low due to the sustained conflict (Lall & South, 2013; Lenkova, 2015). UNESCO (2019) notes that, while the primary completion rate for Kayin State is 68%, the secondary completion rate is 13%, with boys' secondary completion at 8%. Between 2005 and 2010, poverty in Kayin State increased from 12% to 17%, particularly affecting rural areas. Aside from farming, employment opportunities are scarce for young people (ADB et al., 2016). The unemployment rate for women is slightly higher than men's, with women more likely to be in 'vulnerable employment' as 'self-employed' or 'family workers' (ADB et al., 2016, 42). Despite migration risks and poor working conditions, many Kayin State civilians have migrated to Thailand. These emigrants send money to their families in Kayin State and contribute millions to Myanmar's income (ADB et al., 2016). A significant percentage of these migrants are youth aged 15 to 24 (30.7%) and are most often young men. In light of these dim prospects for young people in the villages of Kayin State, becoming a fellow with AAM's fellowship programme appears to be an excellent opportunity.

Becoming an AAM fellow is a multi-layered process that each new fellow experiences in their own way. It is a process that requires a personal transformation that includes the new fellow absorbing an array of new skills and knowledge in a short period of time. It is a process that challenges the new fellow and makes them face their fears while they develop as individuals. This chapter looks at this process and asks: How do youth in Kayin State become fellows and what happens when they start working in their communities? The process is examined primarily from the perspective of the fellows and sheds light on problems they face in the beginning of their unique journey. The chapter also describes how overcoming those problems and difficulties contributes to helping the new fellow in mobilizing their community.

5 Information in this section is gotten from the research participants as well as from: http://www.gad.gov.mm/sites/default/files/kaaangchipkii.pdf. (Accessed:25.9.2019).

WSHG meeting at the home of a fellow.

Fellow meeting with community members.

4.1. Becoming a fellow

Youth in Kayin State become fellows in several ways. The most common path is to be selected by their community. Often, either a new project has started, and the community must select a fellow, or the current fellow working in the community has resigned and the community needs to select a replacement. To select a fellow, the village administrator first discusses with the village head and they choose candidates who they think should be nominated. Afterwards, community members gather together for a meeting wherein the village administrator and the village head present their choice. If the community agrees with their proposal, permission is sought from the candidate youth and their parents. Even though becoming a fellow is a free choice, youth interviewed emphasized that refusing the opportunity would be difficult, in that it would represent refusing an offer to support to their communities.

Youth selected to become fellows were already active in their villages and had a good reputation. For example, one of the fellows interviewed was a volunteer teaching younger children. Another had been an assistant midwife before their selection. Some had been part of other NGO projects, while others had simply been general participants in village affairs. Working as a volunteer for AAM is another common route toward selection as a fellow. Within the AAM fellowship programme, volunteers are selected the same way as fellows. Their role is to assist fellows in the village development process. In the event the fellow ceases to perform their responsibilities, the volunteer can take over the fellow's work.

Becoming a fellow is not an easy process. Even though fellows expressed strong mutual support for one another throughout the research process, some fellows reported feeling alone in dealing with their challenges. As one stated,

,

Fellow meeting with community members.

> *When you are faced with difficulties, you need to suffer alone. Sometimes you are depressed about that. You feel very small sometimes. The community does not understand you and why the fellow is needed. At first, nobody knows the idea of the fellows and their work. They do not give any encouragement to the fellow at first because of that. It is a common problem with all of us.' (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

Additionally, the fellow's gender has an impact. Karen society is patriarchal. Although women are often prominent figures in their communities, leading cultural village activities and religious support groups, Karen culture privileges men's mobility (KHRG 2006). At times these gendering behaviours and attitudes are reflected among fellows:

> *Female fellows especially cry easily. Women are more vulnerable and less competent. For them, it is easier to want to quit. They need more encouragement than male fellows. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

The fellow's background, including ethnicity and language also can have an impact on the fellow's experience. A fellow might feel different and afraid of actual or anticipated discrimination. As one fellow explained,

> *In the beginning, you are worried about how you speak because of your accent. You fear that you are judged because of your ethnicity and where you come from. Especially in a greater event where you need to speak to other people [people not from the fellow's own village or state]. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

Eventually, the process of becoming a fellow creates a sense of group among these youth. The need to share experiences and develop into a wider network is part of the Fellowship programme and the quest of young people to become young leaders.

4.2. Adopting a new personality

After their selection as a fellow, new fellows participate in a six-week training conducted by AAM. After a two-month placement in the village, they participate in a second, more in-depth training that lasts four weeks and is also conducted by AAM (ActionAid, 2012). During the two rounds of training the newly selected fellows are provided with skills and knowledge needed to mobilise a community (Ferretti, 2010). Among other topics, the participants receive information about development and social theory, women's rights, governance, participation, and poverty. The training also offers the new fellows with skills in facilitation, mobilization, participatory techniques, and financial administration. Participatory rural appraisal tools are also introduced to the fellows (Bro-Jørgensen, 2013). According to previous reports, the ActionAid training approach is a key component of the fellows' journey, with ActionAid and participating fellows assigning high to the experience. (Löfving, 2011)

Fellows in the current study found the training challenging and intimidating at first since they were exposed to new concepts and ideas and encountered new ways of working. Some of the fellows reported that they participated in the training without expectations and with limited knowledge regarding the nature of the training. Respondents also reported that they did not have much knowledge about development work in general. It was noted that development work is usually considered as a job for adults and elders in the community and not something that would be pursued by youth. Because of their young age, new fellows initially lacked interest in development work. However, the training made them realise the meaning of their new role in the community and the level of commitment the work entails. Two fellows further clarified:

> *First, I did not expect so much from development work. I only attended the training. But after I realized what being a fellow means and how important he is and what he does. How the fellow improves the village and works with the leaders and other people in the village. It is important work and central to the village (Fellow, KISG, group interview, Hpa-an, 26.6.2019)*

> *At first, fellows do not have an interest in the work, because you do not understand the profits of that work. Later, you realise that you are part of the process yourself. You are the central string. (Fellow, group discussion, final meeting, Hpa-an).*

The fellows training programme impacts the self-confidence of fellows and promotes change in their behaviour. (ActionAid, 2012). In other words, new fellows are not only exposed to new concepts and ideas but are also required to adapt a new way of being. As a staff member from AAM who works with fellows explained,

> *… Through the training, we give them volunteering spirit. Their mindset and attitude changes through the training. To work with fellows, some are different than others. Their mindset is not the same. This affects their work. You can see that, yes. In their attitude. They are different. We can train them to change [within], but they begin with different mindsets and attitudes. (Employee of AAM, interview, Yangon, 24.9.2019)*

While many of the fellows who took part in this study had been active in their village before their selection as fellows, most of them recalled having gone through this attitudinal and behavioural transformation during their fellows training. Some participants noted that managing this type of change process often requires a strong will and coping with difficult changes. As one reported,

> *… I had to behave like a fellow. I had to prepare my mind to act like a fellow. It was difficult at first. (Fellow, TDG, group interview, Hpa-an, 25.6.2019))*

For fellows the tensions that accompanied the interpersonal change were related to becoming a role model within the community. The transition required them to no longer be carefree young persons. Rather, they were now expected to set a good example for others, behave in a valued manner, and demonstrate to the rest of the village how the village life can be improved and better developed. According to the fellows, this is an enormous responsibility that sometimes created substantial internal pressure for them. One of the fellows mentioned that a change in mindset occurs because, by becoming a fellow, you are quickly required to be able to use your learning with others by sharing your new knowledge with the rest of the community. This goes against deep rooted cultural traditions, wherein youth are expected to have a general respect for elders and relatives (KHRG 2006).

Some fellows discussed diverse qualities that they think make a good fellow. Self-confidence is at the centre of this personal transformation. Newly adopted qualities include determination, courage, impartiality, patience, and

tolerance. These are qualities many had not associated with themselves before. Little by little fellows start adopting these qualities and behave according to new types of values and attributes. They start to see things in a different light. As two respondents stated:

> *I used to think very little about others. My mentality changed. A lot. I started to see things differently. I started to be more polite and consider others and I learned how to speak with others, like village leaders. (Fellow, KISG, group interview, Hpa-an 26.6.2019)*

> *I changed mentally. I used to be very childish and did not understand the meaning of community development. Now I lead community development work. (Fellow, KISG, group interview, Hpa-an 26.6.2019)*

A change in the fellow's thinking takes place because it is required to effectively pursue their new responsibilities. They must learn to speak in front of others and collaborate with governing authorities and the most influential individuals in the village, such as the village head, administrator, and elders. For many this is a completely new experience, but ultimately represents an personal achievement:

> *… It was difficult at first [to]work with elders and village leaders. I was only 17. I was very young, and I had never worked with adults. When I was talking to them it made me… I was not confident when I was talking to them. (Fellow, TDG, group interview, Hpa-an, 25.6.2019)*

> *Before I was very shy to speak in front of people. But not anymore. (Fellow KWKR, group interview, Hpa-an, 25.6.2019)*

According to some fellows, a transformation in terms of their identification with the community also occurs. This is because over the course of the fellowship, the fellow's hopes and aspirations toward the future start to change. The fellow recognises that they have begun to care more about community affairs and want to become useful to their village.

4.3. Fear of failing

After the first round of training, fellows return to their home villages and start to mobilise the community. A report written by ActionAid in 2012 states that fellows tend to adapt to their new role more easily when they return to their home villages (ActionAid, 2012). Reflecting this assessment, Löfving (2011) has emphasized that when a fellow is native to their placement area, understanding and managing the community's cultural, social, religious, and economic factors happens rather easily. Yet, while being from the community eases the process for new fellows, this study also illustrates that personal challenges and factors beyond the fellow's control impact their ability to manage the mobilisation process, especially in the beginning of their village work.

For some new fellows, when initiating the mobilisation process in their home community, they found that they were strongly associated with their former status as 'just another youth' from the village. Particularly in their interactions with old friends and other community youth, some fellows found it to be difficult to start acting in a new, more responsible role. The new responsibilities together with the new personality resulted in a fear of failing. Some felt pressure and fear of not being able to fulfil the expectations set for them as fellows and reported questioning whether they were capable of living up to the challenge.

For example, some fellows recalled that it had been difficult for them to get villagers to come to meetings at first and remembered being worried about letting the entire village down and failing to meet their expectations. They were also required to have long conversations with the village administrator at first to explain the details of the fellowship process and how the village book works in practice. For them, this created stress and even more pressure as they felt that administrators did not appear too eager to support their efforts. A member of the AAM Hpa-an field staff who had also been a fellow himself, recalled a similar situation:

> *… Based on my own experience, when I started to develop the book [village book], I had to call all the villagers to come for the first meeting more than 20 times. I had to ask help from the village administrators to gather the people together. In the beginning, the administrator promised to help me. But the last day, once I got there, no one was there. I almost cried. I had to go to the administrators again to ask for help. Many fellows face the same situation. (AAM Hpa-an field staff, group interview, Hpa-an, 28.6.2019)*

This pressure resulted in several fellows deciding to resign. The impact of fellow attrition during the three-year project cycle in Kayin State is notable. The AAM Hpa-an field office revealed that many of the current fellows were selected in a short time frame as quick replacements for fellows who had left the programme before the end of their tenure. The interviewees indicated that because of this, some of the current fellows possess less knowledge and experience than

others with more experience and training in the programme. Some had only attended the second round of training. The field office staff assessed that this had a negative impact on the fellow's ability to implement the change process in the village:

> *… Some former fellows join another organization and quit being fellows. So, we have had to search for new fellows. Kayin fellows did not receive the same training as what the fellows received before. So, they are less capable and weaker than the former fellows. The new fellows do not receive full training, only the refresher training – they have less experience than the former fellows.' (Group interview with AAM Hpa-an office staff, Hpa-an, 28.6.2019)*

Fellows also mentioned being afraid to make mistakes and be judged as inadequate. As three fellows reported:

> *These are feelings fellows experience when they first start working in the communities. You have little knowledge and self-confidence and you are shy to talk. You are worried about making mistakes, because you are scared that someone might tell you that you are not good enough. We have all experienced this. Especially when speaking in public. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

> *You are afraid to act as a leader. You try to lead the community, but in the beginning the community does not follow your lead. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

> *When I started working in the village as a fellow, the work was challenging at first. I felt unencouraged and that I had a lot of pressure to make the process work in the village. I was worried I would fail. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)*

Community members do not always understand and appreciate the central role the fellow is intended to play or why his or her presence in the village is needed. The fellows stated that villagers might be very interested in seeing results and making improvements in the village but getting them to participate in the process and doing the necessary work is difficult at first. The fellows also mentioned that many village members had doubts about the process because of previous unsatisfactory experiences with other NGOs. As a result, at times villagers offered resistance to believing that the community development process would bring any real value to them.

4.4. Determination

> *But over time it gets easier. I found a way to convince people … (AAM Hpa-an field staff, group interview, Hpa-an, 28.6.2019)*

Despite of all the challenges that they face, eventually most fellows focus their determination and begin to develop diverse strategies to get village members to participate in the process and follow the fellow's lead. Four main strategies for engaging the community were identified: 1) visiting villager houses several times to persuade them to participate; 2) starting the process with stakeholders with whom it is easiest to work and who show most interest in the process; 3) reaching out to other fellows for help and guidance; and 4) seeking help from village elders.

Of the four strategies, visiting villagers at home several times to persuade them to participate was the most popular and successful. This approach was a solution to the problem of scarce villager attendance at initial village group meetings. Several fellows interviewed for the study observed that in the beginning of their work in their villages, the first group meeting that they arranged was not successful. Often only few village members attended the gathering. Sometimes, no villagers appeared. As a response to this problem, many respondents demonstrated their persistence by visiting villager houses one by one. While visiting a villager's house, fellows usually explained the village development process to the household members and discussed the nature of fellow's work. They also invited the family to attend the next village group meeting. Gradually the number of villagers participating in group activities and who expressed their interest toward the process increased.

After returning to their villages from an AAM training, one fellow reported they began to work with the village head and mobilised a group of adolescents from the community. For them, these represented community members who demonstrated most interest in the fellow's work and with whom it would be easiest to work. Afterwards, other villagers started to express more curiosity regarding the process and gradually more of them got involved in village meetings. Yet, the same fellow emphasized that it took a couple of years to realise progress in village engagement and for villagers to demonstrate trust toward them as a fellow. By the timeframe of this research this fellow felt capable of bringing the community together. Villagers had slowly started to see the village development process in a way that was meaningful to them and understand the usefulness of the fellow's work for the community.

Another fellow found assistance through reaching out to other fellows. When they started working in the community, they struggled as villagers did not seem to care about the

work related to creating the village book. As a response to this problem, they got in touch with other fellows who they had met in the fellow training. As a result, a group of fellows from nearby villages formed a support group and begun to help each other whenever this peer support was needed. When a member of the fellow peer group required assistance, another fellow came to their village and stayed for a while to offer support.

While working with village elders was at first considered to be challenging for many fellows, for others, village elders were a useful support network in the beginning of the fellowship process. One fellow found support from the elders after experiencing initial difficulties. In their village, villagers had originally seen the establishment of the VCBO as a burden and described it as something that would only cause additional work on top of their daily responsibilities. To solve this problem, the fellow first conducted monthly meetings where they hoped to share the concept of VCBO to the villagers. The goal of these meetings was to explain why the VCBO is important to community development. At the first meeting only four villagers attended. This fellow demonstrated determination by talking to the village elders who then reached out to their fellow villagers and explained the importance of the fellow's work. Afterwards more villagers attended the meetings.

5. Leader in the middle

Once a fellow has gained more self-confidence and built trust with community members, regular weekly meetings are initiated, and the village development process begins. During this process, with the help of the fellows, the community starts to prepare its village book. The book is prepared in a participatory manner that involves use of tools and exercises that engage the community. In the village book the community defines its needs and problems and what should be done to address their needs and overcome the problems. The book preparation process usually takes about one year and includes several weekly community meetings and activities as well as engagement with external organizations and other actors. After finalizing the book, fellows and village leaders present it to governing authorities and start using it as evidence when negotiating improvements for the village. In mixed-control communities in Kayin State the book contains two parts: one for presentation to the government and the other to the EAOs. The current chapter offers evidence regarding this process and illustrates aspects of change that have occurred in the villages as a consequence. While the preceding chapter examined challenges individual fellows face in the beginning of their fellowship journey in Kayin State, this second analysis chapter explores challenges that arise when fellows prepare village books in mixed-control communities. The current chapter also addresses the experience of female fellows in this context.

5.1. Bringing the community together

The interviews and FGDs conducted with community members demonstrate that during the fellowship programme in Kayin State, participating villages experienced change on several levels. The villages have seen infrastructure work including better roads, and improved school buildings and health clinics. The education system in the fellows' placement areas has been improved and most villages have received more sustainable sources of electricity and water. Villages that have established security groups have experienced security improvements.

Despite the existence of tangible changes in the participating villages, study respondents assessed that the most notable change has taken place in villager attitudes and how community members collaborate with each other. Before the fellows began their work, many community members stated that cooperation at the village level was often weak and women and youth especially did not play active community roles. According to some, this was because villagers were not used to collaboration and there was no real interaction among community members before the arrival of the fellows. As a respondent stated,

> *People thought that it was better to look after own matters only and that there was no point of helping others because they will not help you. People were weak in sharing experiences. There was a mentality that one has to work only for themselves and no one will help you. People thought that participating in community activities was waste of time and useless, because it was no use for yourself … There was no interaction between villagers … (FGD, community member, TDG, Hpa-an, 27.6.2019)*

Other villagers mentioned that traditional socio-cultural norms and values regarding the roles of women and youth in society had impacts. They were not considered important to village affairs. Making decisions regarding the community was seen as a responsibility reserved for men, village elders, and religious leaders. Regarding the differentiation between women and men in village affairs, one respondent noted the following:

> *Before the village development planning, the relationship between men and women was that women could not make time to attend meetings because of the large*

> *amount of household work. Back then, the responsibility of women was to stay at home and look after children … Men were responsible for attending meetings, perform leadership in the community, earn income … The ones who made decisions were elder men of the villages, household leaders and monks. (FGD, community members, KWKR, 16.6.2019)*

During the course of the village development process the respondents indicated that community members became more united and much more eager to collaborate with each other. Villager interest toward shared community affairs also increased. As a respondent summarized,

> *There are improvements in the village after the planning. During the development planning, the villagers began to take interest, started to give respect to others and the cohesion of villagers started to grow. There are also improvements in how responsible people are … (Interview, community member, TDG, 20.6.2019)*

Village decision-making became a collective activity, with the development process involving all village members. In particular, budget decisions were made collectively with a view that all expenditures should benefit all community groups, especially those living in economically and socially difficult situations. One responding villager expressed this in the following terms:

> *In the village, youth, women, men and elders are all involved in decision-making now. It is not only one person anymore who makes decisions. And since it is everyone's decision, they can implement plans quickly … (FGD, community members from KISG, Hpa-an, 27.6.2019)*

The emergence of greater village cooperation was also reflected in easier resolution of arguments among community members. For instance, community members in one township explained that before the introduction of the village development process, when an argument took place in a village, often only the village head was there to resolve the issue. According to villager respondents, this often resulted in unfair decisions. Improved village collaboration has meant that resolving arguments is now a shared responsibility, resulting in more fair decisions.

Notable changes in villager attitudes toward women were also reported. Women are now seen as key actors in village affairs, with trainings and other activities no longer organized without the participation of women. Women have also become more active in community decision-making and fundraising. In villages where women formerly earned lower wages than men, women's wages are now equivalent to those of men. Women have also gained equal access to employment opportunities. A conversation between a fellow and a villager summarizes these important changes:

> **Fellow:** *What do you want to say about the time before the village development process?"*
>
> **Community member:** *It was an unpeaceful period for the village. A period of poor connection. And a period when women were not given rights and a period when we did not know our own rights. And then, women did not have the freedom to do what they want … We faced discrimination. Especially in daily wages, even for same working hours. Men were paid 3000 Kyats while women were paid only 2500 Kyats. It is kind of discrimination.*
>
> **Fellow:** *Why do you think these problems existed?*
>
> **Community member:** *It was because of lack of knowledge of rights and lack of solutions […]*
>
> **Fellow:** *Are there any changes in the village after the Village Book process?"*
>
> **Community member:** *There are many changes … the equal wages for men and women. Men begun to give respect for women leading and rights. As for me, my husband allows me to help pregnant women in child birth. I began to know my rights after becoming a member of Maternal and Child Welfare Association, which I am happy with. It is also because of the fellow … (Interview with a community member, KISG, 11.6.2019)*

Since the beginning of the development process in the subject villages relationships between youth and elders have also improved. Like women, youth are now considered integral to the village decision-making process. Youth opinions and ideas now receive more recognition by adults, with their role in village development activities now viewed as central. Village respondents also report that parents have built better relationships with their children, with more interaction taking place between parents and children. As a respondent noted,

Kwinkalay village.

> *[…] Elders were narrow minded. There was no transparency. Elders just said: 'Just do as I say!' […] Now elders let youth take a leading role in community development and they let youth make decisions. If they [youth] need help, they [elders] help the youth. It is total opposite than what it was before. Elders stay behind now. The youth are more educated. Community development becomes fast with them. (FGD, community members from KISG, Hpa-an, 27.6.2019)*

As part of the village book process, community groups such as village community-based organizations (VCBOs), women's self-help groups (WSHGs), and adolescent groups have been established in most villages. According to community members, these groups have brought villagers together, made communities more self-reliant, and added village ownership to village development. Respondents agreed that the existence of these groups has improved relationships between men and women in the communities. It has made men and women more aware of women's rights, given women more agency, and built a stronger and more open dialogue between women and men. Women have gained new knowledge and skills in terms of village affairs that has re-enforced their community role. As a community member noted,

> *Before the WSHG, there was no cohesion among women in the community. There was no self-help group. There was lack of knowledge about the rights of women […] WSHG was founded in 2018. It was hard. Because of the small amount of experience and understanding […] There are changes*

VCBO and WSHG meeting for Village Book.

in the situation of women after forming the WSHG. They managed to perform the cooperative credit society, improve group working skills, create data, do accounting and take notes. These changes are formed by the leadership within the group and the experiences. There are changes within men and women, such as women got the chance to make decisions and participate in village meetings. These changes happened because women brought out the self-help system. Men noticed the rights of women and gave space to women. It is important, because it gives women a chance to experience how a cooperative credit society works and women can use the borrowed money to support their own families. (Interview, community member, KISG, 8.7.2019)

5.2. Between two governing authorities

The evidence produced by the study indicates that the work of fellows on the community level has brought improvements to their villages and fellows have proven to be important AAM communication channels for first-hand news and updates from the villages. However, the evidence also reveals that in the context of mixed-control communities wherein the fellow must navigate between two governing actors, their work is often challenging. While navigating between the governing authorities is burdensome and stressful, some fellows reported that working with both sides was not so difficult. The evidence also shows that the experience can vary within townships and according to the capabilities of fellows.

As discussed earlier, fellows in Kayin State work in mixed-control communities wherein EAOs and the government of Myanmar (GOM) simultaneously exert authority (Kyed,

2019). Fellows pursue their development work in the aftermath of armed conflict and, although the conflict is no longer active in the area, many communities still suffer from its consequences. For example, land confiscation has taken place in some villages. All three of the subject townships continue to experience landmine contamination, active militarization, and intermittent fighting (HRW, 2016; KHRG, 2019a). Many villagers who were forced to flee from their homes during the conflict have not been able to return to their villages (Lenkova, 2015).

Community member respondents made it clear that what happened over the course of the conflict remains prominent in their memories. They emphasized that, due to the fear and trauma many villagers experienced during the conflict, building trust and living fear-free continues to be difficult for them. According to respondents this has an effect on how willing villagers are to participate in village activities and the ease with which fellows can gain their confidence. In the words of a fellow respondent,

> *… people were living under the oppression of the armed forces. They had fear and trauma. They were afraid all the time. It left deep scars to people and fear that still exists in their minds. People are still very afraid. And even though people now think more broadly and freely because of the democratization, it is still difficult to trust others. (Community member, TDG, FGD, Hpa-an, 27.6.2019)*

Because of the protracted conflict characteristics of the Kayin State setting, members of AAM staff observed that, while the work of fellows there might not have progressed as fast and easily as the work of fellows in other areas of Myanmar, the effectiveness of the fellowship programme in Kayin State should be measured within the context of the difficulties that they face. The protracted conflict social, economic, political, and physical condition of the subject townships presented situations that challenged the training and ingenuity of fellows there. AAM staff members emphasized that the communities where fellows work in Kayin State should be viewed as politically sensitive:

> *Those villages, where fellows in Kayin work, are in mixed control areas. The conflict is not active right now, but it was not long ago. The ceasefire happened maybe two, three, four years ago. Those areas are not very stable. People living in the communities do not know if the conflict will start again ... [Although] the conflict is not there right now, it is always present in people's minds because you never know … (AAM Staff member, interview, 23.9.2019, Yangon)*

From the perspective of the fellows in the subject communities, the context of instability was less of a problem than was the protracted conflict mixed-control reality that involved navigating between two local governing actors on a day-to-day basis while also implementing the village development process. The fellows reported that constant worry regarding negotiation with and between the two governing actors required a tremendous amount of energy and was very stressful. Since in the beginning of the process fellows encountered scepticism from EAOs and governing authorities. The fellows recalled experiences where they had been initially required to build trust with both governing actors and convince them of their skills before starting the development process activities and creating village books. For example, when starting to organize meetings in their villages and establishing the Women Self-Help Group (WSHG), Village Community-Based Organization (VCBO), and other groups, fellows had to reach agreements with the EAOs and government. AAM staff reinforced this argument and indicated that each fellow is required to inform and seek permission from both actors for every activity. When asked how they felt about this aspect of their work, for some fellows it did not appear as a big challenge. For others it was seen as the most difficult thing they had to do in their community work. An AAM staff member stressed that much depends on the individual fellow's capability and willingness to carry out negotiation with and between the EAOs and government:

> *… Fellows are there in-between the two actors, [the] government and EAOs. Whenever they do something, they need to confront both actors. They need to consult both actors always. It depends on the fellows and their ability if that work is easy or difficult for them. The fellow is already a community member, so it is obvious that the two sides consider what the fellow says. But only if the fellow wants to. It depends on the fellow and the fellows' willingness as well. (AAM Staff member, interview, 23.9.2019, Yangon)*

Fellows also discussed their current relationships with EAOs and government. A number of differences appeared among the three townships, and between fellows' individual opinions and experiences inside their townships. While one fellow described the situation in their township as not so stressful, another fellow from a different township pointed out that the very presence of the two actors creates pressure in their work as everything must always be reported to both sides and done according to both actors' expectations. Another fellow mentioned that a lot of interaction takes place between fellows and the two actors. But for them the interaction was difficult as all actors involved in the process always must be informed and an agreement from either sides must be secured. Later in this conversation the fellow stated that the situation has recently become more

transparent, with more trust existing now between the two sides. This has resulted in a reduction in stress for the fellow.

Some fellows stated that they constantly worry about whether both sides will accept proposals that they develop, as both governing actors take a considerable amount of time when making decisions. The fellows found this situation highly unpredictable as they never knew if activities will be implemented. Some fellows also doubted their skills as negotiators and wondered whether they would disappoint the villagers by having to abandon their plans. Indeed, some fellows reported that one of the most difficult things that they experience in the development process is when plans for activities in some villages that had required substantial effort, had been cancelled because they were not able to get agreement from both sides. Fellows who emphasized difficulties in gaining support from both governing authorities reported that negotiating between the two had been difficult due to their differing policies that had to be taken into account. To these respondents it is essential for fellows to remain clearly in the middle of the two sides and make sure they do not favour one actor over the other. In a fellow group interview, participants pointed to the discomfort in such negotiating situations as contributing to their level of stress.

In contrast to the problems faced by fellows who felt caught between interests and demands of the governing authorities, another fellow stated that the EAOs and government have been fairly easy to work with in their village. They later clarified that this situation appears only in their village and that the experiences of fellows in other villages in the township are more challenging. Another fellow from the same township assessed that, while their work and the development process is considered useful by governing actors, it requires gaining their trust in order to convince them of the value of the fellow and the development process. In another township, in addition to the efforts required to convince both governing actors of their value, the fellow's work had been interrupted twice in two years and they were required to provide additional information about their village work before they were able to continue with the activities. The two sides do not accept the village plans easily. In contrast, fellows from another township recalled positive experiences in working with EAOs and government. According to them, fellows in the area had been asked to help EAOs and government in their development activities and in return, the fellows received assistance from both sides.

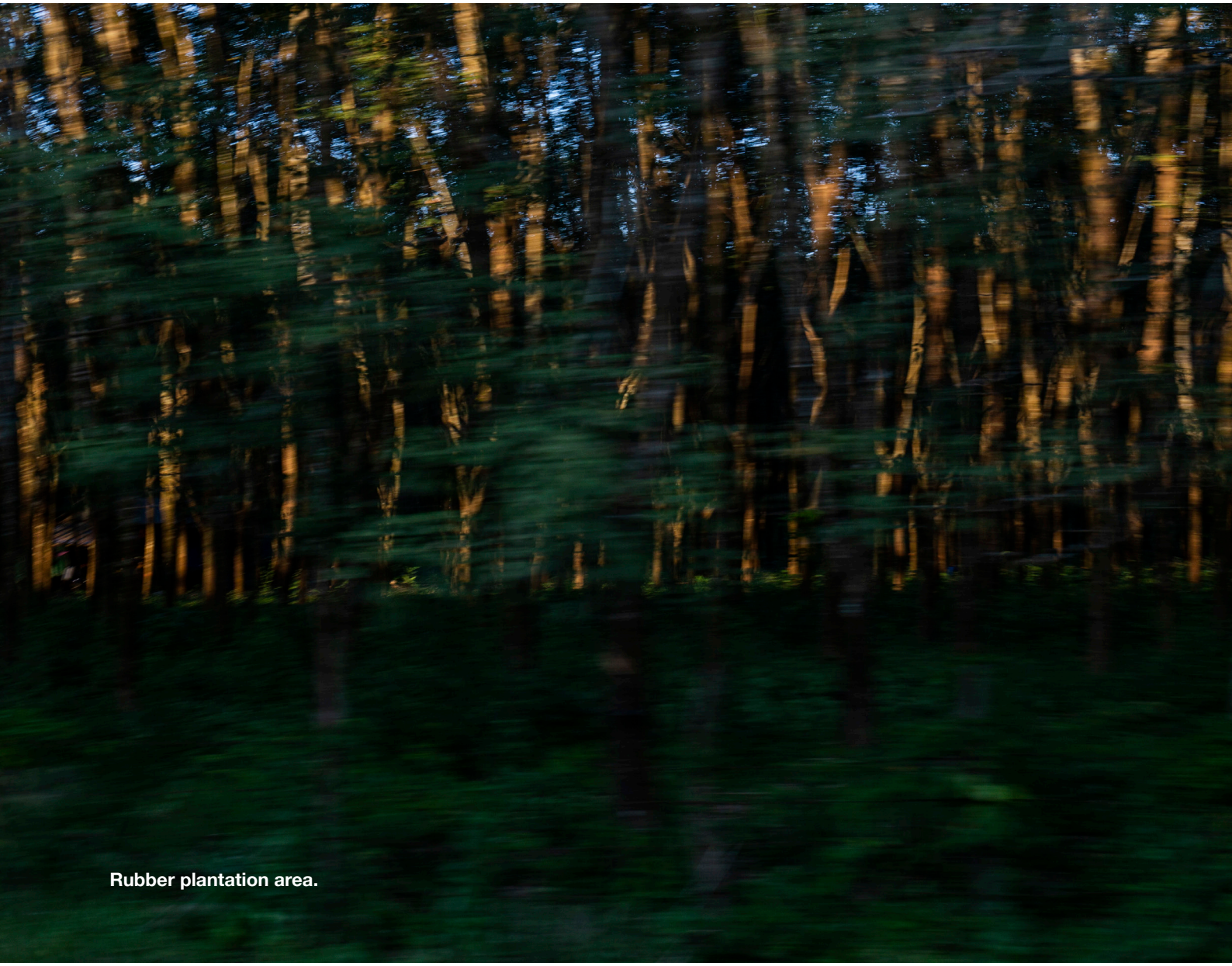
While over time navigation between the EAOs and the government tends to get easier for fellows and negotiation with and between the parties increasingly routine, some fellows reported that they had become exhausted to the extent that they considered quitting the programme as a consequence. One fellow was so tired of the negotiation required that they gave the village book to a village monk and said that they would no longer continue with the process implementation. The issue of land registration in one township exemplified the frustrations that fellows experienced when dealing with governing authorities. The frustration was exacerbated because of their personal identification with the interests of their villages. Fellows in one township reported that they had not been successful after years of trying to resolve the land registration issue and to gain the land back to its original owners. One informant stated that because of their duty to bring justice to the village, they felt discouraged:

> *Most cases … are land confiscations. Land has been taken from local people … [and] it is not easy to get land back. [Land registration] is the most common problem … [The] [p]revious owner does not have proper documentation to prove their ownership of the land, but the owner believes that they own the land. [The] fellow has a lot of connections with the authorities and people might ask the fellow to help in these types of cases. I have tried to help with this problem but there is no result yet. This has discouraged me. It is something I want to achieve for my community. It is their livelihood, the land. I must achieve it. (Fellow, TDG, final meeting, Hpa-an*

5.3. 'You have kings, no queens'?

> *… There is a traditional belief that only men are true leaders: 'you have kings, no queens'. And according to religious beliefs, men are holier. (FGD, community member, KISG, Hpa-an, 27.6.2019)*

An ActionAid report in 2012 indicated that female fellows tend to face more challenges than their male peers in implementing the village development process. According to this report, some female fellows are not easily accepted by village elders. Some also have faced verbal abuse and discrimination, while others feel looked down upon when they first start to mobilise the community. The report clarifies that these challenges usually originate from traditional socio-cultural gender norms and values that persist in Burmese society, according to which women are not recognized as leaders or associated with matters outside the household sphere. (ActionAid, 2012) As noted earlier in the current report, this traditional framing of the woman's role in the community existed in Kayin State before fellows began their village development process there. Interviews and FGDs conducted with community members demonstrate that before they became fellows, women were not part of village



Rubber plantation area.

decision-making and generally experienced limited social space beyond childcare and household chores.

When the conversation with fellows and AAM staff interviewed for this study turned to the issue of the experiences of female fellows, the issue appeared in a totally different light. In the opinions of fellows and AAM staff members, female fellows' capabilities in Kayin communities appear equal and sometimes even surpass those of their male peers. As will be further discussed in Chapter 6, the only significant problem that they saw as affecting female fellows differently was that of required travel. When asked about the difference between the observations in the 2012 ActionAid report and their current assessment, the respondents identified four factors that affect their opinions: 1) the important role that women played during the years of active conflict in Kayin State communities; 2) cultural differences among states and regions in Myanmar; 3) the point in time in the fellowship programme at which a female fellow began her community work; and 4) the particular female fellow's personality, skills, and way of working. Fellows and AAM staff respondents also emphasized that the presence of female fellows in Kayin State communities has had a positive impact on the capability of female villagers to articulate their needs and express opinions to others.

In the final training meeting for fellows an exercise was conducted during which fellows introduced quotations collected from the interviews they had conducted with community members. The quotations demonstrated the unbalanced power relation that existed between men and women in the communities before the fellowship programme began. Although the fellows agreed with the assessment of villagers, they also pointed out that since women usually

decided whether villagers would flee or remain in their villages during the active years of the conflict, they in fact played powerful roles in the communities. The fellows also underlined that, while male community members were forced to run and hide from soldiers who looked for porters in the villages, women were left alone with children and elders in the to take over decision-making authority regarding village affairs for several days at a time. According to the fellows, this history impacts how female fellows and their leadership capabilities are seen in Kayin communities. The fellow respondents also stated that comparisons should not be drawn between the way women have traditionally been viewed in rural communities and the way the female fellow's role is seen in by the village members today. For them, the underlying difference now is their status as fellow. The young woman selected to take part in the fellowship programme have gained training which increases their self-confidence and gives them leadership skills and awareness of their rights. Since like their male peers, female fellows possess knowledge that they are able to pass on to the rest of the village, they are seen as valuable in the eyes of community members. This newly gained knowledge is seen as making female fellows more able to defend their leadership position and rights.

An AAM staff member emphasised the cultural differences among states and regions also that impact the community work of female fellows. This interviewee indicated that the greater recognition of the equality of women in Kayin State as compared to other parts of Myanmar was likely due to the existence of the Karen Women Organization (KWO) and the priority given to women by the KNU. A fellow supported this argument by noting that in Kayin communities, women have been named as village heads. This impacts how female fellows and their capabilities are seen by their communities. In terms of the topic of the effect of the armed conflict and women, another fellow stated that the active agency that women experienced in Kayin villages was given to them only because all village men had been forced to flee. Today, selection of female village heads is done voluntarily because women's leadership skills are now recognized by the communities.

At what point in the Kayin fellowship programme process a female fellow was selected was identified as factor in their acceptance as a community leader. Fellows reported that the process was easier for female fellows who entered the fellowship programme when the development process had already started in the community. Respondents also indicated that more recently selected female fellows do not experience the same challenges as those of their older female counterparts who began their community work when old socio-cultural norms and values toward women were more persistent. While AAM staff members generally supported this assessment, one staff member argued that in some instances traditional gender norms and values persisted, depending on the situation. For instance, differences might be seen between meetings led by male and female fellows. Yet, according to the AAM staff respondent, while male community members still tend to dominate conversations, since in the eyes of village women female fellows are highly valued, their presence in meetings usually makes it easier for female community members to articulate their ideas in front of others.

A noteworthy point raised by fellow respondents is that male fellows contribute to the acceptance of female fellows as community leaders. The way that male fellows approach female fellows and their work impacts how the rest of the community sees them and their capabilities. Fellows point to their AAM training on the history of societal discrimination, women's rights, and gender equality as helping them to value their female colleagues and their work.

The position of religious leaders was also identified by fellows as impacting the acceptance of female fellows as community leaders. For example, since some religious leaders do not recognize female village leadership, female fellows sometimes experience difficulties in being accepted at the beginning of their community development work. However, some fellows indicated that the young age and inexperience of female fellows are likely more important factors in their difficulties in finding village acceptance. They further argued that it is usually easy to work with religious leaders in the subject villages.

In comparing the work habits of male and female fellows, the study respondents assessed that female fellows work differently. Female fellows were described as being more organized in conducting their work. They were portrayed as more systematic and explained issues to villagers in a more in-depth manner than their male colleagues. Fellow respondents noted that these qualities represent good management skills, make them more transparent to community members, and have a positive impact on female fellows' ability to facilitate the village development process. Male fellows on the other hand were described being more relaxed and faster in making their decisions. Although male fellows were also seen as responsible and transparent in their work, they were assessed as less patient than female fellows when it came to listening to villagers' opinions and ideas. Their patience was seen as allowing female fellows to easily interact with villagers and contributed to making organization of village meetings less problematic. That this was seen as important to establishing female fellows as leaders was noted in fellow group discussion:

> *Women have good leadership skills and they are willing to sacrifice themselves to the work more than men. It takes a lot to agree with everyone. Being patient is a sign of a good leader. Women are good leaders because of their patience. (Fellow, group discussion, final meeting, 12.9.2019, Hpa-an)*

Fellows saw no difference between female fellows and male fellows when it comes to negotiation between EAOs and the government. While they indicated that there was no difference between male and female fellows in negotiations, fellows focused on the importance of speaking skills and, that if females possessed good speaking skills, it assisted them in community leadership.

In describing their intra-group relationships, fellow respondents used familial terminology. They emphasized that fellows in Kayin State view and treat each other as siblings, with their relationships becoming extremely close while they work together. In line with this view of their relationships, fellows said that they give support to each other whenever it is needed. Similar to their male colleagues, female fellows receive assistance whenever they need it.

The overall assessment of the study's fellow and AAM respondents on the role and experience of female fellows is positive. However, the study's sampling problems identified above, including the participation of only one female fellow in the final meeting, make the findings problematic. With scant participation from female study participants, a feminist perspective is severely limited in the study. This means that it lacks in representation of the lived experiences of female fellows.

WSHG meeting.

6. Like wax of a candle

AAM Lead Researcher: *How would you describe the future of the community development process in Kayin State?*

Field Assistant: *After the project is finished, the villages will be able to stand by them-selves. I think that some of the active fellows will continue the work. The united villages will be more developed. The stronger villages will be in better condition. The fellows will find a way to work with other organizations and use the village book with them. Since the fellows have raised some money for the villagers and their development, they can continue their work for a while. But since some fellows are not active, they will not continue. Some will probably help other projects. They will learn something there and then they can come back and develop their own communities. (Group interview with AAM Hpa-an field staff, 28.6.2019, Hpa-an)*

The two ongoing fellowship projects that have operated in Kayin State since 2016 will be closed by the end of January 2020.[6] Whether the fellows continue working toward community development in their villages depends on a variety of internal community and external factors. When

6 One project was closed in December 2019. The other one will close in January 2020.

talking about the future of the community development process with the fellows who took part in this study, a phrase that they often used to describe their situation was: 'Once a fellow, always a fellow.' This means to them that a fellow will continue advancing community development at the village level, with or without a project. As most fellows are selected for the programme at a young age, throughout the fellowship journey they define and construct their identity as a fellow. Little by little it becomes part of them and defines who they are as people. It 'grows under their skin.' It grows in them so deeply that in the end, no matter what happens, they will remain a fellow and continue their supporting communities.

Yet, even though all fellows who took part in this study demonstrated an enormous amount of dedication toward improving their communities and each one of them asserted that they would eventually find a way to keep the work alive, some also emphasised that the level of commitment might sometimes feel like too much and it would be difficult to continue the work for too long without the support of a project. Others also pointed out that several things should be taken into consideration should AAM continue supporting fellowship projects in Kayin State. In this final analysis chapter, the focus is turned toward the future of fellows and their communities and to the question of what should be done differently if the fellowship programme is to continue in the future in the area.

6.1. Sacrifice for a community?

An old Burmese proverb entitled, 'Like wax of a candle,' describes a teacher who gives all the knowledge possible to his students and aims to educate them even if doing so means sacrificing his free time. The proverb was used by one of the fellows when describing the fellows' work in the communities. According to this respondent, the work of a fellow and their commitment to the community can be seen clearly in light of the proverb. To them, a fellow in the community setting is a teacher who shares all their knowledge to their students, the community members. The fellow is committed to the village development process and will do anything to make villagers more empowered so that they can be better prepared to improve their community. Even if it means that the fellow sacrifices their free time and other non-fellow responsibilities. In the final meeting for this study, a discussion considered this description. Other fellows agreed with the 'teacher like a candle' interpretation that a fellow makes a personal sacrifice in assuming responsibility for implementation of the community development process. Even though the fellow is not placed in a community as a community leader, they organize all activities and plans and coordinate all work and negotiate with other actors as required of this community coordinator leadership role.

This interpretation of how fellows take on their role was echoed by an AAM staff member. However, this respondent also reflected on the work of the fellow in comparison to their other options in life as rural residents. If they do not take on traditional work in agriculture, young rural residents tend to migrate outside the country in a search for alternative employment opportunities. As a fellow they choose to stay in their community with the aim to improve the village and its residents. While the work of the fellow is a choice full of difficulties, the other work options for young rural residents are also stressful and less rewarding.

As a result of their assessment of the stresses and sacrifices associated with their work as fellows, the study respondents asserted that the commitment it entails should be more clearly acknowledged when planning fellowship programme activities in the future. An AAM staff respondent agreed with this assessment.

6.2. The fellow-family dilemma

Because of the commitment they make to the community and the amount of time fellows put into this work, disagreements with their families were reported by the study respondents. Thus, balancing their responsibilities as fellow with those of caring for their families was a source of stress. When a fellow is married and has children it is even more difficult to balance the two roles. Fellows elaborated on this fellow versus family responsibilities dilemma in the following terms:

> *Some fellow's term is too long. Sometimes, even longer than the village administrator's term. You need to spend a lot of your own time, attending trainings and the responsibilities. The family starts to have arguments. (Group discussion with fellows, final meeting, 12.9.2019, Hpa-an)*

> *You need to think about family member's perceptions of fellows and their work. They need to take care of their own family. (Group discussion with fellows, final meeting, 12.9.2019, Hpa-an)*

> *Financial and mental support needs to be better. To implement and continue the work in the community. At first you are very active, but after a while families might start to think that it is not good anymore to work as fellows. It is not profitable. It is more a burden than a good thing for the family. (Group discussion with fellows,*

final meeting, 12.9.2019, Hpa-an)

The fellows pointed out that, because of their childcare responsibilities, this dilemma fell particularly hard on female fellows. The participants reasoned that in future planning of community development activities the household responsibilities of female fellows should be seriously considered. An AAM staff member concurred in this assessment. Another AAM staff member, while also agreeing with this analysis, emphasised how the fellow-family dilemma was acute when the impacts of seasonal rains and agricultural impacts are considered:

> *… But if a fellow is married, they have more responsibilities. For example, one fellow with whom I stayed with in one of the villages, he has 3 children and a wife to take care of. Because of his work as a fellow, he was late in cultivating the time I was visiting him in his house. Because he had to balance between being a fellow and taking care of his own family. Especially when it is the harvesting season. Then it is difficult to do the fellow activities. It is when the rain starts falling. You need to avoid those calendar months. It is hard for the community members, it is hard for the fellow and it is hard for the NGO. Everyone is busy during that time and no one can concentrate properly. (AAM Staff member, interview, Yangon, 23.9.2019)*

The fellow respondents recognised that that community development-family responsibility dilemma is a two-edged sword. While fellows feel stressed to meet their family responsibilities, they also internalise the challenge of meeting their responsibilities as fellows, such as meeting programme deadlines.

6.3. More than volunteers

Another status issue that fellows addressed is that they are not perceived as staff, but as volunteers. The participants assess that when the level of responsibility that they assume in their community development work and the amount of work each one of them carries out within each village, fairness indicates they should be considered as staff and not merely as volunteers. This contrasts with the assessment of the fellows offered by an AAM staff member:

> *Fellows are not recruited as staff. When we say community development, it should come from the community. We want the development work to stay in the community. It cannot leave when AAM leaves the community. It is in our [AAM's] mind when we train fellows. That is why they establish the SHG, VCBO and have volunteers. Through them, they can still do the development work even AAM would leave the community. We [AAM] only give stipend to fellows, but it is to assist their living expenses while they work as fellows. We want them to think about their community and work for their community. It is also for the community to have a sense of ownership. (AAM Staff member, interview, Yangon, 3.10.2019)*

Löfving (2011) supports this argument. According to her, the fellowship model is intended to find solutions to village level needs by promoting low-cost interventions through which community self-reliance is emphasised and the work is performed by villagers (Löfving, 2011). According to the preceding AAM staff argument, the development process is to originate from the community itself, not from an external third party. Hiring fellows as AAM staff members would therefore violate a key component of the fellowship programme model of change as described by Ferretti (2010).

For the fellows the matter of their treatment as volunteers rather than as paid AAM staff members was a matter of practical reality. They see the stipend that fellows receive as not sufficiently meeting their living needs. The expectations of the fellows' appointment involve full-time work and a high level of responsibility for the village development process. The requirements of their village development work also impair their ability to meet their home responsibilities. Thus, they see payment as AAM staff members as a reasonable and fair expectation for the practical realities of their lives.

However, AAM does not see the fellowship programme as about producing employment on the village level. The programme is about enabling village development and village youth contributing to that process. As an AAM member summarized,

> *In Myanmar, there is a long tradition of this thought of 'youth for village development'. And that is exactly what fellows are about. It is for their own communities their work. Communities have so many challenges and you have to work to improve them. As a fellow, you work through those challenges. It is because of the challenges that there are fellows. It is not because they are not staff. Their role is defined from the challenges. If there were no challenges, there would be no fellows either. Fellows are there to solve the challenges and help the communities to solve them. The fellowship programme*

Crossing the stream with Cargo Kubota truck.

> *is not so much about creating jobs for them [for youth who become fellows], it is about enabling them to help their own communities. They do volunteer, yes, but it is for their own communities. If the fellow is able and willing to commit to the work, sometimes it depends on the individual fellows as well. Some have their own businesses and farms. Some have more personal responsibilities than others and they continue as fellows and do their own business on the side. (AAM Staff member, interview, Yangon, 23.9.2019)*

The financial realities that fellows face results in some of them dropping out of the programme to look for a better paying job. Fellows argue that payment as an AAM staff member would eliminate this problem. They also believe that receiving a higher financial reward for the work also would better motivate fellows.

Fellows and the communities that they serve are expected to keep the work alive beyond the duration of the programme (Löfving, 2011). The fellows interviewed for this study argue that lack of remuneration for fellows threatens this intended continuity. Without even the AAM stipend available, after projects end fellows are forced to seek employment and not continue to support the community development that they largely put in motion. The fellows' analysis presents the dilemma of maintaining the intent of community development or possibly allowing projects to end due to lack of paid staff to support them.

6.4. Travel impacts

Another factor that fellows identified as needing attention in planning future projects that involve the fellowship programme is the training required and travelling associated with them. Staying away from their home villages for long periods of time during trainings was described as a factor that make fellows' work in Kayin State stressful. If a fellow is ill and misses a training, they might have to wait an extended period of time for the next available session. This becomes yet another source of stress. While most fellows agreed that the number of trainings has not been overwhelming, the length of the trainings and how that effects the fellow's responsibilities in the community should be considered by project planners.

Another travel factor that fellows identify is that roads in some townships tend to be in poor condition making travelling that sometimes involves long distances within townships very difficult. In Than Daung Gyi for example, travelling from one village to another requires traversing poorly maintained stone covered roads and is a constant problem. According to the participants, this makes fellows' travelling within the township more challenging compared to Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi townships.

The respondents concluded that paying better attention to fellows' travelling requirements and making sure that trainings and other activities are organized closer to their community settings would make it easier for fellows to participate. This would be of particular benefit to female fellows with children.

6.5. Uncertain future

Within the fellowship programme, the community-led development process facilitated by fellows is expected to extend beyond the duration of the programme. For this to happen, communities must continue the development work without support from AAM. (Löfving, 2011) An AAM staff member stated that much depends on the communities themselves and their willingness to continue the work after AAM support leaves the village. A significant factor for this respondent involves whether fellows and communities are committed to continuing the process and will be able to agree upon how future activities will be pursued:

> *… [I]t now up to them if they want to continue or not. It depends on their own commitment and will. And for fellows, they have the national network and they can always learn from each other through the network. If they really want to continue the work, they can find a way to continue. But fellows and communities need to be one. They need to have the same goals and mission. If they are united, then they can do it. (AAM Staff member, interview, Yangon, 3.10.2019)*

A group discussion among AAM Hpa-an field staff further scrutinized the issue. While the group recognized that some villages are indeed strong and able to continue the work by themselves, other villages still require support and guidance from the fellow. Variation can be seen between townships as well. In the case of Than Daung Gyi township a fellow received recognition of their leadership ability and success by being chosen as village head. However, this did not assure continued operation of the community development process. The competence and commitment to the process cannot be limited to one leader, it must be embraced by the village a whole. In this instance it was not. In contrast, in some villages located in Kawkareik township fellows also acquired high ranking roles in the communities. However, in these villages the status of the fellow and their role in the community was assessed by the fellow respondents as enabling the villages to continue the development process on their own.

The length of service of the fellow was seen as also affecting the willingness of villages to commit to continuation of the community development process. In villages where a fellow had started to work only recently, the situation was problematic. In these situations, both the fellow and village are seen as highly dependent on continued support from AAM. Whether the fellow is from an outside village appears to also negatively impact the willingness of the village to commitment to continuing the development process. When disagreements have appeared between the fellow and the community members regarding the implementation of the project activities, community commitment to the development process also has been limited.

Fellows around Kayin State have acted to address problems that threaten continuation of the community development process. For instance, they have acted to establish fellow-led VCBOs. The VCBOs are committed to keep the work alive after the AAM projects end and help the communities to implement their development activities. The VCBOs will also focus on external fundraising to support community projects. The VCBO approach is viewed as a valuable product of the community development Kayin State. All villages simply cannot be expected to generate the capacity to act alone. They need supra-level support in the form VCBOs.

At the time of the data collection for this study, the idea of establishing three VCBOs in the subject area was active. The next step in the process of establishing these organizations is registration as official VCBOs and then initiating operation. The fellows who took part in the study were proud of

their project achievements and were enthused about the prospect of directing their own organizations in the form of the VCBOs. The idea of sustainability and keeping the work alive at the community level was also appreciated by the fellows. Fellows from Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi townships elaborated on their thoughts:

> *The reason behind the establishment is that we want to reassure that the fellows can continue working for community development after the project as well. So that they do not have to lose that work. One fellow suggested the idea and we others were on board. After he proposed the idea, we started to negotiate about it. We plan to for example share knowledge on education and give handicraft training to the communities. (Group discussion with fellows, final meeting, 11.9.2019, Hpa-an)*

Yet, while the fellows are excited about further exploring the VCBO idea, challenges and doubts regarding the future were also evident during the conversations with them. While the fellows agreed that the idea behind the VCBOs was clear, engaging their communities with the proposal is yet to be done. This can only happen once the VCBOs are legally registered organizations.

Limited available financial resources and concerns regarding whether funding can be secured lead the fellows to see that the nature of the work will have to change, especially in the beginning of VCBOs assuming responsibility for community development. Although some fellows have saved money toward this goal over the course of the two fellowship projects and will seek funding from external sources, to pursue the projects that they need communities must also assume responsibility for fundraising.

Another concern that the fellows expressed involved the ability of VCBOs to function as fellow-led groups. In implementing and operating their fellowship projects, fellows were able to rely on support offered by AAM when needed. Under the VCBO approach for the first time they will have to function on their own. AAM staff members echoed some of these concerns. While they respect the capability of the fellows, they acknowledge the challenges that the fellows will face in collaborating to form and operate an organization. They also pointed out that in the near-term strong support and guidance from AAM is still needed, especially when defining the structure of the organizations and establishing what needs to be done in the communities after the two projects have come to an end. Additionally, AAM staff members see that capacity building and mentoring still will be required when fellows start to engage as VCBOs with funding and collaborating stakeholders such as NGOs, donors, the government, and EAOs. They stated that AAM will continue to mentor the former fellows through the national fellows network.

AAM staff members emphasized their concerns regarding collaboration among VCBOs, EAOs, and the government. At the time of the data collection, AAM had introduced the idea of the VCBOs to the EAOs and government and explained why their existence is needed at the community level. While the government had received the idea without questions, EAOs needed more convincing. As an AAM staff member elaborated,

> *We have introduced the CBOs to EAOs and the government. So that they know about them. Government had no questions so far. But EAOs was a little bit concerned. They said they have a lot of CBOs already and they asked why we need to form fellow CBOs again. But we explained to them that they will work with the right based approach. Their working approach will be different. We explained that the fellow CBOs are not a charity and that they improve the rights of peoples in the communities through their implementation. And that they will listen to the voices from the communities and bring the communities voice to the stakeholders. After that they finally accepted … (AAM Staff member, interview, Yangon, 8.10.2019)*

Once the fellows have managed to get the CBOs up and running and proposals regarding each CBOs' vision and mission have been finalized, they will be ready to represent the organizations to the two governing actors on their own. While presenting to the KNU will most likely be easier for fellows, AAM staff suggested that the CBOs will need support when the time comes for them to officially present their ideas to the government. The experience of fellows in negotiating with the local government likely will be useful and ease the process of working with both governing entities.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Research results

The Fellowship programme: Personal and Community Adaptation and Transformation

ActionAid's fellowship programme might be best described as an approach to support community-level adaptation and resultant transformation. Communities around the world – particularly in developing settings such as Myanmar – are continuously adapting to a variety of challenges that define the first quarter of the 21st century. These challenges range from protracted conflict recovery to threats of climate change to the impact of economic globalization to unstable governmental regimes (Fook, 2015). For villages in Myanmar, all of these challenges are in play. However, the challenges that trump all others in Myanmar involve protracted conflict recovery in the context of a country moving towards democracy (ADB, 2014; Burke, et al, 2017). Throughout Myanmar, AAM has introduced the fellowship programme to assist village adaptation to the circumstances of the present and imagine and plan for a more desirable and sustainable future (Löfving, 2011; Ferretti, 2010, 2015).

The programme engages communities in Myanmar in a self-defining process that involves identifying their needs, specifying desirable actions to address these needs, and setting priorities among the chosen actions. This process of self-definition produces a strengthened sense of community and self-empowerment. The essential product of this effort is the village book which memorialises the evidence resulting from these efforts of villagers to imagine their shared future and concrete steps needed to reach it (ActionAid, 2012; 2014).

Key to this approach to community development is the role played by the young fellows of the fellowship programme. As has been examined in this study, like the communities that they serve, fellows experience a challenging process of self-definition and self-transformation. This transformational process exhibits internal and external manifestations. As the evidence presented here demonstrates, as young products of the villages that they serve, fellows enter the fellowship programme presenting the intersectional influences that have formed them as young men and women. Their age, gender, ethnicity, language, prior experiences in their villages, and other factors intersect into a maze of layered influences that impact their view of themselves and their worlds. Again, to understand the internal journey of fellows requires accounting for their intersectional formation. To adapt, survive, and succeed as fellows requires that they take on the mission of self-transformation. From 'just another youth in the village,' they assume responsibility to transform themselves into essential change agents for their villages.

In addition to the internal transformation that young men and women undergo during their journey as fellows, the study's evidence shows that they also experience a transformational process in terms of how they interact with the world. From the young person's state of experiencing little responsibility on the public stage of the village before they enter the programme, fellows are transformed into essential ingredients in the life of their villages as they assist them through the community development process. From a state as young villagers carrying intersectional baggage that prevents them from feeling that they have a place in interacting with their elders (much less leading them), as fellows they are largely self-transformed into village assets called upon to interact with village, government, and EAO leaders in the interest of promoting and supporting community development objectives. From a condition of no voice in village affairs, the young fellow eventually takes on a leading voice in the life of their village.

A Difficult Pathway

The evidence produced in the current study documents the remarkably rapid transformation that fellows experience during their participation in the fellowship programme. From a state of unsure self-assessment and little experience in village affairs, in a couple of years they become engaged as change agents in their villages. However, this does not happen without them paying a psychological and emotional price. To reach their intended state as an effective leader in community development, the fellow must overcome a variety of hurdles to build their self-confidence and their competency in community leadership.

Perhaps the most difficult psychological barrier to overcome in the fellow's journey involves the intersectional factors that have impacted their view of themselves and their place in the world. The concept of intersectionality that is central to feminist theory posits that our social and political place in society is a product of an interweaving of multiple converging social systems. As fellows start their journeys in the fellowship programme, they carry internalised understandings of themselves that have been influenced by how their age, gender, ethnicity, language, and other characteristics – most of which they possess as the result of the accident of birth – have been assessed by those in power in their social settings. As young people their social environment has conditioned them to believe that only their elders could serve as village leaders. That they might be village role models is a foreign concept to them. Female fellows have grown up being led to believe that village leadership is a man's role in the community. As members of

ethnic and linguistic minorities in Kayin State or Myanmar, they have seen and heard from dominant group members and leaders that their 'out group' is socially inferior or less sophisticated than the dominant group or groups. These intersectional influences produce an effect of multi-layered self-doubt that leads fellows to question their ability to succeed in their work. As they become fellows these young villagers are challenged to overcome this psychological baggage to become problem-solvers and leaders in their villages.

When new fellows enter AAM's fellowship training they are intimated by the new material that they must take on to develop the competencies that they will need as they participate in village-level community development. They also are intimated by the new mindset – the new personality – that they must absorb to effectively perform as village leaders. During their AAM training and afterward in their village work this personality transformation involves the transition from the youthful mindset of the young villager to an adult tasked with doing and leading community development work in their villages. During their AAM training they gain tools and encouragement that promote development of the self-belief that they need to take on their new village work. Yet, they typically enter the field and the doing of their work with lingering self-doubt. They ultimately overcome these self-doubts through a blend of strategies. They are provided continuous support from AAM staff. They develop support networks with other fellows in their township and beyond that provide emotional and practical support in their times of need. They develop new forms of relationships among village leaders and other villagers that provide reinforcement for their personal and professional development. Their stature in the village dramatically changes from 'just another village youth' to that of village leader. Most importantly they find their identity as young village leaders through the doing of their work. Applying trial and error methods and a remarkable level of determination, they are able to adapt, survive, and flourish as leaders in the community development process.

This assessment of self-transformation is subject to qualifications seen in the study's evidence. Some fellows are advantaged by characteristics of their background and particulars of their village context. For instance, fellows who have been active in village affairs prior to their participation in the fellowship programme find the adjustment to the village leadership role easier than those who do not have this prior experience. Female fellows who were active in the village prior to their tenure in the fellowship programme are better able to engage with women in the village, thus improving the fellow's acceptance as community leader and assisting in getting villagers to participate in the community development process. Other fellows were advantaged by working with village leaders that immediately offered them support and assisted them in developing networking among villagers needed to support the community development process.

Another advantage involves the fellows' length of tenure with the programme. Those fellows holding their positions from the beginning of their project tend to adjust more fully to their new roles, and more completely take on the new 'personality' seen as being required by the study's fellow respondents. Fellows that assume their positions later on during the project period are disadvantaged by less AAM training and by less exposure to the 'acclimation by doing' process involved in interacting with villagers and village leadership. Since there is notable turnover among fellows in a township over the course of a project, this should not be assessed as a trivial problem.

In summary, fellows experience internal transformation through what might be referred to a reflexive change process (Ferreira, et al, 2020). The word 'reflexive' is appropriate because it connects internal processes with external influences. As fellows act in and upon their social environment, their social environment acts upon them, which contributes to building their confidence and competence to become effective community leaders. Challenges and positive experiences in their work environment also contribute to the determination that fellows must exhibit to adapt, survive, and flourish in their community development work.

Building Proto-Governance on the Village Level

The fellowship programme is intended to contribute to building what may be referred to as 'proto-governance.' This means that it assists villages in developing capacity and capability needed to self-govern. The programme aids villagers in building relationships and products of collaborative action that can support the processes and products of governing. The community development process remains in the status of 'proto' because, though it should be seen as essential to building good governance on the local and state level, it has not become part of formal governing structures and processes.

As fellows experience a process of internal transformation from 'just another youth in the village' to a state of village leaders materially contributing to community development, they also become important components of a process of village transformation. As they make contributions to community development, fellows also participate in transforming power and role relationships, particularly those involving men and women. They support a planning process wherein women are essential contributors.
Fellows provide leadership in a community development process that results in new structures and products of proto-governance. In terms of village structural transformations,

they support the creation of Village Community-Based Organizations (VCBOs) and Women's Self-Help Groups (WSHGs). These new structures of village life are intended to be more than input elements of the community development process. It is hoped that they will be permanent structural features of a village-level approach to self-governance. The most important product of the community development process that fellows assist in guiding are the village books. Village books are intended to be much more than charming artefacts of a stimulating village experience. They are intended to be durable records of what villagers have determined, through collaborative self-governance, to be prioritised village needs, actions to address those needs, and desirable outcomes of actions to address village needs. Village books represent the sort of evidence essential to effective local governance.

Another structural transformation supported by the work of fellows on the village level involves the roles and power dynamics experienced by men and women. During the protracted conflict in Kayin State, as men fought and were killed, contrary to social norms regarding their 'acceptable' village roles, women assumed positions of leadership in village life. Some even become village chiefs. Additionally, the existence of the KWO for 35 years in Kayin State has played a role in empowering women in the state (KWO, 2010). Yet, the traditional minimal public roles of women in the village as compared to men remains a component of the intersectional definition of women in Kayin villages. The community development process supported by the fellowship programme and fellows assigned to individual villages has introduced a structural shift in the traditional role definition of women. Women play essential roles throughout the process that leads to the development of village books. The formation of WSHGs provides an institutionalised location to strengthen the self-identity and self-empowerment of groups of village women. That the fellowship programme prioritises the appointment of female fellows offers the potential for the creation of additional links between the interests of women and village decision-making.

Perhaps the most important role that fellows play in the structural transformation of villages involves their representational responsibilities in dealing with village chiefs and administrators and the government and EAOs. As part of their efforts to engage with the village from the beginning of their community development work, fellows seek support from and collaboration with village leaders. The level of responsiveness on the part of village leaders can impede or facilitate the extent that fellows are able to engage villagers in the community development process. Beyond their initial collaboration (or lack thereof) the fellow and village leaders generally maintain a relationship related to village problem-solving that eventually takes the form of the village book.

A greater challenge involves 'fellows in the middle' as they act with and between government representatives and representatives of EAOs regarding on-going matters of village governance and the disposition of the village books. This role of course has consequences for the internal development of fellows as they face the uncertainties and stresses associated with dealing with these powerful and contentious interests that critically impact the life of the village. However, that fellows find a place in negotiating with government and EAO representatives, jointly or separately, indicates a structural shift in the management of village affairs. The voice and aspirations of villagers represented in the efforts of fellows as they deal with these entities means that villager-centric participatory planning holds the potential for influencing the institutional holders of power over the future of villages.

7.2. Recommendations

The recommendations that result from this study fall into two categories. First, recommendations are offered regarding a pathway forward to transform the current 'proto-governance' state of village-level participatory planning and community development into an institutionalised part of local governance. Second, action is suggested to AAM for revision of the fellowship program in response to the following recommendations suggested by the fellows that participated in the study:

- Provide support for fellows to help them address the internal struggles and fears they face at the beginning of their fellowship journey.
- Address female fellows' childcare and household responsibilities to encourage their participation in activities, especially those that require travel and staying away from home for several days.
- Support them in the establishment of fellow-CBOs

From Proto-Governance to Governance: Institutionalising Village-Level Participatory Planning

ActionAid's experience in Myanmar provides ample evidence of the success of participatory planning at the village level. With facilitation assistance from fellows, community members have been able to demonstrate in many settings that they have the desire and competence to create sustainable change for their communities. A problem that ActionAid has identified is that this dynamic and effective approach to community development is having questionable impact upon the formal structures and processes on the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar. VCBOs, and WSHGs established by the fellowship programme for instance, have not been incorporated into formal decision/policy-making processes. Nor have permanent bridges been constructed to meaningfully connect village participatory planning to formal government or EAO decision-making. The assessment here is that while the current AAM model has been effective in bringing 'proto-governance' to the villages of Kayin State and elsewhere in Myanmar, this approach to village-level participatory planning/community development has not been institutionalised to become part of the formal structures and processes of local and state/regional decision-making.

The central recommendation of this study is that AAM and governance actors work through the village participatory planning process in a way that it becomes an integral part of formal governance at the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar. This effort should be pursued within the context of reforms being pursued by the General Administration Department (GAD). As part of this solution, the experiences, opinions, and concerns expressed by fellows also should be addressed and taken into consideration in the search for sustainable solutions.

To address concerns raised by the fellows in this study, a funding mechanism should be found such that the work begun by AAM fellows can continue without interruptions in the future. The present study demonstrates that fellows are invaluable resources for effective community development. As a result, a way forward must be identified to continue – to integrate – this work as part of a permanent local level governance solution at village tract level. If funding cannot be found to support a 'community development specialist' in every village, a smaller number of these specialists could form village tract and/or township cadres of permanent employees armed with the fellows' skill set. This township and village tract level cadres of specialists could support continuing volunteer community development processes in the villages. Additionally, either through the use of the township level team of 'community development specialists' or another organisational approach, independent funding for civil society organisations can continue support of the nascent village VCBOs as well as to create a feedback channel for village track administrators.

However, these suggestions will only have enduring meaning if they are part of a new approach embraced by governing actors to integrate village level participatory planning and community development into formal governance structures and processes. The study suggests that AAM, other interested national or international stakeholders, agree to support further GAD reforms to undertake a project intended to design an effective approach to build an institutionalised bridge between village participatory planning/community development and formal governance structures and processes.

7.3. Suggestions for future research

Beyond our suggestion for a project to identify and test an approach to institutionalise village-level participatory planning as a permanent part of local and state formal governance in Kayin State and Myanmar as a whole, we suggest that additional study should be undertaken regarding the experience of participants in the ActionAid fellowship programme. More specifically, limitations of the current study involving sampling problems should be addressed in future research. To make the research more generalisable, a research plan that includes a larger overall sample size should be developed. To support a focus on the experience of female fellows that will make application of a feminist perspective more robust, female fellows should be over-sampled. In addition, the research plan should accommodate the logistical constraints that female fellows face related to time and distance away from their maternal and other family responsibilities. The research plan should further account for the agriculture production calendar and the impact of Myanmar's rainy season.

Beyond Myanmar, variables explored in the current study also should be examined in other national settings. This includes our suggested applied research concerning the search for an evidence-based approach to bridge village-level participatory planning with the formal structures and processes of governance.

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Annex 1: List of stakeholders interviewed by fellows for the study in the communities

Kawkareik Township
1) VCBO leader / secretary & one group member
2) Elders
3) Fellows
4) Volunteers
5) WSHG leader / secretary & one member of the group
6) Headmaster
7) Youth leader
Kyar Inn Seik Gyi Township
1) Village head
2) VCBO
3) WSHG
4) Headmaster / School committee member
5) Fellows
6) Volunteers
Than Daung Gyi Township
1) Village administrator
2) Youth leader
3) Volunteers
4) Fellows
5) VCBO leader
6) WSHG leader
7) Adolescent group leader