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CLIMATE ACTIVISM

Assessing Civil Society
Engagement in Myanmar



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Lead Researcher

Tomas Derville

Editor

Florence Pichon

Research Team and Contributors

Hein Htet Aung

Mariana Cifuentes

Khun Thet Paing

Liliana Demartini

Photos

Darya Alikhani/ACTIONAIDMYANMAR

ABOUT ACTIONAID

ActionAid is a feminist organization that uses a human rights-based approach to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable, particularly women and youth, are heard. ActionAid is working with communities across the world to develop solutions that help people adapt to climate change impacts and build resilience. ActionAid is working with

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ACRONYMS

AAM	ActionAid Myanmar
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GHG	GreenHouse Gases
INDC	Intended Nationally Determined Contribution
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LRC	Local Resource Center
MATA	Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability
MCCA	Myanmar Climate Change Alliance
MERN	Myanmar Environmental Rehabilitation-conservation Network
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NAPA	National Adaptation Programme of Action
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WWF	World Wildlife Fund



People in Yangon participating to the march during the Climate Strike. September 2019

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 15 years, the ActionAid Federation has advocated for climate justice, which affirms the rights of communities dependent on natural resources for their livelihood and culture to own and manage their resources in a sustainable manner, and is opposed the commodification of nature and its resources.¹ In September 2019, accompanying the Global Climate Strike week, Action Aid Myanmar (AAM) collaborated with 17 civil society organisations (CSOs) in Yangon to demand faster and more equitable actions to tackle climate change. Although some CSOs have only recently publicly recognised climate change as a serious threat, the engagement with the Global Climate Strike opened a new window for climate activism and action in Myanmar.

To better understand the relationship between climate change action and Myanmar's civil society, this study focuses on how CSOs, in particular youth-led CSOs, are engaging with climate change mitigation and adaptation issues in three different regions in Myanmar: Ayeyarwady, the Dry Zone and Kayin State. For the 18 CSOs (including 12 youth networks) involved in

the study, it assesses capacity building and training needs as well as the possibility of creating a CSO-led coordination mechanism for climate justice in Myanmar.

First, the research summarizes the history of civil societies and the rise of climate activism in Myanmar. Secondly, based on interviews with youth-led CSOs, the study describes the current landscape of climate-oriented CSOs and provide some examples of activities in which they have taken part to address climate change. The key questions framing the research include how CSOs understand and perceive climate change, how communities have been affected by climate-related events and natural disasters, and what kind of activities they have been implementing at their local level. The findings of the study suggest that since 2018, youth-led organisations working on environmental issues in Myanmar have multiplied. These organisations are engaging in a range of climate change related work, including advocacy, weather and air quality monitoring, reforestation, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture practices and sustainable waste management.

1 To know more about AA's climate justice work please consult <https://actionaid.org/land-and-climate/climate-justice>



People in Yangon participating to the march during the Climate Strike, September 2019

A. Environment and trends

Environment and climate projections

With diverse geology, spanning mountains to plains and coastal zones, Myanmar is exposed to various climate-related risks, including droughts, flooding, erratic rainfall patterns, cyclones, salinization of land in coastal zones, and landslides. This section describes Myanmar's hazard profile and how climate change is expected to impact diverse agro-ecological zones.

The dry zone, situated in the centre of the country, is regularly impacted by droughts and heatwaves, affecting water supplies in the region. Across the dry zone, water is scarce during the summer months (March – May), vegetation cover is thin, and soil is severely eroded (Adaptation Fund, n.d.). The Ayeyarwady region falls under the category of tropical climate, with a short dry season. The region is comprised of a low lying delta, which is highly exposed to storm surge and sea-level rise, especially given the intensity of deforestation of mangrove forests. The region is slightly cooler in terms of annual average temperature but prone to high levels of precipitation during the monsoon season, creating frequent flooding in the process. Kayin State, situated along the southern interior border with Thailand, is composed of plains used for agriculture and mountain

ranges. Kayin State is particularly prone to flooding and landslides, and was severely affected by flooding in 2018 and 2019 monsoon seasons.²

Overall, wet regions such as Rakhine, the delta region and Thanintharyi are getting wetter. Research suggests that the summer monsoon season, has become shorter by approximately one week on average. In other words, more rain is falling in fewer days in Myanmar (Horton et al., 2017). Across the board, temperatures have been significantly rising in the country. Indeed, a study in 2017 from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology showed that between 1981 and 2010, average daily temperatures increased by about 0.25°C per decade over the country (ibid).

Myanmar ranked second out of 183 countries most affected by extreme weather events from 1999 to 2018 in the Global Climate Risk Index (Eckstein et al., 2020). Myanmar's high ranking is driven by the human and economic losses incurred from the most devastating storm to hit Myanmar in recorded history: Cyclone Nargis in 2008. As the index is calculated over a period of 20 years, Nargis' high toll is likely to maintain Myanmar's high ranking in the index in the coming years.

Climate-related hazards have largely impaired the agricultural sector. This is devastating for Myanmar's economy, as the agricultural sector contributes 30%

2 ReliefWeb, 12 August 2019, Myanmar Floods and Landslides-Information Bulletin.



Messages shared by participants during the Climate Strike in Yangon, September 2019

of Myanmar's Gross Domestic Product (Eurocham Myanmar, 2019: 11). In the past ten years, rainfall patterns have become more erratic, with some years recording unusual high precipitation and other years recording abnormal low precipitation. This climate feature has become a challenge for farmers who are dependent on rain to irrigate their fields. Indeed, farmers often lack access to irrigation systems. In 2015-2016, only 16% of Myanmar's crop area was connected to public irrigation systems (ibid: 9).

Climate Governance

The Government of Myanmar has enacted a few key programs and plans to adapt to and mitigate climate change. The two main components of the global climate change architecture are National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) and Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), which signatories to the Paris Agreement submit to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In 2012, the Myanmar Government submitted Myanmar's NAPA, identifying and classifying the most urgent climate adaptation needs. In 2015, Myanmar submitted an Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC), which focuses on mitigation of greenhouse gases.

This policy shows the commitment to the international community and to Myanmar citizens to meet the goals proposed by the Paris Agreement. The ultimate goal set for the Paris Agreement is to limit the global average temperature rise in this century to well below 2 degrees Celsius, while pursuing efforts to limit the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees (UNFCCC, 2015).

Going beyond Myanmar's commitments in the Paris Agreement, the Government established a more detailed approach to tackling climate change by drafting in 2019 the Myanmar Climate Change Policy and the Strategy (2018-2030) with the help of UN Habitat and UN Environment Programme (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018). The next big stepping stone for Myanmar's climate policy will come with the submission of an updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are designed to give countries specific and quantifiable targets to limit greenhouse gas emissions as a mean to address climate change. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic and other delays in drafting the agreement, the release (initially planned in 2020) has been pushed to a later date.³ As of December 2020, the discussions are still on-going, in particular with the energy sector, as it is one of the prominent sectors responsible

3 Interview with UNHabitat

for Myanmar's greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).⁴ In Myanmar's original INDC, targets remained rather general and vague. Indeed, no numbers were disclosed about CO₂ and other greenhouse gases mitigation contributions. The future release of the Nationally Determined Contribution is therefore an important step to refine the targets previously stated in the INDC, as well as specifying the future energy production portfolio in Myanmar (fossil fuel, gas, coal, hydropower, solar & wind energy, etc.) (Zhai et al., 2018).

While some plans and policies have been drafted at country level to address climate change in Myanmar, large gaps remain: land use, energy consumption, and a commitment to develop renewable energy capacity beyond hydropower. Although hydropower dams are relatively low in GHG emissions, large dams have proven highly controversial in Myanmar, with opposition pointing to the large-scale and irreversible social and environmental impacts as reasons to seek other low carbon energy solutions (IPCC, 2014; Urban et al., 2015).

According to FAO, total GHG emissions in Myanmar can be broken down in the following manner: 32% agriculture, 32% land management including deforestation, 27% energy sector, and 8% waste management (FAOSTAT, 2017). From an energy perspective in Myanmar, hydropower contributes to the largest share of electricity generation accounting for 55%, followed by natural gas at 42% and coal at 2% (Eurocham Myanmar, 2020). Forestry, land use, and the energy sector are key areas in which the Myanmar Government will need to strategically work to decrease emissions of GHGs and support the climate resilience of vulnerable people.

One of the biggest drivers of emissions in Myanmar from land use is deforestation. When forests are cut for timber or to clear land for agriculture, dead trees release the carbon they have been storing into the atmosphere (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, 2018: 23). Conversely, protecting forests offers one of the most powerful, nature-based, and cost-effective tools to addressing the shared global challenge of climate change. It also offers a multitude of other benefits, including protecting wildlife and critical watersheds that provide key ecosystem services and preserving indigenous cultures and heritage. Though

in practice difficult to implement at scale, addressing land degradation and deforestation would be a win-win situation when it comes to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Land conservation efforts should secure participation of local communities to ensure accountability, transparency and the principle of equity and fairness. A growing body of evidence shows that indigenous people and local communities are excellent at investing in conserving their forests (Tauli-Corpus et al., 2018).

B. Civil Society Organisation History

Despite decades of government surveillance and restrictions under military rule (1962 to 2011), Myanmar is home to a vibrant civil society and community-based organisations (CBO) at both the national and local levels, including in ethnic minority areas (MCRB, 2014). The ceasefire agreement in 1989 between the government and ethnic regions was instrumental in allowing the development of more CSOs, as organisations could work in areas previously inaccessible due to fighting and insecurity.

Civil society organisations during the military era could easily be suppressed by the authorities, particularly if their aim was related to promoting human rights or if they had (suspected) political motives. Indeed, any associations could be declared illegal by the President of the Union under 1908 Unlawful Association Law, Article 15(2)(b) (Amnesty International, 2003). Until today, this law is still valid and can be used to target peaceful opposition activists or the media (Radio Free Asia, 2017).⁵ In 2014, the government made it easier for associations to register through the enactment of the 'Law Relating to the Registration of Associations'. From this date onwards, associations have been able to operate without officially registering with the government (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014).

For the first time in several decades, peaceful assemblies were allowed in 2011 with the enactment of the Law relating to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Processions (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2011). Under this law, assemblies and processions are permitted under the condition that approval is granted by the relevant

4 Interview with WWF Myanmar

5 In 2017, three journalists in Shan State were charged under the law after contacting an ethnic armed group while covering a drug-burning event to mark the UN's day against drug abuse.



People showing their signs during the Climate Strike in Yangon, September 2019

township police at least five days prior to the day of the activities. In 2014, several amendments were made to the law which stipulated that police shall not refuse to issue a permit, provided the demonstration is not contrary to the laws enacted for Union security, rule of law, community peace and tranquillity, or public morality. The amendments reduced the prison punishment for failing not to seek permission from the government from up to one year down to 6 months.

The numbers of local and international NGOs in Myanmar have gradually increased over time. A directory produced by the Capacity Building Initiative recorded 30 local NGOs in 2001, rising to 62 in 2004 and 86 in 2009 (Wallis et al., 2011). Later, the Myanmar NGO Directory, published in 2012 by the Local Resource Center, listed 118 local NGOs and 56 International NGOs (Local Resource Center, 2012a; Local Resource Center, 2012b). Some networking organisations such as Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability, Local Resource Center, and Myanmar Environmental Rehabilitation-Conservation Network have been instrumental in helping local NGOs by providing networking opportunities, capacity building, funding, and policy consultation.

For the purpose of this study, community based organisations refer to non-profit organisations, working only at local level. Moreover, civil society organisations include non-state, not-for-profit voluntary entities

formed by people, and do not include businesses. Local NGOs are considered as more structured organisations, having activities in several parts of Myanmar, and officially registered under The Law Relating to Registration of Associations (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014).

C . Climate Change Movements

One of the most prominent organisations working with CSOs on climate change issues is the Myanmar Climate Change Alliance (MCCA). MCCA was founded in 2013 and is currently based in Nay Pyi Taw. It is implemented by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment). Its primary objective is to “raise awareness and disseminate knowledge and science of climate change so that policy-makers and society more broadly can address climate change in their decisions and daily life.” MCCA played a significant role in the preparation of the Myanmar Climate Change Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2018).

The Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA) is the largest national network when it comes to environmental protection, comprising 518 members as of 2017 (Lanjouw et al., 2017). It has been particularly active in helping to reach standards

for transparency and accountability in the extractive industries such as coal mining, onshore/offshore oil drilling and natural gas extraction, which are all emitters of greenhouse gases. According to the CIA, crude oil in Myanmar was estimated at 139 million barrels in 2018, and 18 billion cubic meters of natural gas in 2017 (ranked 29th country in the world) (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.).

The Universities Green Network is a youth network representing a wide range of university environmental clubs. It was particularly active in providing a platform to integrate environmentalism into politics in the midst of Myanmar's presidential elections in November in 2020. The network made a range of recordings about relationship between climate and the elections with the heads of youth-led CSOs, using the slogan "vote for nature" to help raise awareness of the place of environmental issues in Myanmar politics.

D. Environmental activism

Environmental issues and climate change have gained more traction and attention among the youth in Myanmar. In the past two years, Myanmar environmental activism has been stimulated by global climate change movements, such as Fridays for Future (led by the Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg) and Extinction Rebellion (Dowling, 2020). Though they have been inspired by global movements, Myanmar activists are motivated by local concerns about climate action. According to youth groups that participated in this study, the major concerns that inspired action are the history of deforestation in Myanmar, severe droughts in the dry zone, and flooding and regular cyclones affecting the country.

Protests and campaigns

In May 2019, Climate Strike was founded with the aim to raise awareness about climate change, and demand the government to acknowledge that the country is ongoing a climate crisis. On May 24th 2019, Climate Strike led the first Myanmar climate rally, which was held at Maha Bandula Park, Yangon. Subsequently, another rally happened on May 31st in San Chaung, Yangon, where 25 protestors peacefully gathered holding placards reading "Save the Earth" and "No Coal" urging the Myanmar government to wake up to the "climate emergency." One protester shared, "In central Myanmar people

are dying of heatstroke. Yangon is becoming hotter and hotter" (Myanmar Mix, 2019). On September 20th 2019, hundreds of protestors, mainly youth, marched in downtown Yangon. Since the COVID 19 pandemic hit the country in March 2020, no gatherings have been possible, which has pushed Climate Strike to change its communication strategy to be mainly online. Climate Strike does not anticipate to be able to organize future protests soon, until the situation with the pandemic is controlled, and restrictions for gatherings are lifted.

Going beyond protests, a campaign called "Climate Talks" was initiated by Conyat Create in early 2019, organising a series of monthly events in Yangon to create a platform for discussion on climate change coordinated by youth volunteers. Since July 2020, the platform announced a new chapter in Mandalay to further raise awareness about climate change.⁶

Social media

Facebook has become a platform for activists to share information about climate change through various dedicated environmental pages. This reflects the wider internet habits in Myanmar, in which a late stage adoption of smart phones has resulted in a technology culture where Facebook is often equated with the internet (Frontier Myanmar, 2018). As of January 2020, 22 million people were using Facebook in Myanmar, with 86% of the users being aged between 13 and 34 years old (NapoleonCat Stats, 2020). This tool has enabled organisations to increase their sphere of influence from a local level to a more national level. Most Facebook pages of youth-led organisations interviewed counted more than a thousand followers.

One message climate activist movements are spreading on Facebook concerns record temperatures: Yangon recorded 42 °C in April 2019, a new record for the city, with a previous April high temperature listed as 41.1 °C (Al Jazeera, 2019). More recently, the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology recorded a new record temperature on May 9th 2020 in Chauk – Magway Region – of 47.5 °C (Department of Metereology and Hydrology, 2020). As the majority of Myanmar people do not have access to air conditioning, rising temperatures can severely affect the population's health and wellbeing, in particular the elderly.

6 See Conyat Create Climate Talks facebook group for more information: <https://www.facebook.com/YangonClimateTalks>

INTERVIEWS

A. Methodology

The research began with a literature review focused on civil society organisations and their history in Myanmar, as well as the state of research on climate change in Myanmar.

Preliminary online interviews were organised with local NGOs, including Local Resource Center (LRC), Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA), and Myanmar Environment Rehabilitation-conservation Network (MERN). International Non-governmental Organisations (INGO) and UN Agencies were also consulted, including World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Earthrights International, and UNHabitat. Finally, organisations from the private sector that were interviewed include Conyat Create, Spectrum, and the Myanmar Journalism Institute. These interviews laid the foundation for this report's broader understanding of the state of climate activism in Myanmar, before contacting youth-led civil society organisations.

Overall 40 civil society organisations were identified from a literature review, preliminary meetings, and networking. Among those 40 civil societies, 25 were selected based on a set of three criteria, scoring CSOs from 0 to 3 on how much the activities of the CSO are correlated to climate change action, how the organisation is representing youth, and the online footprint of the organisation, in particular on Facebook. Finally, 18 interviews with Youth-led Civil Society Organisations were organised from the 22nd of September to the 2nd of October 2020. Due to challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were arranged online. This method had limitations, such as encountering poor bandwidth connection with interviewees and less opportunity to establish a rapport than a face-to-face interview might have.

The key informant interviews followed a semi-structured approach. Participants were sent questions in advance of the interview, so that they could better prepare their answers, especially as their voice often represented the values and interests of their whole organisation. Interviews were arranged primarily in Burmese language, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English language.

B. Civil Society Organisations profile

Total Civil Society Organisations (CSO) interviewed	18
• Ayeyarwady CSO interviewed	8
• Dry Zone CSO Interviewed	7
• Kayin CSO Interviewed	3
Youth-led CSOs representation	12
Organisations founded in between 2018 and 2020	10 (56%)
Registered CSOs (total)	3 (18%)
Registered Youth-led CSOs	0

Table 1 Civil Society Organisations studied in the research

Among 18 CSOs interviewed, 12 were youth-led, with a high majority coming from university environmental clubs. For the purposes of the research, a youth-led civil society is considered as an organisation that has a majority of board members below or equal to 30 years old. This research found only one youth-led organisation in Myanmar with the terminology “Climate” in its title: Climate Strike. The number of members per organisations ranged from 5 to 100 members. Among the 18 CSOs, 10 of them were founded between 2018 and 2020, demonstrating a large uptick in interest in environmental activism. None of the youth-led CSOs were registered under the Myanmar Association Registration Law. As the sample size of this study is small, those numbers only represent trends and should be considered with caution when extrapolated to the whole country.

Climate change is a complex topic. As no sectors or groups of people are exempt from climate change impacts, it can be challenging to define in Myanmar which organisations play a significant role in tackling climate change mitigation or climate change adaptation. More often, CSOs are addressing a topic that is related to climate change without necessarily making reference to it. For the purpose of this research, topics such as sustainable agriculture practices, climate early warning systems, disaster risk resilience, forest protection, sustainable water management, promotion of reduction fossil fuel extraction (oil, coal, natural gas), and promotion of sustainable energies (solar energy and hydropower) were considered to fall under the umbrella of addressing climate change. These criteria are derived from the Myanmar Climate Change Strategy.



Sign shared during the Climate Strike in Yangon, September 2019

C. Interview findings

1. Understanding of climate change and perceived impacts

General climate knowledge and policy

The term ‘climate change’ was familiar to all CSOs. Most of them were able to acknowledge that climate change was anthropogenic, a concept in line with the global scientific consensus (Cook et al., 2016). Despite this baseline, the causal relationship between the emission of greenhouse gases and climate change did not appear to be well understood. In general, interviewees could often name effects of climate change on the environment, but were somewhat unclear about the sources of the problem.

“I do not think that political parties will focus on environmental protection or climate action. When we read the campaign manifesto of some political parties, we did not see much about environmental protection or climate action.” (Ayeyarwady)

Similarly, CSOs were not familiar with the global governance structure for climate action. New policies, programmes and laws regarding climate change generally pass unnoticed by CBOs and youth-led organisations, suggesting there is a need for better

communication from the government to Myanmar’s youth community. Some activists fear that climate change will not be a focus for the new government, as no wording regarding “climate action” was reported (as interviews were arranged before the national elections).

Perceived climate impacts

“I am from the village Wan Twin, we have not been able to grow paddy for two or three years because there is very little rain.” (Dry Zone)

Myanmar’s CSOs focused on different aspects of climate change: some were concerned with intergenerational impacts, others focused on the history of natural resource exploitation, and still others concerned with the hazards and high temperatures that Myanmar is projected to face under climate change. Many expressed worry that Myanmar’s population is not prepared to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

The most common concerns were the extreme temperatures, in particular in the Dry Zone and Kayin State. CSOs were worried about the population’s ability to manage heatwaves and an associated decrease in agricultural yields. CSOs noted some environmental changes they had already observed, such as warmer winters and more scarce fresh water. In the hot season, streams are reportedly drying up more quickly than usual and groundwater is falling to lower levels,

suggesting some depletion of the water table. Extreme rainfall caused frequent flooding in all three regions surveyed, and villages had to be temporarily evacuated until water receded. Flooding is responsible for a host of other problems too; extreme heavy rainfall increases soil erosion, reduces land fertility, changes the shape of stream beds in particular in hilly areas, and causes high sedimentation in rivers.

One youth-led organisation provided historical context to explain the exploitation of natural resources and the rising GHG emissions in Myanmar. Under military rule, Myanmar was under international sanctions, making it difficult to trade services and products internationally. According to one CSO, this situation increased the appetite of the military government to extract available national resources: oil, coal, natural gas and teak. As a result, environmental degradation was accelerated over several decades, causing forest cover in Myanmar to decline significantly. In turn, this has decreased the land's resilience to extreme weather events.

Some CSOs expressed worries about Myanmar people's ability to cope, especially those whose livelihoods depend on the land. Agriculture remained a central topic due to its exposure to a changing climate, and high level of dependence on rain-fed agriculture for Myanmar farmers. Because of the decreased availability of water, freshwater costs have increased in some instances, adding another financial burden to poor families.

"When I do surveys during my travels, people often suffer from climate change [impacts], but rarely seek out for solutions for mitigation or adaptation. Climate is changing, but the solutions to climate change are not going as fast as they should be." (Dry zone)

There was also a sense that people need more information and technology to be able to adapt to and mitigate climate change locally. CSOs noted that few people know how to properly store rain-water to further use it for agriculture. Equally, communities contribute to greenhouse gas emissions in small ways, but do not have alternatives. For example, CSOs noted that communities practice waste burning or crop residue burning, but rarely know other solutions to stop these practices.

"It's very important that youth engage with climate change because climate change has a huge impact on youth lives" (Dry zone)

It was well understood that climate change will have a greater impact on the youth and the new generations, as they have more years of life remaining on this planet. As greenhouse gases continue to accumulate in the atmosphere, temperatures will continue to rise, unless humanity reaches carbon neutrality. This sentiment is also felt in other parts of the world. A survey of more than 10,000 young people, from Amnesty International, shared at the UN climate talks in Madrid in December 2019, found that four out of 10 young people view climate change as one of the most important issues facing the world.

2. Activities

Activities arranged by environmental groups cover a wide range of topics. For most environmental clubs, activities for the protection of the environment are often directed towards their university campus and students. In general, CSOs with minimal capacity and low membership usually first start using platforms such as Facebook to raise awareness about different environmental issues.

Meteorology

"90% of the students in our university come from families of farmers and their livelihood depends on agriculture. The data on the weather that is available to them is very weak and we wanted to stimulate students who might be interested in meteorology." (Dry Zone)

As in many countries in the world, data from weather stations installed by the government comes at a cost for any organisation or company wanting to use it. By installing their own weather station, youth-led organisations can therefore conduct their own observations in a specific given area. In the Dry zone, one student organisation decided to order a mini weather station to monitor the weather in their city. In addition, the youth-led CSO built a partnership with the company which sold them the weather station, to analyse information on rainfall, temperature, wind speed, and events like thunderstorms for their area

The advent of open source satellite imaging online databases and geographic information systems, such as Google Earth, allow anyone who has the skills to measure a wide range of indicators related to climate change such as temperature averages, rainfall, sea level rise risks, deforestation and reforestation rates, and level of green vegetation (Normalised difference

vegetation index – NVDI), creating new opportunities for youth to participate in research and advocacy. One part of the youth-led CSO's research includes the use of satellite images with the aim to share the information to the public, with an ambition to reduce climate migration.

"We use four websites that use ECMWF models and CMA models (European and Chinese climate monitoring forecast models) and gather data through images. The benefits are that we can be alerted on the weather events and disasters. We wanted to reduce the number of climate refugees due to weather disasters. We also plan to write a research paper on this as well." (Dry Zone)

Air Quality

Before 2019, it was very difficult to have a precise idea of air pollution levels in Yangon. The government had installed sensors for several years, but was not willing to share the readings with the public. This prompted the youth group Air Quality Yangon to conduct further research on the topic, as observable air pollution was evident in Yangon. The research translated into a full size online campaign which reached a large number of residents in Yangon. This campaign was a significant success on the part of the youth-led civil society as the government started to take the situation more seriously and be more transparent. From February 6th 2020, the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology and the Ministry of Information decided to release air quality indexes publicly.

Air pollution is the result of several factors in Yangon such as transportation, manufacturing, coal stoves for cooking, leaf debris, waste and crop residue burning. No study has been able to quantify how much each factor is contributing to air pollution. However, despite some disagreements over the validity of measurements from different stakeholders, this campaign led by youth has been instrumental in changing public awareness. A large portion of the Yangonites now understand the importance of air quality. As of October 2020, Purple Air website is sharing air quality measurements of 11 sensors based in Yangon, and one sensor based in Mandalay.

Forestry

A wide range of environmental student groups took part in tree planting in the past years, either by planting trees in their university campus or in their city. One organisation had an ongoing partnership with a local NGO that provided small trees from their nursery.

"In order to get the trees, we cooperate with another CSO called Natural Green Alliance which provides us with young trees from their own nursery. After that, we work together with teachers from the schools for permissions and areas to plant the trees in." (Dry Zone)

Despite being organised at a small scale, reforestation activities allow members to develop their sense of environmentalism. Reforestation is a critical part of climate change adaptation and mitigation, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation has a targets to reforest 600,000 acres of denuded forest land from 2018 to 2028.

In addition, the local population was encouraged to take pictures of illegal deforestation so that the CSO could share them with the State Forestry Minister and thus discourage the practice. (UNDP Myanmar)

Organic farming

One CSO had a project that included building a greenhouse. The CSO aimed to conduct experiments in organic farming to promote good practices. The organisation explained that in the recent years, Myanmar farmers have been receiving cheap chemical fertilisers from countries like China and Thailand. This has caused farmers to gradually move away from organic farming.

"We want these students to learn about these [organic farming] techniques. When they return to their respective homes they will pass on this knowledge to their families." (Dry zone)

Sustainable waste management

Sustainable waste management was a reoccurring topic among most CSOs, a sign of the efficacy of sustainable waste campaigns such as Clean Yangon campaign organised by non-profit organisations and the private sector in Myanmar in the past years (Myanmar Times, 2018). Several clean-ups and communication campaigns to properly dispose of waste have been arranged in different areas. Some environmental clubs are trying to reduce waste entirely, by banning the use of single-use plastics on campus, ban single-use chopsticks in cantinas, and incorporate a three bins system for waste segregation.



Climate Strike sign, Yangon, September 2019

Communication tools

With multiple lockdowns implemented by the government to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, CSOs have had to adapt their communication strategies as they are no longer able to meet in big groups or organise outdoor advocacy campaigns. Various communication tools have been used to raise awareness such as posting on social media, the creation of videos (informational videos, songs, comical videos etc.), photo contests, printing of pamphlets and flyers, and the organisation of online debates, workshops and trainings.

“During the Covid period, people can use documentaries or Ted Talks to educate themselves on the matter. In Myanmar we have some active groups that translate Ted Talks into Burmese versions. They have translated many climate change related videos.” (Dry Zone)

Most youth-led civil society organisations believe the way forward to a more sustainable world is reached by preserving harmony between all stakeholders in Myanmar, including the government and the corporate sector, inclined to an inter-agency approach to the advocacy strategy. However, a minority advocate for a more radical approach to incite reforms, primarily through the organisation of protests as major environmental international organisations have done in past (Extinction Rebellion campaigns on climate change, Green Peace

campaigns on anti-whaling, etc.). Ultimately, regardless of the advocacy approach chosen, CSOs seek to raise climate change and environmental protection as major priorities on the country’s agenda.

3. Strengths

Despite having minimal experience, youth-led CSOs have genuine strengths when it comes to tackling environmental issues and raise awareness about climate change. First, young people are very passionate about the topics they fight for. Some older activists shared that when they were younger, they had less to lose compared to later on in their life, when they had more responsibilities associated with having children.

“When I was younger I was more motivated, more passionate. We had nothing to lose. We were able to push with much more enthusiasm.” (Dry zone)

Youth groups use technology efficiently to transmit their messages. The study shown that platforms managed by youth are diverse (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Zoom calls) and have been used to raise awareness about climate change. For example, Air Quality Yangon has been particularly active in 2020 and 2019, with a least one post per day on Facebook on average in the past year using personalised animations.



Figure 1: Challenges encountered by youth-led CSOs during interviews by order of difficulty

Furthermore, a case could be made that youth-led community based organisations (CBOs) hold a rather neutral position, as their ultimate aim is to support their local community well-being. This means they are likely to have fewer conflict of interests and hold more trust locally compared to larger organisations.

Finally, as their organisational structure is less rigid and complex compared to local and international NGOs, youth groups display a lot of flexibility and adaptability. This makes it easier for them to adapt their dissemination strategies and activities.

4. Challenges

The most commonly reported challenge was access to financial resources. Although some organisations manage to conduct their activities without any major costs, they are constrained from scaling up in any meaningful way. Several methods are used to generate funding for youth-led organisations. One method consists of asking for donations from family, teachers, and students when money is needed. In addition, most organisations have a membership system where each member pays annually to be part of the group (500ks – 1000ks). However, this method has limitations as an organisation with 100 members annually would only raise around 100,000 mmk for the CSO. Alternatively, products are sometimes sold during fairs or fundraising events to increase the organisation’s treasury.

Only a minority of organisations have successfully applied for funding to finance their projects. Most of the time, young students or professionals do not know how to write grant proposals and do not have the capacity in their organisation to manage funds to the standards of INGOs (keeping receipts, managing budgets, and listing overall yearly costs, etc.). Some organisations prefer not to receive any funds from local NGOs or INGOs, as they want to fully preserve their independence. If they were to accept the sponsorship of a funder, they estimate they would have less leeway in the choice of their activities and how to conduct them. The largest financing received by a youth-led organisation was reported to be \$10,000 USD. Lack of funding has consequences on the material resources of the youth-led CSOs. It is common for youth-led CSOs to lack microphones, speakers, and working space for their members. It also constrains their ability to collect data for their research projects.

Lack of professional experience or certain professional skills is another limitation for youth-led CSOs. One CSO mentioned that without scientific backgrounds, they felt unqualified to advocate that the Government “unite behind science”, and felt out of depth discussing technical issues. Equally, lacking skills like video editing lowers the quality of the outputs that the organisations achieve and demands that members acquire skills on their own time. Maintaining commitment from members can be a challenge, as members are working on a voluntarily basis. People have other professional or academic commitments, limiting their engagement.

“I am the focal person of the contact team, so I have to edit the video. It takes me 6 hours to do a video blog. If I had a professional working on this, it would take 1 to 2 hours”. (Ayeyarwady)

Stakeholder acceptance has been a challenge for multiple CSOs, whether it is the community or the government. Some activists were denied the right to enter Maha Bandula Park in Yangon, on the basis that they did not have a letter from the government or the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC). Amongst interviewees, there was a clear sentiment that the government believes young people are deliberately creating issues for them.

Finally, as many people do not have Wi-Fi access, CSOs encounter difficulties communicating online. Even where they do have Wi-Fi access, poor connectivity interrupts communication. As mobile data expenses are not refunded by CSOs, members from CSOs are personally responsible for these costs. For some members, the costs related to internet data are too high.

5. Women Involvement

“There was a [CSO] policy that stated that there should be a certain number of women to proceed with the project or campaign. However, it has come to a point that it is no longer needed since women are already taking part in it by themselves.” (Kayin State)

“We try to put women in the leading role during the protests.” (Ayeyarwady)

Women’s involvement in the youth-led CSOs included in the study was usually high. In the vast majority of CSOs interviewed, women represented more than 50% of the members. Despite women’s participation, women-led CSOs (with a female president) were still a minority. Only two organisations in the study had a woman as president. One CSO leader believed that women are more invested than men when it comes to environmental projects, but found that men are still presented with more opportunities, such as participation in workshops, trainings, and interviews. One female participant perceived that women leadership seems more common in humanitarian work and religious activities, but found that women are less represented in leadership roles in environmental grassroots movements. This is an area

for further advocacy with CSOs, to ensure women’s participation is not confined to membership but also expanded to leadership roles.

6. Public Policy

In general, most youth-led CSOs do not take part in public policy debates or consultations with the government, which prefers to consult with registered organisations. Youth tend to say that their experience in policy is often too limited to provide a sound opinion or that their parents do not want them to take part in political affairs. Although it is important to have a strong technical understandings of the environment to provide recommendations and advice to the government, youth-led organisations could still be consulted at the first level of consultation, and seek their perspectives.

Furthermore, there can be consequences to activists that protest government policies. The situation between the government and CSOs has been tense in the past. In Kayin State, the population opposed the construction of coal plants in 2017 and demonstrated in the streets. According to CSO key informants that were involved in the protest, some activists were reportedly arrested or had to hide from the authorities after the demonstration.

7. Registration

“I used to work for an organisation over four years, but they just got they registration one year ago, despite being active in Myanmar for 10 years. They registered in the US but not Myanmar because of that complicated relationship between government and CSO.” (Dry Zone)

None of the youth-led civil society organisations in the study were registered under the Association Law. Most organisations do not feel the need to be registered to conduct their activities. The registration process may take a long time. For one CSO that registered in 2012, the application process took two years. The main incentive to do so was to receive funds from international donors, such as UN Agencies. Today, their leadership is constituted of individuals above 30 years old, and they are no longer considered a youth-led organisation.

Some organisations were uncomfortable registering as they would need to integrate personal information such as contact address, phone number and emails in their

application. They also worried that they would not be able to conduct all their activities as the registration process requests the CSO to specify which activities they are undertaking in Myanmar (environment, peace, education, healthcare, etc.). For CSOs that span multiple purposes, they were concerned that recording that their purpose as addressing humanitarian needs may prevent them from working in other sectors such as the environment.

The Registration Law was revised in 2014 to facilitate the process and provide a legal framework for the establishment of both local and international non-

governmental organisations and associations. Registered NGOs have the right to sue, the right to establish funds, the right to collect donations, the right to open bank accounts and the right to own property. The fact that many youth-led organisations decided not to register may prevent them from engaging in state and regional level climate actions which could necessitate greater volumes of funding. Finally, providing funds to unregistered organisations that lack structure can be a challenge for INGOs wishing to support community based organisations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly affecting the population in Myanmar. Extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, difficulty accessing freshwater, and landslides were mentioned several times during interviews as hazards that occur almost every year.

Funding constitutes one of the primary challenge encountered by youth-led CSOs. As youth-led organisations are not registered as an Association, they encounter difficulties scaling up funding and receiving grants from local and international donors. Instead, money is collected through their surrounding communities, limiting opportunities to gather resources to scale up their actions. Women are well-represented in environmental CSOs, but leadership teams are still mostly comprised of men.

Although youth-led CSOs recognize the importance of policies and regulations, they have for the most part not been able to take part in consultations with the government. Despite the new law in 2014 to facilitate the process for CSOs to register as an Association, all youth-led CSOs in the study have preferred to avoid registering.

All CSOs were enthusiastic at the idea of following a training on climate change in the future to improve their understanding of the global climate crisis and better help the communities they represent. The creation of a new CSO network dedicated to climate change would be beneficial for CSOs to share relevant information, disseminate and discuss weather historical data and upcoming forecasted climate extreme events, and update CSOs on the latest mitigation and adaptation policies implemented by the government. Providing further education and capacity building specifically on climate change is a promising avenue for supporting these motivated CSOs, who would like to help their communities adapt to a changing climate.

Recommendations for donors and INGOs:

- » Build on the current momentum and growth of youth-led CSOs, providing training, materials, and flexible financing for engaging in climate activism;
- » Develop a network for youth-led CSOs working on climate activism, so that they may share experiences and build on each others' work in meaningful ways;
- » Nurture women's engagement in CSOs, providing

knowledge on the intersection of gender and climate change and encouraging more female leadership in climate and environmental activism;

- » Support youth-led CSOs to engage in stakeholder consultations for major policy decisions or investments that have implications for the environment, equipping them with the tools and confidence to contribute;
- » Consider providing legal and administrative support for youth-led CSOs wishing to register as an Association;
- » Help connect Myanmar's youth-led CSOs with successes from global climate strike movements, enabling Myanmar's CSOs to adapt global climate activism strategies to fit the Myanmar context and local priorities.

Recommendations for youth-led CSOs:

- » Contribute to a CSO network for Myanmar's youth-led CSOs engaging in climate change activism, trading experiences, setting priorities, and sharing information and knowledge where relevant;
- » Engage when possible in stakeholder consultations with Government or private sector to inform major policy or investment decisions that affect the environment;
- » Elevate women in leadership positions to foster a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to climate action;
- » Create a 'wish list' of topics CSOs require more information about further their mission, and pool resources with other CSOs to strengthen competence in key areas (i.e. how to help disseminate early warnings for disasters, understanding social and environmental impact assessments to engage in stakeholder consultations, the mechanics and science of climate change, etc).

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ANNEX

Annex 1. Interview questions with youth led civil societies

1. What do you understand by Climate Change?
2. Have you or your organization been affected by climate change or natural disasters? If so in which way?
3. What do you view as the main strengths and weaknesses of Myanmar civil society today at addressing climate change?
4. What are the primary objectives with regard to how the organization will address climate change?
5. For the people you represent, what would be the most two important points to address, to cope with climate change?
6. What are your organization's main skill gaps? What is preventing your organization from growing and achieving its strategic objectives?
7. In your opinion, what are the three main obstacles that currently face CSOs in Myanmar?
8. Are there challenges to activity implementation that disproportionately affect women-led organizations?
9. How would you describe CSOs' impact on public policy in Myanmar? Is it substantial, limited, or very limited? What do you view as the two most significant constraints on CSO's ability to have a larger impact on public policy?
10. Who are the stakeholders that are benefiting from your activities, and how many are they?
11. In the past, have you received financial resources to tackle climate change. If so, how have you used them?
12. To what extent do your services achieve measurable climate change adaptation and mitigation results? What are examples of the results?
13. How many active members are involved your organization?
14. How are you communicating and working with other civil societies or civil society networks?

ActionAid Myanmar

No. (1), Win Ga Bar Road
Shwe Gone Daing, Bahan Township
Yangon, Myanmar

Tel:..... +95 1546671 +95 8603142

Fax: +95 1 546671 (Ext:236)

Email: aa.myanmar@actionaid.org

Web: <https://myanmar.actionaid.org>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ActionAidMyanmar/>

act:onaid