



CONFLICT SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS
THANDWE DISTRICT, SOUTH RAKHINE, MYANMAR

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1. Introduction

This report was realized to present the Conflict Sensitivity Analysis, carried out by Istituto Oikos in Southern Rakhine. The analysis aims at assessing the current social, cultural, and religious context as it is perceived by local communities, so to understand the nature of the impact of present interventions. Specifically, the assessment addresses the context where the last project - on Community Forestry (CF) and Community Forestry Enterprises (CFE) opportunities - has been implemented by Istituto Oikos with the financial support of UNDP.

Conflict sensitivity, as commonly defined at international level, is a guiding principle for development projects that are implemented in conflict-affected contexts. The principal objectives of this approach are (a) to understand the context of intervention and its changes, (b) to understand how the programme(s) interacts and influence the context and vice versa, and consequently (c) to construct and adapt the programme(s) so as to minimise the negative effects and maximise the positive results from this interaction (UNDP, 2017).

The need for this assessment comes from the long-standing condition of conflict affecting Rakhine State that has resulted in a deep and multidimensional condition of poverty. The situation is aggravated by the overlap of different fronts of conflict, from the violent attacks against Rohingya Muslim communities, to the conflict between Tatmadaw (National armed forces) and the insurgent armed group, Arakan Army. In this complex scenario, there is the necessity to protect development interventions, as fuel of poverty eradication and tension alleviation, with a continuous confrontation with the socio-political dynamics and their impact on the stability of communities.

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the relation between the project and the context in which it operates, the survey will target the different dimensions of potential instability, mainly: inter-communal relations, which often corresponds to inter-ethnic ones, inter-religious relations, state-civil society relations, and the discriminations, vulnerabilities and conflicts that arise from these interactions.

Currently, the ongoing tensions have not reached the southern part of Rakhine, and specifically the district of Thandwe, where Istituto Oikos projects are being implemented. Moreover, according to local staff testimonies, hardly were project activities affected by socio-political, intercommunal tensions during the past years. In this regard, an explanatory factor for the absence of direct propagation of

conflict and instability in the project area can be seen in the quite homogeneous ethnic composition. According to the latest census reported by the district Forest Department, about 80% of the population is Arakan (Rakhine), while the remaining 20% is composed by Chin and Burmese ethnic groups. The information collected by the survey confirms this factor.

2. Objectives and main research questions

The main objective of the research was to acknowledge the impacts of the present instability of the region in the project area. Direct and indirect beneficiaries of the CFs and CFEs project were interviewed to understand the changes of the context and the overall externalities of the specific intervention. The analysis was conducted through a series of questionnaires, directed to a selected representative sample of the population of target villages. The questionnaire sample was designed in order to comprehend a diversification among the interviewees in terms of age, gender and ethnic and religious community of origin (Annex I). The following sub-groups were identified:

- (a) *women head of households*, who are fundamental subjects for understanding the gender-specific repercussion of the changing context and power dynamics;
- (b) *village chairmen* and *business leaders* as formal and informal leadership figures and representatives of the internal dynamics of power and influence;
- (c) *youth*, of which 50% female, were addressed to understand the new generations' perceptions of intercommunal relations as of the relations with the government and the overarching socio-political condition;
- (d) representatives of *Community Based Organisations* (CBO), of which 50% females.

The methodology for conducting interviews was changed from the intended in-person focus groups to phone interviews, in response to the latest government dispositions during Covid-19 emergency.

The survey was developed around a series of research questions that address the main drivers of instability raised by the current conflicts in Rakhine State. In particular, the questionnaires were intended to investigate on:

1. **Inter-communal relationships** were investigated in order to understand the level of interaction among the different political, social and economic groups. In particular, whether the coexistence of different ethno-religious groups generates tensions that affect specific vulnerable sub-groups.
2. Level of awareness of the community on the current **conflict in the region**, its impact in the area of study and communities' perception of the parts involved and their actions.
3. What is the level of community's **awareness on development programmes** implemented in the area, by INGOs, CBOs and local authorities, and what their opinion about its repercussion on social interactions.
4. What is the idea for a **better future**, the primary needs and hopes of the population and their openness towards further social and religious inclusion.

3. Description of the implementing partner

Istituto Oikos is an Italian non-profit independent organisation, that is active in Myanmar since 2006. Its mission is to contribute to preserve ecosystems and support development projects aimed at promoting conservation through a participated and sustainable management of natural resources in remote rural areas. One of the main driving principles is that preserving the environment and its ecosystem services can effectively increase local communities' development and resilience. The latter is particularly crucial for a country as Myanmar, which detains a high index of exposure and vulnerability to climate change¹.

Oikos work has developed through the years thanks to the strong collaboration with Myanmar Forest Department, local communities, local environmental associations, and Burmese, Italian and international universities. Currently Istituto Oikos works in the Myeik archipelago and in Rakhine State, where it has carried out more than 30 projects in the field of biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihoods, participatory natural resource management, environmental education, and eco-tourism.

In South Rakhine, Oikos has been promoting Community Forestry (CF) projects in cooperation with

¹ ND-GAIN Country Index summarizes a country's vulnerability to climate change and other global challenges in combination with its readiness to improve resilience. See: <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>.

the Myanmar Forest Department and national and international NGOs, and with the support of several public and private donors. Since 2013, the number of registered CFs has increased to 71 CFs encompassing over 20,000 Acres of forest. (EU prop) Forests in Myanmar, and in Rakhine specifically, have been rapidly degrading and so have the livelihoods, food security and tenure security of forest communities. The model of Community Forestry has successfully expanded because it represents a cost-effective and equitable socio-political response to forest loss and tenure rights insecurity, with a strong potential of activating a process of rural economic growth. The support to CFs creation and sustainable management has been accompanied and integrated with activities aimed at promoting the development of local Income Generating Activities (IGAs), based on local production and centered around the role of women. On this regard, 29 women-led groups were established in 2016 following a mobilization campaign and training programs.

4. Findings and Analysis

In this session the main findings will be presented and analysed. The answers for each of the interviewee were organised according to the main research questions. Therefore, the findings will be reported following the same organisation, trying to show the common points and highlighting minor differences in opinion. The overall findings show a homogeneity of responses for almost all the research questions. The most relevant differences that emerged from the survey have been disclosed and will be reported in the analysis below. The main cause of this homogeneity can be found in the condition of non-conflict, which differentiate South Rakhine from its Northern part.

The sample of interviews was composed by 25 people from 17 villages, prioritizing those villages that have been involved in the project activities. The sample was selected in order to comprise different categories of respondents:

- 40% of interviewees are female;
- 24% of the interviewees are representatives of young population, of which 50% are young women;
- 2 women out of the total number were interviewed to represent the voice of ethnic and religious minorities: one woman is Chin and Christian, the other is also Chin and Buddhist.

- 8 respondents are representatives of local CBOs, of which: 3 women from IGAs and 3 women from the local-based NGO RCA; 2 men members of RCA.
- 8 respondents are village chairmen, in representation of the formal leadership in the villages;
- 2 interviews are business leaders, in representation of the informal leadership. One man is in the business of farming, salt production and trading, livestock raising and crab breeding. The other is in the trading business and building business. It was initially planned to interview a monk, in representation of religious leadership. However, it was not possible for them to participate, in accordance to a religious precept that prevents them to express comments on the topic.

1. *Understanding inter-communal relationships: what are ethnic and religious relations within the studied communities; understanding, if it is the case, who is affected from conflictual relations.*

The first series of questions investigated the general context in which the interviewee and its community live. In particular, it was asked to give an overview of the different social, religious and political groups composing the community of reference and what kind of relationships exist between them.

The main variations in responses were obviously related to the ethnic composition within the village and the main political groups of affiliation. The Graphs below show the presence of the different Ethnic, Religious and Political groups in the villages under study, according to the interviewees perception.

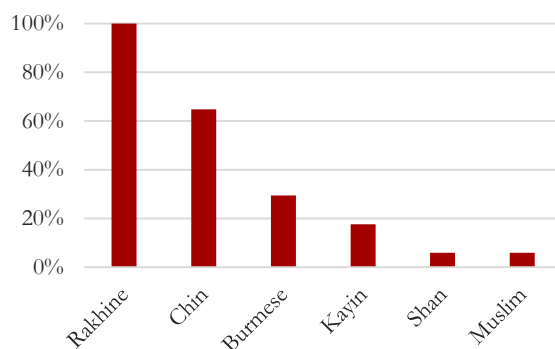


Figure 1. Presence of the different ethnic groups in the villages under study according to interviewees' perceptions

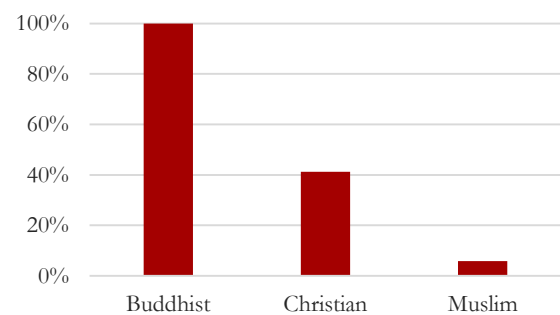


Figure 2. Presence of the different religious groups in the villages under study according to interviewees' perceptions

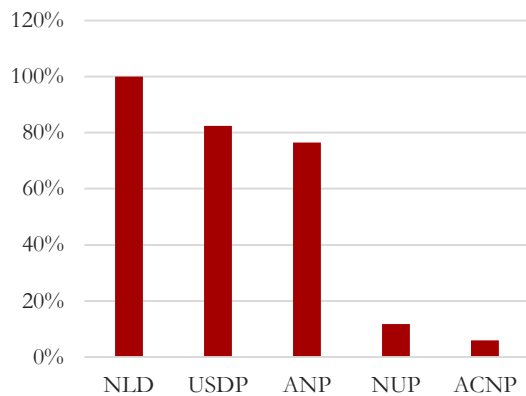


Figure 3. Distribution of the different political groups in the villages under study according to interviewees' perceptions

As it can be observed from the data, Rakhine ethnic and Buddhists are the dominant groups in all the villages, Chin and Christian are present in some villages, and after Kayin, Burmese and Muslim that represent the most minoritarian groups, present in only few communities. Forms of strong association between the members of the same religious group exist, especially for Buddhist people who gather in support of the monks for their needs and for organising religious celebrations in the monasteries.

For what concerns the political groups, NLD and USDP are the main political groups in all the villages in the survey area².

The principal social groups that are recognised by the respondents as active important point of references in the community are:

- youth volunteer groups, helping the communities and the CBOs in different kind of social and development activities;
- school committees;
- Community Forests Users Groups (CFUG) and Community Guardian Groups (CGGs), that have been established within CF projects and support all management and conservation activities, as agroforestry and patrolling against illegal logging and wildlife hunting.

² NLD (National League for Democracy), USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party), ANP (Arakan National Party), ACNP (Acho Chin National Party), NUP (National Unity Party).

All the comments on the interactions between different groups were homogeneous in stating that there is no explicit example of tension and that they often collaborate in economic, social and religious activities. It is very common, for all the interviewees and the members of their community, to have friendly relations with people from other religious and ethnic groups. No relevant difference was registered in terms of gender and age of the respondents.

2. *Understanding, if any, what are the causes of fear and insecurity in the communities under study.*

All the respondents agree on the absence of causes of fear and insecurity in their community. We understand that the responses must be considered in the light of the focal point of the survey, that evolves specifically around the dynamics of interaction among different social, ethnic-religious groups.

3. *Understanding experiences of trust and cooperation between different ethnic and religious groups.*

The totality of respondents agrees on the existence of trust and cooperation among different ethnic and religious groups. Experiences of cooperation are recognised especially in social relations, that include communication and mutual support in everyday activities inside the community, in education and development activities, for which no cases of marginalisation or exclusion exist. Trust and respect are therefore recognised by all the interviewees, in representation of their social and ethnic-religious group of belonging.

The two men involved in business activities and one woman from the IGA group added, to the previously mentioned fields, also business and economic activities as relevant contexts in which trust and cooperation among different groups exist. Finally, two interesting supplements to the responses were noted. 10 people out of 25 (of which half female) emphasized on the importance of continuing in this process of building trust and cooperation (“we have to build trust and cooperation”). 4 people out of this subgroup highlighted the need not to discourage the process of integration with other religious groups, This information revealed an understanding of the external context and the importance of preventing from changes in that direction. Only one interviewee (a male representative of RCA) explicitly mentioned Muslim

religious groups in the answer as part of this process of building mutual respect for building cooperation.

4. *Understanding perceptions towards the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA); Understanding feelings and perceptions over the ongoing conflict; Understanding evaluations of the intervention of local authorities, Rakhine State Government (RSG) and Union Government.*

The general opinion that arises on the perceptions over the current conflict, between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA), is of a desire for the parts to negotiate and find a peaceful agreement, that will put an end to the violence and its consequences on the populations involved. The main reason for condemning the conflict is that it prevents the fulfilment of regional rural development, that is considered by most of the communities to be the priority for Rakhine in this moment. Almost half of the interviewees (47%) revealed no to have a clear opinion on the rights and wrongs of the two sides, but they recognise the role and responsibility of the Tatmadaw to intervene to reach a resolution of the conflict, together with the Union Government. The means of interventions were not discussed. The other half more openly condemned the violent approach of the AA and recognises the actions of Tatmadaw as coherent with their public authority and responsibility to protect the country and its citizens.

For what concerns the evaluations over local authorities' and Rakhine State Government (RSG) intervention in the region, 7 people out of 25 - of which the majority are women and young women - claimed not to be fully satisfied with their work. They believe that the main weaknesses are in managing the priorities in the area (development activities and prioritization of poor communities and minorities are of main concern). Only 4 respondents declared to have no particular opinion on the issue. The composition of this latter subset of responses, in terms of gender age and group, is very diversified, therefore not significantly relevant.

5. *Understanding, if any, causes and impacts of movement restrictions.*

None of the respondents is being affected by movement restrictions since Southern Rakhine is not subjected to them as it happens in the North. No further comment has been given on the topic.

6. *Understanding local perceptions of UNDP and of CBOs' work in the area.*

Interviewees were asked about their level of awareness of UNDP work in the area and in general about what kind of activities local CBOs are implementing to improve communities' living conditions. More than half of the interviewees (64%) replied to have heard about UNDP and its work for development in Rakhine. Almost all the respondents were exhaustive in giving information about the sectors of intervention of CBOs in the territory, mainly transportation, small business, health care, education, environmental and wildlife conservation activities.

7. *Understanding prospects of openings for the future: how a better future would look like; what are the feelings about an opening of peaceful coexistence with Muslim communities.*

When asked to imagine the characteristics of a better future, all the interviewees insisted on the importance of improvements in every sector in which the life of their communities evolves: social, economic, health, education, and environmental sustainability. Moreover, it is believed by all the respondents that the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups is an essential condition for a desirable future scenario.

However, disagreements arose when they had to respond specifically about future openings of peaceful coexistence for Muslim communities. The main focus was put on the need for recognising their citizenship so to officially affirm their rights and duties to respect the laws and to begin a process of respect and trust consolidation with local people. For the majority of respondents this scenario is possible in the future. The primary responsibility for this to happen is given to the Myanmar National Government. 6 people, of which 4 women, also included local people, local authorities and religious leaders as fundamental actors for this achievement.

Only 3 interviewees, two chairmen and one woman, declared not to be open to the possibility for Muslim communities to travel freely in Rakhine State, and to have access to the same hospitals, schools, and markets as everyone else. The main reason is a feeling of distrust.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The survey carried out for this Conflict Sensitivity Analysis has revealed important factors to be taken into consideration for future steps of development programmes in South Rakhine. The initial perception of a significant difference in the level of conflict between North and South, where Oikos projects are implemented, was confirmed by the survey. However, the current intensification and unpredictability of the conflict in North Rakhine lead to the necessity of monitoring the distribution of its effects in the entire state.

The sample of interviewees was chosen among the villages Oikos has been working with in the last years. The long-lasting relationship with local communities allowed to conduct the survey with respect to the sensitivity of the topic, and despite the phone interviewing methodology. The level of willingness to respond varied according to the subject, but it mainly revealed an attitude of openness and availability towards the interviews. This is because in all the cases the relation to the violence of the conflict is not direct and the feeling of peaceful coexistence in the communities of the study area is widespread.

In addition to the absence of conflict and restrictions affecting the population of South Rakhine, the general scenario that emerged from the survey is of a shared sense of integration and cooperation within communities and between different social, religious, and ethnic groups. The significant predominance of Rakhine ethnic groups and Buddhists does not imply any kind of marginalisation or discrimination of other ethnic and religious groups. The totality of respondents agreed on the positive level of integration and cooperation in different sectors of their lives: from economic activities to religious celebrations. Not only they are satisfied with the current equilibrium in the area, but they also expressed the willingness to intensify the processes of building mutual trust to prevent the negative direction that is affecting the North. This discourse, for most interviewees, was valid with reference to

Muslim communities too.

The respondents' perceptions towards the parts involved in the conflict show a big predominance to condemn it, with Arakan Army seen as the more responsible for its violent nature. The consensus is high in attributing to the Tatmadaw and local and national authorities most of the responsibilities to protect the country and to peacefully end the conflict. The interesting element that emerged from this set of questions is the priority that was given by all the interviewees to the development projects in the area, that, after the death of innocent people, are the more affected by the context of conflict in Rakhine. To notice this element and to observe that the level of awareness of INGO interventions in the area is not very high, lead to important considerations. The motivation for implementing development projects with a high participation and consensus from local population, in a situation of inter-communal cooperation and peaceful coexistence, are very positive indicators. At the same time, it is of extreme importance to build continuous dialogue with local communities and that every layer of the population is represented, in terms of age, gender and social and ethnic religious minority. The survey was of great utility to grasp a general overview of the current scenario in the target area, but the close contact with the communities and long-term observation are able to reveal socio-cultural details that hardly emerge during direct interviews.

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