

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Collaborating and Adaptive Programming to Better Understand Rumor Management and Prevent Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar

Vanessa Corlazzoli, Maneshka Eliatamby, Isla Glaister, Laura Ochoa, and Ah Yo

Search for Common Ground



Rumor Management in Myanmar. Search for Common Ground Myanmar.

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

For many decades, an oppressive military junta in Myanmar imposed severe restrictions on public access to information. This forced the public to rely on traditional methods of communication and learning; through personal accounts and hearsay. As a direct result of the country's political transition to democracy in 2012, Myanmar experienced increased access to information, freedom of speech, assembly, and association. These freedoms have played an important role in the empowerment of Myanmar's civil society. However, the opened access to information and communication has also presented challenges, including a notable rise in hate speech spread across methods of communication, including social media.

Hate speech and slander have catalyzed incidents of inter communal violence (ICV)¹ across the country. Such volatile instability and violence between communities has the potential to destabilize Myanmar's continuing and delicate transition. Desiring to prevent violence and support a fragile peace process, communities have expressed the need for support on analyzing and managing information flows.

Search for Common Ground (Search), implemented the pilot project "Rumor Management to Mitigate Inter-Communal Conflict in Myanmar", funded by the United States Agency for International Development's Office of Transitional Initiatives (USAID-OTI), with a local implementing partner, Myanmar Information Development Organization (MIDO), who had significant experience in ICT developments in Myanmar. Building on Search's conflict assessments, the project was designed for, and implemented in, Mandalay Division and Shan State; identified as hot spots for inter-communal violence.² The pilot aimed to minimize **the impact of rumors and manipulated information as triggers for violence in Myanmar.**

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

The project was designed in the aftermath of a number of violent outbreaks triggered by photographs or rumors³. For example, in 2012, a rumor about an incident between a Buddhist and a Muslim⁴ ignited a spate of inter-communal violence in Rakhine State. In 2014, rumors that a foreign aid worker had inappropriately handled a Buddhist flag in Sittwe in Rakhine State resulted in organized and targeted mob violence against INGO workers and buildings in Sittwe. Several incidents of anti-Muslim violence sparked by rumors or photos have killed and displaced thousands, triggering a humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State and resulting in the segregation of Rakhines and Muslims in camps. These are not isolated events, with similar incidents having taken place in Mandalay, Meikteila, and Lashio, Shan State. Within this context, there had been little research conducted around the triggers of violence. As such, certain communities recognized the urgent need to assess and address information flow in these areas.

Drawing on thorough global experience, Search identified tested approaches to rumor management. Recognizing the newly emerging field and role of social media, the project sought to understand and respond to global patterns of rumor and manipulated information that could potentially to trigger violence. The Myanmar staff eagerly designed initiatives based on lessons learned and best practices from similar global initiatives.

¹ Inter-communal violence or inter-communal conflict is specifically used to describe violence/conflict that takes place between different groups living in the same state, rather than across nation-state borders

² Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for Assistance, Mercy Corps by Adapt Research and Consulting, April 2014

³ In Rakhine, 2012, in Meikteila 2013 and Lashio in 2013.

⁴ "New Mandala, Beyond Bigotry: Unraveling Ethnic Violence in Myanmar", 19 December 2013, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/12/19/beyond-bigotry-unravelling-ethnic-violence-in-rakhine/> Max Beauchamp, (Accessed August 27, 2014).



As Search recognizes the need to localize any approach - especially in Myanmar, a country of complex ethnic, political, social and religious dynamics – the project embedded Search’s reflective practice approach throughout the implementation process. Space was intentionally created within the project design to steer implementation decisions based on evidence and collaborative processes.

The project’s theory of change proposed that “If community influencers, empowered by knowledge and collaborative relationships, find platforms for action, they will create spaces to challenge information, stereotypes and belief systems and penetrate echo chambers by injecting positive responses. As a result, the impact of rumors and manipulated information on inter-communal violence and hatred will be reduced”

The project included several key components of collaborating, learning, and adapting:

- *Collaborative Research & baseline:* While there is evidence that rumors have caused inter-communal violence, there was little documentation to corroborate this. As such, the initial phase of the pilot project included in-depth interviews enabling rigorous learning during the research phase that informed the entirety of the project;
- *Learning and Addressing the issue:* Until Search carried out its pilot project, rumors and manipulated information had been largely unaddressed in conflict transformation efforts in Myanmar.⁵ As such, little knowledge existed on the efficacy of using rumor management to address the issues in the local contexts. The research was important to learn about the issue and understand flow of information before implementing;
- *Adapting programming to the needs of key community influencers:* The project used the research phase as an opportunity to identify, engage with, and train key community influencers who would play critical roles in information management. It adapted its programming to fit the needs of the influencers based on consultation and collaboration.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

Building on existing programs: The project was embedded in Search’s wider inter-communal violence prevention strategy – targeting 1) low hanging fruits (e.g. trainings) 2) helping constituencies find peace and 3) providing input into national mechanisms. Designed as a three staged process, the first phase of the project included in-depth collaborative research to examine the nature of inter-communal violence in the targeted areas, followed by reflective practice and learning in the form of dialogue sessions with Key Community Influencers (KCI), and finally an adaptive program design.

The overall goal of the pilot initiative was **to minimize the impact of rumors and manipulated information as triggers of violence in Myanmar.** Project implementation was tailored accordingly, specific to the needs identified in the research. This

⁵ Joseph G. Bock, *The Technology of Non-Violence*, The MIT Press, Harvard, 2012



ensured that the needs of the population were taken into account in project design. Regular intervals of analysis and learning of conflict dynamics throughout the project timeframe improved implementation. Trust-building and local partnership were seen as key in supporting conflict transformation throughout the project. The overall CLA approach ensured proper adaptation to local context nuances, ensuring local ownership, efficacy and sustainability.

Collaborating to Improve Research: The in-depth research served to support the project's design. Thus, there was targeted focus on establishing a baseline understanding of the situation in target areas, and enabling the project team to build relationships, identify key community influencers, and start conceptualizing potential project activities relevant to the context. Although led by a research consultant, the process was developed and undertaken by Search's project implementation team, rather than a separate set of researchers.

In a collaborative learning approach, the team workshopped and designed data collection tools for each of the targeted areas, including information/briefing sheets for the researcher; guiding questions for key informant interviews (KIIs); planned sessions for focus group discussions (FGDs); a short note format for note-taking in interviews/FGDs, and a data entry tool for data collation following interviews/FGDs.

An international consultant with more than five years of local Myanmar experience, and Search's project team conducted fieldwork for a total of 4 weeks. 19 focus group discussions and 37 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) took place in Amarapura, Mandalay, and in Lashio, Shan State. The interviews were inclusive of Bamar Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Bahai, as well as mixed ethnicities. Focus groups also included a range of male and female day laborers, bus drivers, civil society activists, journalists, business people and religious and other community leaders.

As a result, the research thoroughly mapped community information management networks and channels, identified new stakeholder groups, and confirmed assumptions as well as conflict history in selected locations. A debrief and analysis workshop with the project team followed each research trip, to construct research findings, extract key lesson, refine the data collection process, and adapt for the next phase.

Adaptive Programming: As a result of the dialogues and trust built in each community with key community influencers, the project successfully achieved the following:

- Identified potential Community Information Management (ICM) members;
- Support and elaborated on an initial committee's institutional design for goals, target groups, structure, working methods and potential outreach activities (beyond the original objective of the project)
- Informed the next phase of the project in training needs such as the inclusion of ICT skills training to the planned media literacy, conflict transformation and rumor management trainings.



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Finally, oriented to strengthen skills of the KCIs to reduce the impact of rumors and information manipulation in their communities, this phase of the project was designed primarily on the findings of the research, emphasizing the importance of learning and adaptation as core principles of project implementation.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

Research was conducted on Muslim-Buddhist inter-communal conflict in one urban and one peri-urban area: Lashio, the largest town in Shan state, and Amarapura, a former capital on the outskirts of Mandalay. Some challenges and unexpected outcomes encountered through implementation of the CLA activity include:

- **Political context:** Since research was conducted just before and after Myanmar's controversial national election, it avoided direct lines of questioning on sensitive topics. This affected the extent to which the research could produce an in-depth conflict analysis.

Similarly, acknowledging that types of information shared and the channels for it might differ before and after the election - and that community tensions might rise and fall during this time - the research team decided; rather than conducting 10 days' consecutive research in each target area, it would make return visits to the same target areas, pre- and post- the general election.

- **Targeted areas:** As a pilot initiative, two initial target areas were selected - Chan Aye Thar Zan, Mandalay City, Mandalay Division and Lashio, Shan State; encompassing relevant criteria (history of violence; multi-ethnic and religious dividing lines; prevalent economic hardship among ethnic or religious communities etc.). As a result of the research process, the township of Amarapura, (outside of Mandalay), emerged as the neuralgic area in intercommunal violence triggered by rumors and misinformation, becoming the main target area for Implementation.
- **Inclusion:** The ability to select the most diverse range of interviewees was limited, as the project was dependent upon existing contacts provided through networks of local fixers. For example, no meetings with any members of the religious nationalist organization MaBaTha in either Mandalay/Amarapura or Lashio could be arranged. In Amarapura, only two Muslims could be interviewed. In Lashio, only one member of the Chinese community participated in the research phase.
- **Information Management:** It was challenging for the researchers to verify information given in interviews – there are few official information sources and the



sensitivity of information makes it difficult to approach government officials to interview them on these topics. Time was also a limiting factor. None of the information on which analysis was drawn from was fact checked, although it was corroborated by different sources. This meant that we too were relying on unverified information to build the picture of the conflict history in Amarapura and Lashio.

The first phase of the project, in-depth research and dialogue sessions used the following resources to support trust-building between the KCIs, persons from different political, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds and hard to reach populations:

- The activities extended over a period of three (3) months out of a total of seven (7) months of project implementation, absorbing around 40% of staff time, in accordance to the project's timeline.
- Collaborative research and other CLA processes consumed 20% of projects financial resources
- An international consultant with 5 years of expertise researching on conflict in Myanmar, and fluent in Burmese was brought into the project as a lead researcher.
- An original target of 36 persons extended reach to over 9000 in each target area.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The CLA approach embedded in this project had three significant impacts.

First, the research findings in targeted areas demonstrated that rumors create an enabling environment for violence, and that people believe rumors as security situations become increasingly tense. The research validated the project's conceptual framework and participatory research adapted the project implementation (Phase II and III) by:

- Identifying specific areas most at risk of intercommunal violence;
- Identifying key trusted information outlets across media;
- Providing invaluable opportunity for the project team to learn from the communities; understand the conflict drivers, community concerns, and build key relationships.

Second, the collaborative nature of dialogue and information analyzed by the community meant that 90% of the recommendations from the dialogue process were incorporated into the project, including:

- Work numerous local networks to verify information and engage with key power-holders: (local authorities, religious leaders);
- Form Community Information Management Committees (CIM) and run a CIM Network in Amarapura and Lashio;
- Establish criteria to identify focal points, including youth, in both communities and appoint them to help manage the rumors.



Finally, the program was strengthened by the evidence-based and community recommendations. A flexible and adaptable program led to the following unexpected achievements:

- Community Information Management Committees (CIM) training activities for youth in Lashio and all age groups in Amarapura;
- 3500 leaflets regarding news and rumors published and distributed by the CIM in Amarapura Township and 5000 leaflets in Northern Shan State;
- CIM-Amarapura, self-named, 'Taung Tha Mann Network' earned high recognition for their work and was invited by the Chief Minister of Mandalay along with political parties and CSOs to cooperate with government.
- Sharing and Learning Workshop conducted with both CIMs;
- Both CIMs created Facebook pages for sharing news and cross learning purposes between the committees and sustainability plans.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

Search and its partners employed a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that mainstreamed collaboration, learning and adaptation across conflict transformation and ICT. The M&E system applied an integrated approach combining multiple tools with target groups at the individual and community level, resulting in a holistic and inclusive strategy including:

- **Research on sources and mapping channels of rumors:** The research identified specific indicators related to the project goal, objectives, and results, serving as a baseline study.
- **Ongoing monitoring and partner meetings:** Search and partners developed templates to help monitor output and outcome data. All program staff was tasked with filling out the forms at the end of each event. SFCG and partners held regular meetings to ensure participatory self-evaluation, reflection on the progress made, and quality of programmatic inputs. M&E team collected lessons learned and shared key data during the meetings.
- **Site visits:** The DM&E Coordinator and partners visited project communities and held semi-structured interviews with participants of the project.
- **Pre and post-tests:** SFCG and partners administered a set of carefully developed pre- and post-test questions before and after the training to measure knowledge and attitude change among the training participants around issues related to rumor management and violence reduction. The M&E unit reviewed, analyzed, and shared the pre-test results with the program team and the trainer to inform future trainings.
- **Final Evaluation:** In order to ensure transparency and independence, SFCG conducted an external evaluation of the project based on USAID's standard evaluation policies and practices. The final evaluation used a mixed approach and methodology, along with a rumor trend mapping by the local community using a participatory approach. The evaluation targeted community residents, including both participants and non-participants. It drew lessons and gauge results of the project.



What were the most important lessons learned?

All aspects of the project complemented themselves, which resulted in important achievements. This was due entirely to the navigation of the project to each nuance of research and reflection. Key lessons from the pilot which will be implemented in future rumor and information management programming include:

- Further research is needed, especially on root causes of inter-religious tensions in Myanmar;
- Implementation based on extensive research by project teams supports trust building, reflective learning, community ownership, targeting and multiplier effect of results;
- Word-of-mouth as a key channel of communication and information sharing needs to be incorporated into program design in Myanmar;
- Building upon existing local capacities strengthens local resilience and ensures local ownership, efficacy and sustainability;
- Reaffirming assumptions and identifying opportunities. For instance, there is a thirst for learning on conflict transformation, rumor management and especially ICT among the local communities;
- The project evaluation recommended the pilot to scale up activities in existing and other areas that are hotspots for violent conflict;
- TOTs for CIM committees to support replication will support wider sustainable impact;
- Nuances of local context - localised research informing project inception that includes conflict assessment should be structured into all programming;
- Strengthen Community Resilience to potential trigger rumors - Build on what is working - forces for peace exist in all communities, research should identify these and build on what's working;

Community education – there is a thirst for learning, for conflict transformation, rumor management and especially ICT. ICT can be used as a leverage to bring diverse stakeholders together. Education should support youth, especially in schools and universities and through various adult education formal and non-formal educations.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Focusing on building a network of key people across dividing lines, the project team used participatory research methods, a-posteriori dialogue sessions, tailored capacity building, cross learning, and periodical mentoring, to ensure the pilot's intended outcome on impact and ownership was met and exceeded.

Two active and engaged Community Information Management Committees (CIMC) were organically formed in both targeted areas. This degree of ownership has resulted in the CIMCs developing sustainable plans beyond the project time frame. These communities are active and work to resolve conflict peacefully while managing rumors and lack of information effectively.



By conducting participatory research, interpreting results through dialogue and in collaboration with all key stakeholders, and adjusting program based on evidence, Search and its partners was able to help build more resilient communities.

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.



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