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Evidence-based Policymaking in Myanmar?

Considerations of a post-conflict development dilemma

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| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Structure of the paper | 2 |
| Method | 3 |
| Section 1: The central challenge of the debate on evidence-based policy | 3 |
| The three steps of producing evidence-based policies | 4 |
| The nature of policy-relevant knowledge | 6 |
| Section 2: Meaning and reality of research and evidence in Myanmar | 6 |
| The meaning of evidence | 7 |
| The relationship between research and policy-making | 8 |
| The reality of evidence in Myanmar | 11 |
| Section 3: Actors seeking evidence | 12 |
| Knowledge actor government | 13 |
| Unpacking the role of the state..... | 14 |
| Knowledge actor: civil society | 15 |
| Government/ civil society interactions..... | 16 |
| International knowledge actors | 17 |
| Section 4: Producing and using evidence for policy | 18 |
| Current methods of research | 19 |
| Using research for policy | 22 |
| Conclusion: Myanmar and evidence-based policy | 243 |

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Mareike Schomerus and Hakan Seckinelgin

Introduction

With a few months to go to Myanmar's national elections, a further spotlight has been shone on the country's political transition and developments since the groundbreaking national elections of 2010. The past five years have seen a tremendous change in the country, leaving citizens and analysts both hopeful and sceptical about the direction and sustainability of such rapidly-paced change (Jones 2014, Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2010). How to support what is perceived as positive change is a concern within the international development community now increasingly engaged in Myanmar, often operating with extremely limited information. This means that assumptions on how Myanmar's path might look are often based on seemingly similar experiences elsewhere. However, what is made less explicit is that international actors contribute to the changing political landscape in many ways. One topic of discussion that has been made more prominent through the increased presence of international development actors and their experiences and foci elsewhere has been how to approach issues of transition and development through evidence-based policies. Implicit in this is an expression of the need for more information; further, basing policies on evidence is broadly expected to lead to improvement and transparency. But is pushing for better evidence in the policy-making process an obviously beneficial approach for Myanmar?

The notion of basing policies on evidence has been a prominent one in development circles over the past few years; the emerging debate in Myanmar on the subject is thus not surprising. Here, the debate on using evidence for policy was refocused through the shock of cyclone Nargis in 2008. International humanitarian help after Nargis marked the beginning of an opening of Myanmar. Increased international engagement, with many processes of negotiation, blockade and engagement with international actors, occurred in parallel with internal political changes (Seekins 2009, Stover and Vinck 2008). Having been devastated by the cyclone and local organisations emerged, or became more prominent, inadvertently creating or strengthening a new set of civil society actors in the country (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2008). The importance of using information to plan programming was foregrounded.

Although basing policies on evidence now seems to be a well-established approach in international development, the approach does not provide a clear path towards improving development outcomes. It often remains unclear what type of evidence can be used to develop policies or how such evidence can be gathered. Through what process policies based on evidence will create a more balanced and less polarised transition is opaque. Framing the debate about the usefulness of evidence-based policies for Myanmar as part of a broader, seemingly internationally accepted trend in policy-making overlooks that basing policies on evidence is not a straightforward process. Evidence-based policies do, in fact, require a moment of evaluating information and elevating it to evidence, or downgrading it to refutation; they also need information in the first place. Evidence-based policies thus do not replace political choices with more neutral processes.

Whether developing policies only if they can be based on existing information is a realistic and sustainable approach is a broader question—albeit one that is of particular relevance to Myanmar, where access to power plays a large part in what information is available and to whom. The push for better evidence and better policies in Myanmar’s transition expresses a genuine need for better information. It is indeed an urgent priority to better understand the country and to establish a system in which decisions made by those governing are more transparently linked to either broader strategies or the welfare of the population. However, such aims too easily overlook the reality of Myanmar today. The country is in a situation of a difficult transition requiring negotiation and compromise, both of which are challenging to combine with basing policies on evidence alone—the transition is, after all, uncharted territory and cannot simply be guided by evidence gathered in different contexts. Furthermore, transitions require a willingness to sequence attention to particular issues that might prove problematic if an issue can only be tackled once sufficient evidence exists.

These challenges and contradictions might invite a complete dismissal of the notion of evidence-based policies for Myanmar. It is easy to judge the approach as one that has been imported—together with many other development norms—with the prominent arrival of international actors. The situation in Myanmar is more nuanced than that, primarily because the country's history has created a particular sense of how information is created and used to support political choices. The political experience inside and outside the country amongst advocacy groups, diaspora and dissidents has been one of having to battle government control of information while also constructing information in a particular way. National actors are currently particularly sensitive towards debates on knowledge production and information. The diversifying landscape of political and development actors in the country is thus actively seeking knowledge that challenges national received wisdom and international norms and their applicability. At the same time, they are aiming to influence policy and the broader direction of the country's changes. Radical approaches to evidence-based policy are thus not helpful. Embracing or dismissing the notion does not do justice to the delicate relationship between information, policy, change and understanding in Myanmar's fracturable and powerful transition.

Structure of the paper

To examine the complicated relationship between information, information actors, debate and implementation in Myanmar today, this paper is divided into four sections. The first section sets out the three challenges of the reality of basing policies on evidence; section two breaks down each challenge in the context of Myanmar. The third section looks at the practices and interests of different knowledge actors. In section four we discuss what methods they use to produce knowledge and how they employ such knowledge. The conclusion summarises the emerging tensions between Myanmar’s history, the current process of transition, and the push for evidence-based policy. In all sections, our research focuses on the intersections of how evidence is understood and the patterns of behaviour that emerged during the prolonged conflict that frame the production and use of evidence.

Method

This paper is based on 25 qualitative interviews conducted over a period of two weeks in late 2014. Some interviews were held with multiple respondents, meaning that we interviewed more than 40 people in total. Respondents were assured anonymity since many had expressed concerns about talking openly. We conducted seventeen interviews with Burmese organisations with Burmese respondents in English. Sixteen interviews were with international representatives of international organisations. Two interviewees were foreign nationals working in organisations established in Myanmar. Not all interviewees are quoted directly, but the broader conclusions are derived from all interviews.

Section 1: The central challenge of the debate on evidence-based policy

In recent years, national and international debates on evidence and evidence-based policy have become a prominent part of policy-making considerations (Cartwright and Hardie 2012) (Teele 2014). Policy actors within international development—for example, the UK Department for International Development or the World Bank—have shown an increased interest in evidence-based policy. Behind this move lies the hope that rooting development interventions in evidence might improve their effectiveness (Cohen and Easterly 2009, Rodrik 2009) (Deaton 2010). Academic enterprises have become important players, notably the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Within the academic realm, the move towards evidence—or towards *better* evidence—relates to a drive towards an improved knowledge base so that policies can be made and implemented more effectively and efficiently (Banarjee and Duflo 2010). The subject areas of development economics, health, and education have all experienced new procedures that first aim to develop or provide evidence and then to support policy making (Jens, Kling, and Mullainathan 2011). It is from these areas of economics, health and education that definitions of what is meant by policy-relevant evidence are drawn. However, exactly how the link between evidence and policy is supposed to work remains crucially unarticulated. How uptake of evidence—putting information of one kind into a practice of another kind—can occur remains unclear. Consequently, research into the link between the production of evidence and the implementation of policies based on a particular piece of evidence remains crucial.

There are different ways of thinking about evidence. Particularly among the actors mentioned, a prominent image suggests that evidence provides sturdy scaffolding for a particular policy, or advocacy for its implementation. Thus, evidence seems to set out scientific reasons as to why a policy needs to be implemented. In this context, evidence is usually debated at the stage when it is being produced. Once research methods are approved and evidence is produced using those methods, what is delivered is expected to become grounds for policy implementation. Such a notion of evidence differs significantly from how evidence is broadly used in law: in the legal context, conflicting evidence is used to contest or argue for a case (Lambert 2009).

Arguing for a good knowledge base for specific policies or policy fields to support effective policies is an uncontroversial move. Consequently, it is not a challenging suggestion that evidence is needed to make policies. In fact, the notion of using evidence to make policies is now so entrenched that the proposal that policies can be drawn up through other processes is often met with surprise. However, what occurs in what seems like common-sense

considerations is a transposition of information and knowledge with evidence, meaning that these terms are used interchangeably. These three categories are related, but they are not the same thing. Their differences arise from the intentional activity of seeking evidence that allows a conclusive act, meaning that an action can be based on such evidence.

Discussions about evidence-based policy come with three complications that are often overlooked in a more casual consideration of the usefulness of basing policies on evidence. These complications manifest themselves in three different components of seeking evidence:

- a) The nature of actors who seek evidence;
- b) how they seek evidence in a particular policy field;
- c) how they use evidence for the implementation of policies.

The essence of what makes the debate on evidence-based policies challenging is to be found within these three components, within the dispositions and methods of the evidence production and implementation processes.

The three steps of producing evidence-based policies

Actors rely on evidential claims to justify their policy focus, but these evidential claims are not as rooted in an open market of ideas, possibilities and experiences as they might seem. This realisation is particularly important in the context of Myanmar as it serves as a reminder that the push for evidence-based policies does not automatically create a new scenario; instead what might occur is a continuation of what exists. With this in mind, three steps of the process need particular consideration. Step one involves the actors who produce or use evidence. Step two is how they seek evidence, followed by step three which is how they use it in implementing policies. These three steps allow a better disaggregation of each component of the process in which evidence is sought, highlighting the component's unique challenge and its role in predetermining how the next step is taken.

The first step is a claim made by a policy actor of the need for evidence. These claims do not come out of nowhere, but rather they often shroud the interests and standpoints of a policy actor in a particular policy area. A claim for the need for evidence is often linked to the political circumstances of the claim-maker, including their organisational mandates to have a role in a given policy field. Seeking evidence thus denotes that an actor stakes an interest claim. What this inevitably means is that the mandate, as well as political interests and positions, provides an interpretive framework within which the development of evidence is situated. This framework makes a distinction between information or data on the one side and evidence on the other. Since any information or data—existing or yet to be produced—is judged by the interpretative framework of interests and politics; it is shaped in such a way that it can be used as the supporting evidence needed to act in a given policy field.

The second step is the process of producing evidence. This step is concerned with methods; it is about how to gather or structure information so that it can serve convincingly as evidence that justifies action. Examples of this second step include methods designed to show the effectiveness of particular policies in producing the expected results. Considerations

that allow for a comparison of different policy tools to assess their comparative advantage in delivering the policy more efficiently in a given policy field are prominent in this second step. In public policy, the approach has increasingly been to borrow from medical sciences and economics in using field experiments. These are supposed to show which interventions work. This methodological tendency also creates a distinction between quantitative and qualitative research in producing policy relevant knowledge. Whether, however, evidence drawn from field experiments is generalisable for other sites, situations, even countries, remains a challenging question.

The third step is the use of policy justified by evidence developed or used by a policy actor. As noted above, the nature of a policy actor shapes how the need for evidence is framed. It determines ways of seeking such evidence and is a crucially influential factor in how actors use evidence when implementing a policy. Policy actors on the international stage, often performing in multiple countries—for example, international organisations or international NGOs—tend to work with organisation-wide policy frameworks for implementation. In addition, they often have best practice guides that help in-country implementation of an international policy.

The three steps outlined here are interlinked. They determine how organisational interests and mandates frame the policy orientation and particular focus on issues. This happens before any evidence has been produced or an open question has been asked. The three steps serve as a reminder that the search for evidence-based policy is not simply about evidence or policies: it is also about interest, mandates, methods and wanting to show success. The concern with methods is of particular importance. Shifting the debate towards what particular type of information is considered valid in the evidence-based policy process often obscures the bigger problem that information or data alone does not create evidence. As the three steps outlined above have shown, labelling particular knowledge as evidence signifies that a particular interpretive framework has been applied; the framework is relevant for the work of an actor seeking evidence. In other words, the evidence label gives the impression that the knowledge implicit in the evidence is incontrovertible. In reality, when policy-makers present evidence what is communicated is a reflection of a pre-existing policy interests.

The nature of policy-relevant knowledge

The three steps of producing evidence-based policies outlined above highlight the need to focus on the nature of policy relevant knowledge. What kind of knowledge do policy makers need? What kinds of methods are most relevant for policy making; what are the ways in which knowledge deemed relevant for policy is produced? Can what is presented as evidence be generalised across the policy field and for policy making in that field? These are pertinent questions that are often overlooked in considerations of basing policy on evidence as a technical process. A view of this process as a technical issue focuses on methods of data gathering and on questions of how to disseminate data to decision-makers most effectively by spotting windows of opportunity to influence.

Different policy fields are shaped with different needs and aims; also, different policy actors working in different socio-political and cultural contexts have different needs and aims. It is crucial to ask at any given point in the process who is seeking evidence. For what purpose is evidence being sought? Who are the target groups for a policy that is being developed? How

is the target group included in the evidence production? Does knowing about the success of a policy in one context allow conclusions regarding how the same policy would work in a different context, albeit in what appears to be a similar policy field? Or is it enough for policy actors to have an experience of policy implementation in one context to transfer the same policy elsewhere? What are the procedures for policy transfer between different contexts? Are such procedures relevant?

These broad questions take into account the particularities of policy interventions in international development. This context is often framed by global policy initiatives; these come with funding and with actors wanting to facilitate the transfer of policy ideas and expertise across multiple contexts. The situation in Myanmar is currently defined by the tensions that appear when national political processes meet international expectations of such processes. The tension also influences how evidence is interpreted and used. The questions one needs to ask of evidence—listed above—also highlight that the move between having knowledge and using such knowledge within a policy process in a particular context is not a simple progression. Policy actors who claim to have evidence often expect that all policy fields present a common ground. This is particularly pertinent when policy actors come from different contexts, for example national or international settings. International policymakers in particular are often quick to establish a sense of shared mission, due to their experiences in a different context but with a similar policy issue and policy field.

But therein lies a caveat. Even if a policy issue appears to be familiar, the context within which the issue emerges and the people who are affected will be different. Such difference is often obscured by the apparent similarity of the policy concern. While most national policy contexts create similar translation challenges for evidence-based policy debates, these trials are amplified in international development. International development approaches are often underwritten by assumptions. These dictate a policy's relevance and presumed effectiveness, regardless of whether assumptions locally are different and affect local policy processes and the behaviour of target groups in entirely different ways.

Section 2: Meaning and reality of research and evidence in Myanmar

We were interested in the way in which the debate on evidence-based policy is taking place within development policy interventions in situations of political transition, including in post-conflict settings. Post-conflict work is one of the central areas of international development. Many international policy actors provide both policy support and funding to national governments for reconstruction, development, and for political processes that can be broadly defined as processes of democratisation. Most of these interventions aim to initiate change that helps society to go beyond the causes of conflict. The contextual challenges that are highlighted above are more pronounced in these conflict and post-conflict-contexts. Furthermore, given the immediate needs of a country after a conflict or a period of political repression, the determination of policy interventions creates a tension between the need for evidence to support or justify policies, and addressing urgent policy needs at multiple levels.

In such situations, international organisations often use past experiences in other post-conflict contexts as evidence. The transplanting of one experience into another context is usually

justified because there is a lack of information or data readily available in the new post-conflict context. Further, the notion that windows of opportunity will close if not filled with programming and interventions creates urgency. As a double-edged issue, this is particularly pronounced in Myanmar.

In one sense, Myanmar presents a typical post-conflict setting, meaning that basic information and data is barely available. What is available is highly political and the credibility of data is viewed with suspicion. The assumed need to develop new policies in an expedient manner leads the implementation process and frames knowledge production practices. We thus considered the extent to which international actors' research practices dominate the country's post-conflict policy processes. Linked to this consideration is the question of what implications such diffusion of international practices might have for the national capacity to produce knowledge that is independent of the needs of policy makers.

In trying to understand how evidence-based policy within Myanmar works, or might work, our aim was to think about the questions related to the three stages of evidence-based policy. These stages are the demand for evidence, evidence production, and evidence use in policy contexts; different policy actors ranging from national governments to civil society groups and international organisations might be involved. We wanted to understand the constraints different actors experience in their ability to develop or produce and then to use evidence for policy processes. This approach reveals relations among various actors. Also, it engages with the way in which the ability to respond to the push for evidence becomes a pathway for different actors to participate in policy processes.

The meaning of evidence

Often the debate about evidence-based policies seems to assume implicitly that a consensus has been found on what evidence is. The many ways in which respondents in Myanmar talked about, conceptualised and reflected on their use of the word evidence was striking, framing their views in distinctly political ways. This is most likely because the availability of information has been, and is, used politically to underwrite particular knowledge claims and policy stances in relation to different groups. Respondents expressed unease about the way in which technical and international approaches to evidence are considered. Although there was a consensus that using more information in the policy process is good, many respondents expressed hope that there could be more heterogeneous ways to engage with notions of evidence and policy. This was seen in contrast to settling on a homogenising technical approach to evidence.

In our interviews, evidence was indeed considered in heterogeneous ways. Evidence was described or imagined, for example, as:

- 1) Any statement that is provided by a higher authority (for example from teachers to students, or from political authorities to citizens);
- 2) a magic bullet to tackle complex socio-political problems;
- 3) a relationship to data - as absence of data, or as having access to data;
- 4) a technical debate on how to produce large data;
- 5) information produced in a technical manner;

- 6) data interpreted according to local experiences and narratives about how to locate evidence to allow for broader diversity;
- 7) as a way of contextualising different claims rather than settling them.

Independent of the way in which people articulated their understanding of evidence and the evidence debate, it was clear in all interviews that research was viewed as an important part of the process. Specifically, research was seen as necessary for the production of evidential claims and then also for proposing policy change and implementation. This confirms that this debate is an important one in and for Myanmar, but that further considerations are necessary about the relationship between research and policy.

The relationship between research and policy-making

We encountered different perspectives when asking about the extent to which research and information currently feed into the policy process. One common answer was that with limited research being conducted, information obviously played a limited role. This perspective, however, came with different narratives. The first narrative pertains to the fact that there is hardly any information available and that a body of knowledge has to be started from scratch. Hence research simply cannot yet play a role in basing policies on evidence. In particular, the few international respondents often categorically stated that no information at all existed. If that were the case, an evidence-based approach to policy-making in Myanmar would face almost insurmountable challenges.

A second common narrative is that information exists, yet ways of accessing it, evaluating it and using it need to be adjusted. Respondents argued that government information before 2008 is “not reliable and most of the data is not very useful....sometimes the information is purposely manipulated.”¹ One respondent explained that the greatest challenge for development in Myanmar is the destruction of: “intellectual infrastructure. No data in this country is reliable. Period. People don’t value statistics and number and evidence in the way they should because in the last 45 years we came to believe that you can make up evidence. You can make up data. You can make up numbers.”²

“Statistics in Myanmar is nothing, it’s unreliable,” explained another interviewee. “There are certain capacities in government with people who have been trained in statistics, so I think they have good people. But when we look at the military regime I would say that they have never listened to the evidence. In agriculture planning for example, information on yield is inflated, evidence is manipulated to suit their purposes.”³ It is important to note that respondents’ assessment of existing research as being manipulated extends beyond data provided by the government. They pointed out that opponents of the regime, particularly if working outside the country, produced research that reflected advocacy interests from often deeply divided interest groups. The conclusion we heard was that new ways of dealing with existing information are required.

¹ Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

² Respondent 2, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

³ Respondents 3 and 4, male, national NGO, Burmese nationals.

Basing policies on evidence requires that certain facts are taken at face value and treated as if they are correct. A thorough investigation of the credibility of existing factual information would create a programming deadlock with which donors are not comfortable in a moment in which they hope for rapid political change. One approach to this lack of credible data might be to create new data and engage in research conducted using internationally accepted frames of reference. That such frames of reference are needed is a dominant narrative amongst international organisations and others interested in research. Some respondents noted this with concern, arguing that particular political challenges are overlooked in the quest for better evidence. One interviewee explained "the census was a good example... many [national] organisations said: let's not conduct the census. This is not a good time. But the UN agencies wanted evidence for their interventions."⁴ Another respondent explained: "UN agencies are pushing for more data...the public sector is trying to build this more reliable set of data. For the private sector, there is more market research, consumer surveys, consumer behaviour. People want to understand what they are setting foot in."⁵ Respondents regularly noted the tension inherent in needing evidence to start processes that are not fully understood.

A third narrative is that the judgment that no information exists, or that none of it is usable, is wrong. Instead respondents argued that international actors in particular were not willing to consider information that predates their arrival in the country. "There is a huge amount out there and when I talk to the NGO or humanitarian community it's like it does not exist," explained one respondent.⁶ Respondents felt that while manipulation of data existed, it had not been done necessarily in a structured way, but that the government had controlled the use of data, and the conclusions drawn on the basis of it, but not necessarily the raw data. One respondent described it as a "controlling system that does not control anything" and that it had simply not used its existing data:

The information is there, but it's about finding it, consolidating it. A lot of it is on Excel files that are so archaic that we can't open it. Or charts that have been created in Word but the original files have been lost. And two out of three people we work with in the ministry of education don't know how to use computers, so we can't ask them to transcribe it.⁷

Another respondent also stressed that state manipulation was not as systematic or profound as is commonly assumed: "This is a weak state. People have the illusion that this was an all-controlling dictatorship along the lines of North Korea. But the state here is very weak outside the military."⁸

From these three narratives about data and information, a number of research, evidence and policy relevance trends emerged.

⁴ Respondents 3 and 4, male, national NGO, Burmese nationals.

⁵ Respondent 5, male, national private sector organisation, non-Burmese national.

⁶ Respondent 6 and 7, male and female, national organisation, Burmese and non-Burmese national.

⁷ Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

⁸ Respondent 5, male, national private sector organisation, non-Burmese national.

1. There is a need to establish a body of factual information while carefully navigating the danger that this might cement a particular understanding of what research means. With the need for factual information great, the danger is that research becomes reduced to being understood as fact-finding missions that provide limited analysis. One respondent from an international organisation funding basic research summed up this tension between information need and the risk of establishing information as being considered synonymous with research: “Nobody knows how many local development funds are there; there is no understanding what the local ecosystem on these is right now. So researching this and laying it out for people what’s actually happening, that’s not really research and not sustainable... I am continually surprised how little information is out there.”⁹

2. Research gaps exist: There is limited credible quantitative work; qualitative work tends not to go beyond superficial focus group approaches. One respondent explained in regards to health research that “what you find is that people come in with a bit of money, and they say I will do some focus group research and then they spend all the money and cannot say what the prevalence is. What we need to do is match the effort with the information that is needed. The gap in quality research is massive.”¹⁰ Official government data is known to be problematic not just for reasons of manipulation, but also for quality control. It is known that census data was copied from one census to the next or that births and deaths records were poorly kept.¹¹

3. Access to historical information is difficult. While the national archive provides access to the history of planning and investment, the reference system is outdated. Colonial resources in the national library are theoretically accessible but are poorly catalogued.¹² Few international sources published after the 1960s are easily available.

4. The international community too readily dismissed existing information, particularly if it was gathered before 2008. This might mean that useful information, particularly on uncontroversial topics, is discarded; indigenous ways of collecting and preserving information can get easily overlooked.

5. Politics determine what information is deemed useful to gather or to foreground, with the exclusion of ethnic categories in the census regularly mentioned as a hot political issue that was threatening to the government. Issues of illegal trade, particularly involving the country’s poppy production, are politically difficult to research, both internally but also because they involve external actors. The impact of such a selective approach to what is deemed acceptable research was described by respondents as allowing the continued exclusion of ethnic groups or groups involved in illegal activities from national processes.”¹³ There are continued concerns that the government is trying to influence information, more often than not through simply not supporting research that asks critical questions or through strategic use of hard facts.¹⁴ This challenge is exacerbated by the broader political landscape in which open contestation and accountability are new phenomena. “Politics here is something dangerous,” explained one opponent. “It’s long been oppressed by the

⁹ Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

¹⁰ Respondent 6 and 7, male and female, national organisation, Burmese and non-Burmese national.

¹¹ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

¹² Respondent 9, male, national organisation, non-Burmese national.

¹³ Respondents 10 and 11, male, national organisation, Burmese nationals.

¹⁴ Respondent 12, male, national organisation, Burmese national.

authorities.”¹⁵

6. Informal information was in the past not recorded and continues to receive less attention, which limits record-keeping. One respondent explained that the backroom dynamics of the current peace process are crucial in bringing about change, yet these are not recorded¹⁶

Despite these challenges, a number of respondents argued that research was currently playing a crucial role, albeit in unexpected ways. For example, particularly under-researched topics were purposely avoided. Awareness of lack of research on a particular topic focuses debates around other topics. A second influence of research on the current policy process that was outlined was an improvement in record keeping. Respondents said that policy-makers and practitioners who are more aware of the trend toward using research meant that organisations were paying much closer attention to the way in which they are documenting their information. This was seen as a step forward as it introduced a new awareness about the need for transparency. An interesting contradiction emerges from this. Evidence-based policy supports the notion of transparency; often transparency is seen as being achievable by taking into account how a situation or policy challenge is understood at the grassroots. The push towards evidence means that quick ways of providing it have to be found, which more often than not means a top-down approach to using information.

This contradiction sets out the crucial dilemma that the push towards evidence-based policies in Myanmar creates. It is implicit in the way in which international organisations frame their engagement, that with more evidence improvements will occur. There is a danger that the push for evidence replicates patterns of governing that the reform process is supposedly addressing. This danger comes from expectations about what research and evidence can contribute to policy processes and how these expectations are situated within Myanmar’s information tradition. Coupled with the presumed need to quickly bow towards donor interests while maintaining established ways of working in the government—to protect interests or simply to keep it functional—might mean that the evidence debate establishes firmly the use of information as a political tool. In a situation of transition, with some hallmarks of a post-conflict environment, this creates the danger that patterns of the past are becoming entrenched for the future.

The reality of evidence in Myanmar

The seemingly uncontested push for better evidence often shrouds the fact that evidence is not a clear-cut category. Calls for evidence tend to focus on particular types of knowledge needed by policy actors. Defining these needs is a complicated endeavour. They might be driven by wanting to maintain power or by a grassroots demand for a particular action. What gets classified as usable evidence is determined by administrative and political decisions, by bureaucratic interests to preserve a status quo or to change it, or by other incentives identified by policy makers. This is true for many different contexts, but of particular importance for Myanmar.

¹⁵ Respondents 10 and 11, male, national organisation, Burmese nationals.

¹⁶ Respondent 13, male, national organisation, Burmese national.

Here, practical use of evidence is currently focused on supporting planning; using evidence to develop strategic, sustainable and realistic policies grounded in the reality of the circumstances is largely a theoretical notion. One respondent described the current situation as “the demand-driven agenda” in which evidence is “not brought together for policy information.”¹⁷ Many of the respondents clearly understood evidence as driven by needs and interests of national or international groups.

A way of navigating these multiple incentives was highlighted by one respondent who explained how his organisation had been working with a regional government to articulate its social protection needs:

But we had to work out as well what the key person’s interests are in this. What are his priorities? One of them was poverty reduction: He wants his region to be developed, to reduce poverty. So we will do some research and we will pitch the direction of this and show the potential poverty reduction impact of social protection programmes. The politics comes in, in what evidence to pitch to what person.¹⁸

Usability of evidence for localised and personalised interests thus defines where the knowledge interests of policy makers are focused. Respondents were very open about the fact that, while pitching into the language used in the evidence debate, they instrumentalised processes for their own interests, often presupposing what change was possible: “Before we produce research and evidence we have to understand what spaces for advocacy in these areas are open and how we would enter these spaces...If the space is closed, there is no point to produce evidence.”¹⁹ Some insights into what might shape incentives that can open up spaces can be derived from descriptions of how evidence is used. For an international community cautious about its political engagement and yet eager not to miss opportunities, observing the actors seeking evidence can help in understanding trends.

Section 3: Actors seeking evidence

We have established that claims about evidence needs are expressions of particular interests or incentives. In calling for evidence, policy actors develop a certain set of requirements and an interpretative framework. The challenges outlined above show the extent to which requests for evidence by certain actors also automatically act as a dismissal of what exists, thus pushing for a particular shape and understanding of the transition process.

This section looks in more detail at how different policy actors are described and experienced, either by those who represent them or those who engage with them. Policy actors differentiate between data and information. Data is the disembodied and seemingly disinterested version of evidence; information interpreted as the more grounded and rounded

¹⁷ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

¹⁸ Respondent 6 and 7, male and female, national organisation, Burmese and non-Burmese national.

¹⁹ Respondent 14, female, international organisation, Burmese national.

interpretation of such data. This highlights the various interests served by the push for more evidence for better policies.

In situations of great social and political shifts, knowledge and insight become the currency of the already powerful. Myanmar's knowledge industry, although nascent, seems firmly in the hands of a few actors who are setting a path in which quiet, diverse and under-resourced voices are in danger of being drowned out. Knowledge is being refashioned using an insider/outsider division, as one respondent explained: "The NGO and donor community looks at a piece of evidence and puts it forward. Everyone will claim—donor, government, private sector—that they have pieces of evidence, facts, private data. They know what people want and everyone claims that they have this kind of information."²⁰

The power of the stronger knowledge actors also comes with responsibility, which in turn has created some shifts. One example given was the election commission which, according to one respondent, "realised they have to answer the questions, it's a huge shift for them to be open and transparent and accountable. If we look at this long-term, it's incredible high stakes next year, but there is too much expectation on the President [and on] Aung San Suu Kyi for this to be the watershed moment. But nowhere in the world has done that ever, you have political process, economic development and the peace process going at the same time."²¹

Knowledge actor: government

The most prominent information actor is the government of Myanmar; its use of data and information is under much scrutiny from the broader policy community. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity as the policy community aims to find ways to systematise the process, with a number of issues particularly prominent. These issues have their roots in the long-standing problematic relationship between society and the state, where interaction was primarily oppressive or marked by strategic neglect.

Government remains the only source for many types of data. Research actors having to rely on such data are thus limited in how much they are able to question the viability of existing policies or suggest new ones, leading at times to government interference in research work that uses government data.²² In many cases, getting to such government data—regardless of whether or not it is of usable quality—requires lengthy negotiation processes and established personal relationships with government actors that are out of reach for many smaller organisations which are seen as challenging government power: "[The government has] this view on data, of data as a state secret. It is power."²³ Several respondents pointed out that the tight link between having access to data and having good relationships with government actors also meant that organisations or individuals wanting to challenge the government were in a weak position to be able to do so with the government's own information. An added problem was that different government departments can deal with the same issue, doubling or tripling the effort needed to establish personal and unthreatening relationships.

²⁰ Respondent 5, male, national private sector organisation, non-Burmese national.

²¹ Respondents 15 and 16, male, international organisation, non-Burmese nationals.

²² Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

²³ Respondent 17, female, international organisation, Burmese national.

Despite acting as a gatekeeper of information, there was a broad consensus among respondents that their expectations of the government's ability to make use of data and information are generally low. Many respondents explained that the link between existing data and the government's use of it was non-existent due to a lack of capacity to analyse data for its policy relevance. Policy planning and data collection happen in different realms, with both processes paper-based and centralised, or as one respondent describes it, "data is very siloed...so for programming and planning you have to have information from different departments."²⁴ Immigration data, for example, is collected by the Department of Immigration as well as by the general administration. Organisations needing this data have found discrepancies amongst the two data sets, further complicating its usability. In such situations, power relations overshadow any question of data quality, because, as one respondent argued, "some ministries are more powerful than others, how to manage that is still quite sensitive."²⁵

However, simply to blame a lack of government capacity to use data overlooks the political use of information by the most important knowledge actor. Respondents highlighted that the image of government as incapacitated by information was misleading since, particularly in recent years, the government has established think tanks and advisory panels to tackle issues. Evidence of more strategic use of information for policy-making was seen by respondents for example in the process of granting telecom licences, or any policy that needed population figures as its basis.²⁶

Unpacking the role of the state

A complicating factor is that government is often mistakenly imagined as one monolithic actor with clear inner workings. Government departments play unique roles in both allowing constructive processes and relationships to develop as well as in maintaining control over data and the framing of issues. Responsibilities on specific issues are often not clear-cut, with many government departments holding a stake. This makes it difficult to know who might have relevant information, but also who can act on it.²⁷ It also highlights that a reform process does not proceed at even speed across all actors. "Some ministries are very reform-minded, but not all," is how one researcher summed up the current situation, with the way changes were progressing largely based on personalities.²⁸ One respondent vividly illustrated what this means: "It depends on the situation of the ministry how much influence bureaucrats have....Some bureaucrats really have the will to change and to accept democracy. But some of them say the life here is like a prison, we have to stay at the Minister's house, wake up at 6 in the morning, it's like that. So it really depends how much they want to improve their ministry and improve their work."²⁹

²⁴ Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

²⁵ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

²⁶ Respondent 5, male, national private sector organisation, non-Burmese national.

²⁷ Respondent 18, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

²⁸ Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

²⁹ Respondent 19, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

An example of how a relationship between government and NGOs works in practice was this:

It depends on the ministry. For example, [one] ministry... is more open because they have more exposure of working with internationals and NGOs compared to, say, [another] ministry... which is still working in the way they used to in the past....There are some experts for instance in one of the departments...we work with her...She is very open, through her we are able to reach to the minister. But [this] Ministry ... is famous for being hardliner. On [one of our reports] it was very hard to communicate with them. So we work with key civil society to try to catch the media attention - which we did for this recent report. We managed to get a relationship going with [one of the ministry's departments] – they're going to organise discussions with us about the recommendation of our reports. As the department is interested in the report they are hosting the event. This is interesting as this department is newly created and they are rivals of [the hardliners in another ministry] So for us this is a very good opportunity to influence [the relevant ministry] via this department's work. In this case we are using the department as an indirect route to influence.³⁰

Knowledge actor: civil society

Civil society activity in different policy fields in Myanmar has been strengthened after cyclone Nargis hit the country. Those civil society organisations (CSOs) that participated in relief and development work during this period emerged as viable actors with which both the government and international organisations and donors could more safely engage. Nowadays, broader civil society is implicitly expected to act as the balancer between the government's protracted ways of doing things and the processes nudging towards change. Furthermore from a donor perspective, NGOs and CSOs seem to provide the natural counterpoint to government-driven evidence searches. "There is strong pressure from the donors to have CSOs and NGOs to try and implement their programmes in a better way. Multi-donor programmes are trying to put pressure on Myanmar NGOs so that they include research as part of their programming activities. It's kind of difficult to have them develop this."³¹

As knowledge actors, CSOs struggle with the same challenges as government agencies: "I have met heads of CSOs and they are being asked to present evidence for their work and they have great difficulties to come up with something which is quality," explained a respondent.³² The notion of CSOs, and NGOs as challengers of government evidence agendas is misleading since, as one respondent argued, "Most organisations, especially NGOs, are very much service-providers; they do not have research capacity or very strong information management systems. They are in a very early stage. They do not even use the available information even when it is reliable."³³ Despite this reality, CSOs are often envisioned as knowledge actors with better connections to grassroots information. We witness a somewhat

³⁰ Respondent 14, female, international organisation, Burmese national.

³¹ Respondent 9, male, national organisation, non-Burmese national.

³² Respondent 9, male, national organisation, non-Burmese national.

³³ Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

circular development here: Claims to acknowledge civil society as a functional and important knowledge actor are not driven by evidence that this understanding of civil society is appropriate for Myanmar.

One respondent explained why this contradiction, if unaddressed, might contribute to entrenching current interpretations and systems, rather than pushing for increased research to build a broader evidence base that might help manoeuvre change. This respondent explained:

I am quite concerned about the turn of the CSOs of Myanmar, because they are looking for nuggets [of knowledge]. Currently I see that a lot of CSOs are donor-driven, so I think some of the CSO may think this is an alternative livelihood...The current trend of the CSO in Myanmar is concerning because the government can relax. Because the NGOs only construct the toilets and schools, so the government can relax. And the government can also show the international community the CSOs are doing that, so it *seems* like political change.³⁴

As a result, respondents saw a move of NGOs and CSOs towards becoming substitute service deliverers:

They have very few CSOs and NGOs that have gone beyond this step as providing services to actually come up with an idea of building evidence and trying to collect evidence and doing research and come up with a statement. Few have been exposed to that. But when it comes to evidence that could possibly undermine the agenda of what the CSO or NGO is trying to achieve, I don't think that will be a big issues. Heads of CSOs and NGOs here are honest enough to analyse if information is against what they are trying to promote. Usually former political activists, they are honest people.³⁵

Government/ civil society interactions

Despite this evolving contradiction, respondents pointed to examples where civil society had acted as a control on government. Interaction between government and CSOs was enlivened through the process of drafting a controversial Association Law (Human Rights Watch 2013); yet more tensions have arisen from the realities of such interaction. During the controversial population census, explained one respondent:

..minority civil society went for face-to-face discussion with the census commissions and they raised that this census activity interfered with the peace process in Myanmar—and also the Rohingya issue was raised. So from this side the CSO recommended not to count the ethnic name and the religious affiliation. They wanted to miss that category because it could raise a potential conflict because of the census activity. The government did take that advice from CSOs, but they still left it in. A lot of potential conflict rose up.³⁶

³⁴ Respondents 10 and 11, male, national organisation, Burmese nationals.

³⁵ Respondent 9, male, national organisation, non-Burmese national.

³⁶ Respondents 20 and 21, female and male, national organisation, Burmese nationals.

Another respondent echoed the sentiment that government engagement with CSOs on knowledge and evidence was half-hearted: “It is just a showcase. The consultations sessions are made just to tick off on their “to do” list. They don’t really care.”³⁷

The process of signing off on the Association Law was regularly referenced as a display of uneasy interaction:

Government recognised the role of civil society but has not entirely accepted it. Even the President made public statements about the role of civil society recently. But street level civil servants don’t know what this means for them within their work. There’s no outwards communication from the parliament or government side after the CSOs proposed this Association Law change. They take the suggestions but you don’t know what’s being discussed behind closed doors. We don’t know whether the feedback is taken seriously or not and then suddenly they announced the new law on July 18th, signed by the president. But the discussion between his office and the upper house is not known to the public—how they decided to amend and sign it or not.³⁸

International knowledge actors

Donors are already a prominent knowledge actor, pushing knowledge production in specific directions or influencing how information is packaged. “It has to be concise enough to catch the attention of ambassadors,” was how one respondent explained the characteristics of useful evidence.³⁹ Another said that:

Donors here are very keen on evidence, they say you are very good at activity reporting but where is your evidence? We have collected a lot of data and we are not good at using it. We know that. So we are also trying to change our outcome monitoring in our evaluation system. But the search for evidence is now strong, many donors are talking about outcome-and results-based work. And I think it’s fair enough, but it also makes it difficult for us to come up with verifiable indicators. Sometimes we worry although we understand that outcome is very important, which is the very reason why we are doing this intervention. But it also means that the process becomes not very important if you are focusing on the result. And this has tradition in this country, because the military government used to say we want your water. We don’t care if your bottle has a hole. And in the villages this means that they only pursue what they need to do regardless how much the people in the village suffer....Having to rely on donor funding is also frustrating, because more and more donors are saying that we want to see policy changes, and they fail to see the continued need for services.⁴⁰

The tension between an agenda to push forward evidence-based policies and the inherent political interests of knowledge actors in shaping the meaning of such agenda is focused in the role of donors in Myanmar:

³⁷ Respondent 23, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

³⁸ Respondent 18, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

³⁹ Respondents 15 and 16, male, international organisation, non-Burmese nationals.

⁴⁰ Respondent 3, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

Capitals need their time to find their position on Burma. There were strong lobby groups in London, Washington, Canberra who say do not invest in this process. But it's balancing perceptions at home, trying to make an impact here and then you have donors waiting for the post-election review in the first quarter of 2016 to see how they will invest. Donors will not continue paying money after the elections unless there is a recalibration after the elections. There will be new demands and also different issues. All of that is on the table for 2016. Who is going to invest in that? Is there money ready? The pressure is on for 2020. It's important to send the right signals that this is a proper reform process.⁴¹

A representative of a national NGO explained how this tension between pushing for reform while finding evidence for what might work in the reform was playing out in the relationship between donors and government: "We understand that donors need to have a good relationship with the government. But they also have to listen to us, but they have to listen to Myanmar government 70 per cent, even though the Myanmar government does only 30 per cent. I want to see that donors have a very strong message, saying hey guys if you are not doing this we cannot support you."⁴²

Yet it was also pointed out that the relationship between donors and government was not always just guided by donors' reluctance to support an unclear transition process. In terms of information, respondents argued that international actors were leading with a wrong example by treating information as proprietary, rather than making data and information as openly accessible as possible to encourage transparent engagement. One particularly poignant example was given about a UN agency that was withholding its data even when the government requested that other actors could use it.⁴³

Section 4: Producing and using evidence for policy

In a situation where a lot of information exists, but little of it is gathered or kept in systematic and methodologically transparent ways, the question of what type of information is produced and how becomes particularly prominent. A corollary to this is the issue of how to interpret and decide the relevance of evidence for use in a given context. The focus on the production of evidence often suggests a clinical approach to the messy findings on social issues and human interaction. The reality does not match those expectations. While the generalisability of evidence is questionable even under the most stable of circumstances, the technical production of evidence, based on fixed methodologies, is often used to justify generalisability without having much information about the context of implementation. The difficult part is often to justify the reason that a particular piece of evidence might make sense in a specific context. It requires much research on broader social, political and cultural issues to allow the evaluation of evidential claims in a grounded manner. In the absence of this, the default position suggests that a given policy worked in another conflict context and therefore it should have relevance for this context too. In the case of Myanmar, rethinking might be

⁴¹ Respondents 15 and 16, male, international organisation, non-Burmese nationals.

⁴² Respondent 19, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁴³ Respondent 6 and 7, male and female, national organisation, Burmese and non-Burmese national.

required when it comes to justifying generalisability: A policy context that consists of the forces of transition is difficult to evaluate. Even broadly applicable policies—for example, holding elections—might not be as generalisable as they seem.

Current methods of research

We have discussed the roles of different knowledge actors, as well as the problematic understanding of what evidence is. This section looks in more detail at the type of research (and by extension types of research methods) that different actors in Myanmar prefer at the moment and the implications of this.

Having identified an information gap, most actors currently focus on reactive and descriptive research. The implications of filling information gaps in this way are profound. Reactive and descriptive research responds to programmatic goals already set, or to a readily identified knowledge gap, by providing a factual basis. In the future, information gathered for this purpose might be used to ask more in-depth questions; however, if it will ever come to that is not clear. Rather, many research projects are not asking fundamental questions that might help generate grounded knowledge that can act as a baseline in number of areas. The implications of this are important: Absence of grounded local knowledge can be expected to generate a cycle of recognising the paucity of information, followed by commissioning research to fill this gap. The cycle might continue without ever creating contextual, analytical tools for interpreting any data that is produced.

Methods to fill the information gap are determined by the usability and implementability of immediate research outputs.⁴⁴ Most research conducted at the moment in Myanmar naturally gravitates towards qualitative methods. These are cheaper, easier to implement—for better or for worse—and findings can often be presented as more niche insights. Focusing issues as narrowly and anecdotally as possible does not challenge the government on a broader issue.⁴⁵ However, it was noted that more in-depth qualitative research is currently hampered by a lack of expertise—it is notable that there is currently no working Burmese anthropologist.⁴⁶ Few quantitative pieces of research have been done.

Respondents also noted other shortcomings of current research. Because of the push for evidence for policy, policy actors frame research questions. This does not allow space for fundamental social and political research questions. In responding to the immediate need for knowledge, many groups quickly produce conceptually limited information. How this information will be used to establish future ground truths is not clear. It was argued that this created a whole subset of activist research.⁴⁷

This enhances the problem that even unprecedented and opaque processes such as the peace process are treated through readily available imaginations of what research can find out. The expedient need to get answers for policymaking means that answers are often given that support policy processes that have already been decided. This is a known problem in the

⁴⁴ Respondent 9, male, national organisation, non-Burmese national.

⁴⁵ Respondent 22, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁴⁶ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

⁴⁷ Respondent 24, male, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

intersection between evidence and policy. For Myanmar, this means that basic questions about the appropriateness of processes are not asked at all. Such research is, as one respondent argued, an attractive but reactive, rather than proactive, undertaking.⁴⁸ It crucially creates a situation in which actors with less audible voices have no opportunity to frame questions or to propose areas of inquiry.

Other organisations described their role as research supporters as that of a catalyst between community needs and translating these for NGOs and government. This meant that they organised community workshops in which research priorities are set. Although community members often act as volunteer researchers in such settings, discussions were guided along the lines of NGO and government frames of reference. The research was directly understood to be a necessary step towards establishing an "advocacy platform."⁴⁹ Thus much of the research that is branded as grassroots-driven becomes a proxy for local voices, with outside researchers bringing assumed local insights to areas of inquiry already framed by actors with other interests. These processes stand-in for local knowledge, ultimately supporting already decided policy directions.

The power of being able to drown out voices is particularly important in this context. NGO respondents argued that it was almost pointless to present evidence and research to the government. Their experience had been that government actors would only consider their own data, or at best data that big international organisations, namely the UN, had collected. Practically speaking, this means for some NGO staff that they were unable to use their findings if these contradicted UN findings, which inhibits locally-driven knowledge processes.⁵⁰ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that international actors often treat data they collect as proprietary, presumably to avoid being cited as a data source on controversial findings that could alienate the government.⁵¹ Thus, only politically safe data is released, which exacerbates the challenge that smaller actors face when they want to act on their information that confronts the government.

New issues or different perspectives are difficult to address in such an environment. Despite a push for information and evidence, the focus is on already identified issues, rather than on identifying new issues. What this means in practice was summed up in a group discussion in which a group of international and Burmese researchers said that they had "more of a quick-and-dirty approach, trying to understand broadly how things are, rather than trying to get a deep understanding of things. How do we pick particular topics is what are the policy windows and what are the gaps that can be quickly achieved in terms of uptake."⁵²

A notable exception to research that is not grounded and does not challenge might be research that begins from local concerns and frames its approach from local needs. This was exemplified by a local organisation whose research was initiated by concerns about accountability and transparency within the political institutions. They produced studies on the

⁴⁸ Respondents 15 and 16, male, international organisation, non-Burmese nationals.

⁴⁹ Respondent 18, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁵⁰ Respondent 19, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁵¹ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national.

⁵² Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

functioning of parliament, aimed at compiling a baseline data set of how parliament works in practice. Methods used included scrutiny of records to mark the number of times different members of parliament raised questions and the number of issues that were brought to the attention of the parliament in this manner. This was augmented with polling people on their opinion about the workings of parliament—possibly muddying the waters between observation and perception. The organisation argued that their mode of data collection by mobile phones allowed a more honest reflection for respondents.⁵³

The emphasis on evidence might be counterproductive, inward-looking, and might thwart innovation. Particularly in the turbulent transitional times that Myanmar is experiencing, respondents articulated the concern that the evidence debate creates a conservative process, rather than a transformative one. "If you develop a model that is different from an old one, you should not reject it on the basis of it not having evidence. Evidence will come later, in the future," explained a respondent who is piloting a community-based resource management approach.

This is very new to our country, but the regional government allows us to pilot in this area. We cannot see the evidence, because the approach is very new, one year, two years. But we cannot provide evidence for the resource management or conflict impact. We don't have that evidence....If you go only after evidence, you are closing for the innovation. Then you are going to go the formal way. For us, it's the more informal and innovative one. This is not very evidence-based because it's still in the pilot. Then DfID may close all the innovation in development, that is a danger. Because all problems need new solutions.⁵⁴

Another respondent agreed:

It's a balance we need to strike. If you stop and say you want to do something only when you have hard evidence to formulate a policy, you are going to be far behind. Of course, this is the goal we want to set, and we have to plan on that in five years. On the other hand, one has to start from somewhere, with the knowledge that this data is not hard or reliable data. So if we do that, then we can see what changes have to be made.⁵⁵

This is a dilemma: on the one hand it is good to have evidence on the other hand one cannot stop acting because there is a claimed lack of evidence, or unsatisfying research methods.

Judging research quality and finding appropriate ways to assess the usability of research is challenging. Several respondents talked about their struggles to evaluate evidence within a situation of political shifts and contestations:

I look at evidence based on the institutions: who brings this evidence? Is it an area that is more familiar to us so that we know this evidence is useful or not useful. And for me, if I see the evidence then I try to triangulate with other evidence. If it's in Myanmar, is there any other

⁵³ Respondent 22, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁵⁴ Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

⁵⁵ Respondent 2, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

evidence in the ASEAN or anything like that? This might mean that the evidence is very solid one.⁵⁶

Sometimes data manipulation and quality derives from method, rather than from intent:

I worked with the government for 12 years... I know how my departments get their data. They only get their data by phone. For example, I am not blaming the government, but the decision makers may be misunderstood. For the food security, they are only focusing on rice production, not multi-stakeholder or multidisciplinary approach. So what happened in the past, the managing director of the ministry needs to report to the Minister how much cotton we grow. Every day. We can grow cotton only two seasons, sometimes only one season. But they want the data every day.⁵⁷

Interference from existing dynamics into the research process often goes unacknowledged:

Sometimes data has misleading interview questions or sometimes I can see the sample size and the geographical region. I can say that this data is not reliable. Because also sometimes NGO conducted the interviews with the assistance of the village committee. So sometimes it can be wrong or incorrect.⁵⁸

There is a danger that research is used to displace political discussion or to move along processes that are deeply political, but can be shrouded by the use of facts:

There is the blind trust in the science and formulas. Here we ask very simple questions, which hide a net of very complicated questions. I don't know if it's a matter of political pressure, time, capacity, but it's difficult to go the next step and say what you are talking about is not a simple question. You are talking about what kind of development you want to have, what kind of social system, but while you are having a blind faith in science, you do not ask these questions.⁵⁹

Using research for policy

Some of the concerns surrounding the debate on using research for policy are very technical. Respondents mentioned that few national staff are in decision-making positions in international organisations that could push for a policy. Few have the capacity to evaluate information and reformulate it to fit a policy drafting process. The communication skills that make a policy process more than a bureaucratic exercise are often lacking.⁶⁰ This links to the challenging process of using research in a policy process.

In the three challenges to this process, a crucial final step is the weighing of available evidence to decide which one to use for particular policies. Views of particular actors and

⁵⁶ Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

⁵⁷ Respondent 19, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁵⁸ Respondent 19, female, national organisation, Burmese national.

⁵⁹ Group discussion 1, males and females, national organisation with international partnership, Burmese and non-Burmese nationals.

⁶⁰ Respondent 8, female, international organisation, non-Burmese national. Respondent 1, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

their political positions are central in this step. Even in political environments that are more conducive for general research, this step highlights that basing policies on evidence is a programme planning tool, rather than a scientifically indisputable grounding of an intervention. Another way to understand how policy actors' interests frame a policy is by examining what kind of evidence is considered, or dismissed, as powerful by the actors concerned.

Others had more defined technical notions of evidence that had been adapted for the current, often fluid context:

For us, it's a combination of numbers as well as other people's feelings. It's important because in our field we work with marginalised communities, so we go particularly to the conflict-prone area and impacted area... and sometimes in our work we don't need to know how many students have been displaced. But we only need to know that this village that was there is no longer there. Sometimes that's enough evidence, that the village that was there in 2012 was displaced due to fighting. All we care at this point is that this is a community we need to care about. But there are other things: war is going on, people's attitude towards the government, the current state of affairs in the country, if a student does not feel comfortable to go back to a place or be with people, that's enough evidence for us.⁶¹

The notion of multiple sources and multiple perspectives—and how these might be combined in sophisticated arguments that allow fine-tuned programming—was identified as a challenge:

What kind of evidence? Peace talks' evidence is never simple, very complicated... People from outside the peace process, no one has the stamina for complexity. They want something simple: he is good, he is bad. You have the phenomenon, where people search for spoilers and people really don't understand the dynamics within a negotiation. I am telling everyone some people negotiate for themselves, some for their bosses, some cannot be bought, some are ideologically driven. We have a lot of things here, resources, unresolved things for 70 years, and the peace process has been an initiative in the larger backdrop of social reforms. You can't just look at the peace process alone. You have to look at it from a larger perspective.⁶²

The peace process might be an apt example to highlight a problematic notion that emerges within the broader evidence debate. The idea that evidence can be used to understand a situation and respond to it through programming is powerful and yet misleading. Based on such a notion of using evidence for policy, evidence becomes refashioned as a manifestation of the truth, rather than as a snapshot of a particular situation and its interpretation. Several respondents were struggling with the tension between gathering evidence today and simultaneously shaping what evidence might look like in the future, particularly if a first round of policies based on the evidence had been implemented.

⁶¹ Respondent 2, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

⁶² Respondent 13, male, national organisation, Burmese national.

Conclusion: Myanmar and evidence-based policy

Implicit in the notion of evidence-based policies is that better knowledge will create better programmes. Another assumption is that the context within which evidence will be evaluated and then used to support policy is transparent. Several caveats remain under-examined in this presumed chain of events for Myanmar, particularly regarding the roles of knowledge actors, production of knowledge and use of such knowledge for policy. The concept of evidence is very loosely interpreted in this context.

Some organisations aim to use the challenge constructively by linking minimal available information to broader programmatic or political goals. This poses the danger that model-based approaches become prominent, foregrounding questions of implementation, rather than asking whether specific models are the right way for Myanmar in the first place. Respondents expressed their doubts that the focus on evidence in the policy debate is a useful one:

Evidence-based policy approach - the issue has to be there, and I think we need to engage. But we have to just keep in mind that it will work in an ideal situation. ...Because in Myanmar, even if you talk to a lot of people and collect evidence, you cannot know to what extent they are telling you the truth. People are scared and politics are very polarised. Where you can go and where you cannot go determines what evidence you can get. That's the Myanmar situation. But as we move out of this in other ways, not through evidence-based policy approach, maybe one day we can look at that. But currently in Myanmar that's not the way to do it, but I don't mean to say that we should not engage in that dialogue, I wish we could do that.⁶³

The usefulness of this approach is thus not as obvious as it might seem. One crucial element that is lacking in the current push for evidence-based policy in Myanmar is grounding this debate in evidence: evidence on the known complications of this process, of the challenges of research and of working within a political context. Even in the most favourable circumstances, the evidence on evidence-based policy for social processes is that it rarely works. In Myanmar, this complication is further exacerbated because the circumstances in which research is conducted in Myanmar highlight that the evidence debate is instrumentalised.

Most of the policy-relevant socio-economic research is currently conducted with funding from international sources. Immediate policy interests of different international policy actors in Myanmar—including international NGOs—broadly frame the research orientation. It is clear that many of the respondents thought that the government is more interested in research and better understands the relationship between evidence and policy than it might be given credit for. Therefore, for international policy actors evidence has become a way of persuading the government to act in particular ways.

The underlying assumption about how evidence-based policy works is simple: If policymakers are presented with the facts of a matter, the decision-making will be faster and

⁶³ Respondent 2, male, national NGO, Burmese national.

lead to a desired solution. This technical notion of the process ignores that the decision-making processes of the government are not clear. Repeatedly we learned that nobody knows how government actors weigh the knowledge they have, how they go about finding out what they do not know, or how they access research through CSOs. It is clear that personal relationships matter tremendously and that individual networks of CSO members reach into the government. Not only the actors pushing for a technical understanding of evidence benefit from this approach—the government does, too. It allows an instrumentalisation of the current piecemeal evidence-based policy negotiations with different policy actors.

It is currently easier to fund policy-relevant research yet at the same time there is an inadequate understanding of how policy decisions are made. This intersection of what kind of research is funded and a lack of knowledge about how it is used creates a long-term problem. Many policy actors allocate money for research in a politically expedient manner to influence what they see as the government policy processes. However, the output from these processes is focused on the present; it is unlikely that such approach to research and policy will allow the building of a deep knowledge base. Given that capacity to conduct research in Myanmar is limited, this mostly externally driven process is integrating most local researchers into a particular model of knowledge creation. It is thus unclear from where future capacity to conduct research that is independent of policy interests might come.

The evidence debate theoretically takes place within the broader context of knowledge production processes and the way in which knowledge production supports evidence use when policy questions change over time. Myanmar's history, the transition to a post-conflict/post-authoritarianism context and the way in which international policy interests are intersecting with these suggest that this relationship between knowledge and evidence is reversed. Evidence is produced in piecemeal fashion. This means there is no attempt to create an integrated knowledge and knowledge production process that can support evidence needs in the future. Given Myanmar's history, this looks dangerously close to the knowledge management of the authoritarian regime in the past.

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