

Initiating a Deliberative Democracy Process:

Evidence from Myanmar Migrants and Refugees in Thailand On Governance and Transitional Justice

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Summary of Presentation

- Describes the results of recent research conducted by Myanmar Advocacy Research Group (MARG) involving the immigrant/refugee Myanmar population in Northern Thailand.
- Focuses on participants' shared experiences of violence and oppression and their attitudes and ideas concerning Myanmar's governance-building and justice-seeking needs.



Support Doh Hlay

- This research grew out of MARG's relationship with **Doh Hlay**.
- **Doh Hlay** as a collective of artists and Myanmar activists.
- Visit its website:
(www.dohhlay.com)



What is MARG?

- It is an inter-sectoral group of Myanmar expatriates living in Northern Thailand who fled the 2021 coup
- **MARG** is a product of a 2021 seminar at Chiang Mai University's School of Public Policy funded by Canada's IDRC and directed by Fulbright Scholar David Crumpton
- The seminar considered the future of governance in Myanmar with a focus on local governance



MARG is motivated by a commitment to a future in which Myanmar is governed according to and through institutions that:

- Reflect needs and priorities of the least advantaged and most marginalised people
- Built on the concept that sustainable justice must be introduced at grassroots level of society through inclusive, participatory, and deliberative processes

Introduction

The study documents a deliberative process concerning the future of governance-building and justice-seeking, assuming that . . .

- Myanmar's problems are not just caused by the 2021 *coup*; rather they are closely linked to ethno-religious identities
- They are deeply rooted in social and cultural lifeways of Myanmar
- Governance and justice perceptions must be addressed at micro levels of experience, across identities and interests

Micro-Transitional Justice (MTJ)




This conceptualisation follows arguments of transitional justice scholars who focus on shaping collective identities to support truth telling and reconciliation in divided societies.

- Building bridges across gender, age, ethnicity, religious, and other identities to support national TJ ambitions
- Involves members of different identity groups entering in dialogues in their communities to understand common experience with violence, oppression and injustice
- Discover common interest in building just, peaceful, inclusive, stable communities



Research Objective

To generate a deliberative process among participants to produce common understandings regarding how their shared experiences with violence and other forms of oppression can inform the promotion of deliberative democracy at the local level that might support grassroots governance and justice-seeking ideas and empower the participants to participate in their application across their nation in the future.



Research Approach

- **Target population:**
Myanmar immigrants and refugees living in Northern Thailand
- **12 FGDs (“learning discussions”)** conducted in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot
- **2 open forums** in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot
- **Survey of forum participants**



**The research team
sought evidence
from participants
on . . .**

- Experiences with violence and other forms of oppression
- Assessment of the need for local governance-building and transitional justice
- React to the idea of linking grassroots governance-building with MTJ



FGD Evidence and Analysis

FDG Participant Characteristics

- 115 participants; average of 9.6 participants per FGD
- Gen Z, as a the target population, were intentionally overrepresented
- 58.7% male; 41.3% female
- Place of origin: 11 states or regions were represented with majority from 3: Yangon (28.4%), Shan (12.2%) and Mandalay (10.8%)
- Religion: Majority (87.0%) Buddhist, 5.2% Christian, 2.6% Muslim, 3.5% no religion
- 51% of respondents identified themselves as “Activist” with CDM, PDF, student movements, or other groups
- 38.7% identified themselves as 7-12 or college students
- 15.3% each, former government workers or employed in other areas

FGD Participant Characteristics

Age Group	Count	Percentage of total	Cumulative
16-25	52	45.2%	
26-35	40	34.8%	80.0%
36-45	18	15.7%	95.7%
46-55	3	2.6%	98.3%
56-65	2	1.7%	100.0%

Table 1. Age distribution of FGD participants

Education Level	% of Participants
7-12	22.9%
Some college	25.7%
Bachelor's	41.3%
Some grad	7.3%
Master's	1.8%
Master's +	0.0%
PhD	0.9%

Table 2. Education level of FGD participants

Self-described background	Count	Percentage of Respondents
NGO worker (non-educator)	9	9.2%
Educator	9	9.2%
Former government employee (including military)	15	15.3%
Other work (attorney, doctor, business person, journalist, poet, artist, filmmaker, other work)	15	15.3%
College student	17	17.3%
School student	21	21.4%
Activist (CDM, PDF, others)	50	51.0%

Table 3. Self-described background of FGD participants

Study Limitations and Strengths

Limitations

- Sampling and recruitment approach
- Socioeconomic and political characteristics of participants
- Conduct of FGDs was not uniform

Strengths

- Approach mirrors the project's intent of sustainable democratic processes
- FGD participants are mostly the young and active “doers” who will be called upon to engage in governance transformation and justice-seeking

In the FGDs MARG sought to:

Explore the correspondence between a conceptualisation of linking grassroots governance-building with MTJ and the experiences and opinions of immigrant/refugee Myanmar people living in Thailand

Analytic Themes and Data Definitions

Theme / Code	Definition
Harm or Injustice Experienced	Descriptions of individual, interpersonal, or systemic harm or injustices that they or people they know have faced in Myanmar as a result of structural conditions in the country.
Responses to Injustice / Resistance	Ways that participants have engaged in responding to or resisting against harms or injustice.
Goals and Processes of Transitional Justice	Expressions of what participants think should be the goals or structure of a transitional justice process.
Future Governance Ideas	Expressions of what participants think future governance in the country should look like.
Barriers / Challenges to Transitional Justice and Future Governance	Factors that participants identify that may serve as a challenges in pursuing transitional justice or future governance strategies.
Perceptions of Micro Transitional Justice and Bottom Up Governance Concepts	Expressions of how participants view the concepts of micro-transitional justice, transitional justice, bottom-up governance concepts, and future governance. This code also includes participant views of the actual FGD process in achieving these goals.

Theme 1: Harms or injustice experienced

- Harms and injustices reported touch every aspect of life in Myanmar society.
- The Tatmadaw was most frequently identified as the perpetrator of abuses.
- Individual episodes and patterns of violence as well as long-term, structural oppression.
- Distinct focus on violent responses experienced by a cross section of Myanmar society as a result of resistance to the *coup* and the military regime.
- FGD participants reported experiencing violence, discrimination, and other forms of oppressive behavior based on identity.
- Dislocation was a frequent focus, as participants were forced to flee to the countryside and then Thailand.
- The collapse of weak institutions of governance after the coup exacerbated harm, as did the COVID-19 emergency.

Theme 2: Reactions and responses to harm and injustice

- Participants described responses to the *coup* and military junta's repression in terms of externally (protest, resistance) and internally directed (micro and macro forms of capacity-building) action.
- Joining anti-military regime resistance movement (CDM, PDF), resistance-oriented social media and campaigns, documentation.
- Resistance actions took various forms, including protests, social media campaigns, and documentation of resistance activities.
- Participants also engaged in capacity-building efforts to support the survival and resistance of Myanmar people, including joining support groups, disseminating information, and participating in education reform efforts.

Theme 3: Reaction to goals and processes of TJ

- Participants offered international examples that Myanmar could draw upon and learn from.
- Considered how EAOs, CSOs, the media, celebrities should be held to count in addition to military leadership.
- Emphasis on the importance of prevention via societal change to prevent future *coups*.
- Invested equal amounts of time on holding perpetrators accountable and on transforming structures and processes of governance.
- Address the trauma of people of Myanmar through mental health services.
- Deep and long-term institutional change versus truth commissions and judicial proceedings.
- Public civics education focus on justice.
- Grassroots level co-learning across ethnic and other identities.
- Public debate and deliberation across identities and interests.

Theme 4: Ideas regarding the future of governance

Governance in Myanmar must be completely transformed. Five categories of ideas were offered: 1) good governance, 2) federalism, 3) local governance, 4) emphasis on governance over government, and 5) education

- 1) **Good governance:** Politically unbiased government; rebalancing civil-military relationship; electoral reform
- 2) **Federalism:** Prefer to focus on decentralization of governmental authority and effective local government at the district level and below
- 3) **Local governance:** elective administrators and democratic processes at grassroots level based on broad and inclusive participation; administrative professionalisation; potential ethnic groups autonomy at the local level
- 4) **Governance over government:** NGOs, the business community, religious organisations, and the people working together in inclusive deliberative democratic processes
- 5) **Education:** Shifting from content to development of critical thinking, human rights training, meeting grassroots economic needs

Theme 5: Assessment of barriers to governance change and transitional justice

- Unwillingness of the military to relinquish power
- Inter-ethnic tensions/Bamar ethnic majority's control of institutions
- Corruption at all levels including in international relief aid distribution
- Difficulty of finding trusted entity to facilitate a TJ process
- Desire for revenge as opposed to justice
- Lack of accountability from international community
- Societal divisions around rural/urban interests, elites, religious, ethnic identities
- Traditional top-down approach to Myanmar government

Theme 6: Perceptions regarding an approach that links grassroots governance-building and MTJ

- Substantial agreement with general concepts of bottom-top governance
- Emphasis on inclusive participatory decision-making
- Strengthening administrative competence and capacity at village level
- Inter-identity understanding and trust-building is essential

Chiang Mai and Mae Sot Forums and Survey of Participants



In the forums MARG:

- Presented evidence from the FDGs
- Sought reactions from attendees
- Solicited suggestions for next steps



Responses from forum attendees

- Participants offered their views on transitional justice and governance and the content and structure of the report.
- Participants expressed favourable views of the concepts represented in the report.
- They offered concerns, questions, and improvements needed for the research process.
- Some participants expressed skepticism regarding the feasibility of implementing a vision for linking grassroots governance-building with micro-transitional justice.
- They described previous challenges with implementation on the grassroots level of similar concepts.

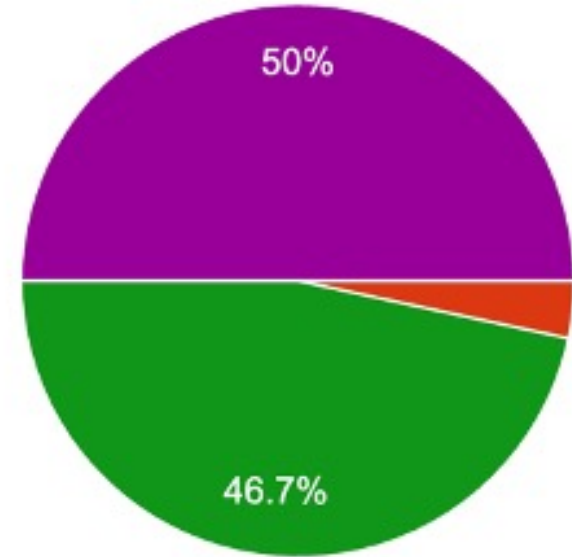


MARG Research Recommendations

- Involve more people with opposing views in the deliberative process. This should include those supporting NUG positions, those with alternative legal interpretations, and the leadership of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs);
- Combine existing TJ efforts with grassroots governance-building;
- Introduce the deliberative process and research among stakeholders and residents in EAO controlled areas;
- Publish findings in ethnic languages and focusing on wider distribution; and,
- Expand the research focus beyond a scholarly approach and with an emphasis on the deliberative evidence-gathering process itself.

Survey Results

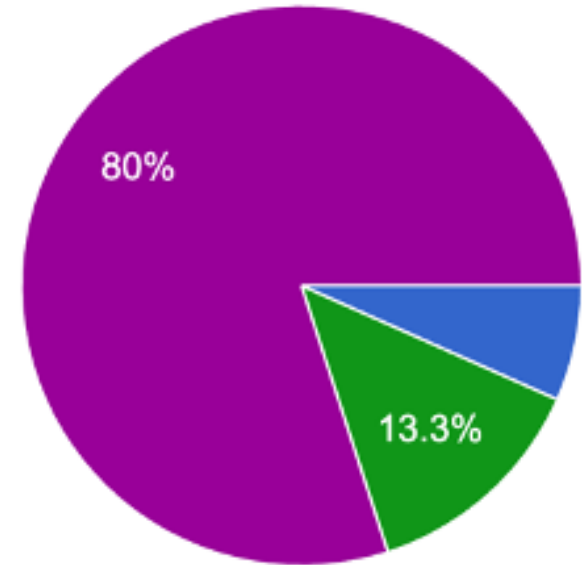
“The MARG report is valuable to me”



- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Survey Results

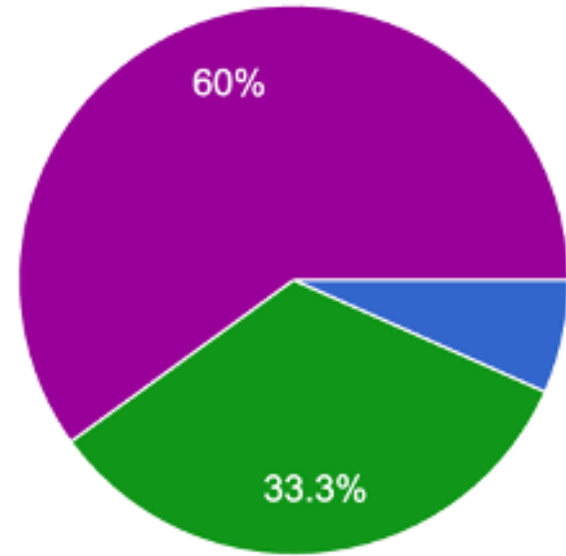
“To what extent do you agree with MARG’s argument that the future of governance in Myanmar should emphasize governance on the grassroots level?”



- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Survey Results

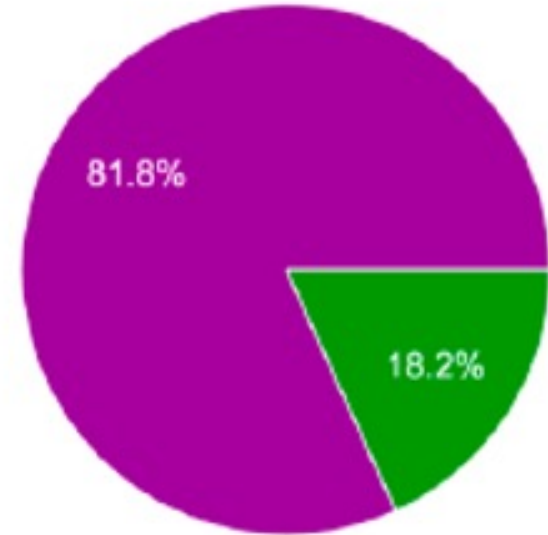
“To what extent do you agree with MARG’s argument that transitional justice in Myanmar should be based on what it refers to as “micro-transitional justice” on the grassroots level?”



- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Survey Results

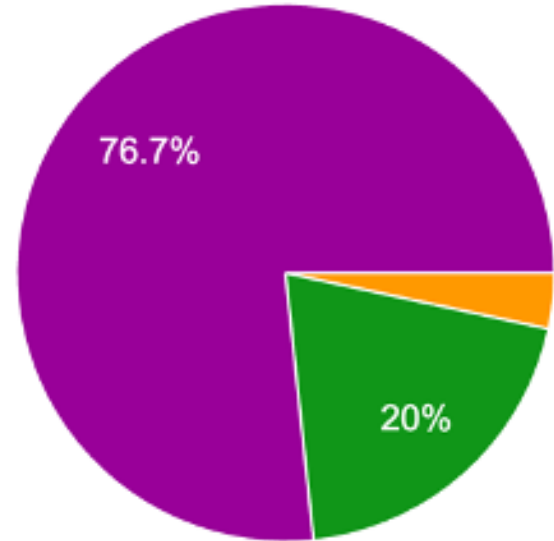
“To what extent do you agree with MARG’s argument that grassroots governance-building should be linked to micro-transitional justice?”



- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Survey Results

“How important is the role of young people – “Gen Z” – to the future of governance-building and justice-seeking in Myanmar?”



- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Next Steps for MARG



MARG has developed a curriculum for “democratically engaged communities”

It is designed to provide the community education required to introduce the principles of deliberative democracy on the grassroots level in Myanmar, emphasising:

- Inclusive participation
- Deliberative decision-making that accurately and effectively represents community needs and priorities

MARG needs multi-year funding support (from a source such as USIP) to continue its grassroots governance-building and justice-seeking objectives:

- To continue its deliberative research approach *inside* Myanmar
- To pilot its “**democratically engaged communities**” curriculum
- To continue to engage with the expatriate Myanmar community in Northern Thailand