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Youth Agency for Peacebuilding in and Beyond Education

Possibilities and Constraints

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Chapter 9
Youth Agency for Peacebuilding in and Beyond Education: Possibilities and Constraints

Sean Higgins and Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo

Introduction

This chapter aims to situate and understand the situation of youth within current processes of social, economic and political transition within Myanmar. In so doing, and in alignment with the book's concern to illuminate the cultural political economy context in relation to the agency of youth as peace builders, it underlines the constraints, opportunities and horizons of action available to youth. It should be noted that the insights offered below draw on the research team's engagement with youth constituencies in Mon State and Yangon and cannot therefore be considered representative of the highly diverse and context-specific situation of youth throughout the country. Moreover, the socio-political landscape in the country is in a state of transition (see Chap. 1), and with unresolved peace negotiations in process, the conclusions presented here should be understood as provisional and appropriate at this particular juncture.

At the outset, the lack of evidence about youth in Myanmar is striking. Indeed, a particular concern expressed by the many participants in this research – including the staff of international aid agencies as well as government ministries – was their current lack of precise knowledge, based on reliable evidence, about the situation and aspirations of Myanmar's youth. This absence of data was perceived by many to undermine effective policymaking tailored to the specific needs and concerns of youth across the country, especially in relation to their economic situation. As one informant pointed out, "*the problem is you don't really know what is happening to the youths out there…job opportunities, education, the employment market*" (int. 1). Exacerbating this perceived knowledge gap, the absence of information sharing between local and international agencies and in particular the neglect by the latter

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of the "*grassroots*" insights and "*practical*" knowledge of youth needs developed by local actors was also underlined (int. 81).[1] For example, the Ministry of Labour's current project in conjunction with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) focuses on gathering data across the country, linking labour market opportunities to planning, for enhanced vocational provision to meet youth needs. This is evidently an attempt to remedy one dimension of this evidence gap (ILO 2015, 86). Such initiatives testify to a broader recognition by both national and international actors that there is an urgent need to generate accurate knowledge as a crucial precondition for understanding and effectively engaging with the country's youth (int. 13). Within recent academic research on Myanmar, there is also a striking inattention to youth needs and concerns. It is noticeable that within assessments of the country's political and economic transition, relatively little is said about the younger segment of the population as opposed to broader civil society. This relative dearth of material on the situation of youth in Myanmar suggests that it is an important example of a broader neglect of attention to youth voices and needs in conflict-affected contexts.

Responding to this gap in knowledge, this chapter starts by sketching out the heterogeneous nature of those considered as 'youth' and continues by situating youth within Myanmar's current political and socio-economic transition. In doing so, we highlight certain important issues affecting youth agency including migration, inter-generational relationships and drugs. The second part of this chapter then moves to analyse current framings of how youth are understood, both within the continuously fluctuating policy discourses as well as by other key stakeholders. Finally, the multiple scales of youth activity and interaction will be considered, from intra-personal reflections, and inter-personal relationships all the way to engagement at national and international levels. This then leads us to the concluding argument that for diverse youth groups in contemporary Myanmar, and across levels of educational attainment, relative prosperity, dimensions of marginalisation and geographical location, a picture emerges of a rather restricted space for manoeuvre available to the younger generation within Myanmar's transition.

Locating Youth Within the Country's Social, Political and Economic Transitions

Reflecting the priority of the *Literature Review: Youth Agency, Peacebuilding & Education* (Lopes Cardozo et al. 2015) to reject assumptions of the homogeneity of youth, the research presented in this book aimed to include youth perspectives from a range of constituencies.

[1] Numbers indicated after quotations refer to our coding system employed as a research team, and congruent with Chaps. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10.

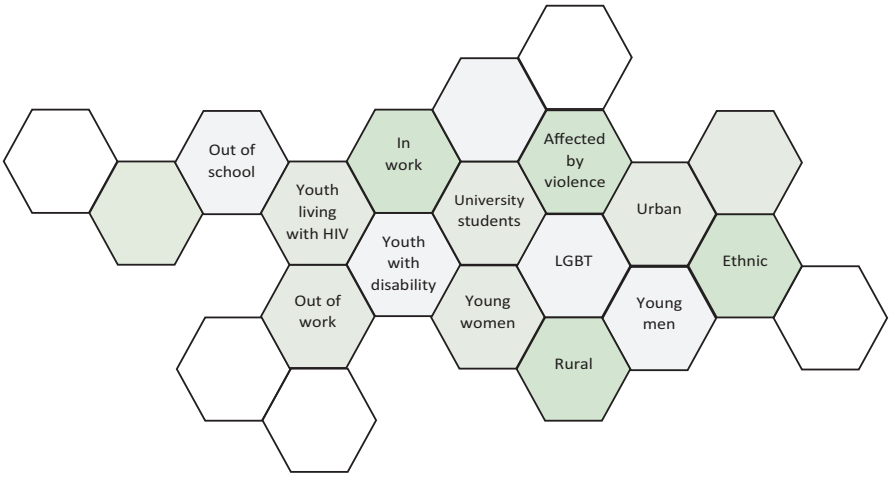

Fig. 9.1 Multiple youth constituencies included in the research. (Design by Elizabeth Maber)

Which Youth?

Youth engaged with in our data gathering were of different religious faiths, socio-economic backgrounds, and political affiliations and were between the ages of 16 and 30. Research took place in the Yangon area and in Mon State, although youth participants included ethnic identities beyond these two areas. An overview of the multiple constituencies primarily included in the research is provided in Fig. 9.1.

These categories of youth overlap and intersect so that individuals may identify with multiple or hybrid affiliations. Identity associations may take on greater significance in certain circumstances over others, and likewise may shift over time as alignments as well as spaces for agency, such as rural or urban, in or out of employment, are fluid and may change. Although not featuring prominently in our data gathering, it is acknowledged that youth may also be parents, carers, homeless, former or current combatants, they may be engaged in forced labour or sex work or subject to a variety of additional positions.

Experiences of Political/Democratic Transition

Youth informants from both urban and rural backgrounds recognised, albeit with a degree of caution, the potential positive impacts on their lives of the tentative opening up of political and social freedoms which have been associated with the country's political transition within the last few years. Many expressed their awareness of experiencing a new national liberalising trajectory stating that "*our country is on the path to democracy*" (int. 40), or involved in a "*democratic transition*" (int. 57).

Articulating a perception of the broad positive implications of recent developments for the presence and participation of youth within civil society, one rural youth informant participating in trainings and offering political and civic awareness noted that "*we have more right to speak freely, teach freely and show freely*" and that there are "*more rights on the cultural side*" (int. 57). Similarly articulating a sense of shifting societal dynamics another informant noted: "*in the past it is very difficult to lead in front of our community. But now [our] community is changing and [the] political situation is changing. So they start to practice democratising*" (int. 32). This also highlights the close association of political change with social transformation for young people. In particular, informants expressed appreciation for the expansion since 2011 of the number of civil society organisations and NGOs that were concerned with youth issues and how these started to provide meaningful spaces for their participation and support (ints. 40 and 57). As one youth CSO member put it:

> in the democratic transition we have more right to start up an organisation and there are more opportunities to attend the courses in NGOs or somewhere else, so the youth can get more chances…and there are many organisations which do the training, like capacity building courses or awareness training, but all are focus[ed] to get peace. (57)

Informants also associated liberalisation processes with new opportunities for offering support to youth to enhance their political awareness: "*now we can give the training freely with the politics in villages and towns*" (int. 57). This was also complemented by their enjoyment of easier access to printed newspapers and social media.

Constraints on Youth Political Engagement

However, optimism about new possibilities for youth held out by the prospect of ongoing 'democratisation' was tempered by a counter-veiling recognition of continuing constraints on youth participation and political engagement. Stakeholders expressed their awareness of the tokenistic appropriation of youth within decision-making spaces, where apparent inclusion masked exclusion from genuine influence and power (ints. 7, 94 and 13). Thus, even though youth might be invited to participate in more formal peacebuilding activities and meet "*high level people*", one informant concluded that "*Youth continue to be marginalised: you know we allow them to participate in the meeting but it's not structural influence*" (int. 7). Some informants, reflecting on experiences of participation in the youth wings of political parties, noted that they became dominated by elders so much that they no longer properly served their purpose as a channel to enable and promote participation. It was also recognised by youth participants themselves that "*in the democratic transition, youth are weak in political knowledge*" (int. 57), highlighting the legacy of inadequate education systems to prepare young people to participate in politics. This sense of frustration at the limits of exercising genuine influence, as well as the

fear of repercussions from police and military that accompany political action have strong influences on participation. As one peer educator commented:

> Youth don't participate in the political because they fear the political. And in their mind, they always think that if they do politics, they will be in prison. For example, the students' protests that we have recently, when they hear the protest, they think about the 88 revolution because during that revolution many students died, so parents call and take back their children. (int. 57)

Further constraints on youth participation and their agency for transformation are discussed in the next Chap. 10. What is apparent from the foregoing discussion is the range of relationships to and experiences of the "political" within diverse youth constituencies in different contexts. These evidently cover a spectrum from activism and engagement – albeit frequently in circumstances of intimidation and violence – to passivity, fear and despair.

Youth Within the Economic Transition

Interestingly, for youth in Mon State and Yangon, who unlike youth in other states may not have directly experienced violent conflict, there was a frequent association of peacebuilding with opportunities for work and resulting possibilities of financial security. Here peace was explicitly understood as a sense of wellbeing, emphatically linked to rectifying perceived economic injustices. In a focus group discussion, a group of rural village youth similarly expressed their conviction of the relevance of well-paid work for theirs and their communities' wellbeing, pointing out that *"good business and income are the important things for peacebuilding"* (int. 44). The dignity and life-enhancing prospects that come from earning a living was perceived by many youth to provide the practical and emotional underpinning for their positive exercise of agency linked to peacebuilding and development within their communities. Thus one youth pointed out that *"in order to have the youth participating in the country's development process, we need job opportunities and methods"* (int. 57). When asked what he meant by "methods", this young man talked about the practical know-how to be able to produce good rubber products such that *"if they know how to, they can get more income and they can go to the schools and they will be educated and they can participate in the development process"* (int. 57). Here economic wellbeing was perceived to be the essential grounding for youth's capacity to learn relevant skills, and contribute to sustainable developmental processes. This was a view not only held by youth, but similarly by state-level stakeholders (int. 80), as is further illuminated below.

Youth informants recognised that Myanmar was undergoing an economic as well as political transition, associated in particular with renewed international investment in energy, mining, industry and agriculture. However, many perceived that such developments were benefiting an elite group of 'cronies' – high ranking business people who enjoyed patronage and economic benefits during time of military

rule (Gravers and Ytzen 2014, 126) – at the expense of the majority of the population, especially rural youth. Thus one informant observed that *"in the democratic transition, there are more economic opportunities for the people who are rich but there are no opportunities at the ground level"* (int. 57). Such perceptions confirm the analysis of other commentators. A review of the country's recent economic trajectory concludes that "lack of public policy and investment support has limited the potential of a young and eager to learn population that could contribute to economic growth" (Findlay et al. 2016, 47). Youth perception of the state's disconnection from the economic plight of its citizens is captured in the comment of one informant on the treatment of farmers protesting at state land grabbing, who pointed out that: *"we can say that we have foreign investment and wide uses of cell phone and more cars"*, but he warns that *"they are not the improvements that we really want, like… you can see the farmers and workers because of their low pay, when they protest they go to the jail"* (int. 56).

Against this perception of their exclusion from the benefits of national economic growth spurred by foreign capital, youth expressed despair at the lack of employment opportunities. This seemed to be relevant both to the diverse constituencies of urban and rural youth, including school drop outs, as well as better educated youth (ints. 24, 44, 67 and 68). They also expressed frustration at the impoverishment caused to them and their families by narrow options of low paid casual labour (int. 38). Similarly, youth with high levels of education were also frustrated that it did not translate to adequate professional compensation or a better standard of living: "*the salary for youth is not related to professional [position] even though you are a doctor, you are not paid [a] professional salary*" (int. 114). Such concerns about high youth unemployment and under-employment were construed within a broader critique of inattention of the state to the social and economic needs of communities. Similarly, they also highlight deeply felt resentment that formal education is failing to provide a pathway to employment and improved living standards for young people.

A recent report on the need for improved vocational education provision confirmed this dismal picture, of the impoverishing consequences for youth of a lack of both work and work-related education opportunities, pointing out that "in 2013 approximately one million lower secondary school drop outs needed access to adequate and labour market relevant vocational education and training in order to break out of the cycle of poverty" (TVET, Sub-Sector Report 7,28). Paradoxically, while the nation's large youth constituency is perceived as an asset in relation to prospects for economic growth as shown below in analysis of state level policy on technical and vocational education – our youth informants emphasised their current experience of exclusion from labour market opportunities.

Migration as Impacting on Youth Agency

While this chapter's attention to youth agency assumes the presence of this demographic within Myanmar, it was, on the contrary, the scarcity or near absence of youth in the villages and communities of Mon State resulting from the impact of widespread economic migration which was a recurring concern amongst informants. As one informant bluntly put it, *"that groups is hard to find in the villages due to migration"* (int. 7).

Youth informants cited the frustrations of youth at the lack of employment opportunities and/or well-paid work opportunities in Mon State as a key economic driver of the exodus of their generation (int. 57). This frustration was particularly felt by well-educated youth who spoke of being ashamed *"for working on the same thing that illiterate people like, like rubber tapping and rice farming although they are graduates"* (int. 38). Some also pointed to a mismatch between what they had learned in their formal education and the employment prospects in Mon State: *"they can't use their education in reality, so most of the youth go to foreign countries to work"* (int. 56). Such frustrations were compounded by pressures to migrate to earn money in order to alleviate family poverty (int. 44) as well as the perceived economic success of friends who had gone abroad to earn and were sending remittances back home. Although our data reflects mostly on the situation in Mon State, similar observations are also relevant for instance in Shan State, Kayin State, Kayah State and Thanintharyi Region (ILO 2013).

Socio-cultural Impacts of the Political and Economic Transition on Youth Agency

This section highlights some of the social and cultural impacts bearing upon youth agency, and reviews them in relation to the above-sketched political and economic context of transition.

Changing Inter-generational Relationships

The scarcity of a youth demographic resulting from migration was perceived by many – including youth themselves – as a social tragedy for Myanmar, undermining the capacity of communities to benefit from the energies and skills of a key group in society. Thus, the negative impact of a youth absence on inter-generational leadership and knowledge exchange were noted. As one informant put it, *"it takes people*

of different generations to run a community right" (int. 80). Moreover, young people themselves were aware that as result of being caught up within processes of economic migration their generation is unable – frequently unwilling – to contribute to the development of their communities. Many perceived the migration process as one that undermined a sense of commitment of youth to their communities.

Youth as well as national and international stakeholders agreed that a major influence on youth agency within Myanmar was their location within these changing inter-generational relationships. There was a widespread perception of a shift away from traditional social hierarchies in which youth were compliant and subservient to elders' dominance. One youth noted that *"in the past only the elders, rich people, authority people have to be leaders in the villages, but now things are changing"* (int. 32). Such shifts presented particular challenges as well as opportunities for youth. Many expressed an awareness and commitment to cultural norms obligating them to a passive role; as one put it, *"the culture makes us to be obedient to elder people"* (int. 57). On the other hand, there were new opportunities to forge more collaborative and co-operative relationships with elders through dialogue. Recognition of greater opportunities for youth leadership in village communities was perceived to be a by-product of such societal shifts (int. 32). Still, many youth continued to be committed to traditional social values, even as they welcomed the new social inclusion of youth. Thus, one youth pointed out that *"we need to bow our head when we walk in front of the older people, have respect [for] older people and have empathy to[wards] younger people"* (int. 38). However, such shifts posed challenges both for youth as well as elders, in particular related to the extent to which traditional cultural norms could be transgressed as youth took up new spaces to *"talk back"* to teachers and parents (int. 81).

Youth Resorting to Drugs

Youth and leaders of organisations working with youth expressed concern at what they perceived as mounting levels of drug abuse among youth. While field work was not conducted in the major drug producing states of Myanmar, nevertheless it was recognised that even within this context removed from the immediate major sources of supply, drugs were accessible and used by large numbers of youth (int. 7). The role of high unemployment, dropping out of school, and the impact of economic migration abroad on youth attitudes and behaviours were all cited as factors instigating youth to turn to drugs (int. 57). The availability of remittances from money earned abroad within rural villages was also cited as a factor encouraging drug use (int. 7).

Moreover, some youth questioned what they perceived as a strategy to arrest youth drug users rather than the suppliers (int. 57). Youth organisations working with youth on drug issues in rural villages in Mon State reported having to seek special security for fear of reprisals by drug traders (int. 56). This indicates the difficulty of addressing youth drug abuse given the range of vested interests committed to their continued production and consumption. Some youth felt strongly about what they perceived as the collusion of state authority in undermining youth agency

by not taking action against drug dealers and instead criminalising youth consumers with heavy-handed law enforcement. For instance, one informant pointed out that:

> The police don't address the drug users and the government lets it happen, so it could mean that they are destroying the citizens intentionally.

Youth drug use is thus located in a complex mix of state collusion, the persistence of a prosperous drugs economy and the consequent challenges of interventions to address drug abuse, and is an area that calls for further research.

Youth-Related Policy and Framing

Having laid out the location of youth within Myanmar's current transition, and young people's experiences of current challenges in relating to this context, this section illuminates the way youth are framed and addressed at the policy level. It highlights the lack of a state level youth policy and policy coherence in this area. Policy coherence is weakened on the one hand by the number of ministerial departments attending to youth issues, including the Ministries of Labour, Education and Social Welfare, and on the other by a lack of co-ordination between them (int. 8). Some informants, youth as well as those working in government organisations, noted with regret the absence of a Ministry or a Minister devoted to youth issues (ints. 13, 14 and 18). Moreover, the lack of co-ordination of responses and programming in relation to youth by international agencies operating in the country was recognised as undermining the effectiveness of interventions (ints. 80 and 81). Being mindful of the attention to youth needs in the policies and programming of some non-governmental organisations, the overall picture remains of the absence of a coherent, systematic focus within national state and donor policy.

Youth as Framed Within National State Level Agendas

It was noted that the absence of a coherent institutional architecture at the state level for addressing youth issues was in part a reflection of a legacy of neglect of this constituency within national policy prior to the recent democratic transition. However, there was also a perception of a more recent *"huge cultural and structural breakthrough"* (int. 51) in the treatment of the country's youth within government, in which their needs, issues and voices were finally coming into view as an important component of national development. One informant noted that within the current transition there were genuine signs of a move away from previous paternalistic approaches to youth as *"babies that needed to be taken care of"* (int. 51) within earlier authoritarian top down modes of national governance. However, the limitations of this apparent cultural repositioning of youth within national policy priorities is underlined by others who point out that youth have been marginalised from

both dialogue on current education reform processes and peace processes and that their concerns are not mainstreamed as a cross-cutting issue (int. 79).

The fact that attention to youth constituencies is frequently implicit or emerges indirectly as a component within broader governmental initiatives perhaps reflects this unresolved and uncertain re-evaluation of youth within national priorities. Some – including youth themselves – for instance have associated recent ministerial aspirations for more "*people centred*" governance with greater recognition and responsiveness to youth (int. 18). The willingness of government Ministries to organise workshops on youth related issues is also taken to reflect a new recognition of youth concerns.

Moreover, the potential role of youth in contributing to the country's economic growth and transformation is recognised within policy formation linked to a perceived urgent need to improve access to and provision of technical and vocational education (int. 8). Here the economic dimensions of youth agency are emphasised and their status as a key source of the nation's human capital. Youth are thus defined in relation to the exigencies of national economic growth within an expanding market economy (int. 86). What is striking is a recognition of absence of knowledge or understanding of youth needs linked to the labour market and employment. A national survey organised by the Department of Labour with the co-operation of the International Labour Organisation (2015) is the first one undertaken in the country in "a quarter of a century and will provide results that will shape the country's employment policy" (ILO 2015, 1). In relation to enabling a greater understanding of the needs of youth, the survey aims to produce labour statistics on the labour force and potential labour markets, child labour, and the school to work transition. Informants from the Ministry of Labour underlined the significance of this data gathering process in providing information about the regional diversity of labour market needs, which could inform the appropriate tailoring of vocational training for unemployed and out of school youth (int. 86).

Recognition of the inadequate quality and provision of technical and vocational education for the country as a whole also indicates a wider concern with youth well-being as influenced by employment and livelihood prospects (ints. 86 and 79). Thus, a report on Technical and Vocational Education forming part of the CESR research process (see Chap. 4) points out that the transformation shifts which the Ministry of Education commits to achieving is that "learners can access and graduate from quality assured certified and labour market responsive TVET which will enable them to find decent employment and secure their livelihood" (TVET Sub-sector report no 7, 1). While this can be seen as a promising response to youth demands for a dignified job, at the same time there lies a potential danger in instrumentalising youth as mere (potential) productive citizens, and leaving more political and socio-cultural aspects of youth agency and empowerment aside.

Youth Within the Policy and Programming Priorities of International Actors

There is wide acknowledgement amongst education staff of aid agencies that Myanmar's youth have been neglected within the priorities and programming of international actors overwhelmed by a multitude of other competing concerns within a challenging context (ints. 4 and76). Such inattention contradicted a general awareness that youth needed to be better targeted in programming and a conviction that *"more needs to be done on policy for youth"* (int. 4). Various challenges were identified, which had rendered youth-related programming problematic and difficult to operationalise.

Firstly, the dangers of offending political and cultural sensitivities by attending to a cohort sometimes *"perceived as trouble"* or being "*controversial*" was highlighted (int. 4). Secondly, the sheer heterogeneity of the country's youth constituencies – including disillusioned students, school drop outs, unemployed male and female youth, young parents and child soldiers, all with disparate needs and situations – made programming particularly complex. Thirdly, the inattention to developing programmes to support Myanmar's youth as agents of peacebuilding was attributed to a perceived lack of an evidence base to inform interventions (int. 3). Finally, it was recognised that the generic programming frameworks which aid agencies brought to conflict-affected contexts, such as TVET or equivalency programmes, undermined comprehensive and integrated analysis of the particularities of youth needs in Myanmar, undermining the possibility of context-responsive and meaningful interventions (int. 4).

Framing of Youth Within Myanmar Society

This section highlights the diverse array of approaches and perceptions of Myanmar's youth circulating amongst national and international stakeholders, civil society actors, the police and state security institutions, elders, and also as reported within the media. Bringing these together indicates the variegated understanding of youth agency, which ranges across a continuum, from highly negative to celebratory and indeed triumphalist (see Fig. 9.2). They also indicate the contradictory expectations held of the country's youth and their status as a constituency whose agentic significance is contested and uncertain.

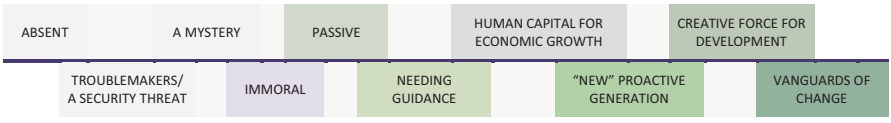

Fig. 9.2 Youth agency across a continuum. (Design by Elizabeth Maber)

Youth as Absent

As noted in the previous section on political economy factors impacting on youth agency, there was a widespread recognition of the absence of youth within Myanmar's rural communities caused by economic migration. Thus a manager of a youth initiative commenting on the challenging process of recruitment noted that "*we said we would like to have youth but the problem we found is that there are no youth in the villages of Karen and Mon state*" (int. 30). This exodus of youth in search of work opportunities was regarded as a social tragedy and a waste of the country's human resources.

Youth as a Mystery

One recurring theme is that youth in Myanmar are an unknown social group in the sense that there is an absence of reliable data and knowledge about their needs and concerns. Such views were expressed particularly in relation to understanding their economic situation. As one informant from an international aid agency put it*: "the problem is you don't really know what is happening to the youths out there… Job opportunities, education, the employment market…"* (int. 6). This view was corroborated by actors at the national ministerial level, who are involved in major national data-gathering exercises linked to youth employment needs. As one put it, there was a challenge to *"connect all the dots"* in relation to understanding the diverse situations of youth in different parts of the country (int. 86). The perception of youth as a mystery is also evident in anecdotal comments that elders within Myanmar culture are unable to understand a demographic whose attitudes and behaviours are currently changing rapidly. One informant evoked this incomprehension, pointing out that*: "I didn't do a study of this*" but observing that

> I came to feel that a lot of people don't know how to handle these transforming youth… I think that leads to comments saying that we don't understand 21st century youth. (int. 81)

Youth as Troublemakers/a Security Threat

There is a consensus among some informants that youth in Myanmar are not so demonised as drivers of conflict as in other conflict-affected contexts (ints. 3, 4 and 12). For example, one informant pointed out *that "youth are not stereotyped as a threat or problem per se, but in specific contexts are perceived as a threat, [as] those who are disaffected"* (int. 4). Yet, the view that certain sections of the youth population were unnecessarily troublesome, anti-social and unreasonable is present amongst a range of national and international actors. This charge was levelled frequently at student activists (ints. 6, 13 and 51). One informant expressed a level of frustration and impatience with *"those who keep protesting about the Education law... because they haven't been heard... that's fine... but do you know of any law*

that is meeting the needs of everyone?" (int. 6). Thus interpreted, the behaviour of student activists was seen to have breached social and political protocols, such that they needed to be more mindful about: *"how your country works, and what is democracy and how far you can and how far you shouldn't go"* (int. 6).

Frequent press reports of the monitoring, arrest, detention, imprisonment and violence levelled at student activists – campaigning peacefully on educational as well as more recently on election related issues – demonstrate a more extreme version of the notion of youth as a threat to social order. In one report, the Home Affairs Minister is referenced as announcing that: "the students posed a threat to Burma's stability" (Irrawaddy, February 13, 2015b). Explanations of state interventions to control student protesters underscore the need to protect the "country's security, rule of law and to maintain regional peace" (Irrawaddy, February 13, 2015b). Reports of the monitoring of student protesters against educational reform by plain clothes police officers (Irrawaddy, March 2015a) underlines the perceptions of such groups as subversive, needing to be scrutinised and controlled. This framing is also linked to their projection as operating against national interests because of "being manipulated by groups seeking to destabilise the country" (February 6, 2015, The Associated Press) including "foreign organisations and ex-political hardliners" in the view of the Home Affairs Minister as quoted in Irrawaddy (February 9, 2015c). Such responses indicate the currency within the Myanmar's state and police authorities of a highly securitised projection of youth as subversive of social and national order, needing containment through monitoring, surveillance and regulation.

Youth as Immoral

Discussions of the country's youth constituency also focused on their lack of ethical behaviour and attitudes. Such views are not limited to elders' moralizing of young people, but were also at times articulated by young people themselves in reference to their peers:

> They are saying that the country's future is in the hands of the young people, but in the young people's hands we see alcohol, drugs and beer… so we can't think of our country's future. (int. 57)

What distinguishes these approaches is their adoption of a distinctively moralised framing, perhaps linked to religious values.

Youth as Needing Guidance

The view of youth needing guidance may result from the framing of youth as immoral, but it is also present particularly amongst educators with less moralising overtones. The view of youth as impatient, rather than overtly immoral, was also expressed by teachers who were frustrated at students' desires to get to the 'right answer' without spending time on learning processes (int. 19). Some pointed to the

needs of youth for direction and values education in order to *"know right from wrong"* (int. 17) or *"to be patient and persevering"* (int. 17). This view of youth as 'in-formation' rather than as autonomous individuals connects to an infantilising of young people particularly from those in positions of state and/or community authority. References by Ministry of Education representatives to students wanting to engage the government in dialogue about education Law Reform as "children" who could not be given everything they ask for (Metro 2014) also illustrates this infantilising approach. Paradoxically this framing is also strongly connected to perceived failures in the education system to meet the needs of young people, particularly in developing critical thinking skills. Many of the young people interviewed also shared a related articulation of desiring more knowledge and access to information and in feeling under-prepared for the tasks they wanted to take on (ints. 14, 114 and 115). This frustration at feeling denied access to forms of knowledge they identify as needing is further elaborated in Chap. 10.

Youth as Passive

Many youth participants drew attention to the cultural expectations that they should always respect elders (int. 6). However it was also acknowledged that such expectations that youth should be deferential often meant that they were not listened to. So one informant pointed out that *"in Burmese culture they don't give space for youth to participate in decision making or whatever"* (int. 81). This, according to our respondents, results in a passivity and compliance with dominant cultural (and religious) norms.

Youth as Human Capital for Economic Growth

Several actors stressed the key role of the youth demographic as a human capital resource, which can potentially make a major contribution to the country's economic growth. Drawing attention to the country's rising yearly GDP but also to the challenge of managing the country's massive natural and environmental resources, one informant warned that *"if you don't work well with those stakeholder youths, it's a disaster"* (int. 76). This framing of youth is also present in the rationales and theory of change of TVET oriented interventions, as further discussed in Chap. 10.

Youth as a "New" Proactive Generation

Some informants emphasised the emergence of a "new" generation of youth characterised by their concern to be proactive in relation to community and national development. Such youth demonstrated an unprecedented concern to engage with

the government, which distinguished them from previous generations of youth under the military regime who were obligated into compliance and passivity in relation to top down and authoritarian governance. So the approach of one youth leader was described as *"definitely the new generation of Mon youth in Myanmar*" (int. 81) because his vision of community development was based on his sense of a partnership between *"community and government… to make this happen"*. Such an approach was indicative of a newfound willingness of youth to exercise responsibility *"instead of just criticising"* (int. 81).

Youth as a Potential Creative Force for National Development and Peacebuilding

Linked to the perception of an emergent demographic whose attitudes and approaches differed from earlier generations of youth, was the view that their potential to contribute in innovative, out-of-the-box and dynamic ways to the nation's development, was currently being under-estimated and neglected. Within such framings their resourcefulness, energy and initiative was underlined as a resource to be harnessed. One informant noted that *"we are really excited about this… when you are 15 or 16 you are already quite ready to be active citizens"* (int. 18). The capacity of youth to be creative and innovative was perceived to be their particular strength. Thus a manager of a youth programme pointed out that *"I think the biggest potential of youth... they're so out of the box… they have a lot of ideas that are so unconventional… that shakes our fixed ideas and prejudices"* (int. 81). Such openness to new knowledges was evident in their ability to use *"technologies… and share these things in a much more dynamic way than us [elders]"* (int. 81).

This viewpoint is supported by media attention to youth mobilising social media to contribute to peacebuilding initiatives. One report headlined – *Myanmar youth strike a pose against hate in selfie campaign* (AFP 13 July 2015) – and explained how youth had used mobile phone technology and social media to promote cross-cultural friendships between Muslim and Buddhist youth within a context of increasing religious intolerance. Press reports that "Myanmar's political parties hope young voters will rejuvenate them" (Mizzima, 5 June 2015) also evoke the association of this demographic with the revitalisation of traditional institutions. While understood as constituting a threat to cultural norms (int. 81), this ability of the country's youth to bring distinctive qualities to development and peacebuilding was regarded by youth respondents as well as some of the national and international actors included in our study as one of the country's strengths (ints. 6, 33 and 80). Reiterating such views, a recent analysis of national prospects for economic growth entitled *Myanmar Unlocking the Potential* draws attention to its "youthful workforce" as a particular advantage along with "its strategic location, ample natural resources, and huge tourism potential" (ADB 2014, iv).

Youth as Principled Vanguards of Change

Located as agents within Myanmar's history, youth were also projected as principled and heroic vanguards of social change in Myanmar. Press reports linking current student protests with earlier traditions of radicalism capture this historicised understanding of youth agency. The Irrawaddy noted that:

> Students have been at the forefront of protest actions since pro-independence sentiment picked up steam against Burma's British Colonizers in the early 20th century. (Irrawaddy, February 13, 2015)

Others record the parallels between current activism and that of the '88 generation. These projections tend to emphasize the moral courage, bravery and conviction of stances taken up by students throughout Myanmar's history. A participant in the '88 uprising, commenting on recent police violence against student activists, noted that "they are just like me… they are in their 20s, I was about 20 then. They will be shocked and nervous now, after their first experience of violence" (Irrawaddy, March 16, 2015a).

In summary, this array of assumptions about the agency of youth forms a continuum from negative framings – as absent, mysterious and problematic – to celebrations of their potential contribution to change in their capacity as unique contributors to economic growth, and as creative and innovative, principled and courageous. It has also thrown light on their positioning within the distinct, sometimes contradictory agendas of various actors. These include concerns for security and social order, national growth and development, inter-generational changes, as well as the resonance of youth behaviour with the broader trajectory of Myanmar's history. In relation to the interest of this chapter in the spaces of manoeuvre available to youth, the emergent message is perhaps the complex and daunting challenge they currently face in negotiating such a variegated landscape of expectations.

Strategic Engagement at Multiple Scales

Youth participating in our research identified a range of supporting 'moments' of engagement that contribute to their felt sense of agency. By interacting in multiple ways across scales, ranging from peer relationships to exercising international influence, youth drew on a variety of connections – local national and international – to support their agency for transformation and where possible circumvent limitations. Figure 9.3 below highlights the levels at which these interactions occur, with further explanation detailed below.

Youth identified supporting and hindering factors across these levels, simultaneously drawing on multiple dimensions to exercise agency – or the capacity to take action – while also constrained by their contextual environment and positioning. Below, we start our discussion from the 'supra' level of international engaments, moving all the way over to the 'nano-level' inter- and intrapersonal levels. In doing

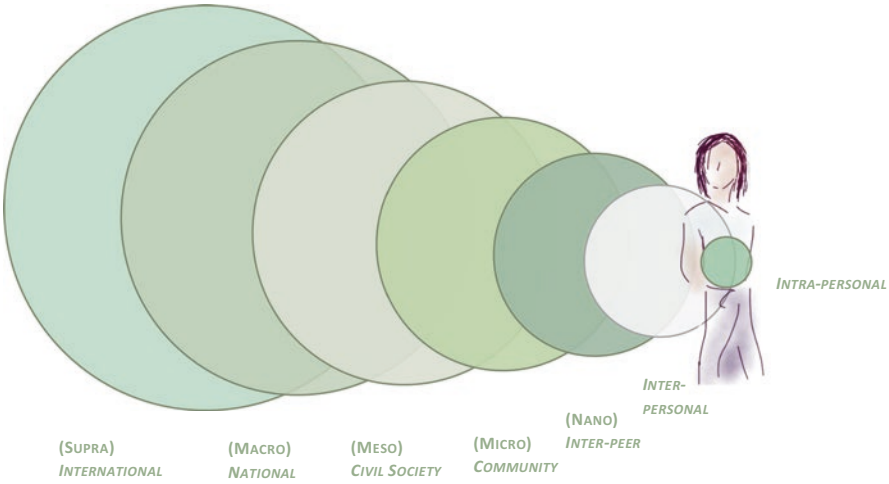

Fig. 9.3 Multi-scalar youth interactions. (Design by Elizabeth Maber)

so, we aim to broaden the often micro-oriented discussions around youth participation to acknowledge their involvement beyond the immediate level of peers and the community, and to provide a more nuanced analysis of spaces and connections that might be more restricting or enabling.

(Supra) International Level

International engagement included global youth movements, travel abroad for study and work, and participation in international events such as International Youth Day. Several youth leaders had participated in ASEAN youth programmes including forums, exchanges and cultural visits with the aim of both advocating for peace and promoting regional dialogue and shared learning (ints. 18 and 115). Similarly, community based or national level organisations working to facilitate these opportunities reflected the intention to contribute to local development amongst participants:

> They provide youth exchange programs, so many youths could apply for the youth exchange programs. Then after they come back, they can run their own organization and build network with the others, youth groups, so they can keep going. (int. 9)

Youth also identified the support of international organisations providing a space to bring young civil society members together such as British Council clubs (int. 114) and American Centre forums and debates (int. 104). This international contact was welcomed across the range of youth constituencies participating in our research, with underprivileged youth as likely to respond positively to international contact: "s*atisfaction is earned while giving trainings to others and when working with foreigners*" (int. 24). For groups traditionally marginalised within Myanmar society,

including young people with disability, LGBT youth and young women's rights activists, international and transnational networks were identified as supporting their advocacy work, both through access to funding for initiatives (int. 116) and through creating a feeling of solidarity (ints. 18, 23 and 88). In addition, several youth respondents also commented on the recently increasing access to information on internet and (inter-)national connections on social media, as discussed in other sections as well.

(Macro) National and State Level

Engagement at the national and state level was characterised as the most problematic arena for young people to influence. Beyond global initiatives that delineate a certain space for youth, participating in national level discussions or seeking to be heard by policy makers was a source of constraint. As has been highlighted elsewhere, the state is commonly associated with limiting the spaces for youth activities:

> Sometimes, it's hard to get due respect and impression from the government authorities just because they regard the youths as still young and not experienced enough. They don't see the capacity and capability of the youths in Myanmar yet. (int. 115)

Interactions with the state were often characterised by a strong impression of hierarchy. Frustration and fear was also expressed at the suppression of youth's freedom of movement and expression by continued surveillance of their activities by state and local government, as well as military and police authorities. Thus one informant pointed out that attempting to organise collective action amongst youth and peer training was difficult as "*the police and the village administrators call very often and disturb us indirectly if we do the training…so we can't say we have freedom for our country*" (int. 57). Other constraints on youth horizons of action included perceived state pressure on youth forums to avoid discussion of issues "*not encouraged by government*", which nevertheless pertained directly to youth's sense of wellbeing, including "*sensitive issues…unemployment, immigration, drug issues*" (int. 7).

However, while this space remains constrained and problematic, youth also acknowledged that government supervision was reducing in some areas (int. 115). One young civil society leader saw increased space available for youth movements as a result of working to build trust with state authorities: "*the views of some [in the government] have started to change and the condition is getting better compared to the past two years*" (int. 115). This expansion of spaces for collective youth networking was identified (int. 14) as an important result of liberalisation impacting on youth opportunities for advocacy and inter-regional reflection and collaboration on issues affecting them.

Youth Dissatisfaction with the Government
Concern was expressed that the liberalising momentum following 2011 had stalled such that "*in 2014 and 2015 the improvement is going a little backward*" (int. 56). Such viewpoints highlight the predicaments facing youth as they attempt to exercise agency within what they perceive as highly contradictory trends within state governance. Some rural and urban youth expressed a noticeable sense of alienation from the state and its apparatuses of authority, with some expressing strong views. One Mon youth noted that "*for the government, their strategy is to put the fear in the youth['s] mind about politics*" (int. 56). This general perception of a regulatory state concerned to exclude youth from political discussions was linked to a negative assessments of the conduct of militarised operation of state institutions. It was noticeable that rural youth in particular construed their dissatisfaction with the state as a result of a perceived inattention to the social and economic needs of their communities. One youth note that "*in the 2008 Constitution I don't see the paragraph for the public like building a preschool for the children and building a home for the aged…so I think we need more justice laws*" (int. 57). Moreover, he also noted that "*we are weak in protecting workers in the job… and we don't have a prescribed basic salary for the workers*" (int. 57). Such comments underline the diverse expectations of the democratic transition amongst different youth groups.

(Meso) Civil Society Level

The opportunities for youth to build networks, develop partnerships and gain skills and knowledge about human rights, advocacy and communication from civil society organisations, NGOs and CSOs was also welcomed. However, this recognition of the expansion of their political agency within spaces and networks available to them co-existed with their awareness of youth's inability to effect structural redistributions of power and resources to address underlying issues such as land rights and financial compensation for displaced landowners. This was due to a perception of the state's continuing desire to centralise control of land and resources. Working within the constraints of such broader political structures produced a paradoxical sense in youth that activism to effect significant social changes linked to redistribution and representation processes was being continually undermined and thwarted. It was also pointed out that many community based organisations addressing youth concerns were operating in an 'underground' fashion, without formal legal registration (int. 57), suggesting either limited approval of administrative authorities for their activities, or a reluctance for youth to formalise their operations, or a combination of these factors.

Engagement with civil society has enabled youth to form links between multiple levels of engagement, often supporting connections to international and transnational movements. For example, for the LGBT community, the recent growth of national and international civil society organisations concerned with human rights advocacy more broadly provides greater opportunities to raise public awareness of LGBT rights despite the ongoing prejudice they experience in society (int. 88). LGBT youth were involved in public awareness raising activities such as Human Rights Day, the International Day Against Homophobia and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, enabling them to gain visibility for advocacy work.

(Micro) Community Level

As highlighted in many of the case-study initiatives presented in Chap. 10, and in contrast to the earlier mentioned framing of youth as passive, youth often demonstrated a commitment to their communities, which motivated their desire to take action. This was at times motivated by a desire to address injustice or discrimination (int. 88), to protect and preserve a cultural identity (int. 68), or to help others overcome challenges they had experienced (int. 24). The perceived expansion of space for activism was also reflected in youth mobilisation at a community level, which has proliferated in recent years. Both youth-initiated as well as (I)NGO-led responses to emergency situations opened up spaces for community engagement of groups of youth, for instance after cyclone Nargis in 2008, and with the more recent flooding in 2015. Although deep-rooted divides persist, at the same time a shared sense of solidarity was articulated by many people in Myanmar in the aftermath of the cyclone and floods, supporting a rise in volunteerism as many young people rushed to offer support to affected communities. In contrast, and as mentioned elsewhere, migration patterns mean that many communities experience an absence of youth members.

(Nano) Inter-peer and Collectives of Youth

Considering the limited space for youth engagement with international and national levels, as detailed above, most of the youth programmatic interventions focus on the civil society, community and inter-peer levels. Collectives of youth are both youth-initiated and youth-led, as well as founded and supported by (I)NGOs, as was illustrated in the micro-case studies on non-formal education initiatives above. Peer learning was frequently identified as especially being supportive for youth agency (int. 24), while in one specific programme inter-faith and inter-ethnic encounters between youth with different backgrounds was seen to contribute to greater mutual understanding (ints. 7 and 32). As an example of youth collectivism, the textbox below highlights the benefits and challenges of Youth Forums in Myanmar.

Youth Forums: Benefits and Challenges of Collective Mobilisation for Change

Youth expressed their appreciation for the sense of solidarity they derived from establishing international networks of communication with youth in other countries, using social media and facebook, as well as learning from the operation of other youth forums in the ASEAN region (18). While the youth forums were celebrated as vehicles for new forms of collective action and social relationships, their leaders also highlighted the challenges faced by their inter- and intra-regional mobilisation of Myanmar's youth:

- Leaders of youth forums mentioned uncertain public spaces and experience of state repression, exemplified by reports of police harassment of a press conference, in which: *"young women were trying to explain to the media what happens to them and what kinds of [violence the] government commits to them"* (int. 18).
- Doing justice to the diverse and context-specific priorities of youth across the country was found problematic, as one leader pointed out: *"we try to make sure we do things in the nationwide level, that's concerned the whole region and the whole country* […] *we made sure the issues we discussed were representative, inclusive and grassroot: issues including youth and peace and youth and education"* (int. 18).
- Youth were *"passionate about their own region and sometimes [our] interests are different"* (int. 18), which rendered agreements on collective priorities and actions sometimes difficult to achieve.
- Youth leaders reported the existence of tensions between different generations of youth, such that those with more longstanding experience in such youth activism *"challenge and point out what is missing"* (int. 18).
- Youth struggled with practical difficulties when coming from conflict-affected contexts – not least because making the journey to attend a meeting was very challenging: "*They have to come like over 20 hours to drive from their place"* (int. 18).

The development of appropriate institutional, procedural and budgeting processes was challenging given that for instance one national network included 157 representatives from each of the states and divisions in the country. Hence, structural and personal constraints on youth, including financial and time pressures, as well as differing interests and priorities affect the ability of youth movements to be sustainable.

Intra-personal Levels

Finally, at the intra-personal level young people involved in (non-formal) education initiatives frequently cited the improved confidence that they attributed to this participation as a helping factor for their activities (ints. 24 and 117). Taking on

responsibility and receiving recognition for their activities (ints. 14 and 24) contributed to this increase in confidence, in addition to building supportive friendships and relationships (ints. 18, 115 and 117). However, as was highlighted in the examples above, youth participants, activists, leaders and students are also subject to the stresses of financial, time and family pressure as well as over-work and exhaustion, which impacts their mental and physical well-being.

Conclusions

This chapter argued how despite the recent transition period since 2011, and consequent increased opportunities for (at least some groups of) young people's access to training, education, participation in civic life and access to information more broadly (newspapers, online (social) media), for most youth constituencies an overall picture emerges of a rather restricted space for manoeuvre. In a humble attempt to start to respond to a major gap in knowledge on young people's needs and challenges in Myanmar, this chapter drew on data collected from a range of youth constituencies in Yangon and Mon areas. This enabled the research team to listen to the views and voices of diverse groups of youth and do justice to our aim to represent the heterogeneous experiences of this demographic.

Listening carefully to the voices and experiences of diverse groups of youth in Mon and Yangon areas during the current period of transition since 2011 this chapter has revealed their hopes, fears, and frustrations and ultimately their restricted space for manoeuvre in relation to the socio-political, economic and cultural opportunities for change. Applying a strategic relational approach to analysing youth agency, this chapter has clarified various dimensions of their situation, notably the opportunities and challenges they face, the sources of support they draw on, and pervasive structural constraints that directly and indirectly impact on their potential and possibilities.

On the one hand the shifting socio-political landscape has opened up new opportunities to access social media, newspapers, political awareness training and new spaces to participate albeit cautiously – in civic life – articulating their viewpoints, in a context of a more general lack of acknowledgement of the political citizenship rights of youth. On the economic front, youth were aware of new possibilities opening up with international investment in Myanmar's and aspired to On the socio-cultural front, youth were mindful of shifting inter-generational dynamics which offered new prospects for youth initiative and indeed leadership in villages communities.

However, youth's space for manoeuvre within these new and unprecedented social political and economic trajectories are delimited by structural and societal factors. The continuation of exclusionary political processes offering youth only tokenistic participation as well as intimidating activities of police and the military constrain youth political engagement. Inattention to the employment needs and vocational training of youth in national state policies and programmes and educa-

tion provision undermines possibilities that this constituency may benefit from new economic opportunities, which appear to be monopolised by elites. This leaves the majority of youth, especially in rural areas, faced with continuous levels of poverty, without sufficient income or work, undermining their ability to contribute to peace and development of their communities.

This chapter has also revealed various systemic factors at the national and international level that undermine prospects for supporting youth. The ability of the state to address the variegated needs of Myanmar's youth is limited by the lack of context and group specific data, of a coherent state level policy focusing on this constituency or a Ministry or Minister devoted to youth issues. Finally, youth are alienated from the formal education system which many feel is irrelevant, and particularly lament the inadequate provision of technical and vocational education linked to labour markets and the prospects of work. Moreover, the needs of youth have not been prioritised in the programming and policies of international aid organisations and donors, faced with many competing concerns.

Moreover, unhelpful, sometimes contradictory societal framings of youth, e.g. as security threats, forecloses recognition of this demographic as a positive national resource who may contribute to peacebuilding processes. Indeed, our data reveals a far more nuanced picture, inviting recognition of the social-cultural, political and economic commitment and collective as well as individual courage expressed by a range of young people. These show a spectrum of responses to the challenges they face – from activism and engagement, albeit in circumstances of intimidation and violence – to passivity, fear and despair.

In navigating their situations youth expressed appreciation for the support offered by the proliferation of local civil society organisations and NGOs in the transitional period. Many also saw an enhancement of their capacity to engage and enact with what they saw as peacebuilding efforts through the connections and solidarities that they forged at the international level with global youth movements, forums and related peer networking.

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