

Sudden Death

*An Obituary on the "Minesweeping through Mindsweeping Project" -
Together with Some Reflections on the Understanding of Myanmar/Burmese History*

Narration of a Pregnancy (2015)

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I Introduction

In retrospect, I received the news about the project's death in the morning of Friday, November 29, 2013 through an email from Yangon. The sender was a man whom I regarded to be a colleague and a friend. He had just arrived in Myanmar one week ago to implement a project designed by me, adopted by a German NGO, the WorldPeaceService (WeltFriedensDienst – WFD) and accepted by the department for promoting peace in developing countries within the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). More than one million Euro had been granted for an initial period of three years.

1 Some facts about the project

The project was known in Myanmar as “Minesweeping through Mindsweeping”. It aimed at using the diverse and conflicting versions of Myanmar's history to contribute to a better understanding between the various parties and societal groups within the country that had suffered from civil war since it had gained independence in 1948 and was still deeply divided both ethnically and politically.

The sender of the death message had been selected for the job to implement the project by two staff members of the WFD and me some months ago. He had been my favourite for the post even before I met him in person at the interview. He had not been involved previously in any special activities with regard to Myanmar. In my opinion, this was an advantage. Almost all "things Burmese" are very controversially assessed and somebody "new" to the country would have the chance to make up his own mind in the course of time of acquainting himself with the country, I had thought.

Later I informed him about my analysis of Myanmar's situation, the history of the project and how both were related in my view. He said that he liked the project's basic assumption that it was helpful to tackle Myanmar's many deep divides not directly but indirectly. History was not to be straightly “re-written” but used as tool to induce dialogues about the many controversial views on Myanmar's history. (For the original draft of the project and a visualisation shown to a number of audiences in Myanmar see Appendices 1 and 2).

On this background, I could hardly believe what I read on that late November day. All activities of the project were to be stopped immediately including a workshop that I had organised to take place before Christmas. It was designed for supporting interested members of the 17 groups that already had promised to cooperate in the project to learn about how to deal with oral history. The workshop was to be conducted by two German ethnologists who were doing fieldwork in Yangon at that time. As a side effect, the workshop was seen as a perfect way to introduce the new representative of the project to the way of how things work – or do not work – in Myanmar.

The newly appointed project manager substantiated his decision thus:

I have come to realise grave insufficiencies in the structure of the project more clearly and I don't want to risk through the presentation of immature ideas coming from 'overseas' to create an untrustworthy, incompetent and unprofessional impression of the WFD (that can hardly be corrected later in most cases).

Three interrelated reasons were given for this assessment which was said to be based on talks with a number of persons, most of whom had contributed to the project in a variety of ways.

First, the new representative explained that in course of his first talks in Myanmar he was asked a number of questions he could not answer. Secondly, as a consequence, he was afraid of being laughed at by possible future partners. Thirdly, he wanted to perform a “survey and analysis” of the project before taking further steps.

The project was thus put on ice six days after the arrival of the expert who had applied for the job to implement it. My first guess was that this abrupt decision might be caused by a strong case of culture shock. But that proved to be a wrong assumption. Six months later, in June 2014, I received

the text of a "Concluding announcement" that was sent to all participants in the project telling them² that the "Minesweeping Project" was terminated by now and that the "WFD is now going to assist a Myanmar NGO engaging in peace building in a rather immediate or direct way." (See appendix 3) Two months before, I had received a lengthy "intermediate evaluation" of the project. In my eyes, it was an assessment of a project that had not yet really started. I regarded the "evaluation" as an autopsy of a child that had just been born.

2 A variety of motivations for this obituary

Such associations clearly show that I was – and still am to some extent - personally very much affected by the sudden death of the Minesweeping Project. I would not mind if my reaction would be called narcissistic. I was angry that my brainchild had been killed by the project manager with the consent of the WFD after the organisation had been granted the money to implement the project I had designed.

I further still wonder about the communication skills of an institution promoting peace and conflict resolution that failed to find ways to discuss with me about different views of a highly ambitious project idea just because the project manager might have been afraid of losing face. Without such a communication the impression is not far-fetched that the WFD just "kidnapped" a project idea.

Various motivations stand behind the writing and publication of this paper. It is an exercise in grief work by documenting my attempts and those of some other individuals, groups and institutions to deal with Myanmar's history in a different way than usual.

Secondly, I think that the story of the project should not be silently buried without some kind of information of the public. The project was not just my private enterprise for more than one reason. The reader is asked to make up her or his mind about the quality of the project and the justification to terminate it before it really had started.

Thirdly, the following narrative provides a number of insights into Myanmar society and its relationship with the West that might be interesting for both citizens of the country as well as foreigners who want to "help" promote peace, understanding and political progress.

Fourthly, the following pages may provide some food of thought for people interested in the effects of the "gold rush" of development agencies that happened after Myanmar's "opening up" in 2011. The Minesweeping-story might be seen as a case supporting the sceptic thesis that development projects tend to benefit the development agencies more than the people they promise to assist.

Fifthly, it is hoped that some of the fragments presented here will serve as a motivation to take up this or that idea that came up during the embryonic period of the project. It would be great if some of the attempts to use history as a tool for national reconciliation could be modified. It is still necessary to try new ways that may help to heal the many wounds caused by the manifold conflicts in Myanmar history still remembered in the minds of the people hindering sustainable peace and reconciliation. Moreover, the reader may find out a bit more about the variety of conceptions of the meaning and the relevance of "history" both here in the west and in Myanmar.

Finally and most important: This narrative of the Minesweeping-story is a tribute to all those people who I met in Myanmar and who contributed some of their time and energy to discuss with me an idea that was both appealing and difficult. Some of the appendices give an idea about what would have been possible if the project had not suffered a sudden death.

II Short History of a Long Journey

My first visit to Burma happened in 1984. The socialist regime supervised by U Ne Win was still in control of the country. Tourists could only stay up to eight days in the country. I was posted in Bangkok at that time as a Protestant minister serving the German Speaking Protestant Congregation in Thailand. Two visits a year to neighbouring Burma were part of my job. Burma was a pet child of

Germany's development engagement in the Third World then, and many experts had been sent out to work there. I had to look after their spirituals needs and to contact the Burmese Churches which like the whole society were cut off the global community.

From the beginning, I found Burma beautifully strange and therefore interesting and tried to make up my mind about the particularities of this strangeness. Little information was available in the bookshops of Rangoon that I consulted to satisfy my curiosity. One book, however, gave me a first glimpse into how Burmese people perceived their own country. It was a historical novel named "Anawrahta of Burma" written by Khin Myo Chit (1915-1999) a famous female writer, published in 1970.

King Anawrahta had been the founder of the first Burmese empire in Bagan. To me, the author's narrative of his life, achievements and shortcomings seemed to present a history of contemporary Burma in historical garb. This impression was substantiated by the book's foreword written by Dr. Maung Maung (1925-1994), Chief Justice of Burma at that time and the unofficial historiographer of post-independent Burma who later would become the last president of socialist Burma for little more than two weeks in 1988. The foreword made the book a semi-official publication depicting Burmese history as a human drama in which people from different background – both ethnic and what we would call today "political" - try to forge unity among themselves under the pure and true doctrine taught by the Buddha.

In my eyes, the book's message was that today's Burma faced the same task as the Burmese people after Anawrahta's death – to continue working on the great assignment of making Burma a great, united and prosperous nation. In addition, I had the vague feeling that "history" meant a different thing to Khin Myo Chit and Dr. Maung Maung than to me. In Burma, it might not just be a chain of events that could be interpreted this or that way but a series of cycles of societal ups and downs that could be compared to the cycles of rebirth of an individual under the law of *kamma* until ultimate freedom – *nibbana* – is achieved one day.

After having returned to Germany in 1990, I got engaged in the worldwide attempts to fight the regime that had ended the socialist period with another military coup and started a new cycle in Burmese history. This we regarded as even more evil than its predecessor which had not yet gained the epithet "military dictatorship" when Daw Khin Myo Chit wrote her book. History changes with the perception of the beholder looking at what happened in the past.

My experience with a bunch of Burma related solidarity groups provided me with more illustrations of this commonplace. I learned from a Burmese exile representing the National League for Democracy in Europe that German made weapons were used to suppress the 1988 revolt. A West German company - Fritz Werner - had supported the Ne Win regime by building up the country's arms industry. This message struck me because I had shook hands with representatives of the company in Burma at some receptions and nobody had told me that they were doing evil things.

This experience was the starting point of my academic research into Myanmar's history. I tried to find out what Fritz Werner had done in Burma in the context of German-Burmese relations after World War II. The story I wrote down after consulting the archives of the German Foreign Office, the reports on Burma in the German press and interviewing some staff of the company was quite different from what my Burmese brother-in-solidarity had told us - and what some Burma activists and German journalists still continue to publish until today.

It was quite obvious that more than one Burmese history existed. I learned later after coming in closer contact with Burmese expatriates from different ethnic groups who had fled Burma after or before 1988 that even more than two or three contradicting versions of the country's history existed. I realised that each group had its own perception of the country's history. The only common attitude was that all were opposing the military and its view regarding the past.

Simultaneously, it became clear for me that it would take some time to overcome the splits in Myanmar society and to establish some kind of pluralistic democratic society in Myanmar. I wondered what could be done in the meantime besides fighting the junta in Burma and supporting Aung San Suu Kyi to lay some foundations for a peaceful Myanmar or Burmese state to be created. I thought looking into history could be helpful. A nation needs - among other things - a national history taught at schools which is - more or less - acceptable to all members of the groups living in the county - ethnically as well as politically.

Starting to draw up such a history book could start right away because members of almost all parties involved in the struggle for a new Burma were living in the West and the view of the missing ones - mainly from the military - was quite clear and could be represented by some proxy daring to play the role of the "devil's advocate". I wrote a short draft of such a project (see appendix 4) and distributed it to some of my German and Burmese friends.

The reaction on the German side was: "Very interesting - you should try to find a sponsor for such a project". But nobody showed any interest of getting involved in such a fund raising attempt. My Burmese friends told me: "Simply brilliant - but wait until democracy is achieved. We will come back to you then."

The project was laid aside after these responses - and taken up again after something like democracy became visible in Myanmar after the instalment of the Thein Sein government end of March 2011.

In the meantime, I had worked with some other projects, mainly the Myanmar Literature Project focussing on the Nagani Book Club founded in 1937 as a starting point for investigating the history of political ideas in Burma. This project brought me in contact with a lot of scholars both inside and outside the country - and members of the emerging civil society in Myanmar.

III Advertising an Idea and Collecting Comments

The first talks about what was to become the Minesweeping Project happened in November and December 2011. At that time, I was in Myanmar to take part in a workshop organised by me for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (affiliated to Germany's Social Democratic Party) and implemented together with two Myanmar organisations, the Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association (MWEA) and Myanmar Egress, a big NGO that concentrated on capacity building. The latter was involved in the process of peace building by bringing the different ethnic groups to the negotiation table. The workshop was about Myanmar Perceptions of Myanmar Economics based on a textbook that I had compiled. With one exception, it contained only texts made in Myanmar and included a lot of texts related to the country's economic history. „Too much history“ remarked one MWEA lady. No, history is important, argued someone else.

Two other visitors were in town together with me at that time: Hillary Clinton and a tooth of the Buddha. The latter had been flown in from Beijing in another Chinese leg of „religious diplomacy“ and drew large crowds from people who were brought to Yangon from many parts of the country just to wait hours until they had the chance to greet the relic for a few seconds. Clearly, for most Buddhists in the country, this trans-historical tooth representing absolute truth was much more important than the „historical visit“ of Mrs. Clinton.

In connection with the workshop, I talked to some people about the impact of history on the country's many problems and about the option to engage people with an interest in politics and development issues to take part in investigating Myanmar's past more closely. I connected these talks directly to my old history project after I learned that my idea conceived in the last decade of the 20th century had recently somehow entered the minds of some Myanmar politicians. I learned from one of the internet services providing information about Myanmar that a group of five ethnic parties had proposed that a peace committee should be set up by parliament that included historians.

A news report quoted the leader of one of the party: “Historians must be included. Because the affair is directly related with the history of Burma’s politics, we need to focus on historical backgrounds and facts. Former prominent politicians must also be included.”

1 First talks (November/December 2011)

The outcome of my first conversations could be summarised in a simple way. There was interest in the project idea and there was a need of deepening the understanding of Myanmar’s historical legacy, but it would be not easy to transform such positive notions into a project. Interest and needs were related to the situation at the beginning of what was widely regarded as a political thaw that opened new ways to deal with the past. The difficulties had to do with the fact that the options of the day were accompanied by new as well as old problems like the top-down structure of all relevant groups in the country. It would be extremely difficult to work bottom-up. Furthermore, there was the fact that I did not stay permanently in Myanmar and thus was not able to establish stable working relations.

At Myanmar Egress, I started my first trial to cooperate with some young people with a special interest in history. My main contact person was a young man who headed the computer section of Myanmar Egress at that time. He and some of his friends were interested in a closer look at events in the late colonial period. They were aware of the fact that the history lessons that had be taught to them at school were absolutely insufficient both in terms of factual information given and the way in which history was taught. Just some standard facts were transmitted without any opportunity given to discuss about these facts. The young people just wanted to know more but had to particular idea about how to satisfy their curiosity.

I offered to send them some documents on a special event in late 1938, the death of a student that is still remembered as a martyr for the fight for independence against the British. I had compiled a lot of material on the student movement in Burma and was interested myself in discussing my findings with Myanmar citizens. I recommended to meet from time to time and discuss about the material and then ask for more according to their interest. This way, I suggested, one could start with a small topic that, when investigated, would quickly develop into a net of related topics connecting the young martyr's death to other events both in pre-war Burma and later. The student's death was related to a series of strikes in 1938 as well as to earlier and later happenings in the country's history from the first student strike in 1920 to the events of 1988. Those events leading to the downfall of the socialist regime and the establishment of military rule in my eyes showed some striking resemblance with what had happened 50 years before. I thought that the establishment of a group working along such lines would be possible given the tradition of reading groups in Burmese society even during the „dark ages“ of the country’s history after the coup of 1962 that toppled the democratically elected government of U Nu.

However, this spontaneously invented scheme did not work. The main reason was that my main contact person some months after our talks had got a scholarship to study in the States and we had not been able to work out a proper plan on how to organise the group. Neither did we have established a detailed plan on how to communicate with each other and those who could help answer questions and solve problems of different nature that for sure would arise quickly.

Through another young guy working at Myanmar Egress, I got in contact with the party leader of a Rakhine party who had co-proposed the inclusion of historians in a peace committee. He was very much interested in history, but was very busy with party affairs. He handed me over some papers of his party addressed to Mrs. Clinton, I gave him an outline of my project. I tried to contact him by mail after my return to Germany but did not get any response. Later, I was informed that he and his party were accused to incite people to violently attack Rohingyas in Rakhine.

2 Second Round of Advertising the Project (March and April 2012) and a First Meeting with Prospective Participants

My next visit to Myanmar took place at a very interesting period in Myanmar's recent history. I witnessed the 2012 by-elections on April Fools' Day. In this election Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League of Democracy (NLD) participated and the leader of the party won a seat in parliament. On a trip to the house in her constituency located in a small village inhabited mostly by ethnic Karen, I learned something about the views of ordinary people connected to the elections. I asked the people who were guarding the freshly painted house what they would expect after Daw Suu had entered parliament. "Nothing" was the answer, "we are just happy that she is around. We love her."

I used my visit of almost three weeks to talk to as many people as possible about the project that was just the "history project" when I arrived. When I flew back to Germany, the project had a name: "Minesweeping" and a first draft of the project idea had been written (Appendix 1).

This name had entered my mind in one of my first meetings (of around 50 or so in this initial phase) with the director of the well-known NGO Paung Ku that aimed at strengthening civil society in Myanmar. In the course of our conversation I compared the various conflicting perceptions of the country's history to the many landmines that had been planted at Myanmar's borders both by government and rebel troops. If not cleared, the mental mines in the minds of the people could explode as the material mines still did despite the many ceasefires that had not yet resulted in a lasting peace and a removal of the dangerous devices. The director, a medical doctor, liked the metaphor but declined to cooperate. "I am no academic" he said. Obviously, the charm of the project had not hit him.

I encountered many of such "Yes – but responses" to my introduction of the project idea that helped me to modify the "standard version" of my explanation about what I had in mind. Here is a list of commentaries I noted down in my diaries together with my – verbal or mental – responses.

- To investigate into history is a matter for academic historians – yes, but up to now, the specialists have not yet written a history of Myanmar that is acceptable to the diverse people living on the soil of Myanmar. Therefore, it could be helpful to take a look at the people's perceptions.
- The government must be involved – yes, but not on the first step. However, government agencies will be informed about the project idea to make clear that the project will not contain any hidden agenda.
- The discussion of events of the past might revive traumatic experiences – that's true; the project will not encourage dealing with the recent past after the start of the popular uprising of 1988.
- The project seems to be a bit megalomaniac – admitted, but such an attitude is part of Burmese political culture and corresponds with the size of the task of national reconciliation along the many lines of factional and ethnic frictions. The project is realistic insofar as it does not claim to produce quick results.
- It would be bad if Westerners are involved in the project – the role of foreigners would mainly be to offer "assistance on demand". On the other hand, Myanmar history is part of global history. Many countries were involved in shaping the country's development and therefore should be included in drafting a comprehensive history of the country.
- Money will be needed. People contributing to "civil society" activities are used to get allowances as a compensation for spending time with a non-profit occupation that does not generate money or can be used for career purposes – okay, here a basic difference in the

comprehension of civil society activities between the West and Myanmar comes into sight that has to be carefully watched.

Besides such critical comments, there were suggestions as well:

- One should start with single events like the death of Aung San. There are still stories telling he was not killed by order of U Saw but because some people did not like the Panglong agreement of February 1947. (The agreement paved the way for the hill people to achieve independence together with the Burmans.)
- Many NGOs in the country have trained people who are dealing with conflict resolution. They can help to discuss past conflicts between members of parties that were and are still continuing to mentally fight the old wars.
- Older people should be interviewed to record their perception of what happened in the past and transmit such views to the younger generation. That could help to create a sense for history among the younger generation.
- Undoubtedly, the military's view has to be included. To do that officially will be difficult given the prevailing mistrust vis à vis the Tatmadaw as a political institution. But there are other options. There are so many retired military men around in almost each family. It could be very rewarding to conduct a series of interviews with such persons.

The many talks made me sometimes feel like a missionary preaching a new gospel. My basic message was threefold: 1. In Myanmar a great number of versions of the country's history exist, but there is no co-existence of these versions. Without a dialogue process on these views lasting peace and reconciliation will not be attained. 2. The present climate is suited to look into the “peoples' history” and confront it with the “imperial” history dominating the official version of how Myanmar came into being. 3. A rational process of discussion has to be envisaged that in the long term could be used as a tool for Nation Building.

Most of the responses to my "sermons" could be regarded as positive even though many of the meetings I used to advertise the idea were informal, rather short and governed by the rule of being polite in face of a senior Burma hand from the west. Some of the conversations, however, showed that it could be worthwhile to continue advertising the Minesweeping idea. For many of my Myanmar friends, “history” was just a collection of plain facts to be memorized and reproduced in a test to obtain good grades at school. That history could have a meaning for today beyond dead facts was quite new for most of dialogue partners.

My conversations confirmed my first impression about the project idea – interesting but difficult – and added one important new insight. Many of the interlocutors interested in the project were interested to have a new look into history because they had the feeling that what they had learned at school was wrong. They had an interest to correct such bogus information and replace it by the “correct” version. They were of the opinion that “true” history could be written. The idea that different perceptions of history should be discussed and harmonised was strange for most of them. The only chance to change their perception of history was to offer them opportunities of new experiences. The project had to be organised consequently in a process oriented way.

As a consequence, the project would only have a chance to be realised if it was organised in a both stable and flexible way. For the time being, only flexibility was available in abundance. There was just one institution that had promised support for the project, my old friends from the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT). However, they had strictly to be regarded only as participants. If they were involved in the project's organisation, “Minesweeping” would be regarded as a Christian enterprise concentrating on the history of the non-Burman and non-Buddhist ethnic groups. On the other hand it was clear that the histories of these groups were underrepresented in Myanmar's

official textbooks. I hoped that an agency from outside Myanmar could provide a platform for initiating meaningful discourses on the issue of how to reconcile the various versions of the country's history.

Since I was away from Myanmar most of the year, somebody was needed to represent the project idea in Myanmar on my behalf. This task was taken over for some time by a young lady who had participated in the economy workshop last year. She had studied Public Administration in Singapore, wrote poems and had agreed to help me during the first steps of exploring the chances of the project. But it was clear that her interest were not with "history" even if funds could be raised to employ some local staff. For the time being, I could not offer any payment but handed out 100 \$ to cover her expenses.

She helped me to arrange a first meeting of persons with an interest in history and who had taken a look at the 10-step-roadmap that I had drafted. The meeting took place on 9th April 2012 eight days after the NLD had won a landslide victory in the by-elections. 11 persons participated. After an introduction of the basic ideas of the project a lengthy discussion about Myanmar history took place that was partly conducted in Burmese. Finally, further proceedings were considered. The participants considered to form four groups focusing on historical events of their interest.

As a measure to raise the interest in history, attract new people and offer the participants-to-be opportunities to meet from time to time and exchange news and views, we planned to arrange events that offered some information about topics related to history. Foreign scholars should be invited to give talks and – maybe - offer their assistance to help the groups dealing with a certain topic to solve problems after the principle of "assistance on demand".

Two of such events took place in May and June 2012. Prof. Wolfgang Schaffar gave two lectures on "Burma's/Myanmar's History – Seen from Abroad" and the role of constitutions. The series was continued later but not in regular intervals (see chapter V, 4).

IV On the Way to Implementation

Before meeting an old friend again in early 2012 at the cafeteria of Hamburg University's South-east Asian Department, I had not known that the WeltFriedensDienst (WorldPeaceService), abbreviated WFD, even existed. The friend had studied ethnology some years ago and I had helped her a bit with her final thesis on Burmese people growing old in Germany. Since then, we had kept in contact. She had worked in some countries but never in Burma, a country she was still interested in. She now lived in Hamburg again and worked part time with the WFD.

1 Accidental Inception

In course of our conversation, I told her about my recent brainchild and she said that it – maybe, maybe – was of some interest for her NGO. The organisation, I learned, was founded in 1959 and was engaged in conflict resolution and poverty reduction in Africa, South America and Palestine. No wonder that my limited horizon had prevented me from coming in contact with the organisation. On the other hand, working in Myanmar would extend the WFD's activities to Eastern Asia. Both of us found the idea promising of bringing our knowledge about Myanmar and the NGO's experience in conflict resolution together.

I drafted the rough outline of a project and emphasised the information about the Myanmar politician's proposal to include historians in the work of the country's Peace Commission. The draft was sent to the WFD's headquarters in Berlin. The program manager responded in early March 2012 that the project was "very interesting" for his organisation as well as for the Civil Peace Service (CPS), a consortium of nine German organisations engaged in peace building and conflict resolution around the world. The activities of this group are supervised and co-funded by the German Government through the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Furthermore, I learned that a lead time of the project could be financed with reserve funds provided by the ministry later this year. It would be possible that the project was conceived as "strongly process orientated" as proposed by me. The "wind of change" had just started to blow in Myanmar one year ago and Myanmar was an interesting new field for NGOs as well as for government agencies.

All in all, I had the good feeling that there was a chance to raise some funds to explore the future options of the idea to start a process of looking at Myanmar's troubled history from an innovative perspective when I set off to Myanmar in March 2012.

2 Fashioning the Project

After my return to Germany in April 2012. I visited the headquarters of the WFD for the first time accompanied by my friend. We had a lengthy talk with the project coordinator. The outcome was positive and it was decided to start the process to make the project acceptable for funding by the German ministry. I was to travel to Myanmar again, explore the options of how a lead time of the project could be organised and after that writing a concept along the lines of the WFD's model outline of such an undertaking. Later, the task of contacting the consultant of another member of the "peace consortium" was included. The other NGO was keen to do something in Myanmar, too.

On this basis, my next visit to Myanmar in September 2012 was based on a special-order contract outlining what I had to do during the journey and what kind of "product" I had to deliver afterwards. The contract required me

- to develop a conception of a multi annual project on working up the past;
- provide orientation for the working groups and accustoming a local staff with the financial regulations of the WFD;
- coordinating the project with that of the other German NGO which would send an expert to Myanmar at the same time;
- elaborating a project concept in accordance with the guidelines of the WFD and a short report about particularities of the journey.

I was paid for this service according to the rules and regulations of government sponsored activities rather lavishly compared to my previous projects that had just provided the money for travel expenses.

Two top priorities guided my two week long sojourn in Myanmar in September. First, I had to continue looking for people willing to cooperate by starting investigating into aspects of Myanmar history. Secondly, a small staff had to be recruited capable and willing to administer the project's start-up phase.

At the end of the journey, I had collected the first "group profiles" (see appendix 5 for the application form) five of them submitted by the Myanmar Institute of Theology. Some 50 people affiliated to the MIT were willing to participate and look into the history of a number of ethnicities (Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Shan and Mon) with a focus on the coup of 1962 which was justified by the military with the imminent danger of a breaking up of the Union of Burma. A fifth group aimed at looking into the general aspects of the coup. Furthermore, some young people who had established a private library would like to investigate into Myanmar's old history, a group of ethnic Chins wanted to look at the different perceptions of the Panglong agreement and a group of young members of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, was interested to participate as well. The members however were not sure yet about the topic and the way of how their activities could be realised. Most of them needed to earn money and were severely hampered to spend time for private interests besides their work for the party.

On the "organisational front" I found two Myanmar ladies who were willing to work for the project on a trial basis. One of them was the lady who had worked for the Myanmar Literature Project since 2007 and, among other things, had looked after the bookkeeping of the project's expenses. She was willing to fill the post of an accountant of Minesweeping. For the tasks to be performed by a local program coordinator, the lady who had taken care of the history lectures since April was not available any more. She recommended another graduate from the well-know Singaporean institution she had attended herself. The lady introduced to me had just returned from abroad and was looking for a job. She turned out to be a Chinese Muslim from Mandalay. She impressed me from the first moment of meeting her by the air of diligence and reliability around her. She was 10 minutes early to see me and told me that she would have to finish an assignment for a government agency first before she could commit herself to the project. I found it very good to engage two Myanmar citizens from different ethnic backgrounds the accountant-to-be being a traditional Burman Buddhist.

In addition, two Westerners, a man and a woman, promised to take part in the adventure as unpaid consultants. The man was a German whom I knew for some time already. He worked for a Christian relief agency in Myanmar and was married to a Kayin wife. The woman was a Polish historian just finishing her dissertation in Switzerland on a topic related to the influence of history in the minds of Myanmar people.

Based on these achievements and many talks, I submitted a report after my journey that defined the aim of the project thus:

The project aims at the initiation of a discourse on the historical reasons of Myanmar's inner conflicts through working on a historiography that can be somewhat acceptable for all conflicting parties and will be symbolically reflected in future history textbooks for the country's students. It is expected that the participants at the end of the project will have passed through a process that represents Myanmar society as a whole. Based on such a process concepts of transitional justice are to be discussed.

Three steps of realising this aims were named:

- 1) The existing interest in the own history of homogeneous small groups shall be supported to that effect that the variety of conflicting and partly antagonistic perceptions history becomes visible and comprehensible.
- 2) Different perceptions are to be discussed among Myanmar citizens from different political and ethnic background.
- 3) By means of a "history parliament" (draft title) concrete measures of initiating processes of transitional justice shall be discussed which are to be forwarded to state agencies.

It was stressed in my report that it would take some time to lay the foundations for realising these steps and that discourses about transitional justice in a "history parliament" was just a long-term goal. On the basis of my report, the program manager of the WFD took over and wrote a project application that envisaged the development of a network as an impulse giver for public discourses on history in Myanmar.

In October and November of 2012, I undertook my third visit to Myanmar within this year to take part in the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Nagani Book Club that had been the starting point of the Myanmar Literature Project. I used the opportunity to continue my talks with people interested in the project and the four members of the coordinating group. A trip to Mandalay brought me in contact with two staff members of a theological college who were eager to extend their activities beyond the narrow scope of teaching "pure" theology. I gave a lecture on my version of recent Myanmar history and introduced the project. My contact persons, both Chin, promised to cooperate in the project by investigating in the history of particular groups of their very

diverse ethnic group. One of the proposed topics was a very sensitive one. A group of lowland Chins was used (and allegedly misused) by Burma's Communist Party in the fight against the government.

Back in Yangon, on one of the last days of my visit I had a final meeting with the four members of the coordinating group in the course of which we clarified future tasks and responsibilities. Some kind of team work was envisaged. The main role of working with the groups and trying to find new participants was to be taken over by the program coordinator. My long time assistant would be responsible for financial matters. The role of the two foreigners was to step in if any problems came up and when assistance in terms of methodological assistance or so was needed. The evening ended with a merry evening at the Little Duck Restaurant situated at the riverside close to the port of Yangon.

3 First steps of Formal Implementation

In April 2013 I learned that the CPS had given the green light for the funding of a three year project. The estimated costs of 1.2 million Euro were accepted. I was happy.

From then on, the initiative for further action shifted to the office of the WFD. A tentative time table was drawn up. (see appendix 6) A job description for a "co-operant" to be sent to Myanmar had to be written as well as draft contracts with the local staff. The co-operant had to be selected by June and trained. The date of her or his arrival in Myanmar was "very approximately" set for October. In Myanmar, a lot of organisational matters like looking for an office site, visa application, transfer of money etc. had to be considered.

36 persons applied for the job out of which six persons made it to a short-list. Finally, three of them were selected to be interviewed. End of June the interviews were held in Berlin. Besides a lady who was in South America at the chosen date and had to be interviewed via Skype, only one applicant showed up at the WFD office to talk with the selection team – the program coordinator, my friend who had established the contact to the WFD and me. All of us were immediately convinced that he was the right person for the job.

After that, the training was done. Most of it was done by the WFD and other agencies. I provided information about Myanmar in two sessions, one a two days seminar at the Academy for International Cooperation near Bonn, the other one a private meeting at my house in Hamburg. Further, I participated in a small workshop in Berlin focussing on the issues of Do-Not-Harm and Gender. It was agreed that my future role in the project would be that of an adviser. Since trust was a core element of the whole project in my perception, I trusted that this agreement would be adhered to and did not even consider to ask for a written contract.

Parallel to the training of the manager-to-be in Germany, the Burmese lady who did the bookkeeping of the project's activities in Myanmar underwent some kind of correspondence course to get accustomed with the WFD's handling of financial matters. I was relieved to learn from the lady responsible for the new project at the NGO's Berlin headquarters that my long term partner had no difficulties to adjust to the rules and regulations of the organisation.

4 Steps NOT undertaken

No staff member of the WFD besides the lady who had established the contact that resulted in the formal implementation of Minesweeping had any idea about Myanmar's situation except what a thoughtful German citizen could know from the media about the country. Furthermore, the NGO had never worked in Asia before. With this project, the NGO stepped on a new territory that itself underwent a rapid transition process the end of which nobody could foresee. Furthermore, the provisional local team knew the organisation that provided the money for their work only through email contacts.

On this background, I strongly recommended to the project manager that somebody from the head office should travel to Myanmar as soon as possible to introduce the German NGO personally to the local staff and to get some first hand impressions of Myanmar realities. Most importantly, a personal contact with the two ladies who received a salary and some members of the working groups receiving funds through the German NGO were deemed mandatory because even I found it very difficult to communicate sensitive issues just via emails – and almost everything related to the project was sensitive in a way due to the character of the project.

However, no such trip took place. The project manager was too busy with his work at his Berlin desk and travelling to Africa to supervise the NGO's projects there. Furthermore, it was not even considered to give the co-operant chosen a chance to have a look at his future working place as part of his training. He had a four-week experience of staying in India for some training related to conflict management but had never worked with people from other countries.

I further proposed – albeit not very forcefully – to care for more trained local staff members instead of anticipating sending out more German co-operants as designated in the project proposal submitted to the ministry. Another idea I recommended to be considered was to look for a way to evaluate and document the project because of its special character and the lack of precedent experiences in the field of long term peace-building in Myanmar.

In face of the limited capacities of the WFD to send somebody to Myanmar to look after the first steps of the project there, I undertook two journeys in January/February and July 2013 at my own expense.¹

V The Start-up Phase (November 2012 to November 2013)

The happy meeting at the Little Duck Restaurant in November 2012 can be regarded as the start of the "semi-official" phase of the project. The chance that it would be funded and the employment of two local staff members indicated that it might be more than just a fancy idea. On this basis, a number of promising new elements were added to the first plan to establish small working groups dealing with a historically significant event in Myanmar history. On the other hand, the project had not yet reached solid ground for a number of reasons. Some of them had become apparent from the beginning, some new ones turned up later.

1 The Ambitious Task of Trust-building

One main positive factor was the - albeit still rudimentary - institutionalisation of the project in Myanmar through the two employed staff members. They could and did care for continuing to advertise the project, explain it to new audiences and collect both positive and critical reactions. This was a big step forward compared to the situation before November 2012 when almost all project promotion was only performed during my sporadic visits to Myanmar.

The assistant project manager had started to contact new people and institutions and introduced the project to them. She provided detailed reports about her activities and the response she got. One of the most valuable information that could be extracted from the notes was and is the questions that were raised by the audiences she addressed. A list of those questions was compiled in July 2013 (see appendix 7). The list clearly accentuated the importance of the “trust-factor” and the interrelationship of attitudes towards Burmese histories and towards the project's aim to work in the field of trust building.

It thus became quite clear that the attitudes towards the project reflected the general mistrust within Myanmar society. Such evidence could be regarded as a confirmation of Minesweeping's basic assumptions and approach as well as a threat that the attempt to sweep the minds of the people would not achieve quick results. As a first “counter-measure” a Q&A list was put together to help

¹ The WFD financed a trip to Mandalay in July 2013.

the people involved with the project to deal with the basic scepticism expressed in the questions that again and again repeated the main theme of mistrust in many variations. (see appendix 8)

In this connection, some episodes are noteworthy.

a) The local staff was approached by some foreign experts engaged in “real” minesweeping at the borders of Myanmar. They shared their difficulties to get the consent of the many parties involved. Some of the experts returned quickly from their field trips firmly convinced that for the time being no concrete activities could be started to remove one single mine planted by different military groups in the near future.

b) In this connection, a visit at the best equipped centre to help victims of landmines in Hpa-an, the capital of Kayin State, showed the immense physical impact of the long-term conflicts in Myanmar and its historical roots. Victims from different armed groups were sitting together around the tables and shared the facilities for rehabilitation. I asked if the former soldiers treated here were exchanging their views about why they had fought against one another. The reply was that nothing of this kind happened. One of the rules of the centre was that any kind of confrontation was forbidden. Nobody had got the idea yet that it could be helpful to talk about the often traumatic experiences of the patients.

c) Most impressive was an experience during a lecture that I gave in Hpa-an for students of a local capacity building Christian NGO. The organisers had chosen the topic “Nation building”. The talk took place in a Buddhist monastery. One of the leading monks of the monastery, a rather young man, attended the event. I presented some criteria that should come together to form a nation as a community of people who have something in common - be it “real” or “imagined” to use a Benedict Anderson's phrase on the emergence of modern nationalism. The list contained a number of factors – language, culture, history, myths, social customs, ancestry, symbols, beliefs – and the answer of my audience if they could be regarded as being shared by the people of Myanmar was NO. Even the common Burmese language taught in all schools of the country was not regarded as a factor binding the people together because it was perceived as being forced upon the ethnic groups by the dominating Burmans.

I continued pointing to two options to deal with this reality – leave it like it is and carry on and live with the consequences or try to overcome the differences by mutual encounters. After the translator had communicated my message, the monk stood up and said in a loud voice “We will never start communicating with the Burmans after all they have done to us.” Obviously, he was a non-Burman monk. I tried to argue with him saying that the Burmans might entertain the perception that ethnic groups like the Kayin “did something” to them by starting the civil war, but to no avail. The monk got agitated and gave a short sermon to the audience. I stopped arguing and did not ask him about his assessment of the Kalama Sutta in which the Buddha had advised his followers not to give any judgement before a thorough investigation done by oneself. Then I finished my presentation with a short introduction of the project without any hope that there would be any positive response.

d) Finally, a meeting with the chief political advisor of President Thein Sein confirmed that the basic assumption of the project was not just shared by many citizens who regarded it as interesting for different reasons but by the government as well. U Ko Ko Hlaing told me in July 2013, that his country suffered from “Four Lacks”: Lack of trust, lack of capacities, lack of unity and lack of political culture. In other words: There was nothing to rely on in terms of the political climate. One had to start from scratch. But on the other hand, the government shouldered this Hercules like task. “Who in the world except of us dare to do this?” he asked a rhetoric question thus counterbalancing his very sober analysis of the situation. This was a conviction of a proud Burman that the government and the people were able to overcome all hindrances. I was convinced that the advisor acted as his master's voice.

e) The German Embassy advised me to contact the Myanmar Peace Centre in which Myanmar Egress was heavily involved. The centre got financial support from the EU as well as the Japanese government. The Myanmar government's main “peace maker”, former general Aung Min, headed the centre. Therefore, the centre was recommended by the Embassy, but mistrusted by the majority of NGOs except Myanmar Egress. If the project wanted to engage with any kind of the hopefully evolving civil society in the country, it should refrain from cooperating with any Myanmar partners for the time being and concentrate

on winning individuals who – of course – might be affiliated with this or that formal organisation or informal group. Any formal partnership would cause the mistrust of other potential partners needed.

Episode d) reminded me on a book published in the early 1960s after the end of Ne Win's Caretaker Government (1958-1960). It informed the public about what the government had achieved and thus giving a positive answer to the question raised in the book's title "Is Trust Vindicated?". The cover of the book showed the Greek mythic hero Hercules performing one of his 10 tasks, cleaning the stable of Augias. The motto of the book gave a short version of the respective story.

History seemed to repeat itself in Myanmar – the people doubted that the military could be trusted. Myanmar was, in a way, back to square one again after Thein Sein had taken over in 2011 as in 1948, 1958, 1962 and 1988, the former landmarks of Burma's recent history.

My conclusion: It would be necessary to keep some distance from the Herculean simile and the megalomaniac aspects of Myanmar history. On the other hand it was necessary to face the realities. Burma/Myanmar had to be invented once again and the Minesweeping Project that was welcomed by the advisor could be part of this ambitious task. One had however to be content with just small progress and stress the long term perspective of overcoming the "four Ls".

The final episode told me that one had to be very careful in cooperating with any Myanmar partner. Mistrust did not only existed towards the government but also between many NGOs as well. It seemed that the situation had not much changed since the times before Thein Sein's taking over as head of government: The people were just united against the government.

2 Meeting More People and the Emergence of Mini-biographies

In February and July 2013, I was introduced to a lot of people who might be helpful for the project in one way or the other. "Minesweeping" had to be advertised not just for the purpose of direct cooperation but to "test" the basic idea of the project and to find people and institutions specialised on issues related to it like mediating interpersonal conflicts and offering legal assistance. The local manager had made contacts with some of her friends who had set up NGOs or played a leading role in advocating issues related to peace building and social justice. Some other contacts like those in Mon and Kayin State were facilitated by friends of mine. All these contacts confirmed that one result of the 'Wind of Change' blowing since Thein Sein had taken over the office of the country's President was an increase of complexity within Myanmar society that made it very difficult to obtain a reliable overall picture of the situation. A trial-and error-approach seemed the only way to deal with this situation and my mixed feelings about my encounters (for some more details see appendix 9).

One of the promising trials was the start of composing a textbook on "Myanmar Perceptions of Myanmar Histories". The idea to compile such a book originated from the workshop on Myanmar economy held in November 2011. As a stimulant for the discussions in five working groups I had compiled a textbook containing material on "Myanmar perceptions of Economics" among them some essays of students that gave an idea of how the younger generation with an interest in increasing their capacities viewed the importance of economic on their daily life. I got a number of very interesting short papers.

I copied the idea and drafted a "Call for Mini-essays" (see appendix 10). My friends at Myanmar Egress were helpful again and asked a class do to a classroom exercise. The director and the program manager of Kant Kaw, a small NGO preparing students for studies abroad in one-year courses, were very responsive as well. Within two weeks of our first visit, the students attending the current class had written small essays. It was even considered that the next class could get the appointment to investigate in one historical topic of their choice in their history class. This idea however did not materialise because the program manager left the school to take over another appointment at another NGO concentrating on capacity building. On the other hand, my attempts to

get essays from students attending classes at the MIT bore no fruits. The lectures were sympathetic, but they had to ask their superiors first.

A promising offer was not realised for a different reason. The manager of a private University to be opened soon said that the task of writing a mini-essay could be assigned to the 120 applicants of the first batch of students of the new institution which was financially supported by George Soros. The opening of the university was however stopped after Aung San Suu Kyi told Soros that she did not support the idea for the time being.

Almost all essays were written in Myanmar language. The provisional funds for the project did not allow to translate them all. Therefore, I was happy that the local manager introduced me to a former staff member of Yangon University's history department who had left the university. She had been fed up with the kind of “frozen history” taught there and was very much interested to use her discipline for helping Myanmar to develop. She had the impression that the perception of “history” in Myanmar had to be changed somehow. She was interested to read the essays and evaluate them. The problem, however, was that she had considered her English to be rather weak. Here again, money played a role. She started to work on the essays expecting some payment. It was, however, necessary to find somebody to help her writing down her evaluation in English. This task had to be postponed until the project could make use of a regular budget.

3 The Ambivalent Role of the Experts

The great vision of the project was to contribute to a “people's history” of the country. The method of collecting a variety of – conflicting – perceptions of Myanmar histories and to investigate into the oral history transmitted from generation to generation in the segments of the country's society served this aim. On the other hand, experts were needed to accomplish such an objective. In the first draft of the project, their role was defined as “experts on demand”. They should only come in when technical advice was needed – in terms of methodology as well as of knowing the facts, but not as the authoritative interpreters of the meaning of history.

This great idea, however, was difficult to realise. The difficulty was formulated by one of the prospective participants in the project this way: “We are missing capacity, we are afraid and we do not have leaders who can lead us to find new paths. The old leaders are afraid as well.” It would need quite some time to modify such a vicious circle. The “old leaders” were part of a hierarchical system that was rooted in a very long tradition of respect for the “great teacher” (*saya-gyi*) in the service of a great ruler being it a king, a charismatic politician like Aung San or his daughter or – during the last decades – the military.

The consequence of this tradition was illustrated by a number of experiences one of them being the lady historian who had left the history department. She wanted to break the mould but lacked the skills to do so both with regard to linguistic capacities as well as to methodology. Here, a foreign historian was helpful who was on the way to establish an institute to build research and intellectual capacity among local researchers.

Another example happened in November 2012 at a meeting after I had given a talk on Myanmar historiography for an audience of some 35 people who had shown interest in the project. Among them was a senior history professor invited by a friend from Myanmar Egress. His idea was that the project could only work if the “old” experts and the new generation would come together. I knew the professor quite well as somebody who was cooperating with the military government by writing popular essays about Myanmar history and culture in line with the official policy. Furthermore, he was feared in academic circles because of his long contributions to whatever topic. After my presentation, he started to give a lecture only partly related to what I had presented. The assistant manager who acted as the moderator had no chance to stop him because of his seniority. As an outsider I finally managed to cut him short somewhat impolitely.

Another older expert with a special interest in local history proposed to use the opportunity for founding a new institution after the model of the Burma Studies Group in the United States, the leading western body coordinating research on the country. This idea was contrary to the “bottom-up-approach” encouraged by the “minesweeping concept” and did not materialise because I as the foreign expert did not support it.

These examples show that the necessary engagement of experts – both local and foreign - in the reconstruction of Myanmar history is faced with a number of obstacles due to a variety of interrelated reasons. There are different traditions defining the role of an “expert” in Myanmar and in the west. The same applies to the understanding of “history” as a factor of shaping the mindset of people's perception of current developments.

4 Publicising “History” through a Series of Events

The starting point of the engagement of experts in the initial phase of the project had been the request of interested people in regular meetings. According to the time frame of the project, a formal exchange based on the investigation of the groups and the textbook on the “Myanmar perceptions of History” was to take place only after a period of at least one year. To invite experts to talk about a variety of aspects related to history would be an opportunity for meeting informally, help to familiarise the interested public with the project and attract specialists whose expertise might be useful for future stages of the project. Seven events of this kind took place in 2012 and 2013. Here is short summary of the presentation given on July 13, 2013 (For a short overview on the other functions see appendices 11, 13, 14):

The talk was given by Rosalie Metro, an educationalist from the United States who had written her Ph.D. thesis about the use of history as a medium to achieve national reconciliation in Myanmar. She had worked for some time in refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border and developed a method to engage people from different ethnic groups in discussions about historical events that were disputed. She talked about the impossibility to create unbiased history curricula (see appendix 12). Her presentation touched a very sensitive point of the role of history in Myanmar, the relationship between truth and trust. Many of the participants in the project from the ethnic groups wanted to write the “true” history of their group against the wrong views publicised in school text books and the government controlled media. Such focussing on historical “truth” would continue the long history of mistrust. The speaker's conclusion was that it is necessary to “acknowledge own biases and evaluate the biases of others” before drawing conclusions. This was in line with a basic assumption of Minesweeping, but did not convince the audience as the discussion showed. The impression that the meaning of “history” was very different in Myanmar than in Germany was confirmed once again.

VI Challenges

The experiences during this period confirmed the insight already gained while dealing with the issue of Myanmar economics: trust in institutions was a rare commodity almost missing in Myanmar. Trust was mainly invested in persons. The events organised to promote the project showed that good interpersonal relations were crucial for motivating people to attend the functions. That did not mean that the topics offered were meaningless, but the main channel of communication in the absence of functioning social networks with an outreach beyond in-groups was mouth-to-mouth propaganda. The events organised were attended by friends of friends. The call for writing mini-essays fell on fertile ground at Myanmar Egress where I had invested a lot of time to build up good personal relations and at Kant Kaw where I was introduced through a staff member and where a western program director found the idea appealing.

This factor among others contributed to a number of difficulties that came into the open in course of 2013. Some of them will be outlined:

1 Problems of Co-operation

When I paid my first visit to Myanmar in 2013, the local manager presented me a long list of complaints about the accountant of the project in our first conversation. Later, I received another list enumerating faults of the other lady. Obviously, the good mood at our celebration in November 2012 had not lasted long. The cat-fight had started early and continued until the end of the year. Most likely, the tensions between the two ladies would not have come into the open that early if they had worked together in an office under the supervision of a German boss. But that does not suggest that the strong tensions would not have developed.

From the conversations during my visits and the many emails I received from both sides, a rather clear picture of a clash of two different cultures represented by the two ladies can be drawn. It can be regarded as representative of some causes of Myanmar's societal problems the Minesweeping project aimed to address.

Both ladies together stood for what President Obama in his speech in November 2012 in Yangon called the blessing of diversity that Myanmar shares with the United States. However, it was just this diversity that contributed to the inability of the two to work together besides personal dislikes that might have existed. The lady who had worked with me for many years already was a typical Burman Buddhist, educated in the country, taking over family responsibilities like caring for the parents, disliking the military, and knowing many people through her family's contacts. She was very reliable and almost always some minutes late when we had set up an appointment. She liked working on interesting projects where she could meet interesting people. To earn money was not her first priority. The manager, only a few years younger, arrived always some minutes early at any appointment and was very strict and precise in performing her work what made working with her a pleasure. She had a Chinese Muslim background, was very bright and had received a scholarship for studying in Singapore. The word "professional" was one of her favourites. She had to earn her living and was eager to use her capacities to achieve something to better the deplorable situation of her country in terms of social injustice and other evils.

Besides these differences, the younger assistant manager was better educated and got a higher salary, but the financial manager who paid her out was more senior. In the absence of a supervisor, both had to practice some kind of teamwork which they managed to perform in a technical way but not on the basis of a good personal relationship. "Misunderstandings" happened quite often which in my understanding were rooted in different personal concepts of live, work, society etc.

2 Time Cultures

On September 15, the assistant manager submitted a letter of resignation from the project. Examples from the difficult co-operation with the Financial Manager in the absence of the clear guidelines for the use of allotted funds were given as the main reasons for the step. Furthermore, the lack of a proper office space was quoted as a hindrance to convince people that the project could be trusted. Attempts to at least an interim solution for the project had been impeded by the lack of cooperation of the other "only staff member".

All the factual handicaps mentioned, however, had been known from the beginning and were addressed many times in our conversations during my visits. It should have been therefore clear that only after the arrival of the German peace expert a solid organisation for the project could be build up based on the experiences gained in the project's "embryonic" stage as both of us liked to call it. Therefore, another motif behind the resignation and related to the character of Minesweeping should be taken into consideration, the lack of an exact roadmap for the implementation of the project. Indeed, compared to the many projects that sprung up after the "wind of change" had been started to blow in Myanmar, Minesweeping was not and could not be "professional" simply because

there were no precedent experiences on which a solid timetable of achieving the project's aims could be build up.

The two staff members of the project represented two culturally different perceptions of time. The financial manager as a good Buddhist was used to regard “time” as a sequence of life cycles both in this life and in *samsara*, the cycle of rebirths until the attainment of *nibbana*. The assistant manager had been brought up in a different time culture that resembled the Christian one in the respect that there was just one life for any individual that had to be used as efficient as possible. This attitude had been developed through her education in the very “professional” atmosphere of Singapore. Such an understanding of “time” and its consequences for the implementation of the project might have been shared by the German expert and contributed to his decision to terminate the project immediately after his arrival in an environment dominated by a concept of time completely different to his own.

3 The Scarcity of Civil Society

In connection with the changes in Myanmar after Thein Sein's becoming the country's president, the use of the term “civil society” increased considerably as a kind of magic word indicating the rise of the democratic forces in Myanmar. However, the meaning of the term related to Myanmar society is rather unclear. The project was based on the idea that civil society groups in a bottom-up way should have a new look on the history of Myanmar. This approach to include the “peoples' view of history” was very attractive to many civilians to whom the idea was introduced. On the other hand, it was hard to find civilians who were not only willing but also able to translate their interest into concrete action.

The realities of Myanmar's society simply did not provide much space for a “civil society” existing outside the influence of the State consisting of volunteers who were willing to spend some of their free time to engage in public services after their liking. Like “trust”, free time was and is a rare commodity in Myanmar. Most members of the NLD group had no time for any excursion because they had to earn money. The people working and studying at the MIT were busy with working for the institution and for their congregations that – as a Myanmar dictionary defined it – could not be termed “civil”. And even Myanmar Egress as a respected NGO only existed with the assistance of western money provided directly or indirectly by foreign governments. Moreover, this organisation as most other NGOs in the country was as hierarchically structured as the government and the NLD. Finally, many of the NGOs in the country were hidden “AGOs” – Anti Government Organisations because their aim was to build up a different Myanmar from the one the military backers of the government in power envisaged. As a result, the project had to aim at creating space for civil engagement instead of just take such space as granted.

4 Fluctuation

The still undeveloped economic breeding ground out of which a civil society could flourish contributed to another challenge to the project: coping with the high degree of fluctuation of prospective participants in the project. The “perfect candidates” were young, educated with some knowledge of English and interested in the future of their country. The poor performance of public education in Myanmar and the sudden opening up of the country, resulted in a situation where many agencies were looking for such “perfect candidates”. This meant a shortage of manpower, a tight competition and a high degree of fluctuation intensified by the wish of many Burmese to obtain more qualifications – preferable through some training in another country – and to work independently. This trend strongly collided with the long term character of the project. Intelligent solutions for this problem that to a lesser extent pertains to all sectors of development work had to be discussed.

VII First Results

At the end of the start-up phase, 18 group profiles had been submitted, the last four in September 2013 shortly before the project was supposed to officially take off (see appendix 8). In addition, some 100 mini-essays on Myanmar perceptions of history had been submitted. The evaluation had started (see appendix 15). Some methodological training had been given, first and foremost for members of the MIT groups.

The budget for the lead time was fixed at 14.000 Euro for personal and office costs, group activities and professional fees (for translations, evaluation of mini-essays etc.). Of course, the estimated costs for the research activities planned by the groups were much higher. Every proposal had to be checked by the managing team and discussed with the respective groups. The dates of the first interim results given varied from May 2013 to April 2014. In some cases, this estimates proved to be overoptimistic.

However, two interim results were submitted until the end of the start-up phase. They were both interesting and quite different in kind. Here are some comments followed by some remarks on the evaluation of the mini-essays.

1 The NLD group

It had taken several meetings to clarify the details of the participation of the group. Finally, they chose to investigate into a recent event in Myanmar history – the resignation of many party members in the Ayeyawady delta which had some parallels in other parts of the country. The investigation was interesting for at least two reasons: It offered to bring some insight into the “inner history” of Burmese parties and the many “split stories” that had already occurred since the beginning of the nationalist movements in the 20th century.

The group members knew each other for some time. The NLD member who had made the contact supervised the investigation somehow, but was not directly involved. Three trips to the delta regions and a number of interviews were conducted with NLD members, dissidents and observers. The interviews were written down in Burmese and translated by the assistant manager. (see appendix 16) They provide a good base for further inquiries and clarifications (see my footnotes to the texts submitted) and for comparisons with former events in Burma's history. On one of their trips, the students got copies of the booklet “Split Story” published in 1959 which documented the split in the League that dominated Burma's politics until the coup in 1962. It was, however, not possible to enter into further discussions comparing the events of then with those of today because of the termination of the project.

2 The Khamti-Shan issue

The investigation into this relatively small ethnic group of some 80.000 people living in Northern Myanmar was proposed by a very energetic young lady accompanied by two friends. From the beginning of our meetings, the trio made it clear that they were interested in participating in the project to gain some more knowledge about inquiries on social matters as a further step for their educational and professional career. The topic chosen had not been known to me previously and was interesting because it dealt with intra-ethnic trouble in which the Burmans as the dominating ethnic group in Myanmar was not directly involved.

The plan of the group was to travel to Kachin State for interviews and investigation. The plan could not be realised right away because of limited funds and security concerns in the northern state of Myanmar in which civil war had commenced again. Therefore, the group just undertook some interviews in Yangon and submitted a thought provoking report that clearly showed that further investigation would be worthwhile. (see appendix 17) One personal experience of the members of the group was the extent of hatred against the Burmans expressed in the interviews. The interviewees belonged to this group.

c) Evaluation of mini-essays. The lady historian who was looking for new ways of exploring history in Myanmar started to evaluate the mini-essays that had been written. Furthermore, she began to conduct interviews herself on the understanding of “history” on the side of Myanmar citizens (see appendix 15). Some of the essays she regarded as typical were translated by her but in some cases she stopped because she needed assistance in doing the job. The work performed can be regarded as a fine starting point for the book on “Myanmar perceptions of Histories” to be used for workshops in different contexts.

VIII Measures to Facilitate Transition

It was evident for me that a smooth transition from my way of project management to the one of my successor would be a difficult task. It was in more than one way “my” project. I had „invented“ it and had supervised the provisional steps of its implementation. Since almost everything in Myanmar is highly personalised, this legacy constituted a big handicap. It would be impossible for anybody to follow my steps. On this background, I was aware of the fact that the transition had to be facilitated. I trusted that the good relationship between me and my successor built up during our private meetings and the rather intense communication during the period of his training for the new assignment was a solid base for such a transfer of responsibilities.

I summarised my personal attempts to familiarise him with the project and its many obvious difficulties – one of them being the prominent role I played in it – in the advice to just acquaint himself with the situation in Myanmar. I suggested to meet as many people directly or indirectly involved in the project aiming at attaining a „feeling“ for the Myanmar realities by listening and observing before making up his mind. Besides, there were a lot of practical things to do - establishing an office and other matters necessary for a formal implementation of the project.

In addition to such informal advice, two measures were conceived to help facilitate the transition.

1 Mini-evaluations

During my last visit to Myanmar before the transfer of responsibility of the project I had drafted a short questionnaire aimed at helping to evaluate the experiences of the 13 groups that had given it a try to participate in the Minesweeping project. Six responses were received (see appendix 18). Obviously, the majority of groups had not yet gained any experiences that could be evaluated. Most prominently, four of the groups constituted at the MIT did not answer. Nevertheless, the returns provided a lot of information that I regarded as helpful for the future manager of the project to clarify its aims, objectives and methods as well as providing „tailor-made“ assistance to the need of single groups.

The answers showed that the interest of writing a „true“ and thus objective history of ethnic groups was a dominant factor motivating the participants. That implied that considerations about the „meaning“ of such „true histories“ had to be emphasised in the future. Step two of the project – organising discussions on the drafts of the groups – would have served this aim.

The outcome of the mini-evaluation further reinforced the insight that the working groups alone did not suffice as the only pillar of the project. Their work was valuable but had to be complemented by other means like the composition of the textbook of „Myanmar Perceptions of History“ and the organisation of workshops.

2 The Workshop

My last active involvement in the Minesweeping Project was the preparation of such a workshop on oral history to be held in December 2013 shortly after the new project manager had arrived in Myanmar. The idea was to train participants of the project in the art of collecting and analysing oral history. Since members from Chin and Kachin communities had shown particular interest to investigate into their past, it was hoped that the workshop could provide an opportunity to exchange

views about future common activities like creating forums for the discussion of projects bringing the different sub-groups of the respective ethnicities together. Within the official list of 135 different ethnic groups in Myanmar, the small Chin communities only numbering some 600.000 people in Chin State – more have gone to other areas – is represented by 51 sub-groups. To a lesser extent, this applies to the Kachins and the Kayins (Karens) as well.

Concentrating on “regional histories” would most likely help to find common ground in terms of culture and history that might be useful for drafting textbooks to be utilized in churches and schools one day. They could help to overcome the deep splits within the respective states as well as to lessen the anti-Burman factor, the latter factor being essential for building a common Myanmar identity. Working with oral history was crucial for such endeavours because the so called hill tribes lacked documents written in their languages and dating from times before Christian missionaries had arrived.

Furthermore, the workshop was an opportunity to look into options to reshape the whole project. To concentrate on the regional history of the many Chin groups and their interaction with other ethnic and political actors could be exemplary for the whole of Myanmar. Another option which was considered already during the training of the new manager was to locate the head office of the project to a town like Mandalay to counterbalance the trend regarding Yangon as the only noteworthy center of intellectual and societal life in Myanmar.

Finally the workshop was seen as a good opportunity for the newly arrived manager to have a look how things were done – and not done – in Myanmar without being responsible for what had been planned. I had asked two German ethnologists who were doing field research in Myanmar to conduct such a workshop and they had agreed to do so. The venue was the Theological Seminary in Mandalay that could provide accommodation for the participants because most of the students had left home for celebrating Christmas. Of course, the WFD had been asked to provide the money and the manager-to-be had been informed and given his consent. 22 person participated, 16 members of working groups – 14 Chin, 2 Kachin – two historians, one Chin professor who had already participated in the Panglong discussion and the lady with an interest in „alternative histories“ of her country.

I therefore was shocked and angry when I learned from the new manager’s mail written seven days after his arrival that the workshop was included in his decision to stop all activities of the project. I regarded the cancellation of the workshop that had been conceived by me extremely uncooperative and a personal offence and I told him so. Moreover, a „postponement“ to a later date as brought into play by him was hardly possible because it was very unlikely that another date for such a seminar conducted by the two German trainers could be realised. They were to return back to Germany after Christmas and did not know when they would be back again.

After my intervention, the workshop took place (for the timetable see appendix 19) and was regarded as a success both by the trainers and the participants. In their report on the workshop, the trainers recommended to offer more such workshops. For a training on the interpretation and analysis of data foreign experts were still necessary because the flexible dealing with orally transmitted material was still virgin territory in Myanmar. (For some information presented at the workshop see appendices 20-23).

I recommended to offer a follow-up workshop after about half a year’s time to discuss how the methods presented at the workshop had influenced the work of the working groups.

IX Aftermath

In his „concluding announcement“ written in June 2013, the new project manager had told the participants to „feel free to get in contact straight to Dr. Hans“ to submit „several finding papers as well as field visit reports so that as little of the results of the project as possible might going to get

lost“.I very much appreciated this idea. However, no material was submitted „straight away“. Moreover, just collecting material would be of no meaning without some funds to publicise what had been achieved already. Most likely, many interviews would have been noted down in Burmese or another language and needed to be translated. Some more mini-essays had to be translated etc. I therefore contacted the WFD and asked for a lump-sum of 20.000 Euro. The project manager in his answer offered to consider a kind of project proposal from my side. I found any bargaining with the WFD not very attractive. By that time I had lost trust in the organisation. In my eyes, the WFD seemed to regard what had been the „Minesweeping Project“ just my private affair.

On the other side, I had good reasons to believe that the project proposal submitted to the ministry had been completely abandoned and something quite new was on the way. I contacted the department that had to supervise the work of the NGOs engaged in peace promoting work, informed them about my suspicion and offered a detailed explanation. The answer given via email was short: The department „trusted the WFD“ and I should be careful in my public utterances on this matter. I had got a similar warning from the WFD's project manager who had taken a look at my website which contained some information about the project's history.

After that, I sent this paper twice to the department of “Civil Peace Service” (Ziviler Friedensdienst) within the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development Aid (BMZ), the first time together with the appendices. Up to today, I did not get any response.

During my next visits to Myanmar, I asked some of the former participants of the project to send me some of their interim results or just the material collected during their field work. I received two papers on Kachin history (working group1 – see appendix 24) and a summary of Cho oral history (working group 9 – in Burmese) as well as a longer paper on Dai history on which I made some comments (group 11 – see appendix 25). I learned from other former participants that they had some more raw material, yet I did not receive any more material. It seemed that my contact persons had lost the interest in the project.

During my visit in January 2015 I got the information of some friends that the WFD was still looking for a partner organisation and that the other German organisation that had received funds for peace promoting activities had difficulties, too, to find suitable partners. Later, I learnt that two partners had been found – one in Shan, one in Kachin State – and that some group members had been brought to Germany. A short information about the project is put on the net by the WFD (<http://wfd.de/thema/kommunen-staerken-in-myanmar/>).

At least one of the partner organisations mentioned, the Kachin Development Group (KDP) is affiliated with the the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) that is the political arm of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The group works in Laiza, the capital of a “liberated zone” in northern Kachin state. The KIO and the KIA fight a “just war” against the Burmese army under the motto “*Ahnte a Awng Padang Yehowa Karai Kasang*” (Jehowa God is our Victory). Almost 100% of the ethnic Kachin have become Christians in course of the civil war that was started by the KIO/ KIA in 1961. For details see some you tube videos that illustrate the national song of the Kachin rebels with the above title for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za14PkHSTW0>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3W9Fp353Hds> - among others.