Reshaping Engagement:

Perspectives on Conflict Sensitivity in Rakhine State

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Executive summary

Introduction

This report is intended to serve as a platform: first to build common understanding across stakeholder groups on the current conflict sensitivity[1] issues shaping Rakhine state, and second to provide a basis for joint action, where possible, to address the issues identified.

The information presented is a consolidation of perspectives from local and international actors in Sittwe, shared largely between September 2015 and March 2016. [2] Interviewees were asked to describe and recommend ways forward to address the conflict sensitivity issues they deemed as most critical in the current Rakhine state context. The issues emerging as most impactful on local tensions were:

1. Targeting in international humanitarian assistance
2. Information sharing, communication and transparency
3. Collaboration between local and international agencies
4. Funding structures and approaches
5. International media and advocacy narratives
6. "Political play" and the role of government
7. Relocation and returns of displaced populations
8. Culture, attitude and behavior differentials

Perspectives on each topic are detailed in the main report. The summary observations below are based on analysis across all views presented.

Summary of findings

The factors shaping the conflict sensitivity landscape in Rakhine are highly interconnected. Actions and approaches taken in the context are therefore likely to have both observable, immediate impacts on local tensions and less apparent, but equally significant derivative effects. It will be critical for actors engaging in Rakhine state to analyze and meaningfully account for these multiple levels of impact.

The current situation presents opportunities, as well as challenges to address the conflict sensitivity issues identified in this report. Nearly all local actors consulted noted a recent reduction in tensions, both in terms of intercommunal and international/ethnic Rakhine dynamics, creating space for improved engagements.[3]

It will not be possible to capitalize upon present opportunities without deeper understanding and more sensitive practice at the policy level. Narratives failing to address the complexities of the conflict in an even-handed manner have played a substantial role in

[1] For a definition of conflict sensitivity, see p. 1.
[2] For more information about the research parameters, see *Methodology and scope*, p. 1.
[3] For opportunities identified, see p. 26.

exacerbating existing grievances, intensifying resentment and competition and in fact increasing the intercommunal nature of the conflict. Influential national and international voices must tangibly and publically recognize the political, economic and demographic fears and grievances at the root of the conflict, and must acknowledge the challenges facing both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim groups.

Any overarching détente in Rakhine state will be improbable without prerequisite steps to lessen ethnic Rakhine grievances. Efforts pushing for significant changes to the status quo in the short term are likely to entrench current positions, obstructing possibilities for progress on intermediate measures to improve conditions for all groups. According to some local actors, for example, it may be possible to undertake discussions on increased access to services and livelihoods for the Muslim population over time, alongside provision of equal support to isolated ethnic Rakhine communities. However, until genuine steps are taken to alleviate present fears and grievances, space to explore such conversations will likely remain constricted.

Competing agendas, mandates and other relational issues between international agencies have high potential to impede timely, appropriate and effective engagement with local communities moving forward. Existing coordination mechanisms have been unable to remedy these problems, and require revisions to fit the changing environment. Interagency initiatives to improve conflict sensitivity and to engage with local populations must be undertaken collaboratively and with clear, depoliticized management arrangements.

Government and international actors have failed to sufficiently explain to local actors that **the presence and extent of humanitarian programming to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) is a consequence of central Government decision-making.** The Government-mandated model for displacement currently limits access of the Muslim IDP population to livelihoods and services. Further, local government departments and service providers have been allocated inadequate resources to support the IDP caseload independently. While this situation persists, the Government will continue to engage international agencies to provide support to the IDP population, and redirection of available international funding to development programming can only be partial. International actors must better communicate, and local actors must further consider the role of Government policies and of the current displacement model in shaping the allocation of international support in the state.

It is also **important for local actors to recognize that the international community abroad, at Yangon level, and based in Rakhine state do not have one unified voice, approach, or position**. Perceptions of international agencies operating in the Rakhine context should thus be determined on the basis of each agency's specific approaches alone. Taking a differentiated view will open the space for more positive and effective engagement with those international actors who are willing to do so in a conflict sensitive manner.

In a context characterized by breakdowns in communication and trust, **discourse itself has emerged as a conflict driver** – both through individual narratives that promote tensions, and divergences between narratives that impede mutual understanding. In this light, there is high value in building awareness of these perspectives between stakeholder groups. It is important to note that in practical terms, the origin of – or agendas behind – popular narratives, and whether they are grounded in truth or misconception, is less important than the fact that they exist, are widely accepted, and will continue to the govern attitudes and behaviors of those engrained in the context.

Practical options for addressing conflict sensitivity issues identified

The following recommendations are based on the views presented in this report, and have been validated with international and local actors through feedback workshops held in Sittwe in March 2016. The practical measures outlined below are indicative and are offered as a starting point for discussion and planning.

For local and international agencies operating in central Rakhine state

1. Build on ongoing collaboration between international and local agencies for disaster preparedness, agreeing institutional partnerships and delivery mechanisms in advance of predicted risks, such as critical water and food shortages, flooding, cyclone etc.
2. Conduct consultation workshop(s) including local and international agencies for the purpose of informing future programming in ethnic Rakhine communities. Workshop objectives could include jointly identifying priority sectors and geographic areas for assistance, and exploring possible ways to collaborate on assessments, taking into account the comparative advantages and limitations of international and local agencies.
3. Organize meetings between interested international and local agencies to discuss possibilities for an interagency capacity building initiative. This could include, for example, establishing partnerships between particular local and international agencies with similar program objectives, and identifying administrative and/or technical staff persons within the local partner organization who might spend a portion of time imbedded within finance, administration, or sectoral teams at international agencies. Experienced local staff from international agencies might also be seconded to local agencies for a period of time.
4. Explore avenues for resourcing and implementing a Rakhine context orientation and training initiative. This could include, for example:
    - A curriculum and training program for all international agency staff new to the Rakhine context, including expatriates and local staff from other areas of Myanmar. The curriculum could provide an overview of local history, conflict dynamics, conflict sensitivity considerations and related topics. The training could be run quarterly, for example, with interested agencies signing on to send incoming staff upon their arrival. The curriculum could be designed in consultation with local agencies and/or other representatives from both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities.
    - A curriculum and training program for local agency staff, local staff from international agencies, and other target groups from the ethnic Rakhine community, providing an overview of international principles, methodologies, legal frameworks, and/or other topics. The topics could be determined jointly with local agencies.
5. Agree and outline principles and recommendations for conflict sensitive donor engagement in Rakhine state, through facilitated dialogue between local and international agencies. Identify focal persons to explore possibilities for a follow-up consultation between donor representatives and field-level representatives (local and international) on the issues outlined.
    - *For international agencies operating in Rakhine state*
6. Draft simple communications materials in local languages, explaining organizational mandate, background and activities. Work closely with local staff to ensure appropriate language, tone, and dissemination plans.

7. Arrange qualified interpretation at cluster meetings and other coordination forums, to enable inclusion of local staff in strategic discussions.
8. Conduct a conflict sensitivity analysis of IDP returns and relocations, to link into ongoing end of displacement assessments.

For donors, including governmental, multilateral and private agencies

1. Consider mechanisms for more rapid release of funds in case of disaster, complemented by increased funds and flexibility for prepositioning of disaster relief items into new and existing grants. Possibilities could include to agree in advance partnership with pre-qualified international and local agencies in Rakhine state for predicted disaster risks.
2. Conduct field-level consultation with local and international actors on calls for proposals and funding priorities, e.g. through workshops to present plans and solicit feedback on potential conflict sensitivity considerations. Such efforts could link to broader consultations on implications of the shifting aid and development landscape in Rakhine.
3. Explore possibilities for funding a standalone partnership program to facilitate ongoing collaboration between local and international agencies, beyond a sub-grant/project implementation basis. Such a program could, for example, provide resources for dedicated partnership management personnel within local and international agencies, include flexible funds for cooperation on small projects jointly determined by the local and international partners, and/or support local-international coordination and capacity building initiatives such as those described in the preceding set of options.
4. In new calls for proposals, reframe social cohesion objectives for central Rakhine to prioritize activities which build attitudes and skills for rumor management, media literacy and dispute resolution within each communal group.
5. Consider avenues to support advocacy and policy initiatives pursuing reform of central Government natural resource management. To complement this, explore possibilities for funding activities related to conflict sensitive business practice in Rakhine state.
6. Allocate additional funds and time in projected work plans for capacity building of local staff, across both humanitarian and development grants.
7. Support internally- and externally-generated strategies for aid and development assistance in Rakhine state that (a) recommend approaches that complement, rather than contradict, other key strategies being pursued for Rakhine state, and (b) are based on local consultation, tailored to fit the particular needs and dynamics of different geographic areas and populations.
8. Incorporate into grant mechanisms more robust requirements for comprehensive conflict sensitivity mainstreaming throughout partner agency programming in Rakhine state.

Methodology and scope

Project background

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) established its Myanmar country office in May 2015, in response to requests from partners and donors to support conflict sensitive practice among international and local actors operating in Myanmar. This need was identified as particularly acute in Rakhine state, where conflict dynamics have become closely intertwined with interventions by Government, local and international aid and development actors and the international community more broadly.

This analysis and the process shaping it have aimed to provide a platform upon which to build common understanding of key conflict sensitivity[4] issues present in the current context, and to initiate discussion on measures for addressing them. This initiative originated from a request made in July 2015 to CDA by field-level managers from international implementing agencies in Sittwe, Rakhine state. These stakeholders identified updated analysis along these lines as a critical need for planning ways forward in the uncertain period of political transition and in the context of a shifting aid and development landscape.

Defining conflict sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity may be defined as:

> Understanding the context in which an intervention operates;
> Understanding the interaction between an intervention and the context;
> Acting upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts between the intervention and the context.[4]

Through early interviews and facilitated analysis sessions it became clear that there is both an interest across stakeholder groups and a number of opportunities in the present environment which can enable positive steps towards improved conflict sensitive practice.

The information presented in this report reflects perspectives gathered through workshops, semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These were carried out largely between October 2015 and March 2016 in Sittwe, Rakhine state. Throughout the project, CDA staff used systems mapping as a tool to build consensus on key issues, including among staff from different of agencies. Information was further gathered through use of a listening methodology. This approach encouraged participants to speak freely on the issues they deemed most important and relevant to conflict sensitivity, rather than to speak to a range of pre-identified topics.

Participants were first asked to identify the key conflict sensitivity challenges and opportunities present in Rakhine state. They were further requested to provide suggestions for reducing tensions and promoting positive change related to the issues they identified.

CDA consulted with over 100 individuals during the data collection process. These included:

[4] International Alert *et al*., 2004. *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: A resource pack*. London: International Alert.

- Local staff working for ethnic Rakhine aid and development organizations operating in Rakhine state
- Local staff working for national aid and development organizations operating in Rakhine state
- Local staff working for international agencies (UN, INGO) operating in Rakhine state[5]
- Political party representatives based in Rakhine state[6]
- International staff working in international agencies (UN, INGO) operating in Rakhine state

The findings presented below are in most cases grouped into "local" and "international" views. This is due firstly to the notable alignment of most perspectives amongst different groups of local actors, including each of those listed above. Secondly, this framing intends to preserve confidentiality and avoid speculation and blame, a possible result of clearly attributed information.

The findings were verified through feedback workshops held in Sittwe in March 2016 with local and international actors, respectively.

Limitations and next steps

This report shares the views of people directly engaged in Rakhine state, with particular focus on the impacts of aid, development, governmental, corporate and other interventions on shaping the evolution of current tensions. It is not intended to be a comprehensive context or conflict analysis of Rakhine state, and therefore does not seek to delve into the factors contributing to the 2012 violence, nor into the root causes of historic tensions.

Given this focus, a limited selection of groups was targeted to contribute perspectives, namely those having notable influence and insight into the full range of dynamics described above. In line with good conflict sensitive practice, however, the scope of the analysis will be adapted in future iterations, in order to explore additional dimensions of conflict sensitivity in Rakhine state and to ensure that a broader set of voices are incorporated.

The groups and individuals engaged during this process are firstly limited to those operating directly in central Rakhine, largely in Sittwe. It is evident that there are diverse sub-contexts within Rakhine state, each with its own dynamics. The context of northern Rakhine is notably unique in certain regards, and presents challenges in terms of access, open discussion and other risks of doing harm which require particular consideration. CDA is exploring the possibility of including dedicated research for this area in the next iteration of the analysis.

One group of perspectives notably absent from this stage of the analysis is those of the Muslim population. Given restrictions on interactions between the Muslim population and other groups, and furthermore given the absence of Muslim political, aid, or development actors in central Rakhine

[5] The majority of local staff from international agencies consulted were ethnic Rakhine. A small number of staff of other ethnic/geographic origin were also interviewed.

[6] CDA approached each of the 3 major political parties present in Rakhine. Of these, 1 party was unavailable for consultation.

state, there is a narrower set of conflict sensitivity issues that this population can directly influence. Currently, this is largely limited to conflict sensitivity impacts in the IDP camps and areas of return. This complex set of considerations is in many ways distinct from conflict sensitivity in the broader context, and should be explored in a dedicated manner in a subsequent iteration of the analysis.

Donors and other actors engaged in Rakhine state from Yangon were also not interviewed during the information-gathering process. This decision was made in order to prioritize focus on sharing perspectives between groups directly engaged in – and impacted by – the central Rakhine context, and furthermore to promote improved access of such perspectives to policy level audiences. Acknowledging the importance of the latter, CDA will endeavor to share the views echoed in this report and to receive feedback from donors, agency headquarters and other policy actors in Yangon.

Across each of these dimensions, focusing on a narrower scope with greater depth and timely release of findings was prioritized over a longer-term but more inclusive process, which would risk missing a window of relevance and opportunity.

Framing the conflict sensitivity landscape in Rakhine state

The context of Rakhine state as it stands today is characterized by the long-standing grievances of ethnic Rakhine and Muslim[7] groups residing there, including tensions between the two communal groups themselves and between each group and the previous central Government. Both communities have faced ongoing political and economic marginalization by the Government, resulting in Rakhine state experiencing some of the lowest development standards throughout the country. Demographic change and competition for scarce resources, coupled with the oppression of each group by the center, has further resulted in tensions between these two communal groups over time.

In May and October 2012, outbreaks of violence between Muslim and ethnic Rakhine communities resulted in destruction of lives and property and contributed to what would later become a large-scale and protracted displacement situation. Displacement arrangements mandated by the central Government have enforced segregation between ethnic Rakhine and Muslim groups in the central part of the state. The majority of the displaced are from a Muslim background, including those who had fled from the violence and those who were relocated by Government directive into camps soon afterward.

The conflict, occurring within a broader context of national political and economic transition, became an immediate subject of international attention. Donors provided substantial funding to support humanitarian interventions for the displaced, resulting in a proliferation of international agencies operating in Rakhine state. In addition, international media and advocacy groups have been vocal in their reporting on the situation in Rakhine state since 2012. Approaches taken by these and other international actors have often exacerbated existing grievances and have added new dimensions to tensions in the area. A complex landscape of local actors with a role in shaping conflict dynamics has also emerged in Rakhine state and nationally since 2012, further complicating existing tensions.[8]

[7] There are multiple ethnic groups practicing Islam within Rakhine state. This includes, for example, the Kaman Muslims and the largest Muslim ethnic group, many of whom self-identify under the term "Rohingya." This latter ethnic designation is not accepted by the majority of the ethnic Rakhine population, and is not recognized by the central Government as one of the 135 official nationalities of Myanmar. This topic, and the term "Rohingya" itself, are highly contentious, linking on the one side to concerns among the ethnic Rakhine of demographic change and political and economic marginalization, and on the other, to the desire for increased individual and collective rights by unrecognized Muslim groups. In order to preserve neutrality on the issue, this report will not utilize an ethnic designation, referring instead generically to the "Muslim" population.

[8] For comprehensive analysis of the Rakhine context, see, for example: International Crisis Group (ICG), *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014, Asia Report N°261.

Conflict sensitivity in the current environment: Perspectives from local and international actors

Key issues identified

The consultation methodology encouraged interviewees to identify the issues they deemed as most important and relevant to conflict sensitivity. In using this approach, it became evident that there is significant consensus on which issues, broadly speaking, are most pressing in the current environment. It is worth noting that the overarching sources of tension are limited in number, yet the complexity, interconnectedness and impact of their various manifestations are significant.

The information presented below is a consolidation of the perspectives shared by local and international actors during the information-gathering process. In most cases, views have been grouped into "local" and "international", firstly due to the notable alignment of most perspectives among the local groups consulted[9] and secondly in order to preserve confidentiality. Where there is a wide range of competing views within either the local or international perspective, this is explicitly noted and the spectrum of opinions explained.

The analysis process identified the following conflict sensitivity issues as critical in today's Rakhine context:

1. Targeting in international humanitarian assistance
2. Information sharing, communication and transparency
3. Collaboration between local and international agencies
4. Funding structures and approaches
5. International media and advocacy narratives
6. "Political play" and the role of government
7. Relocation and returns of displaced populations
8. Culture, attitude and behavior differentials

Perspectives on each topic are outlined in detail below.

NOTE: The information presented below summarizes the perspectives shared by the individuals and groups consulted during the facilitated analysis process. The views below therefore do not necessarily represent the organizational views of CDA or of the author.

[9] See *Methodology and scope*

1. Targeting in international humanitarian assistance

> *Perspectives from local actors*

The issue of humanitarian targeting has been at the forefront of ethnic Rakhine narratives pertaining to the international community since the 2012 international response commenced. According to some actors, however, frustrations about this issue began with some of the earliest international interventions in Rakhine state in the 1990s. At that time, international agency programming was reportedly concentrated in Maungdaw district, where the population is over 90% Muslim[10], leading to perceptions of disproportionate support to Muslim groups as compared to ethnic Rakhine, a trend commonly referred to as "aid bias."

In the aftermath of the 2012 violence, townships in central Rakhine state saw a rapid increase in the presence of international agencies. Ethnic Rakhine actors explained the high expectations which had accompanied this expansion; namely, that international agencies' resources and expertise would contribute to evident improvements in development standards for the state as a whole. The realization that the majority of international programming would support displaced persons exclusively – a population largely comprised of Muslim groups – constituted a significant disappointment.

The resulting backlash against international agencies has been substantial for two reasons. Firstly, many recipients receiving ongoing humanitarian assistance since 2012 are from Muslim groups considered by some views as having been in competition and/or conflict with the ethnic Rakhine at various points in recent decades. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the long history of ethnic Rakhine marginalization by the central Government, British colonial powers, and Burman empire is still keenly felt by modern Rakhine society. Perceived sidelining by the international aid community has therefore exacerbated these existing grievances. There is reportedly a widely-held fear among ethnic Rakhine that the population has and will continue to regress as a key consequence of marginalization, increasing vulnerability of the ethnic Rakhine people to continuing waves of domination by external actors.

In addition to targeting decisions embedded in the ongoing post-violence humanitarian response, particular events have reinforced broader perceptions of bias and have enflamed resentment towards international agencies. These include the limited international response to the sinking of a public line boat traveling from Kyauk Phyu, which resulted in the deaths of dozens of ethnic Rakhine. When raised during discussions, this event was frequently juxtaposed against the relatively greater international response to the May 2015 disembarkation of Muslim individuals who had been stranded off the coast of the state following a crackdown by regional governments on human trafficking.

In addition, though some local actors acknowledged positively that international agencies supported ethnic Rakhine communities following Cyclone Komen in 2015, many described several shortcomings of the response. Firstly, targeted communities felt that international assistance was

[10] Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH), *Rakhine State Needs Assessment*, September 2015.

slow to arrive and criteria poorly explained; second, they noted its short-term nature compared to the longer-term support provided to internally displaced persons.[11]

One of the most commonly expressed perspectives among local actors consulted was that the central Government played a key role in fueling or directly organizing the 2012 conflict.[12] While international agency targeting prior to 2012 is not seen as a factor contributing to the violence, a number of local actors explained that perceptions of inequitable international assistance post-2012 has added new layers of resentment to existing intercommunal grievances, thereby intensifying and entrenching them. This has inadvertently created space for narratives framing the conflict as ethnic and religious, rather than political and economic, to predominate. Further, attention has been diverted somewhat away from the central Government as the main party responsible for the grievances of both groups.

Interviewees linked resentments about humanitarian targeting to the spread of negative rumors about international agencies in Rakhine state. They explained that some individuals and groups have actively fabricated and circulated damaging information about international agencies as a means of impeding operations and venting frustrations felt on this issue.

Local actors had diverse perspectives about the level of support to the ethnic Rakhine community which would be considered acceptable and unbiased. While some emphasized a "50/50" approach, others stated that the actual breakdown is less important than for the ethnic Rakhine population simply to feel that they are being fairly treated. It should be noted that there was no correlation between type of local actor consulted and any particular stance on this issue; local staff of international agencies, local staff of local organizations, and local political party representatives were equally mixed in their views.

Most local actors raised the point that international assistance to the ethnic Rakhine population has increased over time, and that this has been regarded as a positive step and a tentative foundation for trust-building with international agencies. At the same time, they noted that additional measures must be taken to improve manners of engagement with the ethnic Rakhine community.[13]

> *Perspectives from international actors*

Most international actors consulted acknowledged as fair the ethnic Rakhine frustration at being largely excluded from humanitarian programming since 2012. From the international perspective, humanitarian principles are central to this issue, as they underpin the humanitarian system and are rooted in international law. One principle is impartiality: that, "humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions."[14] In the immediate aftermath of the 2012 violence, the displaced population saw access to shelter, health

[11] See also *Information sharing, communication and transparency*
[12] See also *"Political play" and the role of government*
[13] See also *Collaboration between local and international agencies*
[14] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

services, and other basic needs chiefly cut off, among other limitations. Early funding and programming therefore prioritized supporting these urgent needs, in accordance with humanitarian principles.

By Government mandate, the displacement situation has now continued over a 4-year period. It is worth noting that the main duty bearer for the displaced population is the central Government.[15] However, international actors echoed local perspectives in noting that allocation of support to Rakhine state is low, further adding that this results in low levels of central Government support to the IDP population. To date, state government has reportedly lacked the resources necessary to address IDP needs itself. As a result, there is a feeling of responsibility among international actors to ensure that assistance is not drastically reduced without alternate support systems in place, as consequent shortages of essential support would disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, such as women and children.

The vast majority of international actors consulted recognized that efforts to explain the humanitarian system and principles to the ethnic Rakhine community have been insufficient, and that this has exacerbated negative perceptions of international agencies locally.[16]

In addition, some international actors were apprehensive towards engaging with the ethnic Rakhine community as a result of the March 2014 riots, when international agency premises and goods were destroyed by local rioters in Sittwe, leading both local and expatriate staff to flee. Some international agencies interviewed were hesitant to pursue programing in unknown ethnic Rakhine communities, as both the March 2014 events and predominant anti-international narratives appear to indicate that communities are likely to perceive international agencies negatively, and may not welcome programming.

Local and international actors mutually acknowledged that the main point of contention with regards to targeting has been related to humanitarian, rather than development activities. Some international actors noted, however, that while development programming has been ongoing in some ethnic Rakhine communities since 2012, it has been little recognized. Scrutiny by the ethnic Rakhine population reportedly tends to focus on humanitarian support to the Muslim population, given the grievances previously described. In addition, these actors highlighted that development activities are often less tangible than humanitarian activities, at times emphasizing provision of knowledge and skills over distribution of material items. Development activities are therefore less visible than their humanitarian counterparts, resulting in a lower public awareness of development assistance. According to some international actors, this factor may have contributed to a perception that international programming in Rakhine state is somewhat more biased than the reality.

International agencies and donors have reportedly improved in recognizing ethnic Rakhine needs over time. Strategies recently formulated by international agencies have increasingly highlighted the humanitarian needs of many isolated Rakhine communities, due to their limited access to services,

[15] See Article 3(1) of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.
[16] See also *Information sharing, communication and transparency*

high rates of malnutrition, and other factors. In addition, there has been an increase in donor funding available for development programming, which to date has provided a greater proportion of support to the ethnic Rakhine.[17] As noted above, these trends were also acknowledged by the local actors consulted, and were largely perceived as positive. This convergence in views indicates a possible leverage point to begin addressing tensions related to perceptions of inequitable support.

[17] See also *Funding structures and approaches*

2. Information sharing, communication and transparency

> *Perspectives from local actors*

According to a broad range of local actors consulted, lack of transparency is among the most critical sources of tension with international agencies in Rakhine state. Limited understanding of international agency activities, mandates and agendas have contributed to rumors and mistrust by the local population. International agencies have been observed as repeatedly informing – rather than consulting – the ethnic Rakhine population on matters of program planning and implementation, reinforcing perceptions of bias and tokenism.[18]

Broad gaps in communication between the ethnic Rakhine population and international agencies have been exacerbated by communication shortcomings in particular instances. Some local actors reported, for example, that international agencies did not sufficiently explain criteria for determining recipients of assistance following Cyclone Komen and subsequent flooding in 2015. Further, international agencies have not clarified why post-flooding assistance was short-term in nature, while post-violence assistance to the Muslim IDP population has been long-term.

Local actors explained that while some ethnic Rakhine communities will have the capacity to understand humanitarian and development concepts if explained, many will have had limited access to education and will require adapted communications approaches. Several actors cited the positive example of a particular international agency that remedied negative perceptions and low acceptance from the ethnic Rakhine community; this agency's strategy was to widely distribute a local-language pamphlet explaining the organization's mandate and activities in simple terms.

The Emergency Coordination Committee (ECC) was cited as the sole mechanism for giving insight into international agency activities and for mitigating grievances related to program targeting. The ECC was established following the March 2014 riots and enjoys high acceptance among local actors interviewed. However, this body reportedly functions as a reporting mechanism, and does not fill the need for broader consultation with the ethnic Rakhine community.

The local interest in increased understanding of international agency activities comes not solely from a desire to monitor or influence humanitarian targeting. Local actors cited fears that resources provided by international agencies to the IDP camps would be misappropriated, later used to support extremist activities that could put the ethnic Rakhine population at risk. Some raised further concerns that the continued internment of Muslim communities in confined camp areas would itself be conducive to increased levels of extremism over time.

Local interviewees noted that the lack of communication channels between Muslim IDPs and the ethnic Rakhine does not provide any prospect for these fears to be allayed. Even those with most access, such as ethnic Rakhine staff working for international agencies, tend to interact with the IDP population strictly on a project activity basis. These local staff have neither the time in their work plans nor the necessary confidence and trust to engage with the Muslim individuals they encounter

[18] See also *Collaboration between local and international agencies*

in discussions on broader contextual issues. International agencies have not leveraged their position of access to support improved insight, clarity and confidence across group lines.

These gaps have reportedly perpetuated fears and intercommunal conflict dynamics in Rakhine state, as the ethnic Rakhine population has little means through which to understand the current perceptions of the Muslim community in central Rakhine towards themselves – and vice versa. One local Rakhine actor stated, "It is very difficult for us to make any conclusions, because information is only accessible to us from the ethnic Rakhine side – not from the Muslim side. So, our points of view may be a bit biased, but it is because we don't have enough information. What we know is the outer layer; what we don't know is their inner feelings and plans. This causes lack of clarity and rumors."

In the local perspective, the lack of support for effective communication from international actors both contributes to local feelings of neglect and marginalization[19], and indirectly enables security concerns – an obstacle to the normalization of intercommunal relations – to perpetuate.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

Many international agency staff cited the lack of communication and information sharing with the ethnic Rakhine community as a key shortcoming of the post-2012 international response in central Rakhine, linking the issue to perceptions of aid bias, fraught collaboration with local agencies, and shortcomings in interactions with local staff. From the international perspective, the main cause of limited communication has been the strong anti-international messages present in popular local discourse. International actors recognized the role that donors and international agencies have played in provoking such messages. Nevertheless, a consequence has been widespread concern amongst international agencies that information shared with local actors would not be interpreted fairly, but rather used to propagate further anti-international messages and actions. Transparency is therefore regarded by many international actors as a risk, rather than asset, to international agency acceptance among the ethnic Rakhine community.

A related concern is that information shared would be used as an instrument of control over implementation decisions; namely, that increased programmatic transparency would be accompanied by an increase in demands for changes to those programs, for example with regards to targeting or staffing. In the event that agencies were unable to comply with these demands due to organizational mandates, donor regulations or for other reasons, some international actors fear a further deterioration of relations with the ethnic Rakhine community.

Fears related to transparency have been particularly acute since March 2014, when hard drives were stolen from several international agencies, and the information they contained subsequently misrepresented on social media. The rumors resulting from this incident further damaged international agency acceptance among the ethnic Rakhine community. Both local and expatriate staff working in international agencies reported facing increased personal security concerns and other pressures as a consequence. They noted a marked increase in verbal harassment, as well as overt threats on ethnic Rakhine social media. Though many staff positions will have turned over

[19] See also *Targeting in international humanitarian assistance*

since March 2014, some international agencies have maintained perceptions of a tenuous security situation since that time, resulting in a hesitancy to engage in open communication with local actors.

Compounding these concerns are the challenges that agencies have faced in participating in the few existing international-local engagement mechanisms. Cases of inaccurate or misrepresented information about international agencies reaching the broader ethnic Rakhine population, for example through records of meetings between international and local actors, have reportedly caused misunderstandings. In their current formulation, therefore, mechanisms to increase communication are not always perceived by international actors as successful in improving it.

Despite the hesitancies cited above, there has been an increasing recognition that the negative impacts of communication gaps must be addressed. Some international actors interviewed mentioned positive experiences engaging in frank discussion with ethnic Rakhine representatives in recent months, and further expressed the view that relationships have improved since March 2014, necessitating a more open approach.

Information sharing and communication among international agencies themselves has also been a significant obstacle to effective and appropriate programming in Rakhine state. Most international actors consulted felt that heavy coordination infrastructures in place rarely achieve more streamlined, consistent or complementary approaches. There are often multiple and at times conflicting strategies and context narratives passed from the field level to donors and strategic forums in Yangon, an issue which has been especially problematic in the context of a shifting funding landscape. Where strategies are not consolidated, the policy-level uptake of one approach versus another risks being determined more by access and relationships between particular actors across levels than purely by the merit of an approach itself.[20]

Lastly, the sensitivity of the Rakhine context has resulted not only in low risk tolerance for information sharing between local and international actors, but also among international agencies. Assessment and analysis is often undertaken in silo, with the result that agencies at times replicate efforts, and are unable to capitalize on knowledge generated by others. In an environment with complex dynamics and where understanding of the context is crucial to avoid exacerbation of tensions, this was identified as a critical gap.

[20] See also *Funding structures and approaches*

3. Collaboration between local and international agencies

> *Perspectives from local actors*

There has been limited interaction between local Rakhine organizations and international agencies in the post-2012 period. According to local actors consulted, where partnerships have been built, they have often been seen as extractive.

Partnerships with international agencies are typically predicated on a sub-grant basis for a particular project, with institutional relationships shuttering immediately after the grant period. This short-term, transactional approach is contrary to local social norms on relationships. Further, local agencies reported that they often continue their work regardless of available funding, utilizing volunteer time and other coping mechanisms to provide support on an ongoing basis. Local agency views on implementation and collaboration are therefore not defined by individual grants or projects, resulting in different perceptions and expectations than those of international donors and partners.

Interviewees further noted that international partners and donors often set both intensive compliance standards and project criteria that are inappropriate to the context. If local agencies are unable to meet these standards, in some cases international partners are seen as responding with disparagement. The local agency staff consulted recognized that improvements are needed to their organizational systems and structures, but also noted comparative advantages such as community mobilization skills, contextual knowledge and rapid response capacity. One example given was the speed of local agencies' emergency response following the 2015 floods, in comparison with the slower international response.

Organizational development support to better meet compliance standards would reportedly be welcomed, but typically has not been provided by international partners and donors. Furthermore, local agencies have faced substantial challenges in retaining experienced staff, given the higher salaries offered at international agencies. The international agencies and donors enforcing compliance measures have therefore had a hand in limiting local agencies' ability to meet them. Though compliance measures may be necessary from the perspective of due diligence, this pattern of expectation without support has had clear negative impacts on relationships between international and local actors.

A consequence of these dynamics has been perceptions of tokenism; some interviewees felt that international agencies partner with ethnic Rakhine organizations because of donor requirements and/or due to the Government mandate for "50/50" support to ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities. The primary interest is not seen as meaningful engagement and capacity building for the ethnic Rakhine people. This perception reinforces other grievances towards the international community, such as those detailed previously.

Several interviewees described a diverse ecosystem of local agencies, noting that some are less suited than others to partnership with international agencies. There are reportedly a range of local organizations having set leadership, some existing systems and policies, and a mission focused on particular humanitarian or development objectives. A second variety was described as loosely organized, implementing any number of different activities as a means to gain influence and to further underlying political or social agendas.

Until recently, local agencies in Rakhine state reportedly did not have a tradition of close collaboration among themselves. As of late 2015, however, there has been a monthly coordination meeting among a selection of local agencies. The participating agencies have begun sharing information and mapping resources, and are currently discussing strategies for opening lines of communication with international agencies. According to the local actors interviewed, this planning has been partially prompted by a recognition of the increase in international agency support to the ethnic Rakhine community over time.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

Views on partnership with local organizations vary among international actors. While some international agencies are now actively seeking to increase and improve such partnerships, others remain hesitant as a result of several concerns. Firstly, some international agency leaders noted that they were familiar with only a limited number of the local organizations that exist; further, they felt unequipped to access objective information about local agency mandates, capacities, and political or social affiliations, in order to inform decision-making.

These interviewees expressed concerns that engaging local partners on the basis of limited understanding would carry certain risks; for example, that information shared would be publicized and misrepresented, damaging the international partner's acceptance, operations and staff security. These concerns are founded in the March 2014 riots and in the strong presence of anti-international messaging within local discourse, reportedly including from some local Rakhine organizations.[21]

While significant intercommunal tensions persist, international agencies would not request local Rakhine partners in central Rakhine state to implement in Muslim communities, instead collaborating on program delivery within ethnic Rakhine and other ethnic communities. However, international agencies would be likely to also support the Muslim population through other programming. Some international actors interviewed expressed concerns that local partners' disapproval of the full spectrum of international agency programming would be an obstacle to building genuine relationships with those partners.

Despite the above considerations, international actors generally acknowledged that to date, partnership approaches have not been conducive to building trust or local capacities. Grant structures have reportedly been a major factor contributing to these shortfalls. The majority of funding available since 2012 has been for humanitarian programming; typically, these grants have been short-term and with limited scope to address broader issues such as relationships and sustainability. Development grants reportedly have also failed to recognize that dedicated staff are needed to engage in ongoing collaboration and mentorship with local partners, while also delivering program activities within the designated time frame.[22]

There has been an increase in efforts to promote cooperation with local organizations in recent months, for example on the issue of disaster preparedness. Some international actors noted the

[21] See also *Information sharing, communication and transparency*

[22] See also *Funding structures and approaches*

importance of ensuring that these first steps are followed by tangible outputs in order to build local agency confidence. However, these actors further cited concerns that fraught relationships among international agencies would jeopardize these initiatives' success. Many recognized that ensuring more sustainable approaches to programming in Rakhine state is critically important moving forward, including through bolstering of local capacities and building effective local-international collaboration.

4. Funding structures and approaches

> *Perspectives from local actors*

While local narratives often highlight grievances towards international agencies, many local actors consulted also noted the conflict sensitivity implications of donor approaches in Rakhine state. This set of issues feeds into dynamics described in previous sections and others, such as interactions between international and local staff within international agencies.[23]

A range of local actors expressed the view that the top priority of international agencies in Rakhine state is to maintain funding levels, resulting in a readiness to implement any program proposed by donors. According to these interviewees, imbalanced targeting and other inappropriate approaches have therefore pervaded international programming in the state. One local actor stated that in the aftermath of the 2012 violence, both donors and international agencies focused on ensuring a rapid response, at the expense of taking steps to understand how their interventions would be perceived, and the possible impacts of those perceptions on the context. Another interviewee stated that international programming in has failed to utilize its potential to reduce tensions and/or to contribute to addressing the underlying factors, instead focusing on achieving high levels of spending and delivery.

Assumptions about the best ways to reduce tensions have also been problematic. There are ongoing sensitivities to social cohesion activities that require ethnic Rakhine and Muslim populations in central Rakhine to come together. Some local organizations interviewed had attempted to undertake intercommunal dialogue after 2012, but reported pushback from certain factions of the ethnic Rakhine community.

Several local actors registered opinions on the changing aid and development funding environment in Rakhine state. While most expressed the view that the time is ripe for a transition from aid to development, others emphasized that a responsible and gradual approach was needed, requiring increased donor flexibility. Actors consulted generally agreed with the view that development programming benefits all groups, without perceived favor for the displaced (Muslim) population built into targeting criteria.

In addition, local agency staff interviewed noted that donor support has been directed disproportionately to international agencies, a trend which has increased tensions between local agencies and international actors. Sub-grant partnership arrangements are often seen as ill-fitted to local capacities and context[24], and furthermore give only a small percentage of the full grant amount to the local partner. Limited donor commitment to local agencies has also further contributed to perceptions of a biased international community writ large.[25]

> *Perspectives from international actors*

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[23] See also *Culture, attitude and behavior differentials*

[24] See also *Collaboration between local and international agencies*

[25] See also *International media and advocacy messages*, and *Targeting in international humanitarian assistance*

Consultations with international actors revealed that many feel caught between contextual considerations and the imperatives of donors and their own agency headquarters in Yangon. Constraints in humanitarian funding structures have reportedly been a major obstacle for implementing agencies to address some of the key conflict sensitivity issues they have observed since 2012.

Grants focused on rapid delivery and tangible outputs have resulted in several consequences relevant to conflict sensitivity. Firstly, short humanitarian funding cycles have meant short-term staff contracts. Expatriate staff contracts typically turn over within 6 months to 1 year; this window of time is insufficient for learning the context and applying learning to programming decisions. Further, there is often little funding for capacity building of local staff, and intensive delivery schedules leave insufficient time to undertake even the capacity building activities that are funded. This has contributed to a limited presence of ethnic Rakhine staff in international agency leadership positions thus far.[26]

Humanitarian funding structures have rarely provided funding for technical resource persons on conflict at the field level, and grants have reportedly been insufficiently flexible to enable program adaptations to fit changing dynamics. Grant agreements have not included measures to ensure accountability for conflict sensitivity mainstreaming that goes beyond box-checking, often contributing to low levels of headquarters and senior management interest in necessary program adaptations. These and other norms of humanitarian grant-giving have reportedly constrained international agencies' ability to analyze and account for long-term considerations in their program approaches, resulting in significant levels of conflict insensitivity, both within individual projects and as a humanitarian community.

Beyond humanitarian funding, many international actors consulted cited concerns with the design of recent development grants requiring activities bringing together ethnic Rakhine and Muslim groups in central Rakhine state. Most implementing agencies currently operating in Rakhine state do not have organizational mandates relevant to peacebuilding, and therefore lack the necessary technical expertise to support implementation of such activities without doing harm. Further, several actors interviewed emphasized that intercommunal tensions in Rakhine state have a long history that require governmental, structural and policy change as a minimum to address them. These actors therefore did not view short-term international interventions related to social cohesion in central Rakhine as likely to contribute to a larger peace.

International actors interviewed highlighted a lack of direct communication and consultation with the field level on the design of calls for proposals, particularly those with potentially contentious objectives. Linked to this, many, though not all international agency staff interviewed had experienced pressure from their agency headquarters to apply for conflict insensitive grants, putting both expatriate and local field staff in the position of implementing activities that they perceive as harmful.

[26] See also *Culture, attitude and behavior differentials*

An additional issue raised by nearly all international actors consulted was the current tension between humanitarian and development funding. There was a broad spectrum of perspectives presented on this topic; however, all actors acknowledged that the changing funding landscape has caused further breakdowns in relationships between international agencies, creating challenges for coordination and implementation.

Some international actors perceived a reluctance among humanitarian implementing agencies to scale down humanitarian programming in favor of development, with resultant gaps in operational planning for development activities. This was perceived as primarily stemming from desires for organizational self-preservation.

Others noted that existing narratives pushing for a "transition" from humanitarian to development funding have failed to recognize that development programming has already been ongoing; and second, that there remains a lack of alternative support for the displaced population, should humanitarian funding reduce. To date, state-level government departments remain insufficiently resourced to take over the IDP caseload. Moreover, returns of the majority of IDPs to their places of origin remain unlikely in the short- or medium-term. International actors of this view expressed that a funding transition, rather than a dual-track approach, may be premature.

All actors consulted agreed that there is a need for increased development programming with ethnic Rakhine communities, as well as for humanitarian programming to meet the needs of particularly isolated and vulnerable ethnic Rakhine communities. The current funding landscape is perceived to be binary, with some donors seeking to increase development programming by decreasing humanitarian programming, rather than by increasing levels of funding, resulting in shortfalls on both sides. Several further considerations were raised by international actors on this issue that are not mutually exclusive. These include:

> There is a recognition that humanitarian programming cannot continue indefinitely, and that there is a risk of doing harm by developing permanent structures and services in the camps, for example by incentivizing the central Government to perpetuate a system of segregation and to avoid taking over responsibility for supporting the displaced population.

> While it will be possible to reduce some activities in the camps, until Government services are better linked to the displaced population, there will be a continued need for life-saving support to the displaced population, for example in provision of food, water and healthcare. The long-term effects of decreasing support to sectors such as education and protection must also be considered.

> There is a need to assess which humanitarian activities can be responsibly scaled down and which must be supported in the medium-term; there is a risk of doing harm if priorities are determined by donor and headquarters decision-making rather than field assessment.

> Existing interagency communication and coordination mechanisms do not have clear links to development sectors, and efforts to streamline these mechanisms to date have not translated into tangible improvements. Joint, rather than separate consultation with UN and INGOs is needed to address these and other interagency blockages to enable more conflict sensitive approaches.

- Development programming must also be based on careful assessment, including potential risks of doing harm. This is particularly important in light of the significant financial resources becoming available for development programming.

- Development programming must avoid being considered a means of "buying" humanitarian space, and must engage in genuine, rather than tokenistic relationships with local Rakhine partners and communities.

- Existing grants have provided insufficient resources to build sustainable local capacities, including both local agencies and local staff of international agencies.

Despite diverging views on the details of some conflict sensitivity considerations noted above, the significant impact of funding structures and approaches on conflict dynamics in Rakhine state was universally agreed, both by local and international actors consulted.

5. International media and advocacy narratives

> *Perspectives from local actors*

The framing of the Rakhine state conflict by international governments and multilateral organizations, media outlets and political/human rights advocacy groups has had a significant impact on tensions on the ground, according to local actors consulted. The conflict has often been painted as ethnic and religious, rather than political, and furthermore has presented an aggressor-victim binary, with the ethnic Rakhine depicted as the former.

Most local actors consulted felt that ethnic Rakhine grievances are vastly underrepresented in international narratives of the conflict. Conversely, ample focus is given to grievances of the Muslim population, including political grievances of some Muslim groups related to citizenship and ethnic self-determination. These latter issues feed directly into ethnic Rakhine fears of marginalization and of a narrowing field of influence over the state's policies and resources. One ethnic Rakhine individual summarized the issue as follows: "The international messages ignore the human dimension of ethnic Rakhine grievances. When there is demographic change, it is natural for people to worry about takeover. The international community needs to understand our history: the fall of the Arakan empire, the marginalization and oppression since, and the fear of our people moving backwards as a result. They must understand that putting pressure on these fears will cause a bad reaction."

In addition, nearly all local actors consulted stated that the 2012 conflict was either fueled or directly organized by the central Government[27] and that the root causes are political rather than ethnic and religious. International messaging which has instead framed the conflict as ethnic and religious in nature, and with clear winners and losers, has reportedly increased ethnic Rakhine resentments towards the Muslim population. This in turn has created opportunities for various groups to manipulate local sentiments and conflict dynamics, resulting in the creation of an intensified and entrenched ethnic and religious dimension to the conflict that may otherwise have been present. The international framing of the conflict has in a sense been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Further impacting tensions is the common local perception that international media and advocacy messages are crafted on the basis of information fed upward by international agencies operating in Rakhine state. Perceptions of aid bias, in combination with international messaging that appears politically biased in favor of the same group, has created a strong impression that international agencies are politically biased themselves. International agencies are therefore believed, to some degree, to be responsible for putting ethnic Rakhine grievances and voices up against that of a unified international community, a major source of enmity towards international agencies.

Some local actors further noted that simplistic international narratives of the conflict have led to expatriate staff arriving with preconceived notions about dynamics and needs in the area. These assumptions, in combination with short-term contracts and other constraints, have perpetuated

[27] See also *"Political play" and the role of government*

international agency practices that are perceived as harmful or inappropriate by the ethnic Rakhine community.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

Many international agencies with operations in Rakhine state have reportedly instituted policies prohibiting contact with the media, or which channel requests for information to a designated communications focal person. These policies typically prohibit communication of any information relevant to politics and other sensitive issues. International agency staff reported often finding themselves in a position of lobbying overseas headquarters, diplomats and other decision-makers to be more sensitive in their framing of the Rakhine state conflict, as there is recognition of the damaging impact that overly simplistic messages have on perceptions of international agencies locally.

International interviewees emphasized that the international community does not have one voice, and that direct communication channels to influential actors abroad often do not exist. Furthermore, the humanitarian principle of neutrality states that, "Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature."[28] Governments, media outlets and advocacy groups are not held to an equivalent principle, thereby resulting in international narratives which can be based more on the agenda or low understanding of a particular actor than they are reflective of truths in the local context.

Some international actors noted that the term "human rights" has been misconstrued by the ethnic Rakhine community as synonymous with "political rights", in large part due to international reporting on the Rakhine state conflict that uses the term without clear explanation or parameters. This has resulted in the ethnic Rakhine population being particularly sensitive to reports advocating improved human rights for the Muslim population. The term "human rights" is broad, however, encompassing a range of different rights, most of which are at the individual rather than collective or political level (e.g. the rights to food and water, health, livelihoods). Steps taken towards improving human rights in Rakhine state focus largely on ensuring dignity for all persons regardless of political status, rather than on attempting to change the political status of any group. The lack of clarity around this has reportedly been one factor impeding dialogue and programming efforts along these lines.

[28] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

6. "Political play" and the role of government

> *Perspectives from local actors*

The impact of the central Government on conflict dynamics in Rakhine state has been significant, according to local actors consulted. There was near universal agreement in a perspective that the central Government played a role in engineering the 2012 conflict as a means of diverting attention away from natural resource extraction projects underway in the state. Projects cited included the Shwe gas pipeline, the deep sea port and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Kyauk Phyu. According to local actors, the conflict provided a distraction that ensured low public awareness of the scant benefits these projects provided for local Rakhine communities. The conflict further provided a central Government facing reduced powers in the wake of democratization with a justification for militarizing the area and reasserting its control.

While some interviewees stated that the conflict later escalated beyond the predictions and control of the central Government, most were of the view that the Government has continued to engage in "political play," or "political tricks," since 2012, employing divide and rule tactics in order to continue extracting resources without major protest. According to local actors consulted, recognition of this manipulation has entered local public awareness more recently, as time has passed and intercommunal tensions have calmed.

Several local actors further stated that the central Government was responsible for engineering the March 2014 attacks on international agency premises in Sittwe. Others conversely framed this event as a direct reaction by the population to a provocation by an international agency expatriate staff member. This individual reportedly removed a Buddhist flag posted outside the agency staff house and placed it in a back pocket – a gesture considered disrespectful.

Local actors highlighted three common issues that would be critical in shaping the future relationship between the ethnic Rakhine and the new National League for Democracy (NLD)-led central Government. These are:

> Natural resource extraction, which has become a major grievance as the low level of benefit to local communities from ongoing projects have become increasingly publicized.
> The issue of ethnic recognition, and by extension political rights, for the majority Muslim group in Rakhine state under the designation "Rohingya."
> Federalism, and more broadly the degree of autonomy granted to ethnic Rakhine leadership and by extension the ethnic Rakhine people.

The majority of the ethnic Rakhine population reportedly distrusts the NLD, particularly on the second issue above, due to past speeches made by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi perceived to imply support for the Muslim population.

A range of interviewees voiced concern regarding the future of military interventions in the state, citing both the high level of militarization in the state generally, and the ongoing conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar Armed Forces. This conflict has resulted not only in displacements but also in what are viewed as arbitrary arrests of ethnic Rakhine individuals on allegations of affiliation with the AA. Given the civilian background of the incoming Rakhine state Chief Minister, and the current position of the General Administration Department (GAD) under the

military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs, many local actors interviewed felt apprehensive that avenues for military actors to continue manipulating conflict dynamics would remain.

With regards to incoming state-level officials, most actors interviewed were generally positive about the intentions and agendas of the Arakan National Party (ANP). These same individuals also presented some concerns, however, pertaining to factionalism and governance capacity. Some local actors explained that while certain party members work for the betterment of the ethnic Rakhine community, others engage in politics for personal gain, such as access to wealth and influence. Some actors further noted that while the party's intentions were good and their belief in democracy genuine, capacities would need to be built to ensure true democratic leadership and a responsible handling of the conflict situation. One interviewee highlighted the need to build bridges between the ANP and the international community in Rakhine state.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

Several international actors consulted echoed local views that the outgoing USDP-led Government had played a notable role in steering Rakhine state's conflict dynamics. In addition to influencing intercommunal tensions, these interviewees further felt that since 2012, government-associated voices have scapegoated international agencies, contributing to the prevalence of anti-international messaging and activity in Rakhine state. These international actors perceived that at the very least, officials have intentionally refrained from preventing such patterns. Whether actively or passively perpetrated, the purpose cited was the diversion of ethnic Rakhine frustrations toward the central Government.

A second critical conflict sensitivity issue relates to the potential impacts of the protracted international humanitarian response on the Government's role as duty bearer for the displaced population. Some international actors stated that the international response to date has allowed the central Government to perpetuate a system of segregation, both by assuming financial responsibility for support to the displaced population, and by building more permanent structures in the camps, thereby removing Government incentives for reintegration. Others expressed that this dynamic has been unavoidable, due to low resource and capacity investment from the center to state-level departments.[29] In either case, it is clear that many international actors engaged in central Rakhine state recognize possible impacts of the interplay between Government, international agencies, and the displaced population on medium- and long-term conflict dynamics.

Relationships between international agencies and the USDP-led Government at both state and Union levels in the past were reportedly uneven across different types of agencies (i.e. UN and INGO) and across different sectors (e.g. protection, education). This has created a precedent of ineffective communication and coordination particularly between state-level officials and INGOs, at times negatively affecting project implementation and relationships more broadly. The position on international agencies, both of the NLD nationally and of ANP and NLD influencers at the state level,

[29] See also *Funding structures and approaches*, and *Relocation and returns of displaced populations*.

is as of yet unclear. Many international actors reported that this uncertainty has impeded effective and conflict sensitive program planning.

As such, a commonly-cited priority for international agencies in the coming period was to improve and increase engagement with state and central departments and officials. In light of this, a number of interviewees highlighted as a gap a lack of progress on coordinated scenario planning for such engagements. In line with local perspectives, several international actors additionally raised concerns about the incoming Chief Minister's ability to influence military actions in Rakhine state, and the impact that this could have on tensions in the area. Further, several international actors noted that continued natural resource extraction without equitable and tangible benefit to local populations could become a destabilizing issue.

7. Relocation and returns of displaced populations

> *Perspectives from local actors*

Central Government plans for returns of displaced Muslim populations are currently unclear, as the NLD strategy on Rakhine state remains opaque. Some local actors consulted confirmed persisting ethnic Rakhine fears regarding reintegration of the Muslim population in central parts of the state. These fears are partially rooted in the lack of sight lines into the IDP camps, resulting in little clarity regarding Muslim attitudes towards the ethnic Rakhine population and concerns that the camp environment has fostered extremism.[30]

There were a range of perspectives from different local actors regarding the current displacement model. Some expressed the view that the camps had evolved to become sustainable quasi-villages over time, with conditions similar to the living standards of Muslim communities pre-2012. Others noted that the current system was unsustainable, due to overcrowding and tensions between IDPs and host communities. Those holding the latter view also expressed concerns about how future return and reintegration processes would be managed.

Concerns regarding returns and reintegration were raised infrequently compared to those related to citizenship and political rights for the largest Muslim identity group. However, local actors who did address the issue of returns did so with concerns. One local actor posited that a large-scale reintegration scenario in central Rakhine would cause tension across all conflict lines: between ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities, between ethnic Rakhine and Government, and between ethnic Rakhine and international agencies supporting reintegration processes. Uncertainty about how the NLD-led Government will handle the displacement situation has the potential to increase fears and the likelihood of escalated reactions to Government decisions on this issue over time.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

There were a range of views on IDP returns and relocation among international actors. Some emphasized a lack of clarity on Government plans for the future, and on the details of the returns that have taken place to date. Concerns and uncertainty were prevalent in the views of some groups consulted, first with regards to whether the Government had moved returnees to their place of origin against their will, and second whether those returnees would be inadequately linked to Government services, land and livelihoods, resulting in higher vulnerability levels than experienced during displacement. These international actors noted that a poorly managed return process would have high potential to exacerbate local conflict dynamics, and highlighted a need for increased engagement with state- and central- level government departments and supporting agencies on the issue.

These same actors also cited concerns about relocation of IDPs from temporary "long house" shelters to permanent, individual homes located within the same enclosure where the camps are currently located. There is reportedly a high likelihood of increased tensions and conflict among the

[30] See also *Information sharing, communication and transparency*.

IDP population as a result of uncertainty regarding whether relocation would require a change in IDP status. Some international actors asserted that relocation could reduce services for individuals still without freedom of movement, leaving the population both without access to sustainable livelihoods or governmental support for education and healthcare, and also without agency support to fill the gaps.

Other international actors emphasized that the small number of returns which have been completed to date were not undertaken forcibly, and that subsequent support packages were likely to be considered case by case, on the basis of humanitarian needs. These actors also acknowledged that there is a potential for returns to negatively impact conflict dynamics, adding that the precise impacts remain unclear, particularly as there are differing factors at play within each area of return. One obstacle observed to date has been the reported hesitancy of ethnic Rakhine officials to enter Muslim areas for the purposes of assessing or providing services, given concern for personal security. In terms of relocations from the long houses as described above, these international actors noted that Government proposals for this process were unlikely to move forward, noting concerns that such living arrangements inside the enclosed camp area may later provide a grounds for loss of land and property for IDPs in their places of origin.

A range of international actors raised the dilemma facing international agencies in planning future support to the displaced population.[31] Continued large-scale assistance arguably has and would continue to enable a system of segregation and a lack of Government responsibility for persons residing within its borders, a responsibility outlined in international frameworks[32]. On the other hand, a reduction in support for this population in absence of alternative support mechanisms would have significant humanitarian implications. Several actors described international agencies as "stuck", particularly given the low likelihood for dramatic changes to the status quo in the near future.

[31] See also *Funding structures and approaches*

[32] Article 3(1) of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement states: "National authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction." The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are based on the norms and provisions outlined in international humanitarian and human rights law.

8. Culture, attitude and behavior differentials

> *Perspectives from local actors*

The majority of local actors consulted spoke of perceived incompatibilities between local culture and common expatriate behaviors, noting that these have increased tensions between international agencies and the ethnic Rakhine population. The behaviors in question relate largely to standards of conduct of expatriate staff, and treatment of local staff working in international agencies.

Many interviewees had observed large, mixed-gender groups of expatriate staff publicly consuming alcohol and conducting themselves in what was perceived as a loud and unruly manner. Several specific incidents of disruptive social gatherings at international agency staff houses were cited in addition to more general patterns of behavior in public spaces. Another issue reported was inappropriate dress, particularly among expatriate women. According to some local actors, clothing considered revealing by local standards is problematic more so in rural areas than in downtown Sittwe. Several individuals further noted that headquarters, donor agency and diplomatic visitors coming from Yangon or abroad are the most frequent offenders.

Additional insensitivities to local culture include cohabitation of male and female international agency staff, the March 2014 incident of an international agency staff person perceived as treating a Buddhist flag with disrespect, and requests that loud music be quieted, given the central role that music and celebration play in ethnic Rakhine culture.

With regards to the reflections noted above, some local actors recognized that they have seen improvements over time, and that this has been a small positive step in repairing relationships between the ethnic Rakhine community and international agencies.

Local staff working in international agencies also cited frustrations that expatriate staff arrive in Rakhine state with little understanding of the local context and culture, yet many take a directive approach to decision-making from the outset. Taking time to observe, learn and build relationships first were recommended as more appropriate to local culture and less likely to result in harmful programming decisions. Local staff reported low levels of flexibility and adaptability from expatriate managers, whose reliance on conceptual, logical and theoretical thinking often leads to low trust in local staff insights and on advice based on local experience. Interviewees argued that while some local staff may have lesser capacity to articulate recommendations in English language in a logical and verifiable manner, this does not mean that the recommendations themselves are unwise.

Local staff reported that promotions to decision-making roles are rare, and as such local staff must often implement senior management decisions that they feel to be harmful. These staff further cited frustrations with low investment in building their capacity, an investment necessary both for individual career advancement and for the overall sustainability of interventions in Rakhine state. Tensions around these issues are compounded by the tendency of some agencies to bring in local staff from other areas of Myanmar to assume mid-level or senior management roles, rather than better supporting ethnic Rakhine staff to assume those positions over time.

Some ethnic Rakhine staff interviewed highlighted the multitude of pressures they face by virtue of working for an international agency. This includes pressure from some members of their own community, who consider employment with international agencies perceived as biased as a betrayal

of the ethnic Rakhine cause. It should be noted, however, that some interviewees noted a recent decrease in such pressure. In addition, local staff face pressures from senior management and beneficiaries alike, to serve as a messenger between the organization and its target groups. Local staff interviewed commonly agreed that these pressures and the grievances noted above were little recognized by employers.

> *Perspectives from international actors*

With regards to local standards for expatriate staff behavior, international actors expressed a lack of certainty about where lines are drawn on certain issues. While culturally appropriate clothing was generally seen as clear and necessary, the rules governing matters such as public conduct were considered less so. International actors noted that in determining their conduct, they rely on cues from the environment around them. For example, as loud music, celebration and public consumption of alcohol are common facets of local life in Sittwe, expatriate staff assume that pursuing these activities themselves is consistent with local standards.

It therefore appears that the issue is not incompatibility between expatriate behavior and local standards, but that expatriates may be held to a different, stricter, and at times unclear standard. One interviewee cited the example of a widely-shared ethnic Rakhine social media post criticizing an expatriate staff person for riding a motorbike without a helmet; however, helmets are rarely worn by local persons.

With regards to cohabitation of male and female staff in agency housing, some interviewees noted that there are typically insufficient numbers of expatriate staff in a given agency to warrant the financial expense of separate housing. Having a small number of residents and/or single-gender expatriate housing is considered a security concern for some agencies, particularly for women and those new to the area without local language proficiency.

Finally, some international actors interviewed highlighted the hardships in living away from home and family, and within an unknown environment. These actors noted that at times, it is necessary to take comfort in familiar behaviors in order to maintain a sense of normalcy.

With regards to interactions between expatriate staff and their local colleagues, many interviewees acknowledged one or more of the shortcomings noted by local actors, above. International actors consulted emphasized that international agencies and managers are diverse. While some pay little attention to building relationships and capacities of their local staff, others put in genuine efforts but are at times constrained by other factors. For example, communication challenges due to language barriers were cited as a significant obstacle to building relationships and trust between expatriate and local staff. In addition, the short funding cycles and emphasis on high output typical of humanitarian grants mean that there is little time and funding available to build long-term capacities.[33] Some expatriate managers noted that at times, surplus funding is retained for the

[33] See also *Funding structures and approaches*

purpose of paying staff salaries in the event of a later funding shortfall, prioritizing local staff job security over longer-term capacity building efforts.

Alongside these views, most international actors consulted recognized that communication shortcomings between expatriate and local staff have been problematic, resulting in a lack of trust on both sides. These actors acknowledged the extra pressures ethnic Rakhine staff face from their own communities as a consequence of their employment with an international agency, noting that feeling disenfranchised by their employers would likely make these pressures harder to bear. In addition, interviewees recognized that by failing to build trust and capacity of local staff, there is a missed opportunity for improving perceptions and understanding of international agencies among the broader ethnic Rakhine community.

Finally, many international actors acknowledged that communication gaps at times stem from uncertainty about the attitudes of local staff towards international assistance. Cases of local staff posting negative messages on social media about their employers or about international agencies in Rakhine state more broadly were cited as a source of hesitancy to closer and more open engagement. Despite these issues, all actors recognized that dynamics between the broader ethnic Rakhine community and international agencies have been gradually improving; and to continue this trend, it remains critical to address extant shortcomings in trust, communication and conflict sensitivity.

Analysis: Key findings and observations

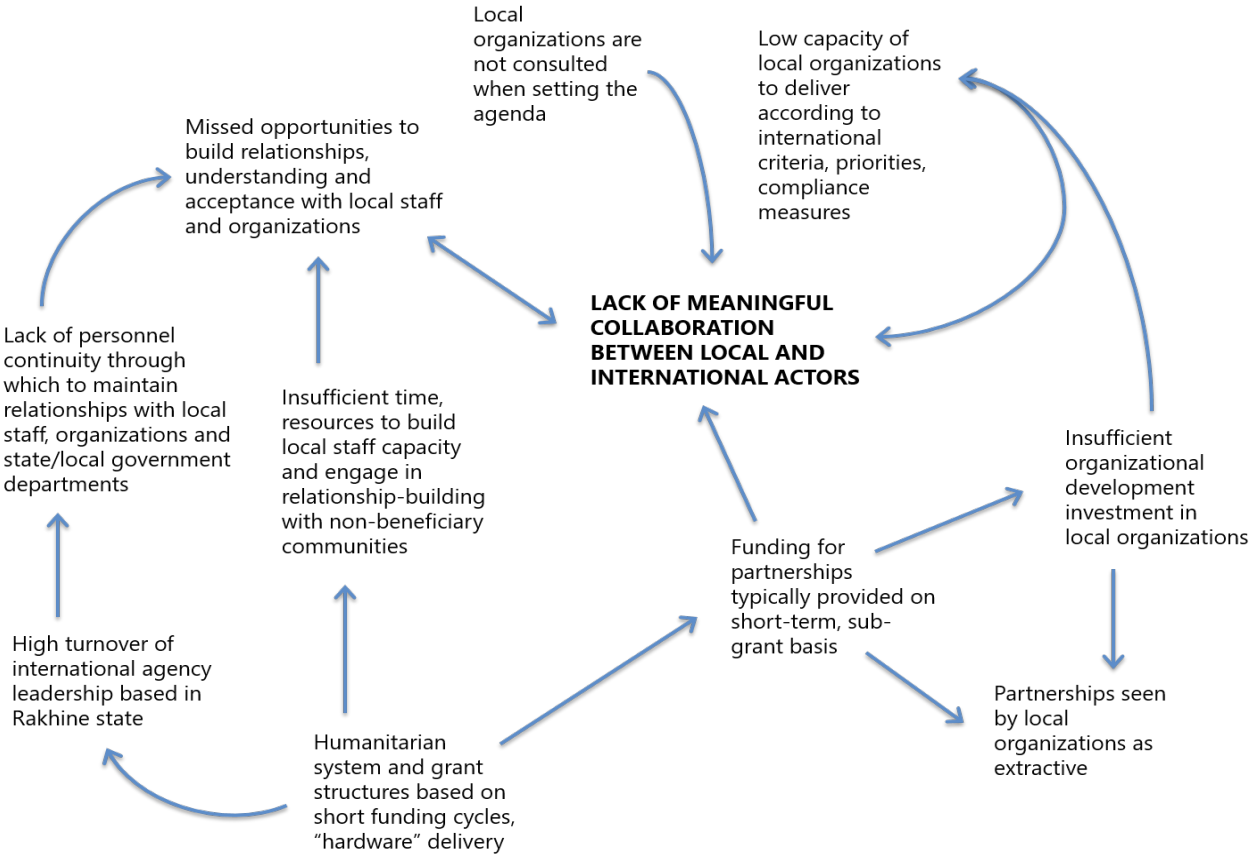
The above perspectives represent a capturing of the current state of popular discourse on a selection of key issues shaping local tensions. The observations in this section are based on analysis across all perspectives.

The main body of this report is structured thematically. In reality, however**, the factors shaping the conflict sensitivity landscape in Rakhine state are not compartmentalized, but rather highly interconnected** in a single, complex conflict system. Actions and approaches taken in the context are therefore likely to have both observable, immediate impacts on local tensions as well as less apparent, but equally significant derivative effects. It will be critical for actors engaging in Rakhine state to analyze and meaningfully account for these multiple levels of impact.

The following examples demonstrate this point. These maps represent small cross-sections of the larger system, showing linkages between a limited, rather than complete set of the factors related to each sample dynamic.

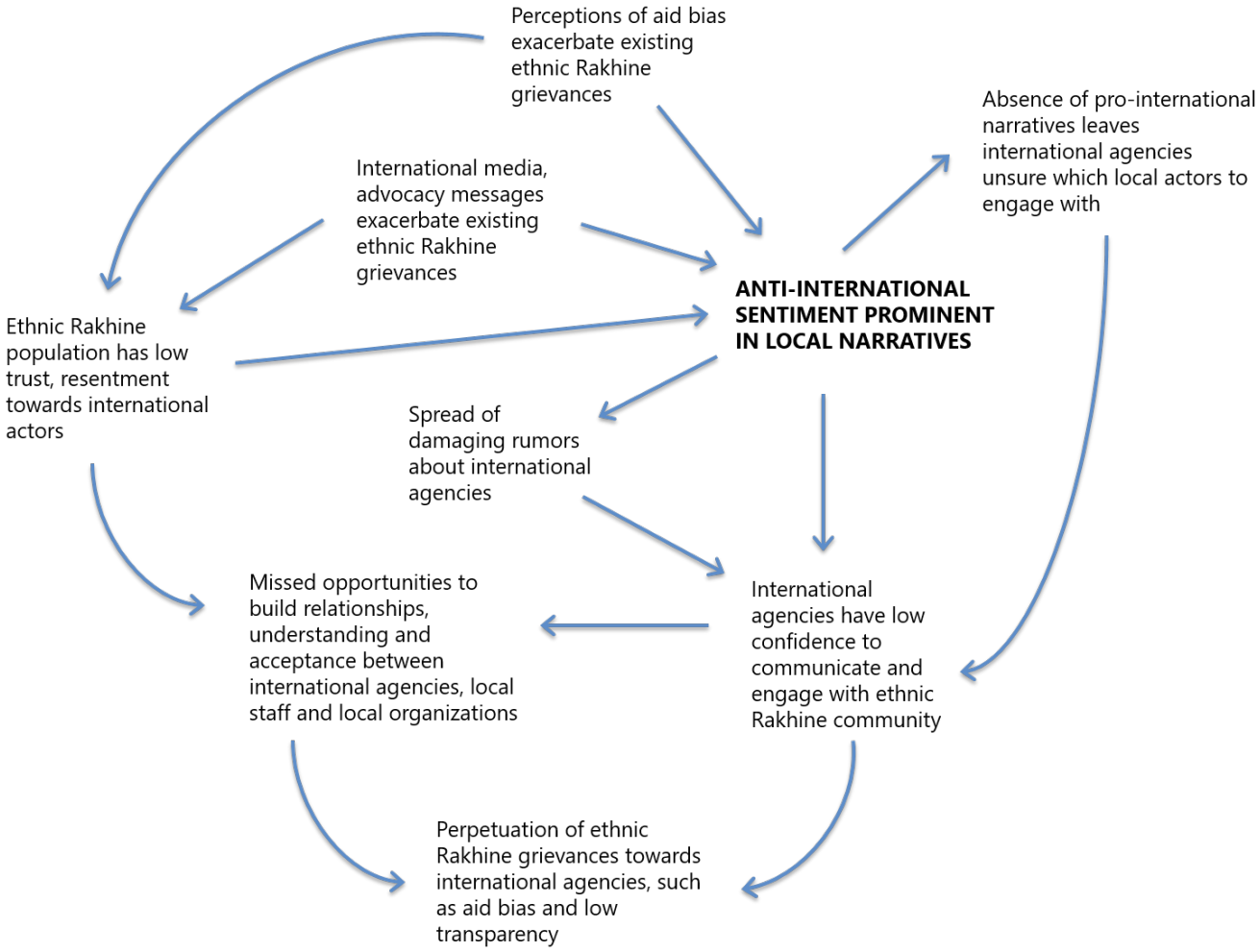
The first example (see Figure 1) illustrates several ways in which humanitarian funding models have contributed to missed opportunities for improved collaboration and relationships between local and international actors in central Rakhine.

Figure 1. Factors related to lack of collaboration between international and local actors



The second example (see Figure 2) shows interconnections between local perceptions of international bias, the presence of anti-international sentiment in local narratives, and the perpetuation of grievances between local and international actors.

Figure 2. Factors related to anti-international sentiment in local narratives



It is evident from such examples that changes to any factor in the system will have a ripple effect, altering other factors and dynamics across a broad range of issues. Both local and international actors have played a significant role in shaping the current environment, and have the power to reshape it – either positively or negatively – moving forward.

A second finding of this analysis is that **the current situation presents opportunities, as well as challenges** to address the conflict sensitivity issues identified in this report and to improve local dynamics. Nearly all local actors consulted noted a reduction in tensions over time, both in terms of intercommunal and international/ethnic Rakhine dynamics. Presently, there is a small but valuable space for improved engagements in the area. Evident opportunities include:

> Local actors' descriptions of the 2012 conflict almost universally focused on an alleged role of the central Government in orchestrating or fueling the violence for the purpose of reasserting political, military and economic control over the state. This is a shift from previous local conflict narratives, which predominantly emphasized the role of the Muslim population in perpetrating the violence, thereby framing grievances largely on an ethnic

and religious, rather than political and economic basis. Though this shift in the discourse is unlikely to translate into intercommunal reconciliation in the short-term, it perhaps represents a de-escalation and/or redirection of intercommunal tensions that could prove beneficial to stability over time, if sustained.

> Local leaders have reportedly shown an increased interest in dispute resolution skills and practice. Additionally, heightened awareness of misinformation and manipulation has led to new interest among local communities in obtaining skills to resist such influences. These factors may indicate a growing valuation of conflict mitigation and management more broadly.

> Many local interviewees recognized positive steps taken by international agencies in their recent engagement with the ethnic Rakhine population, such as increased assistance to ethnic Rakhine communities and more culturally appropriate behavior by expatriate staff. Some local actors stated that they would welcome new discussion with international actors; further, a coordination group comprised of local agencies is currently exploring joint efforts to engage with international agencies.

> Most international actors interviewed readily acknowledged a range of shortcomings of the international response since 2012. Though certain hesitations remain, there appears to be a consensus that closer engagement, particularly with local Rakhine organizations and state-level Government, is essential in the coming period. Initial steps have been made towards joint disaster preparedness planning across local and international agencies.

> The shifting aid and development landscape and the entry of new state and central Government actors provide opportunities to reimagine and renegotiate the nature of international assistance in Rakhine state, and furthermore to address past conflict sensitivity failings.

Based on perspectives shared during the information-gathering process, it is clear, however, that **it will not be possible to capitalize upon present opportunities without deeper understanding and more sensitive practice at the policy level.** Narratives failing to address the complexities of the conflict in an even-handed manner have played a substantial role in exacerbating existing grievances, intensifying resentment and competition and in fact increasing the intercommunal nature of the conflict. Influential national and international voices must tangibly and publically recognize the political, economic and demographic fears and grievances at the root of the conflict, and must acknowledge the challenges facing both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim groups.

Decision-makers seeking address the situation in Rakhine state must therefore consider whether the immediate effects of advocacy and related actions will be to lessen or intensify tensions on the ground. It is important to recognize that **any overarching détente in Rakhine state will be improbable without prerequisite steps to lessen ethnic Rakhine grievances.** Efforts pushing for significant changes to the status quo in the short term are likely entrench current local positions and obstruct possibilities for progress on intermediate measures to improve conditions for all groups. According to some local actors, for example, it may be possible to undertake discussions on increased access to services and livelihoods for the Muslim population over time, alongside provision of equal support to isolated ethnic Rakhine communities. However, until genuine steps are taken to alleviate present fears and grievances, space to explore such conversations will likely remain constricted.

A further risk is the high potential of **competing agendas, mandates and other relational issues between international agencies** to impede timely, appropriate and effective engagement with local communities moving forward. Existing coordination mechanisms have been unable to remedy these problems, and require revisions to fit the changing environment. Interagency initiatives to improve conflict sensitivity and to engage with local populations must be undertaken collaboratively and with clear, depoliticized management arrangements.

In addition, Government and international actors have failed to sufficiently explain to local actors that **the presence and extent of humanitarian programming to support the IDP population is a consequence of central Government decision-making.** The Government-mandated model for displacement currently limits access of the Muslim IDP population to livelihoods and services. Further, local government departments and service providers have been allocated inadequate resources to support the IDP caseload independently. While this situation persists, the Government will continue to engage international agencies to provide support to the IDP population, and redirection of available international funding to development programming can only be partial. International actors must better communicate, and local actors must further consider the role of Government policies and of the current displacement model in shaping the allocation of international support in the state.

It is also **important for local actors to recognize that the international community abroad, at Yangon level, and based in Rakhine state do not have one unified voice, approach, or position**. The international community is in fact diverse and often discordant. Perceptions of international agencies operating in the Rakhine context should thus be determined on the basis of each agency's specific approaches alone. Taking a differentiated view will open the space for more positive and effective engagement with those international actors who are willing to do so in a conflict sensitive manner.

Practical options for addressing conflict sensitivity issues identified

The analysis above is intended to serve as a platform: first to build common understanding across stakeholder groups on the key conflict sensitivity issues currently present in Rakhine state, and secondly to provide a basis for joint action, where possible, to address the issues identified. Recommendations have been formulated on the basis of the perspectives presented above, and have been validated with international and local actors in central Rakhine via feedback workshops held in March 2016. The practical measures outlined below are indicative and are meant as a starting point for discussion and planning.

For local and international agencies operating in central Rakhine state

1. Build on ongoing collaboration between international and local agencies for disaster preparedness, agreeing institutional partnerships and delivery mechanisms in advance of predicted risks, such as critical water and food shortages, flooding, cyclone etc.
2. Conduct consultation workshop(s) including local and international agencies for the purpose of informing future programming in ethnic Rakhine communities. Workshop objectives could include jointly identifying priority sectors and geographic areas for assistance, and exploring possible ways to collaborate on assessments, taking into account the comparative advantages and limitations of international and local agencies.
3. Organize meetings between interested international and local agencies to discuss possibilities for an interagency capacity building initiative. This could include, for example, establishing partnerships between particular local and international agencies with similar program objectives, and identifying administrative and/or technical staff persons within the local partner organization who might spend a portion of time imbedded within finance, administration, or sectoral teams at international agencies. Experienced local staff from international agencies might also be seconded to local agencies for a period of time.
4. Explore avenues for resourcing and implementing a Rakhine context orientation and training initiative. This could include, for example:
    - A curriculum and training program for all international agency staff new to the Rakhine context, including expatriates and local staff from other areas of Myanmar. The curriculum could provide an overview of local history, conflict dynamics, conflict sensitivity considerations and related topics. The training could be run quarterly, for example, with interested agencies signing on to send incoming staff upon their arrival. The curriculum could be designed in consultation with local agencies and/or other representatives from both ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities.
    - A curriculum and training program for local agency staff, local staff from international agencies, and other target groups from the ethnic Rakhine community, providing an overview of international principles, methodologies, legal frameworks, and/or other topics. The topics could be determined jointly with local agencies.
5. Agree and outline principles and recommendations for conflict sensitive donor engagement in Rakhine state, through facilitated dialogue between local and international agencies. Identify

focal persons to explore possibilities for a follow-up consultation between donor representatives and field-level representatives (local and international) on the issues outlined.

> *For international agencies operating in central Rakhine state*

6. Draft simple communications materials in local languages, explaining organizational mandate, background and activities. Work closely with local staff to ensure appropriate language, tone, and dissemination plans.
7. Arrange qualified interpretation at cluster meetings and other coordination forums, to enable inclusion of local staff in strategic discussions.
8. Conduct a conflict sensitivity analysis of IDP returns and relocations, to link into ongoing end of displacement assessments.

For donors, including governmental, multilateral and private agencies

1. Consider mechanisms for more rapid release of funds in case of disaster, complemented by increased funds and flexibility for prepositioning of disaster relief items into new and existing grants. Possibilities could include to agree in advance partnership with pre-qualified international and local agencies in Rakhine state for predicted disaster risks.
2. Conduct field-level consultation with local and international actors on calls for proposals and funding priorities, e.g. through workshops to present plans and solicit feedback on potential conflict sensitivity considerations. Such efforts could link to broader consultations on implications of the shifting aid and development landscape in Rakhine.
3. Explore possibilities for funding a standalone partnership program to facilitate ongoing collaboration between local and international agencies, beyond a sub-grant/project implementation basis. Such a program could, for example, provide resources for dedicated partnership management personnel within local and international agencies, include flexible funds for cooperation on small projects jointly determined by the local and international partners, and/or support local-international coordination and capacity building initiatives such as those described in the preceding set of options.
4. In new calls for proposals, reframe social cohesion objectives for central Rakhine to prioritize activities which build attitudes and skills for rumor management, media literacy and dispute resolution within each communal group.
5. Consider avenues to support advocacy and policy initiatives pursuing reform of central Government natural resource management. To complement this, explore possibilities for funding activities related to conflict sensitive business practice in Rakhine state.
6. Allocate additional funds and time in projected work plans for capacity building of local staff, across both humanitarian and development grants.
7. Support internally- and externally-generated strategies for aid and development assistance in Rakhine state that (a) recommend approaches that complement, rather than contradict, other key strategies being pursued for Rakhine state, and (b) are based on local consultation, tailored to fit the particular needs and dynamics of different geographic areas and populations.
8. Incorporate into grant mechanisms more robust requirements for comprehensive conflict sensitivity mainstreaming throughout partner agency programming in Rakhine state.

Looking forward

In a context characterized by breakdowns in communication and trust, discourse itself has emerged as a conflict driver – both through individual narratives that promote tensions, and divergences between narratives that impede mutual understanding. In this light, there is high value in building awareness of these perspectives between stakeholder groups. It is important to note that in practical terms, the origin of – or agendas behind – popular narratives, and whether they are grounded in truth or misconception, is less important than the fact that they exist, are widely accepted, and will continue to the govern attitudes and behaviors of those engrained in the context. Communication and relationships are at the nexus of conflict sensitivity in this environment.

All actors engaged in Rakhine state at this time – whether international or local, funder or implementer, governmental, non-governmental, multilateral, or corporate – are inevitably influencing local tensions and dynamics. These actors therefore have a responsibility for the consequences of their engagements, and must reshape them to seek the greatest positive, and least negative, possible impacts.

Annex I: Challenges and opportunities identified by interviewees for addressing tensions in Rakhine state

The tables below are a record of interviewees' perspectives on the main obstacles and leverage points for reducing current tensions in Rakhine state, particularly those related to the conflict sensitivity issues they had identified.

Table 1: Challenges for addressing tensions in Rakhine state

Perspectives from local actors	*Perspectives from international actors*
> Incoming Chief Minister will not have powers to control the military in Rakhine state	> Incoming Chief Minister will not have powers to control the military in Rakhine state
> Ongoing natural resource diversion without benefit to local communities	> Ongoing natural resource diversion without benefit to local communities
> Cultural differences between ethnic Rakhine and Muslim populations	> Cultural differences between ethnic Rakhine and Muslim populations
> Humanitarian system doesn't work to address, but rather exacerbates, conflict dynamics	> Humanitarian system and funding structures not conducive to acting in a conflict sensitive manner during a protracted crisis
> Lack of international agency consultation with ethnic Rakhine communities resulting in low understanding of the Rakhine context	> Low understanding by international agencies regarding conflict dynamics
> Controversy about ethnic designation for majority Muslim group; use of term "Rohingya"	> Insufficient information about conflict impacts on women and girls, inclusion of their voices and considerations in looking to next steps
> Complex landscape of actors, drivers, agendas; ethnic Rakhine community unsure which voices to listen to	> Lack of trust, communication and information between many actors
> Corruption and lack of rule of law	> Lack of/challenges to coordination with the Government
> Lack of education and analytical skills among the ethnic Rakhine, leading to rumors and vulnerability to manipulations	> Ongoing fears about staff security and organizational protection following March 2014
> Ongoing conflict between the AA and Myanmar Armed Forces	> Missed opportunities for better engaging local staff
> Ethnic Rakhine community perceive NLD as pro-Muslim	> Uncertainty about shifting aid and development funding landscape and operationalization
> Factionalism within state level political parties	
> Influence of political actors with hidden agendas	
> Local and international media messages pursuing political agendas	
> Lack of structures to support reconciliation processes	
> Low acceptance among ethnic Rakhine population of peacebuilding and dialogue activities	
> Lack of access to information to understand perspectives of Muslim population towards ethnic Rakhine	

Table 2: Opportunities for addressing tensions in Rakhine state

Perspectives from local actors	*Perspectives from international actors*
> Steps being made towards local and international agency collaboration	> Steps being made to engage local agencies, e.g. on disaster risk management
> Recognition that international agency presence in needed, particularly in case of natural disaster	> Increased contact between local and international agencies through 2015 flood response
> Increased international assistance for ethnic Rakhine communities	> International agency strategies increasingly recognize ethnic Rakhine needs and perceptions
> Some ethnic Rakhine support idea of education/capacity building support for Muslim population, so they can also better analyze conflict triggers before acting, lessen likelihood of extremism	> Engagement with Government increasing on some sectors
> Voices inciting tensions quieter in the post-election period	> Shifting aid and development landscape provides an opportunity to renegotiate donor approaches in Rakhine state
> Leaders' increased interest and initiative around dispute resolution, violence prevention activities within ethnic Rakhine communities	> New Government provides opportunity for improved international – Government collaboration
> Ethnic Rakhine community's increased awareness of manipulation, analyzing before acting	
> Expatriate staff behaviors, attitudes gradually improving	
> Some local agencies have been raising awareness with ethnic Rakhine communities on role and importance of international community in democratic transition	
> Some ethnic Rakhine support improved individual rights/dignity for the Muslim population, so long as political rights are not attached	

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