

Cyclical, Temporary, No Return Multiple Navigational Strategies of Displaced Persons from Myanmar

Alexander Horstmann, Markus Rudolf, Clara Schmitz-Pranghe

Abstract

Displaced persons in and from Myanmar employ a wide array of coping and navigational strategies to secure their livelihoods and to find physical protection. Placing these in the context of the security situation in Myanmar, the paper demonstrates that organised violence and related concerns for safety are not only the main cause of displacement, but constitute an important factor that continuously shapes livelihood options and strategies for those who find themselves in cycles of protracted violence and displacement. The array of strategies is situated between or beyond the classic paradigms promoted by international refugee organisations: return, local integration and resettlement. Beyond aid and non-aid related strategies, we observed such vital coping mechanisms as cyclical return movements, the establishment of transnational networks and webs, and the development of self-established infrastructure. Return and local integration are two options in a continuum of strategies comprising cyclical and temporary return processes, transnational networks and patterns of de facto local integration. The cases presented show that refugees weigh the risks of return in relation to their current situation. Decisive factors include security, access to legal documents, public services and infrastructure. Our research showed that any dichotomy that contrasts non-refugees as masters of their own fate as opposed to displaced persons as victims without agency is obsolete. The coping patterns of displaced persons are highly flexible and adaptive.

Keywords: Myanmar, displacement, coping strategies, cyclical return, transnational networks

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Introduction

The recent opening of Myanmar, the country's national elections in 2015 and the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with several ethnic armed movements raised hopes in the international community that Myanmar's protracted conflicts – and one of the world's worst protracted crises – could be settled in the near future. Accordingly, international policy changed: international sanctions were lifted and increased cooperation and development assistance were granted. This was based on the hope that the problem of displacement would fade away as affected persons returned to their home communities in Myanmar. This hope was soon to be terribly disappointed (Cheesman / Farrelly 2016).

The period from 2014–2018 has seen some of the most violent military atrocities against the Muslim Rohingyas in Arakan state, Western Myanmar, producing as many as 727,000 deeply traumatised new refugees, trapped either in overpopulated camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh or worse, in camps guarded by the Myanmar border police in Rakhine state without food and drinking water, medical help or educational facilities (Ocha 2018; Ware / Laoutides 2019; personal observation and interviews in the areas of Sittwe, Kyauktaw and Mrauk U in 2016). In northeastern Myanmar the breakdown of the ceasefire initiated some of the worst assaults against the Kachin, with the army using Chinese and Russian helicopters to drop bombs and chemical weapons. Like the Rohingyas, the predominantly Christian ethnic Kachin are fleeing killings, torture, rapes and other violations by the Burmese military. Internally displaced Kachin flee toward the Chinese border, but are not allowed to cross it, staying in makeshift camps in the forest or at the edges of Kachin's urban centre in Myitkyina. In both cases, the Myanmar military has prevented aid organisations from helping, threatening local groups such as the Kachin Baptist convention with imprisonment for helping refugees in rebel-controlled areas (Cheesman / Farrelly 2016; Sadan 2016; personal observation and interviews in Bahmo and Momauk area in 2016).

Moreover, the situation in the Shan states, Karen state, and Chin state remains highly volatile. Armed clashes as well as harassment of villagers continue up to the present. The ceasefires here are highly precarious and the newly formed Border Guard Forces are perceived by the villagers as a source of insecurity, extraction and corruption, not as peacemakers (Woods 2011; personal observation and interviews in Hpa-an, Kawkareik and Lashio areas in 2016).

This article assesses current displacement processes and the state of return movements against the backdrop of ongoing violence and persistent developmental challenges in Myanmar and scrutinises the strategies used by forcibly

displaced persons in Myanmar and Thailand to cope with these challenges and secure their livelihoods. The main question of this paper is how displaced persons respond to the challenges posed by physical and livelihood insecurity and which strategies have been actively used to navigate in the context of organised violence.¹

The Myanmar borderlands show many of the typical patterns ascribed to the concept of the frontier and contemporary projects of land acquisition (e.g. Geiger 2008). The frontier areas of Myanmar, where most of the minorities reside, have long been inaccessible to the state, but are increasingly being claimed by the military commanders of the Myanmar army and the different militia and ex-military leaders. These different violent actors compete for the benefits from the extraction of resources, the development of large infrastructural projects and the establishment of special economic zones. The area is opened up for capitalism, with some ex-military leaders getting rich on casinos, real estate and bribes. Special economic zones enable production at low cost and mostly without organised unions whereas the remaining villagers are vulnerable to eviction, land-grabbing and speculation. For the military as well as for various war entrepreneurs, the state of structural and actual violence on the ethnic frontier following the ceasefire with ethnic armies is beneficial to the extraction and accumulation of resources in lawless spaces – a state that has been aptly called “ceasefire capitalism” (Woods 2011).

Another explanation for the question of why Myanmar’s ethnic frontier areas have spiralled into cycles of war and violence after the military’s rejection of all claims for cultural autonomy in the hills (Sadan 2016) can be given with reference to Schetter and Korf. They show that many of the contested spaces in frontier areas today are conceptualised as spaces of exception (following Agamben 2004) and, in military eyes, as ungoverned spaces or ungoverned territory (Schetter / Korf 2012: 165). To enforce control of land in the frontier zones, the national army Tatmadaw thus considers it as its “national interest” to integrate those spaces into its dominion.² The presence of competing armed actors, extortion and ongoing violence provides the context in which (returning) migrants and refugees as well as internally displaced per-

1 In our understanding “organised violence” includes the “planned and co-ordinated application [or threat] of violence by social and political groups” (BICC 2015: 4). This refers not only to physical force and the threat of violent death or bodily harm or armed conflicts between two or more groups, but comprises all measures that any social collective comes up with in order to deal with the problem of physical violence. “Organized violence responds, in other words, to the need to organize violence in one way or another – to ensure predictability in social interactions and minimize the danger of any sudden, violent ruptures and thus is inherent in any kind of social order. This includes, for example, devising and implementing various social norms and institutions (e.g. treaties, laws, ‘killing taboo’) that determine when, where and by whom which kinds of violence may be exercised. Organized violence thus frequently entails the establishment of organizational bodies entitled to use force in certain circumstances (e.g. the police, the armed forces), the arming of these bodies (e.g. development and acquisition of weaponry) – as well as ways of controlling and curtailing them (e.g. discipline, accountability, oversight, arms control) (BICC forthcoming: 7).”

2 For details on governance, legitimacy, everyday life activities and strategies in conflict areas such as e.g. Karen state, see South 2010, Thawngmung 2008 and Thawngmung 2011.

sons try to navigate their everyday lives in the search for livelihoods and physical security (cf. Phan / Hull 2008).

Here, we use the term displaced person for all those who at a point of time have felt or feel compelled to leave their place of residence involuntarily. Thus, we neither adhere to the legally motivated, static differentiation between refugees and migrants and undocumented migrants, nor do we exclude internal displacement. Instead, we understand displacement and return as a process that is oftentimes not linear, but interrupted and sometimes characterised by cyclical movements and multiple displacements. Moreover, the legal status of people may change over time: categories might become blurred both in time and space; internally displaced persons (IDPs) might become refugees, refugees might become internally displaced during return, and refugees frequently leave the “temporary shelters” to become illegal migrant workers or even obtain official migrant worker status. We find educational migrants in the camps and, on the other hand, people who fled violence and conflict, who have not registered in the camps but have applied for migrant status instead or live and work as illegal migrants. Accordingly, though we recognise the consequences of different legal status for the situation of the individuals concerned, we do not adhere to the legally motivated differentiation between refugees, migrants, undocumented migrants or IDPs in this article. The concept of displaced persons enabled us to apply a transnational approach that places points of transition and commonalities that exist within this group, despite undisputable legal differences, at the centre of our research.

Roughly, one can differentiate three major groups of Burmese displaced persons. First, there are members of ethnic minorities who have been fleeing violence and the direct and indirect impacts of armed conflict in the eastern borderlands. In Thailand, ethnic Karen and Karenni mostly reside in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. They live as (undocumented) labour migrants or students in rural areas or the urban centres such as Mae Sot, or as refugees³ confined in one of the nine camps along the border. Also most ethnic Shan have the status of (undocumented) migrants. There is, however, a small informal Shan camp north of Chiang Mai (Kuang Jor) where those who did not qualify for refuge in the nine official camps are tolerated.

Many of those who did not manage to cross the border and are internally displaced within Myanmar are living in spontaneous shelters, camps, church or temple compounds, or with local hosts. Those who stay in areas administered by ethnic armed groups such as the KNU (Karen National Union) get assistance through the respective organisations – in this case the Karen Office

3 Thailand is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or its protocol. Hence, displaced persons from Myanmar are not recognised as refugees but are usually referred to as “displaced people escaping from fighting”. Confined in nine so-called “temporary shelters” in the border region with Myanmar, they are neither allowed to leave the camps nor to take up work.

of Relief and Development and The Border Consortium (TBC) across the border. In Karenni and Mon State most IDPs stay in areas controlled by the Karenni Army between Loikaw and the Thai border, or by the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) close to the Three Pagodas Pass to Thailand. In addition, we find a number of immobile IDPs in the eastern border areas. Especially in Kachin and Northern Shan state, civilians close to the front line are stuck due to financial problems, lack of access to alternative livelihoods or any options of safe haven. As they have been unable to escape the threats permanently, they usually flee to the nearby forest overnight or for several days and hide out there. This strategy has the advantage that they do not lose access to their livelihoods. If they leave, they will not be allowed to return – as these areas have been declared unsafe for return by the army. A second important group of displaced persons are the Rohingya, who have been victims of what the UN considers ethnic cleansing. Thirdly, there are those who have faced political persecution and repressions.

The focus of this paper is on displaced ethnic minorities from the eastern borderlands of Myanmar within the country and in Thailand. For decades, the Burmese army has imposed a permanent state of war on the villagers, in the hope of cutting support for ethnic armed movements. Ethnic armed movements, on the other hand, have recruited from the ethnic households and taxed ethnic minority villagers, implicitly accepting the suffering of the villagers. But even in a state of extended crisis, people have to go on with their daily lives, organising food, access to health care and education or simply upholding family and friendship or religious or business networks. Lubkemann (2007), for example, argues that we need a fresh approach, to view war as normality rather than exceptional disruption, as conflicts span decades and generations. This normality of war has shaped social relations and the culture of war. Often the older people have to stay behind in unbearable conditions, while the younger seek fresh life perspectives. Their mobility and earnings often keep households afloat in multiple spaces. “Home”, hence, is relative to context, and mobility is crucial for navigating the difficult circumstances.⁴ While mobility allows for the possibility to reconstruct or establish new livelihoods and networks and to continue everyday family life, forced immobility shrinks spaces of opportunities.

4 For a long time, mobility of refugees and other migrants has been perceived as a linear, unidirectional and predictable process. This stance in academia has changed only slowly, recently and with regard to migration towards the global South (e.g. Benezet / Zetter 2015, Kuschminder 2017, Mallett / Hagen-Zanker 2018). By focusing in this paper on the Thai-Myanmar context, we want to contribute to this debate by highlighting that protracted displacement is much less static and fixed and more dynamic than commonly perceived and serves as a mayor livelihood strategy of displaced persons. For an in-depth discussion of the concept of mobility see Etzold et al. 2019: 25.

Methodological Approach

The article is based on qualitative research carried out by Schmitz-Pranghe and Rudolf in various locations in Thailand and Myanmar between July 2016 and February 2018. Research sites encompassed both urban and rural settings in Kachin, Shan, Kayin, Mon and Rakhine states and Yangon in Myanmar, as well as Mae Hong Son, Tak, Chumphon and Ranong provinces and Bangkok in Thailand. Methods included on-the-spot observations, focus group discussions and in-depth qualitative narrative interviews with displaced persons, members of the host communities, experts, international humanitarian and development actors, local civil society organisations dealing with the topic of displacement and human rights, representatives of refugees and IDPs, (former) combatants of ethnic armed organisations, and political organisations in Thailand and Myanmar. Armed actors proved to play an important role in both return and (re-)integration processes.

In total, over 200 interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Thailand and Myanmar, in refugee / IDP camps and in both rural and urban contexts. Additionally, four research assistants, who had been recruited, trained and supervised, conducted 39 individual interviews plus three focus group interviews with displaced persons and labour migrants. To take into account developments in the highly dynamic context of displacement within and from Myanmar, two of the research assistants engaged in longitudinal field research enabling us to continuously update results.

Though the research does not claim to be representative, it depicts the diversity of displaced persons from and in Myanmar to a large degree. Differences in the ethnic background, gender and age of respondents, diverse livelihood contexts in- and off-camp and the different legal status of the displaced (e.g. refugees, labour migrants, stateless and undocumented persons) were taken into account throughout the research process. Regarding ethnicity, we focused on Burmese minorities, with the Shan, Karen and Kachin as the most prominent cases, but also including Rohingya, Karenni and Mon in our approach. To prevent blind spots, representatives of other ethnic minorities such as the Chin and Rakhine were consulted in expert interviews. Methods and results were discussed with Thai and Burmese counterparts in order to achieve a participatory approach. From the elaboration of specific questions to the interpretation of answers we strove for unbiased triangulation and intercultural sensitivity (e.g. through a kick-off workshop in Bangkok). Triangulation of all interview data was complemented with the analysis of country-specific secondary data and relevant literature. Finally, a workshop in Yangon ensured that preliminary results were made available to and commented on by our partners – without whom this work would not have been possible.

Coping strategies of displaced persons

Displaced persons have developed a variety of strategies to secure and to optimise their livelihood beyond return or full local integration. These patterns of *de facto* integration have not yet received much attention despite representing everyday practices for displaced persons around the globe (Lubkemann 2007).⁵

People in Myanmar had high hopes for Myanmar's re-establishment of the "rule of law" in the post-2010 "transition to liberal democracy" (Cheesman / Farrelly 2016). One component of this political transition is the formalisation of labour and the transition of workers from casual to formal labour, protected by formal contracts and unionisation. Even today, precarious, dangerous and exploitative labour relations without formal protection or guarantee of minimum wages continue in the domains such as road building, mining, construction and the service sector (Campbell 2019: 68). The transition to more regulated employment is thus particularly relevant for returning migrants, who frequently find work in the volatile and weakly protected frontier zones, such as in the Shan or Kachin states, where large investments are being made in infrastructure. The jobs are sometimes so poorly paid that the brokers bring in migrants from even more destitute regions to work on road construction.

Navigational strategies evolve against the backdrop of ongoing conflict in Myanmar and specific legal and political framework conditions in Myanmar and Thailand. An important coordination point is the legal status of displaced persons. Field research in Myanmar and Thailand showed that, depending on the circumstances, status as a refugee or an IDP in contrast to that of a(n) (undocumented) migrant can be either beneficial or detrimental in the quest to regain access to housing, land, property, services and integration. The status fosters or obstructs access and thereby frames the options. Accordingly, individuals try to claim or refuse labels within the range of choices that they have.

Some navigational strategies are based on the explicit reference to a displacement status. Karen and Karenni in particular use their UNHCR identification papers to access food rations, education or health care in the camps. A majority of Burmese in Thailand do not have the opportunity to gain recognition as displaced persons and remain undocumented migrant workers against their will. Some keep trying to acquire legal residence and work permits as migrant workers. But another coping strategy is to stay below the radar of any authorities and remain and work in Thailand's informal sector.

One of the main findings of our research is that violently displaced people shift in and out of refugee status. For example, a returnee to Myanmar reported keeping his UNHCR identification papers in order to safeguard the option

5 A notable exception is local scholarship on the blending of Theravada Buddhist Karen and Shan villagers into mainstream Thai rural and urban societies (Rangkla 2013).

to return to the Thai camps when necessary (interview with 19-year-old Karen college student, Hpa-an, September 2017) and thus to maintain access to health care, food provision, job markets, education or resettlement opportunities. Due to the dramatic cut in food rations in recent years, many people who register in the refugee camps eke out a living in rural Myanmar and return to the camps only to stay registered. Young people who stay in areas of fragile ceasefires, backed by the ethnic armed movement, go to the refugee camps to gain an education, returning to the village for the rice harvest. Thus, in order to understand the strategies for coping with displacement, it is necessary to assess a variety of interrelated factors – the options to access land, work, rights, services and protection – in addition to the status attributed to displaced persons.

Access to livelihoods / labour

Many residents of the ethnic borderlands of Myanmar's peripheral areas have been displaced or have migrated to neighbouring countries and have tried to gain a new foothold elsewhere: Karen and Shan people have migrated to Thailand, Kachin people to Northeast India, and Chin people to Mizoram, India. Some of these people have been very innovative, establishing themselves as traders in Yunnan, Southwest China, trading jade, for example (Song 2017). Chinese Muslims from Myanmar have specialised in the jade business, setting up stores in provincial towns of neighbouring Yunnan province in Southwest China (Egreteau 2015). Others join motorcycle repair shops or work in industries and in the informal sector. Along the way, many have collected valuable experience in contacting brokers and middlemen, taking out loans, renting warehouse spaces, importing used cars and bicycles, repairing broken cell-phones, etc. These experiences, as well as savings, have enabled some entrepreneurial people who have returned to the border region to open start-up companies, to buy and rent out minibuses, tractors and cars, to import and export commodities, such as used cars, to buy or speculate on land, to rent out warehouses, to open car repair shops, etc. Many start-ups have opened in urban centres, especially in border towns, such as booming Myawaddy in Eastern Myanmar, just across from Mae Sot on the Thai/Myanmar border. Some succeed, but the border trade involves high risks and not a few end up in debt.

Connections to humanitarian organisations, activist groups and religious NGOs and church networks have been very helpful for many return migrants, including those who lost everything in their home villages. Young Karen people who picked up English in faith-based schools or schools in refugee camps constitute a reliable labour force for the international humanitarian organisations that need to hire local employees. Christian church networks and activist groups that were active in missionary work are also eager to hire locals for

their humanitarian projects, projects that target the poor and downtrodden (Horstmann 2015).

However, the income of a majority of displaced persons in ethnic borderlands in Myanmar depends on agriculture. Access to land as a basis of subsistence is therefore crucial. Large infrastructure projects such as road building, the Deep Seaport in Dawei or hydro-electric power projects on the rivers present new threats to the livelihood of villagers, many of whom do not hold land titles, nor even identity papers. Moreover, for young people who have been out of their ancestral villages for decades, subsistence agriculture no longer provides a promising future. Many seek out a new livelihood in Thailand, with better opportunities for income, education and healthcare. Burmese migrants mostly work as agricultural workers on plantations or as unskilled labour in sweatshops and factories. Many Karen villagers along the long border with Thailand work seasonally in Thailand, in the factories or as maids in Thai urban middle-class households. They accept unfavourable working conditions and low wages. Mae Sot's factories in the special economic zone heavily rely on migrant labour, have unsafe working conditions and pay very low wages or, sometimes, no wages at all (Campbell 2018).

Conditions in Myanmar under "ceasefire capitalism" remain difficult too. Various displaced communities that live next to their original settlements reported that the best chunks of land along the main streets had been confiscated and never returned (Northern Shan State). Many areas occupied by the Tatmadaw are situated around or close to mines. Moreover, the army is increasingly occupying land in the border area. "[There] they claim to [...] secure the border. But in my opinion, they want to get a foot in the door of the drug traffic," an NGO employee (working in Lashio, September 2016) commented. Returnees and IDPs from ethnic minorities face extortion, forced labour, embezzlement and corruption. Income opportunities are often limited by the lack of infrastructure. In Shan State locals recounted: "The transport routes are blocked by the military. We risk either paying a bribe or losing our products." Respondents also feared being recruited as porters for the military. This, in turn, fosters the choice of farmers to cultivate the poppy. "It can easily be transported on less frequented paths and the price is good" (Shan male, Kuang Jor, July 2016).

Relation of encampment and dependency

Though a majority of displaced persons in the Thai camps and Burmese IDP camps depend greatly on international aid, many refugees have been seeking to combine international aid provisions in the camps with other livelihood strategies: "Usually, the men leave the camp in the rainy season for three or four months and come back only once a month to get registered and to receive

their rations” (Karen refugee, Mae La, July 2016). Even though this has long been a pattern, the rate of such cases has increased lately due to the reduced food rations: NGO staff reported that they had been wondering why young people were not available for farming training courses during the holidays until they discovered that they were farming their fields on the other side of the border. Despite the risks involved, the refugees had to supplement the rations that had been reduced by international organisations due to decreasing humanitarian funding for the region (all camps on the Thai side). Similar cases have been encountered among IDPs in disputed areas.

The modes of livelihood of the Burmese DPs have considerably changed over time. A longitudinal fieldwork study conducted by Lee (2014) showed that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) did not guarantee any institutional support for the refugees nor did it interfere in the NGOs’ activities providing food and shelter or in the refugees’ livelihood activities until 1995. However, between 1995 and 2005, the RTG changed its stance towards refugees considerably – mainly due to heightened border security concerns resulting from the collapse of Karen strongholds and cross-border attacks by Burmese army and DKBO forces. It initiated a policy of “control” and “regulation” (Lee 2014: 469). 30 camps were merged into 12 camps, guard forces were strengthened, camps fenced and check points established. This severely restricted the refugees’ mobility and livelihood opportunities. While until 1995 INGOs supplied only 50% of the food needs of the refugees, now INGOs provided 100% of the food needs of the refugees (*ibid.*: 470).

The refugees, in other words, became completely reliant on external food aid. The years 2005 to 2011 were again marked by a shift in the RTG’s perspective on refugees: from being perceived as a security risk they became a useful economic resource. In 2004, Mae Sot and its surroundings were declared a special economic zone. The RTG approved skills training projects designed to produce household income and improve livelihood and employment opportunities and agreed to support education in the camps by setting up learning centres with a focus on teaching the Thai language. In 2007, Thailand issued identity cards to some 85,000 refugees in the camps (Lee 2014: 472, Betts / Loescher 2011, Loescher / Milner 2008). Today, following the military coup of 2014, confinement policies are still in place and regulations are more strictly enforced.

Inside the shelters for refugees, sewing and weaving are important income-generating activities. In addition, different NGOs run diverse livelihood projects, such as raising small animals and small-scale agricultural activities, as for example in Karen, Karenni and Kachin camps. Another successful livelihood strategy that has evolved in the refugee camps during the last decades of humanitarian action is to obtain rare employment with one of the many INGOs. All organisations heavily depend on camp staff to keep their pro-

grammes running. This offers refugees some income and the opportunity to gain important language and professional skills. These skills, in turn, serve them when they decide to leave the camps and work as either labour migrants or as undocumented migrants in Thai communities or upon their return to Myanmar. Most cases that we encountered during fieldwork where returnees had found jobs were indeed reported to be either with INGOs or as teachers who returned to work with their respective ethnic communities.

The main problem for migrants in Thailand remains their lack of recognition as refugees and their illegalisation by the governments of both Myanmar and Thailand. The Thai government mainly resorts to the marker of ethnicity to distinguish between refugees (Karen) and illegal migrants (Shan). The Shan have been using their cultural capital as Theravada Buddhists and resemblance to the ethnic Thai to blend into mainstream Northern Thai society. They work, for example, in Chiang Mai as cleaners, in construction, as taxi drivers, in local markets, in the red-light district and in NGOs. Around 200,000 Shan people are making a living in Chiang Mai, and sending remittances to the elderly and children back in Shan state. Buddhist Karen have also often been denied refugee status, as the camps have been dominated by Christians. Buddhist Karen villagers have thus been trying to remain under the radar of the Thai police by blending into Thai Karen villages, Mae Sot and even Bangkok (Rangkla 213).

Access to basic services

In Myanmar, members of ethnic minorities lament the lack of access to health care and education in their native tongue as well as the poor quality or high expenditures for both. The ethnic minorities feel that they are not only on the periphery in a geographical sense, but also with regard to basic services. De-nounced as hill tribes, montagnards or highlanders, many of the ethnic minorities have been discriminated against by the respective majorities throughout South East Asia. The groups are quite diverse but they are united by the fact they have been excluded on multiple levels from state services (Scott 2009, Michaud 2013, Formoso 2010, Winland 1992, Smith 2005, Toyota 2005, Laungaramsri 2014). In Myanmar, they are foremost excluded from Burmese education by their vernacular. The ability to speak Burmese is required as a *sine qua non* in the school system, even though many non-Bamar are not able to understand it. This contributes to the widely shared impression of ethnic minorities that the current ethnocentric regime disadvantages them and that the system represents a policy of cultural hegemony (Walton 2013). The demand for cultural autonomy and the fear of the cultural hegemony of Bamar culture has, for example, been a major driver of resistance among all ethnic armed groups (EAGs). By deliberately pursuing an agenda of resistance, eth-

nic educational policies used to run counter to the official Burmese curriculum. The negative result of this system has been that the chances to access education have, in fact, been traditionally slim for ethnic minorities (Lall / South 2014).

The lack of access to basic services such as health and education for displaced persons has led to a multitude of responses from both affected persons and international aid organisations in Myanmar and Thailand. These responses show, on the one hand, how local coping strategies evolve in interrelation with external aid and, on the other hand, how this combination influences future trajectories in novel directions. For years, health care in the periphery has only been provided by non-state actors (Horstmann 2017, 2018; McCarthy 2016). Also in Thailand, undocumented migrants often cannot access health services. The Mae Tao Clinic near Mae Sot is an example of how persons affected by displacement manage to help themselves. It was founded by a Myanmar refugee and offers medical treatment for both labour migrants and undocumented migrants free of charge. Despite the fact that the Mae Tao clinic has received considerable international recognition, it is struggling with decreasing funding.

With regard to access to education for displaced persons from and in Myanmar, missionaries and churches have played a strategic role. Ethnic armed groups and other community-based providers have established ethnic basic education providers (EBEPs) throughout their areas of influence – including camps (Davis / Jolliffe 2016). The EBEP education often exceeds the quality of national schools. In Thailand, multiple migrant schools have been set up by Burmese over the years, which partly receive support from international NGOs.

The example of education also shows how displaced persons compare and combine benefits on the one hand and how this, on the other hand, influences individual trajectories across borders. Due to the considerably positive reputation of the migrant schools, some students who would have the chance to attend Thai schools opt deliberately for migrant schools. Mae La camp is said to host approximately 3,000 boarding students. In many cases parents stay in Myanmar, while children live with relatives in the camps or in the boarding houses, visiting their parents during summer break. Camp staff in Thailand recounted that nowadays most of the newcomers are such unaccompanied students. In contrast to families that have stayed in the camp for decades they are more likely to return to Myanmar.

The change in individual options related to displacement has accelerated social change. Especially young refugees, who receive a relatively good education in the camps and the migrant schools, have a different perspective than previous generations or more isolated groups with regard to livelihood activities. The exposure to new options, especially as transmitted through education, is a driver that pulls and pushes people in various directions. On the one

hand well-trained persons are returning; on the other hand, especially in the rural and ethnically controlled areas, people are pushed to camps due to the lack of educational possibilities in Myanmar.

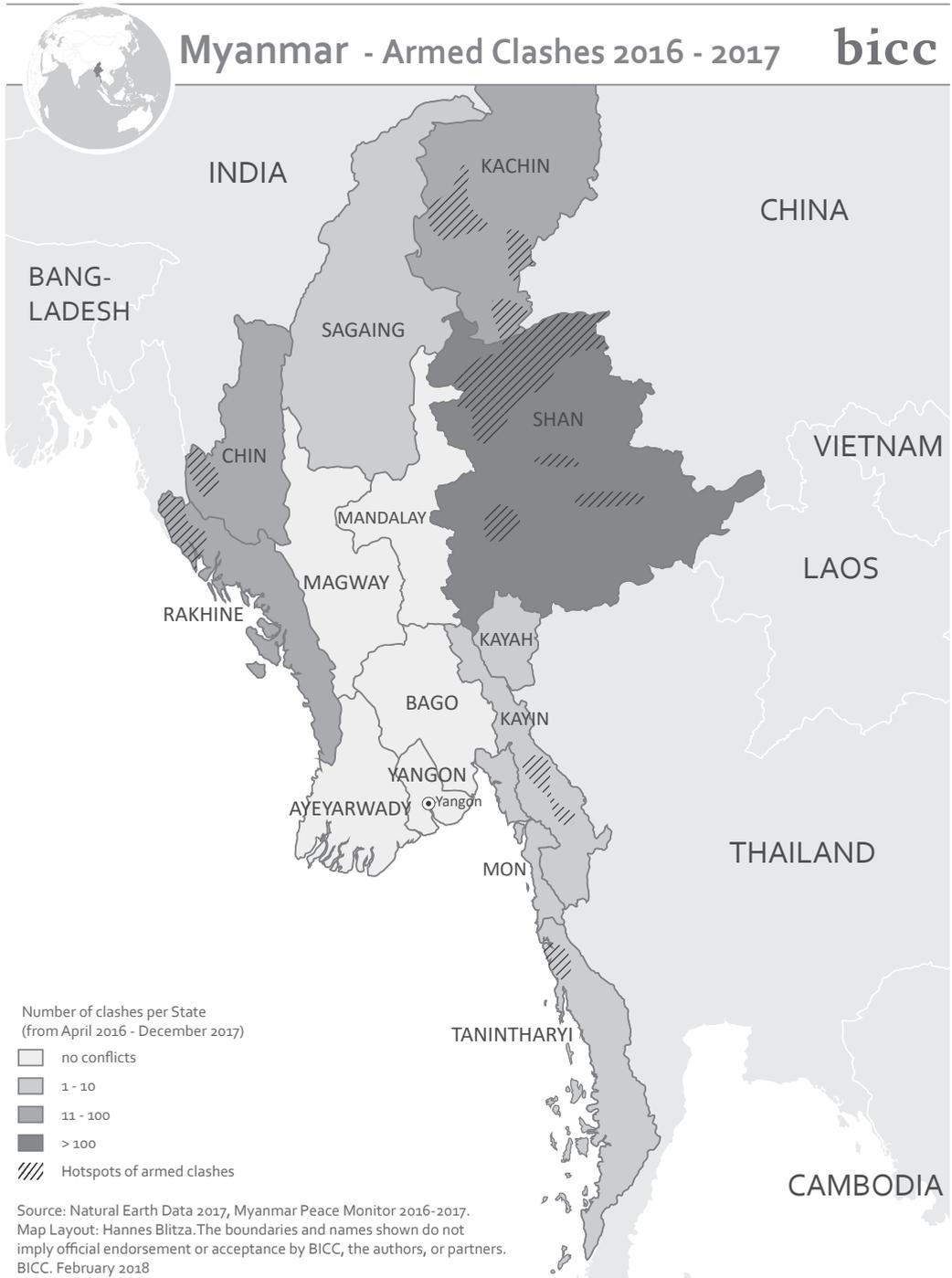
Access to protection

Since the democratic elections, battles have stepped up again and intensified in the border region. “We hear about the peace talks, but we see something different. There are soldiers, air raids, mines,” people in IDP camps in Kachin explained (interview in August 2016). Even where, in contrast to Kachin, peace talks are effectively in place, action taken by the army is anything but trust building: “In my area the military told the ethnic armed group: you misunderstood. When we said we will pull back from this area we meant that we now work together. We will both control the area. We cannot and we will not go back” (interview in Southern Shan State, July 2016). Churches and monasteries are among the most important places of protection for vulnerable villagers. They have established infrastructure, schools and public health facilities and often provide vital sanctuary.

On a micro level it is often difficult to see any impact of the political transition and ongoing peace talks. Quite the contrary: in Northern Shan State the number of ethnic armed groups, and those forcibly drafted into their ranks, has been steadily rising due to the divide-and-rule tactics of the army. Minefields remain in place and chances for demining are slim (interviews around Lashio, September 2016). The continuous presence of EAGs worries families with young males in particular. Forced draft into EAGs has been a common strategy among the armed actors and is still both an important cause of displacement and a hindrance to return. A former child soldier with KNU and DKBA⁶ stated that he still fears forced recruitment upon return to Karen state (interview with Karen student, Chiang Mai, July 2016). In another case an interviewee in Northern Shan State explained that his father had taken his place and was subsequently killed. To this day young men are sent to monasteries to avoid forced recruitment, such as the brothers of the orphaned interviewee.

6 Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (now Democratic Karen Benevolent Army).

Map 1: Ongoing armed conflicts in Myanmar, 2016–2017



Source: Hannes Blitza, Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC)

Access to rights

Another main obstacle to both *de jure* and *de facto* reintegration of DPs and returnees is the frequent lack of documents. In terms of access to legal and political representation, birth certificates and identification cards, in particular, are necessary. In conflict-affected areas, in areas controlled by EAG or in isolated places like the Southern Tanintharyi Region, access to identity documents has been restricted for ethnic minorities. According to an NGO that has stepped in with mobile registration offices to provide Myanmar citizens with legal documents, eleven million persons in Myanmar lack official identification. For example, most of the elderly Shan do not have official Burmese papers and, unable to speak Burmese, they are not able to apply for them (interview with community leader, Kuang Jor, 14 July 2016). IDPs and other vulnerable groups are especially affected by this lack of papers: “Without an official ID card, people cannot access medical services, open a bank account, go to school or travel anywhere, and they can be arrested at any time,” the Norwegian Refugee Council explains in a recent report (Jenssen 2017).

The high number of people without citizenship or legal papers is a logical consequence of the Myanmar military junta’s triple strategy to simultaneously promote (i) ethnic division, (ii) religious nationalism and (iii) territorial integrity/unity over the last decades (cf. Kipgen 2017). Legal obstacles to obtaining papers have been used systematically as a means to divide and rule (IRIN 2016). Restructuring the legal framework of citizenship had already been identified as one of the major challenges before transition started (Lall 2014: 10 ff.); experts explicitly pointed out that the combination of religious nationalism and citizenship could alienate non-Buddhist groups and divide the nation (*ibid.*: 42 ff.).⁷ Various interviews that we conducted in 2016 showed that Rohingya and other Muslims throughout Myanmar have been denied citizenship (interviews August–September 2016; also Green et al. 2015: 56ff.). The history of scapegoating Muslims is still vivid and has driven many of them into exile (cf. Van Klinken / Aung 2017, McCarthy / Menager 2017).

In exile the problems related to the lack of documents continue. As a consequence of the difficulties in obtaining papers inside their country of origin, many displaced persons and migrants lack IDs, residence permits, birth certificates and work permits. Burmese birth certificates or IDs are a requirement for applying as a migrant worker. The difficulties in obtaining these back in Myanmar include funds for travel procedures and the fact that many DPs come from areas under the control of an Ethnic Armed Group. Even those who have papers from Myanmar face bureaucratic and financial hurdles. Thai

7 The population in Myanmar is far from homogeneous. Many interethnic marriages could be observed and family genealogies include various nationalities and ethnicities. Cases where married couples, or parents and children, speak different languages were frequent. The number of people that find it hard to reconcile a policy of purity with their personal history is therefore high – especially in the border areas.

IDs are expensive (around 10,000 Baht according to a Shan male, Kuang Jor, July 2016). Many migrants and refugees prefer to get by without them and to mingle in with communities with similar ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds in Thailand.

Access to health services, formal employment, housing and land in Thailand nevertheless often remains limited. As one refugee noted “even the 10-year ID provides only limited permission. Like [you] can only rent a house, [but] can’t buy or build your own house. You can buy only [a] motorbike, not [a] car yet. As I have already decided to continue staying here, I need to get [an] opportunity to own a house and other things that I need. If I get a Thai ID, I will also try to earn possessions for the future of my son” (interview with Karen refugee, Mae Sot, 16 July 2016). Without proper documents, movement is restricted. Police checkpoints at entry points into provincial capitals, as on the borders of provinces adjacent to Myanmar (e.g. Mae Sot, Ranong), are common and target non-nationals.

Access to social inclusion: return movements and translocal networks

Despite all the bureaucratic hindrances, in the border areas, especially on the village level, a certain degree of “de facto local” integration seems to be possible. However, the level of integration into Thai society very much differs depending on ethno-linguistic commonalities between the displaced and local host communities. This is exemplified by the Karen and Shan communities. In western Thailand, the porous border to Myanmar and the existence of a Thai Karen community facilitates de facto local integration. Numerous persons from ethnic groups on the other side of the border have been informally integrated into the host communities for decades. Many displaced Karen still settle today in Thai Karen villages on the border. There, it is reportedly easier for Karen people to integrate locally, even to find a spouse, while integration in the city without a Thai ID and language skills is said to be much more difficult (interview with female Karen and representative of DCA, Chiang Mai, July 2016).

DPs usually assess the risks and benefits of different options – including return – carefully and on their own behalf. Instances of spontaneous return demonstrate this clearly (UNHCR 2017a). In general, there are several major obstacles to sustainable return. Firstly, refugees are often not consulted beforehand when decisions are made to repatriate them. “We were told that a deal had been struck, that we could go back, and that our houses had been built without anybody asking us before” (anonymous interview, Northern Thailand, July 2016). In other words: the community was not involved in the process and had neither chosen the site, nor verified the commitment of the

armed groups. As they did not share the assessment of the NGO that had initiated the return process and built the houses – that the new site was suitable and safe – they did not return. Secondly, the legal access to land is unclear.⁸ Nobody is certain that the people who have acquired land and access to resources thanks to the displacement are willing to give it up. Thirdly, trust in the NCA is low and long-term prospects for peace seem dubious. Many therefore prefer to stick to what they consider safe options.

Burmese refugees fear discrimination in the event of their future return. Those who stayed behind see refugees as “[...] lazy, reliant on other people, uneducated and unable to work like them. So, there will be some argument among refugees and local people in Myanmar” (focus group interview with young refugees, Nu Po camp, August 2016). Another Karen college student stated:

If we go back to Myanmar, we will surely face discrimination among local people against us. Currently, some people from my village [...] think refugees are bad people because refugees are those who are against the country. So that there are wars because of refugees. We are rebels and they stare like we are bad men (focus group discussion with Karen junior college students, Umpiem Camp, July 2016).

In addition to those fears everyday trials of a seemingly less problematic nature play an important role. “I did not know where to go, I did not know anybody or anything about the place,” a young refugee recounted his visit in his parent’s village of origin in Myanmar (Mae Sot, August 2016). Many other refugees who were either born or raised in exile recounted similar experiences about different behaviours, different ways of relating socially and different living standards on the other side of the border. Their social capital and their networks in Myanmar are therefore insufficient. Furthermore, there are different perceptions and related expectations of life in exile: the people who stayed feel that they have suffered and endured more than those who allegedly abandoned their homes, whereas the refugees see it precisely the other way round. Practically this means that returnees often do struggle to gain the support they expected from their villages of origin and vice versa (interviews in Chiang Mai, July and September 2016).

Well aware of the obstacles to return with regard to the persisting conflict in Myanmar and the lack of livelihood opportunities, many displaced Burmese thus view return as one, but not necessarily the favoured, option. “We are only guests here [in Thailand] and have to go whenever asked to,” a Karenni representative explained, “but we cannot go now. Maybe in 30 years.” Asked about the advantages and disadvantages of being a camp resident compared to a legal work migrant the same person answered: “We cannot become

8 For those returnees who manage to acquire land for cultivation there are significant differences regarding legal entitlements in Myanmar. While the KNU for example issues land titles (ownership of the land), the government only issues permission to use the land (interview with representative of the CIDKP, Mae Sot, July 2016; for the situation of Karen IDPs see Hull 2009).

migrants, because they can be sent back whenever their permit expires” (Ban Mai Nai Soi, August 2016). What the representative was referring to was the principle of non-refoulement, which derives from the 1951 Refugee Convention and forbids a state from returning refugees to a place where they would face persecution.⁹ This example shows that DPs are well aware of the rights, restrictions and opportunities – access to aid, resettlement, work, etc. – that are connected to different statuses. The basic lesson DPs have learnt after multiple displacements is that you have to expand your options and be prepared for any eventuality.

For a long time Burmese migrants and displaced persons from the periphery have crossed the border to search for job opportunities, economic and social purposes, to flee persecution and violent conflict, and to find better health care and education. The border between Myanmar and Thailand has for a long time been less of a dividing line than a resource in the everyday practices of those communities and remains highly porous. Crossing the green border via motorboat, without any passport or visa control, is easy. In Mae Sot, for example, boats cross the Mo river every minute at peak times to bring people and goods from one side to the other. Better-off Burmese cross the border for one-day shopping trips. Against the background of substantial obstacles to local integration for DPs in Thailand and to their reintegration in Myanmar, due to the uncertain future of the ceasefire processes and persisting economic hardship, it is crucial especially for DPs to have a variety of alternative livelihood options available. The establishment of translocal livelihoods,¹⁰ moving back and forth as well as partially returning, has evolved as an important coping strategy (Aung 2014).

A study by the Jesuit priest Vinai Boonlue confirms that young and old Karen have been navigating back and forth along the Myanmar border with Thailand, and that their struggle for survival involves constant movement (Boonlue 2015). Vinai observes that the displaced rarely stay in fixed places but are constantly on the move. They live neither in their home community nor in a fixed place abroad in Thailand, but rather in translocal life-worlds, tied together by specific place-knots (Saxer 2017) such as, for the Karen, the border, the refugee camp, urban Mae Sot in northwestern Thailand and, as a consequence of large-scale resettlements, in urban districts abroad such as in

9 Though Thailand is not a signatory to the Convention, non-refoulement is considered to be customary international law.

10 Our understanding of translocal livelihoods is based on the concept of transnationalism that describes transnational migration as “the process by which immigrants form and sustain simultaneous multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Glick Schiller et al. 1995: 48). In contrast to the concept of transnationalism the concept of translocality evades “methodological nationalism” (Glick Schiller 2007: 7).

Sheffield, St. Paul and Toronto.¹¹ Family-splitting and cyclical returns are typical strategies of families whose members are spread over large distances. Thus, kinship ties continue to play a crucial role, but in innovative ways.

Long-term migrants who earn incomes through work as cleaners, construction or agricultural workers, factory workers, or as employees in international NGOs or church ministries invest money in the education and social mobility of their sisters and brothers, or in the health and welfare of their parents. Burmese children attend migrant schools or camp schools cross the border, or stay in boarding houses and go back to their families in Myanmar in the summer break, as mentioned above. The downside of sending unaccompanied children to school is that this often increases the children's vulnerability, as caretakers belong to a variety of actors with different motivations and agendas. It is not only pupils who travel back and forth. Quite frequently those in the camps travel regularly back to their communities of origin to meet their relatives and to participate in the harvest. These trips also help them to defend possible property rights back in Myanmar and to stay informed about the situation back home. Such trips also clearly illustrate that – despite confinement policies and precarious living conditions – close linkages exist across both sides of the Thailand-Burma border (Lee 2012).

However, the option of movement is not the same for all displaced persons. Besides the ones who cannot afford to travel or those who are hindered by security constraints, age or health problems, political activists who have not been resettled are particularly restricted with regard to visits or financial remittances. These persons often fear difficulties with the Burmese authorities and explicitly ask their exiled relatives not to return (interview with KRC¹² representative, Mae Sot, July 2016). Furthermore, there are those who have already returned to Myanmar but refrain from repatriating to their village of origin: “They are scared of me because they don't want to be in trouble because of me and I don't want to give them trouble and put them in danger, too” (interview with 54 year old Burmese, South Dagon, July 2017).

Motives for moving are, in sum, complex. Rather than finding neatly separated realities of refuge and return, our research revealed a high level of interwoven in-between layers. More research on such translocality and cyclical return movements is needed. Such movements are empirically of greater significance than permanent return or facilitated repatriation. DPs have experienced the fact that it is vital to maintain multiple access points to health care,

11 In 2006, IOM and UNHCR started one of the largest resettlement programmes in their history, and since 2005, more than 100,000 refugees from Myanmar (and a small number from other countries) have been resettled from Thailand, mainly to the United States, Canada and Australia (Loescher / Millner 2008: 318; Chantavanich / Kamonpetch 2017).

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food provisions, job markets, education or resettlement opportunities, etc.¹³ They have developed strategies of family or community separations, that are, like seasonal internal labour migration, not solely correlated with armed conflict. Little is known, finally, about immobility, i.e. when communities are forced by armed groups to stay in a restricted area. More investigations into such cases – that are not visible on the radar of most aid organisations – are needed to better understand and distinguish causes, forms and long-term impacts of violent conflict.

Summary

This paper has described a wide array of coping strategies applied by displaced persons in and from Myanmar in order to secure their livelihoods and to obtain physical protection. Placing them into the context of organised violence, the paper shows that organised violence is not only a main cause of displacement, but is an important factor that continuously shapes livelihood options and strategies of people who find themselves in cycles of protracted displacement.

The wide array of identified navigational strategies of displaced persons can be situated in between or beyond the three classical solutions promoted by international refugee regimes (return, local integration and resettlement). Beyond aid and non-aid related strategies we observed (cyclical) return movements and the establishment of translocal networks, as well as the establishment and institutionalisation of self-organised infrastructure, to be vital coping mechanisms. Return and local integration (and probably resettlement) should thus be considered neither as an exhaustive list of alternatives nor as completely unconnected approaches. They are rather two options in a continuum of strategies comprising cyclical and temporary return processes, transnational networks and patterns of de facto local integration.

The role of risk-benefit considerations for decisions on return

In a focus group discussion with college students in Nu Po camp, July 2016 the following concerns were raised:

13 DPs stressed their wish to stay independent in their decision to return: “I heard bad news about those who return ... That’s why I’m returning on my own. If I come back with a repatriation programme, there will be a lot of procedures and restrictions that we are required to follow. They will give you money but there will be monitoring and evaluation and that undermines my freedom [...]. I want to be a free person with no restrictions [...]. People will call you to evaluate you [...]. I don’t like to be controlled. If the government could provide assistance – financially and mental health programmes – for those who return, it would be good. But now, they are asking too many questions and our freedom will be undermined” (Burmese returnee from Mae La Camp, South Dagon, May 2017). Recently intensified battles and the low trust in the peace process make this assessment appear sound.

If we go back, we don't have cash to go hospital [...] Do we have to be refugees again to return into Thailand? [...] We don't have Myanmar IDs and some refugees lost them or they were burned during war in their villages. Without ID we will probably face difficulty travelling to other regions.

Displaced persons from and in Myanmar weigh the risks of return in comparison to their current situation. Decisive factors concern security, access to legal documents, public services and infrastructure. The lack of infrastructure is directly related to security concerns:

We [are] still afraid of the Burmese military. If war comes again, how should we ask for help, communicate and spread news to the media without phone or internet lines [...]. For travelling, our land and regions are not developed yet with roads and bridges, we worry for one thing that if we need to go to the town or countryside, or to the Thai-Burma border in emergency cases, it will be very difficult to travel" (focus group discussion, Umpiem Mai Camp, July 2016).

In addition, decreasing prospects for resettlement, the general uncertainty about the future of the camps, fear of forced return, and the prospect of discrimination at a place that is not home influence the trajectories of DPs. "Integration is a European idea", many correspondents stated, indicating that they have to develop other options based on a more diversified tactic in the long run (interview with Burmese NGO worker living in Thailand for 30 years, Bangkok, July 2016).¹⁴

Our research showed that any dichotomy that contrasts non-refugees as masters of their own fate with displaced persons as victims without agency is obsolete. The coping patterns of displaced persons are highly flexible and adaptive. The legal status of people is relatively flexible though the legal categorisations that frame individual coping options: a person can shift from one status to another or hold different legal statuses simultaneously. Conditions for pursuing certain strategies very much differ for the Shan, Rohingya, Karen and Kachin and within those groups themselves. But if circumstances require or allow it, IDPs might become refugees, refugees might become internally displaced while trying to reintegrate, and refugees frequently leave the temporary shelters to become illegal migrant workers, or obtain official migrant worker status.

This list is by no means exhaustive and the options are not mutually exclusive. We found persons who were immobilised in conflict zones, educational migrants in camps, people who fled violence and conflict that have not registered in camps, and a variety of other patterns: some displaced persons have applied for migrant status instead of applying for asylum. Others live and

14 According to a representative of the Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), 70–80% of the IDPs in Kayin State have returned. The majority of these former IDPs have gone to their place of origin, while some, especially those who do not own land, have gone to the newly built settlement sites. Reportedly, there is also a generational difference. While the elderly usually want to return to their home villages, the younger ones prefer relocation sites. The better educated ones – in contrast – would prefer to move to the cities or to be resettled in a third country (Mae Sot, July 2016).

work as illegal migrants. As legal-normative categories are blurred in both time and space we thus argue that it is rather counterproductive for descriptive studies (probably also for humanitarian interventions and development aid) to remain fixated upon them (cf. Horstmann 2015, Sadan 2013).

Time in exile and prospects of return

The assessments of IDPs, migrants and refugees on their options to either stay or to return are not necessarily in line with official policy. The factors that influence the decision vary: those who fled conflict and repression often stressed that they would not return until the conflicts had been settled. Those who, in contrast, fled indirect consequences of conflict such as poverty or escaped preventively would be more likely to go back, if there were public infrastructure and individual opportunities. Even though the different weight given to the factors varies, livelihoods, peace and security, regulated availability of land and housing, access to health services and education, marginalisation and discrimination by the authorities, and conflict with local communities are crucial determinants in the decisions of all displaced persons on whether or not to eventually return. The choice therefore depends to a large extent on the amount and quality of knowledge people have of the political situation, the political transition process and ceasefire negotiations in Myanmar.

Older persons who have experienced many displacements (sometimes stretching back to the Japanese invasion) are more sceptical about return than younger ones (who usually have not experienced as many traumatic events). The latter are described as more hopeful, and more willing to return – even to a place different from their place of origin (interview with local expert and activist, Mae Sot, September 2016). As noted above, education is a decisive factor in this regard: children are sent (often on their own) to benefit from migrant schools on the other side of the border. Responsibilities towards younger relatives who attend school in the camps, in turn, play a role in the decision on return for camp residents (interview with Karen male refugee, Nu Po camp, July 2016). Finally, the time in exile and the number of contacts with the area of origin is of utmost importance for movement dynamics. The longer the displacement lasts, the less likely people are to go back. The existence of social networks and contacts with relatives or friends in Myanmar has been positively related to the likelihood of return. Many displaced persons travel to their community of origin on a regular basis and thus are able to maintain these networks.

DPs have developed a wide range of mixed strategies in response to these circumstances – some members of the family are sent to safe havens while others remain in high-risk areas. Livelihood activities that became insufficient due to the violent conflict were complemented with labour activities, seasonal

national migration and international migration. Refugees in camps resorted to their fields across the border to compensate for diminished food rations. Numerous IDPs found temporary shelter arrangements in camps, temple compounds or with hosts. Some IDPs are still in the vicinity of their houses and fields, some with, others without access to them. Many are confined in areas with very limited opportunities to make a living (e.g. Rohingya), while others are in areas where their labour force is highly sought after. However, diversification is not by definition beneficial for DPs. The desperate situation opens the door for abuses and exploitative practices by employers and authorities (Marschke / Vandergeest 2016, Brees 2008) – including cases of trafficking, especially of female victims (Beyrer 2001, Thomas / Jones 1993, Young et al. 2006).

Moreover, it needs to be stressed that different groups of displaced persons have very different experiences, opportunities to access the labour market, access to services such as education, health care or justice and aid, as well as very different choices available to them. The differences in the ability to cope with the challenges of displacement depend not only on their respective legal status (refugee, undocumented migrant worker, IDP) but also on ethnicity (e.g. Shan and Karen in Thailand), religion or the place of refuge (camp or urban or rural context). Ethnic identity, religion and location greatly impact on and shape the mobility and transnational networks of the displaced villagers. Different minorities in different border regions receive different treatment and recognition or discrimination in neighbouring countries. For example, the Shan and Karen or Kajah are classified differently in Thailand, which means, for instance, that Shan people have greater opportunities to assimilate in Thailand, because of their cultural similarity, but rarely receive refugee status. Mobility, the switching and combination of different socio-legal statuses or the establishment of self-organised infrastructure in the fields of health care and education feature among the most important practices applied in order to secure physical security and livelihoods (South 2012). Our findings demonstrate that displaced villagers regularly move in and out of different statuses – IDP, illegal migrant, refugee and citizen – throughout their lives.

In sum, the experience of multiple displacements and protracted conflict have led to a diversifications of livelihoods (e.g. farming, gardening, day labour), income sources (e.g. work, aid, remittances), residency (e.g. rural, urban, bi-national), poly-local households (split-up of family members) and entitlements (right to stay, resettle, return, compensation, option of work permit or amnesty in Thailand). Those strategies have not in all cases diminished vulnerabilities. In some cases – e.g. for trafficked persons – the effects have been plainly counterproductive. But the bottom line is that those coping strategies define the agency upon which any durable solution strategy of international actors has to build.

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