

STEP Project Review & Follow-up Formulation Report

Executive Summary

In September 2013, UNDP Thailand undertook a review of the Southern Thailand Empowerment and Participation project and an analysis of entry points for future peace building and development programming which can be built on the foundation of the STEP project.¹

Context

The major development in the programming context is the change in the government's strategy following the adoption of the new National Security Council policy and the establishment of an official dialogue process with the BRN, a militant group openly challenging the authority of the Thai state in the southern provinces. The initial stages of the dialogue process have been slow as the BRN seeks to assert its positions on key issues and the government tries to formulate a response that keeps the BRN at the table while not leaving itself vulnerable to accusations of weakness from conservative elements opposed to the process. There are good reasons to be cautious, not least continued political polarization at national level, but if the government can contain political opposition, overcome bureaucratic rivalries and push forward the implementation of the new NSC policy to consolidate the tentative dialogue process, it may produce a major shift in the dynamics of the conflict. This is a critical juncture in the conflict and an important opportunity for UNDP to build on the STEP project's valuable experience to reorient and intensify its programming activities in support of the government's objective of promoting the broadest possible participation of civil society in the peace process.

Development and Peacebuilding Response

So far the response to the new NSC policy from the various government departments engaged in the south has been tepid, a desire for progress undermined by uncertainty about concrete new measures to support the process, and a lack of conviction that the dialogue process will lead anywhere without the full backing of the Thai army. The main SBPAC response has been to provide funding directly to Islamic and educational institutions while the central government's strategy has been to provide compensation to the families of those killed by the security forces and the insurgents. In the past efforts to address economic underdevelopment have been central to the government's strategy to reduce the conflict. A \$2.4 billion special development program approved by the government in March 2009 is drawing to a close but its impact has been limited by security, capacity constraints, and allegations of corruption. Many local people saw the project primarily as an attempt to undercut the insurgents' *casus belli* and reinforce a governance system that is centralized, predatory, and exclusive.

Civil society has grown considerably in the Deep South in recent years and has become a major driver of the peace process. The "Pat(t)ani Peace Process" was launched in September 2012 as an initiative to create space for all interested stakeholders to come together to analyze the conflict and propose a roadmap to peace. The process is supported by the Insider Peace Platform (IPP) an inclusive civil society-centred peace-building platform composed of a core group of respected Thais who are also representatives of broader constituencies including community-based networks, religious organizations, government staff, student associations, or NGOs. The development of the civil society sector has been accelerated by a high level of women's participation in CSOs across a range of areas from promoting the rights of women and children to providing peacebuilding, environmental awareness raising, community development, public information and media production, and skills training services.

This growth in civil society seems to have occurred partly because of increased space as a result of changing government policy but also thanks to the capacity development support initiatives by a number of international actors including the World Bank, USAID, the European Union, and UNDP.

¹ The review was conducted by Sean Deely, an independent peacebuilding and transition programming advisor, and Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat an independent researcher and conflict analyst.

Donors have commonly encountered major absorptive capacity and monitoring constraints that have only been overcome with significant funding for management capacity development and implementation support, and the articulation of rigorous monitoring frameworks.

Review of the STEP Project

The review of the STEP project confirmed significant progress towards the achievement of the outputs set out in the project document. Of particular note was the significant contribution to the expansion of civil society and the empowerment of community based organizations, human rights defenders, women's groups, youth networks, and peacebuilding platforms.

Achievements

- Capacities of civil society networks and community based organizations with whom it worked have been strengthened and project activities have made a visible contribution to the growth of civil society in the Deep South.
- Critical crosscutting cleavages that link communities across differences of language, identity, religion, and culture, and help them transcend tension and divisions related to the conflict have been identified and explored, and project activities developed to strengthen these links.
- The project has developed and piloted relevant and effective capacity-building strategies under a number of key areas including women's empowerment, youth development, and community-based networks for disaster management and response.
- Valuable capacity development products have been created including training manuals,
- The project has also contributed to development of alternative media and reporting outlets and products that help increase access to information about events in the Deep South, and ensure their availability in Yawi.
- The project also supported mapping and research activities that highlighted how the erosion of traditional livelihoods is exacerbating poverty and exclusion, fuelling a growing sense of alienation that feeds into the conflict.
- The project's catalytic effect has helped build relationships, understanding and acceptance on behalf of PSU and UNDP, and develop a human resource and knowledge base on which future activities in the Deep South can be built.

Shortcomings

- Probably the single biggest shortcoming in the STEP project design is the lack of any overarching focus that would contribute to an outcome level impact. It seems that the project was conceptualized using UNDP's 7-pillar Community Security and Social Cohesion Policy, which may not have been appropriate given the likely role of UNDP, the fact that Thailand is a middle-income country, and the high level of government sensitivity to the potential "internationalization" of the crisis.
- The strategy that was contained in the project document did not provide adequate guidance on implementation and did not seem to be a product of detailed joint planning. Project implementation strategy should be derived from an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the conflict *at the level of the intervention* and based on joint planning with key stakeholders from government and civil society.
- The review noted an imbalance in some outputs between the investments needed to diagnose the problem and the implementation of the proposed solution. It is recommended that any successor project ensure that the ratio of research to implementation is driven by the achievement of the output and overall outcome.
- The targets and indicators in the project document RRF were not adequately formulated and do not constitute an adequate basis for monitoring progress. This shortcoming was exacerbated by changes to some of the activities and problems with access to some project sites as a result of security threats. It is recommended that the project review its monitoring plan to establish realistic end-of-project targets that reflect changes to

outputs and related activities, and obtain and report against baseline data for all indicators.

Potential Strategic Intervention Points

The assessment analyzed six potential strategic intervention points. Empowerment remains the central focus: if the peace process is to contribute to a sustainable outcome to the conflict it is essential that it be structured in a way that offers local people an opportunity for inclusion as invested parties to the process rather than disempowered citizens. Moreover, peace processes do not gain traction or advance in a vacuum: the need for a broader public engagement in the process has been recognized in the new NSC policy, but of itself this acknowledgement will have only a symbolic value unless people are empowered through access information and education about the process, and systems to facilitate their involvement are strengthened and expanded.

Sustaining the Peace Dialogue and Broadening Participation in the Process

Only by increasing knowledge and understanding of the peace process and related developments, and by broadening the engagement of people from all over the southernmost provinces, will it be possible to empower meaningful participation and build a critical mass of support for a sustainable resolution of the conflict. Promoting increased participation requires a significant investment to build the capacities of civil society organizations, and to put in place and maintain the networks, systems, and platforms that will inform and sustain participation. This is a government priority and it should also be a UN priority.

Access to Information

A related priority intervention point is civic awareness to promote understanding of the Malay Muslim population, and knowledge of the problems caused by the conflict, and an informed public discussion about what would constitute an appropriate solution. A television drama in mixed Patani-Malay and Thai languages using satellite television would be a powerful channel for civic awareness raising among ethnic groups seeking self-expression in their own cultural and linguistic terms and represents an important strategic entry point for increased knowledge of and engagement in the peace dialogue process and the wider transformation of the conflict.

Access to Justice

Continued support for access to legal services should be a critical priority for UNDP in the next phase of its engagement in the Deep South. It is clear however that the Adilan Centre does not provide an environment where vulnerable people can have confidence that their case will be handled confidentially or with the authority that is required to ensure their protection, or secure a fair hearing. As suggested by the SBPAC Justice Administration Affairs Director UNDP should support MAC to train religious leaders and other appropriate volunteers from villages as trusted focal points for legal assistance.

Participatory Planning and Sustainable Livelihoods

The experience of Output 2 of the STEP project demonstrated how a small grant fund could have a disproportional impact of economic wellbeing among vulnerable women's groups. UNDP could consider including a "Participatory Planning, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Women's Empowerment" component in the new programme that would use participatory planning and sustainable livelihood activities as a means to build participatory governance capacity, maintain the relationship between Buddhist and Muslim families, and to promote social cohesion to overcome economic marginalization.

Local Governance Reform

Although there appears to be growing recognition of the need for major governance reform in the Deep South to allow for some form of local self-government, the extent, nature, and form remains controversial, and opposition among a conservative elite is deeply entrenched. In examining options for UNDP support, it may be worth considering that there isn't always a technical, administrative, or capacity-strengthening solution to governance problems. Given the deep polarization that characterizes national politics, and anxieties around the future royal transition it seems unlikely that any changes to the structure of the state will be agreed in the near future.

Women's Empowerment

Women in the Southern Border Provinces have to contend with insecurity, disrupted education, fears generated by the activities of insurgents and security forces, and constraints on the freedom of movement of male household members in conflict-affected districts. Although surveys indicate that women's participation in civil society organizations in the south is three times higher than the national average, they face a range of cultural and religious constraints that restrict women to domestic functions. As part of a Participatory Planning and Sustainable Livelihoods activity it would be worthwhile to include sustainable livelihood options for women heads of households affected by the conflict. Working outside the home also provides space for Muslim women to interact with Buddhist women. As part of its support to the peace dialogue process, UNDP could consider including a capacity development component for women activists and CSOs to strengthen their potential role as peace-builders.

Proposed Program Outline

Support to peace dialogue and the IPP initiative should form the core of an interlinked series of outputs that places strengthening civil society capacity to promote public participation in the peace process at the centre of the UNDP's strategy. Key elements include: making available conflict transformation and peacebuilding advisors to provide expert analytical input to the IPP process, enhancing access to information to increase knowledge and understanding of political developments; improving access to independent legal services to increase protection for conflict-vulnerable families; and strengthening participatory planning and sustainable livelihoods to improve economic security and empower women as peacemakers and entrepreneurs. These outputs should be elaborated during consultations and participatory planning sessions with relevant stakeholders on location in the south.

Priority Area 1A: Strengthened Capacity to Facilitate Participation in the Peace Process

Contracting an international peace and development consultant and a national expert on the south to provide expert analytical input to the IPP process; establishing a schedule of peacebuilding resources to contribute to the IPP process; working with IPP and other stakeholders to develop a support strategy for an inter-connected series of peace networks; developing a sub-strategy to strengthen women's potential role as peace-builders.

Priority Area 1B: Access to Information

Contracting an international media production agency with experience in the design, scripting and production of documentary-drama products for television to work with a local Patani-based media NGO (e.g. FT) to produce a television drama in mixed Patani-Malay and Thai languages that will channel information about developments in the conflict – including the peace process and the impact of the conflict on the lives of ordinary people in the Southern Border Provinces.

Priority Area 2: Access to Justice

Working with MAC to train a network of civic and religious leaders and other appropriate volunteers from villages as trusted focal points for legal assistance to ensure that local people have a trusted focal point where they can seek support in the event of rights violations, intimidation, torture or other mistreatment; exploring opportunities to strengthen the role of the NHRC in national level advocacy and capacity development support to NHRC provincial offices.

Priority Area 3: Participatory Planning, Livelihoods, and Women's Empowerment

Building on the experience gained implementing output 2 of the STEP project identify a small number of sub-districts in close coordination with the World Bank/LDI for product development, adaptation, processing and marketing initiatives; identify and foster cross-cutting cleavages and priorities based on common interests, including in mixed Buddhist-Muslim communities to work together; build participatory planning capacities through a carefully developed series of community consultation and capacity development activities; ensure the inclusion of women in community planning and decision-making by identifying and dealing with the social and occupational obstacles that may reduce their opportunities for active participation.
