

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS BEYOND THE STATE: THE SALWEEN PEACE PARK IN MYANMAR

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For building peaceful and inclusive societies, the United Nations 'Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16)' calls for good governance and strong institutions that are transparent, effective and accountable. While this is a commendable aim on paper, its implementation encounters immediate problems in the context of Myanmar. This is because SDG16 presupposes the state and its formal institutions to be the main target as well as implementer of reform. This is worthy of support. After all, Myanmar's security sector has not only demonstrated for decades its incapability to provide human security in the face of protracted armed conflict. More importantly, the country's security institutions have long been the main source of insecurity for large parts of the population, and remain so today despite the limited liberalisation of Myanmar's polity since 2011. A journey to the war-torn Karen communities in Myanmar's eastern borderlands towards Thailand demonstrates that promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies in Myanmar needs to start with appreciating the ethno-politics of conflict in order to rethink and engage institutions beyond the state.

In December 2018, Karen villagers, environmental and social justice activists, and revolutionaries gathered for the official opening of the Salween Peace Park. The 'park', named after the Salween River, comprises of vast forest and hill lands that roughly map onto an area locally known as Mutraw. Located in the very northeast of Myanmar's Karen State, Mutraw is in many ways the last stronghold of Myanmar's oldest ethno-national rebel movement: the Karen National Union (KNU), and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). While counterinsurgency campaigns and geopolitical transformations have weakened the Karen rebellion in most of Karen State, Mutraw remains a liberated territory.

In recent years the Myanmar Army has, however, made gradual inroads into Mutraw by building roads and military camps, sparking heavy fighting with local KNU units despite an official ceasefire. Nevertheless, the Karen rebellion remains deeply embedded within the social fabric of Mutraw, maintaining close-knit relations with local communities by way of sophisticated governance arrangements, including the provision of health, education and security. To

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Representatives of local communities and KNU officials sign the charter of the Salween Peace Park which won the UNDP's Equator Prize in 2020.

Source: David Brenner



understand the depth of this non-state political order, it is important to appreciate that the Myanmar state has never governed in these areas – not before, during or after British colonial rule. For most villagers in Mutraw, the only significant encounter with the state has been at the hands of indiscriminate counterinsurgency campaigns.

It is against this stark background that any attempts to strengthen institutions for the purpose of peace and justice in Myanmar should thus be assessed – and the Mutraw's Salween Peace Park provides a useful if contentious starting point for doing so. Its main architects are passionate Karen environmentalists for whom conservation is not only a matter of ecology but foremost a vehicle of social justice through which Karen communities can highlight their grievances in the face of the politics of ethnic discrimination, militarised resource exploitation, land grabs, and state territorialisation. It also serves to stake a claim to ownership over land. This is not least because environmentalism makes these claims legible to the international community.

In fact, the name Salween Peace Park is a conscious reference to the global 'peace park' movement, which is concerned with more than just environmental conservation. Firstly, the peace park movement promotes the restoration and maintenance of fragile ecosystems in close cooperation with local communities. It positions itself vis-à-vis conservationist approaches that view humans and nature in an antagonistic relationship. These approaches have often contributed to the marginalisation of local communities by restricting their access to livelihoods dependent on natural resources. In doing so, conservation has become a strategic tool for states to territorialise and securitise their peripheries together with international conservation organisations.

By contrast, the peace park movement seeks to achieve environmental sustainability by reviving and promoting local knowledge and institutions. Peace parks centre on the rights of local communities, understood as indigenous to the land, and can thus become a vehicle for local communities to counter state territorialisation and stake claims to local autonomy instead. Secondly, peace parks are often designed as transboundary conservation zones established to promote peace and cooperation between nations. By linking up to the peace park movement, Karen activists are not only rendering their concerns legible to an international audience, they are also staking claims to belonging and self-governance as an own nation far beyond the immediate remit of environmental concerns.

The launch of the Salween Peace Park followed years of preparations, during which activists meticulously mapped customary land use systems, boundaries and conservation zones in close consultation with villagers on the basis of what is called the kaw. The kaw regulates mixed land use practices for farming, forests and village life, following local beliefs of spirit

dwelling. Revitalising the kaw system is central not only to preserving local modes of governance, much of which have suffered from decades of armed conflict and displacement. Mapping the kaw throughout the Salween Peace Park also serves as a means of resistance against large-scale land grabs for commercial development purposes, which have been expedited by amendments to Myanmar's Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law. During the two-day-long ceremony of the Salween Peace Park launch in Mutraw, Karen conservationists enthusiastically explained the vulnerable ecosystem, local poets and musicians praised the spirits of the forest, and revolutionary leaders from the KNU spoke about the importance of defending Karen lands.

Following a local referendum – most villagers voted for the establishment of the peace park – the launch event culminated in the signing of the Salween Peace Park charter by representatives from local communities, including a woman's association, a KNU official and the park's designated chairman. The charter lays out the rights and benefits as well as obligations and responsibilities of all sides, including transparent elections to the peace park steering committee. Despite the persistence of armed conflict with nearby troops from the Myanmar Army and the looming spectre of powerful investment interests, the officials and local villagers I spoke with during and after the event were

generally optimistic. According to their hopes, the Salween Peace Park institutionalises long-existent practices of self-government. In the words of one community elder, 'We cannot wait anymore for real democratic change in Myanmar. Our forests are

disappearing and we will as well. That is why we have to take matters into our own hands'.

Highlighting the case of the Salween Peace Park in a reflection on good governance and institution-building is not to argue for an abandonment of much-needed institutional reforms of the state in Myanmar. Nor is it meant to romanticise non-state governance arrangements that, like any political orders, are riddled with imbalances of power and injustices of their own. It is instead to urge a rethinking of international governance support away from the formal bureaucracy of Myanmar. In the face of an ethnocratic state – whose institutions work directly against the interests of most of its populations and are unlikely to be substantially reformed in the foreseeable future – the only meaningful way of improving the human security of local populations is to work with institutions beyond the state to deliver transparent, effective and accountable governance arrangements.



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