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Health justice for all: The development of alternative health system capabilities in the conflict-affected context of Shan State, Myanmar

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Development Studies

at Massey University, Manawatū

New Zealand

Sharon Margaret Bell

2018
Dedication


This thesis is dedicated to my friend and research assistant, Nang Mo Kham,’ and the community health workers and medics of the Shan Health Department, working tirelessly to bring health justice to their communities in Shan State, Myanmar.

\[1\] Not her real name.
Abstract

As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development advances, it is vital to determine how conflict impacts on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in conflict-affected contexts. The United Nations (UN) regards conflict as the leading risk to development progress as these contexts have high rates of poverty and limited access to crucial healthcare services. Shan State, Myanmar is one such context, facing a critical shortage in its health workforce, considered one of the building blocks of an effective health system. Approaches to building health workforce capabilities can meaningfully contribute towards meeting SDG 3 – ‘to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’, and consequently, health justice for conflict-affected communities.

This research aims to understand how the approaches taken by an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) support the development of alternative health system capabilities in a conflict-affected context. A global development agenda of state- and peace-building has meant that INGOs have been criticised for undermining state legitimacy. Meanwhile, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in areas like Shan State, Myanmar, have established alternative regimes which seek self-determination as well as attempting to provide for the social and economic wellbeing of their people. However, little is known about how a partnership between an INGO and a NSAG contributes toward enabling alternative health system development in these contexts.

This research contributes to new ways of understanding this through the development of a capabilities framework for health system development in conflict-affected contexts. This was used to analyse findings from the qualitative case study of an INGO’s health workforce training programme on the Myanmar-Thailand border. The research found that a positive partnership between the INGO and the NSAG has played a crucial role in enabling the workforce capabilities of the alternative health system, leading to promising improvements in health outcomes in communities. However, the effectiveness of the programme is restricted by the INGO’s reliance on volunteerism for staffing, where expatriate medical volunteers are selected based on their availability, rather than the appropriate skills and experience for this context. The international aid community has also reduced its funding for cross-border development programmes in Myanmar which has constrained the activities of the INGO and the NSAG. For Myanmar to achieve health justice and SDG 3, supporting health system development that focuses on improving health outcomes needs to be a priority for the international community.
Acknowledgements

The process of writing the research into this thesis was a solitary experience, but I was surrounded by the support, generosity, prayers, and love of many people. I pay tribute to these people now.

First, I respectfully acknowledge General Jao Yawd Serk, leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S), for his valuable time and for permission to conduct my research in Loi Tai Leng. I also thank the senior leadership of the RCSS/SSA-S for their ongoing support of the Shan Healthcare Training Programme. Sai Laeng, Director of the Shan State Development Foundation, was extremely generous with his knowledge even though he is very busy with the ongoing peace process with the Myanmar government.

I give my warmest thanks to Paw Shar Gay, head of the Shan Health Department. Her vision to see better health outcomes for the people of Shan State provides the Shan Health Department with the impetus to bring about health justice for all. I also thank Khu Tun Aye² for sharing about his life and work with the Community Health Worker Training Programme.

My most heartfelt thanks go to Nang Mo Kham,³ my friend and research assistant, and the community health workers and medics of the Shan Health Department who participated so willingly and enthusiastically in this research. I hope it honours, in some small way, the sacrifices you make to bring health justice to your communities. Ying zhum kha!

Drs Alison and Ken McFarlane deserve very special thanks. Their willingness to give up their comfortable retirement in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the service of justice on the Myanmar-Thailand border is inspiring. They supported my research with their honesty and openness in discussions and with information. They were thoroughly enjoyable company during my fieldwork, providing great conversation, movies, snacks, and my excessive toilet paper requirements!

I have been blessed with a Dream Team of supervisors. Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers: I blame you for getting me into this in the first place! I could always trust you to drop everything when I needed your help (especially during tricky fieldwork experiences), and

² Not his real name.
³ Not her real name.
you were relentlessly confident in my abilities, even when I wasn’t. Dr Sharon McLennan, aka Sharon Number 1: you were always available for coffee and conversation, importantly at times, about things other than my research. Your shared understanding of my research passions has been a huge encouragement. Professor Regina Scheyvens: I relied heavily on your expertise, wisdom, good humour, and continual encouragement. You all consistently advocated for the value of my research and for financial support for me to continue. I am forever grateful for your belief in me as it kept me going.

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My Mum and Dad, Judith and Russell Bell, have always been proud of everything their three children have done, which gave me a good foundation of self-confidence. They have
also provided mindless retro TV, a frequent bed for the night, meals, wine, and far too much dessert throughout.

To Marty, my lobster,⁴ there are no words to fully express my love and gratitude. You did everything you could to push me into fulfilling my dream of doing a PhD. You gave me the gift of being able to give it my all, and travel away from home for long periods knowing my children were in the best hands with the best Dad. I hope this PhD propels us into the global adventures we have been dreaming about since 1990!

To Maggie, India and Angus: I did this for you! I know it didn't feel like it when I wasn't around, and couldn't give you my time and energy. You helped me to keep the research in perspective. Maggie, I'm gratified to see you turn into a critical thinker, ready to take on the world. India, your empathy and heart for justice is a joy to me. Gus, your dry wit and wise words to “stay determined” got me to the end of the journey. Mum's PhD has been an example of lifelong learning to you all. I hope I have opened your eyes to what you can achieve to make your part of the world a more just and caring place. I love you all.

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### Abbreviations and acronyms

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHW</td>
<td>Community Health Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECBHO</td>
<td>Ethnic and community-based health organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCCG</td>
<td>Health Convergence Core Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICRC</td>
<td>International Committee of the Red Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>International non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoHS</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOU</td>
<td>Memorandum of understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTA</td>
<td>Mong Tai Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCA</td>
<td>Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSAG</td>
<td>Non-state armed group</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>Partners Relief and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCSSS</td>
<td>The Restoration Council of Shan State</td>
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<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>Relief International</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHTP</td>
<td>Shan Healthcare Training Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA-S</td>
<td>Shan State Army-South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSDF</td>
<td>Shan State Development Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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WHO  World Health Organization
WVNZ  World Vision New Zealand