



"Social support" without state welfare

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Relatively few scholars have analysed the structures of grassroots support activities outside the sphere of the state in Myanmar. These include religious organizations, local non-government-organizations, neighbourhood groups, and the like. The umbrella term is usually "civil society" (South 2008, Prasse-Freeman 2012). The message of these works is that Myanmar has had an active civil society all along – also under the harsh military dictatorship. In instances like the catastrophe of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, these non-state actors responded quite impressively, considering their very limited resources.

While such structures have often been studied with a focus on their political role, e.g. in the process of democratization, I have a different starting point. My observations in Myanmar were guided by the question: "If the state does not offer a social security program for most people, how do they deal with situations of adversity?" I look at how individuals draw on different support sources as part of their livelihood management. Further, I try to understand how religious and moral concepts are deployed in the course of such activities.

Most of what I describe is happening in the informal sector (to draw on another distinction that is, from an emic perspective, not always very useful). But the relationship to the state is not my main concern here. Put simply, from the viewpoint of the household, the state is largely absent when it comes to economic support. Less than 5 percent of Myanmar's population is entitled to any state support.¹ State organized pensions, unemployment benefits and health insurance are not part of most people's reality. This does not mean that people do not see the state as being in charge. I heard many complaints about how things are mismanaged, that the education and health care systems need improvement, that teachers should get higher salaries, and the like. The state is indeed seen as responsible. But as long as these demands are not met, people rely heavily on community-level support patterns, as part of their social support system.





Trishaw drivers waiting on the jetty in Patheingyi (2015).

The manifold forms of community based support

For many people in Myanmar, incomes are low, unstable and unpredictable. Market sellers, trishaw drivers, small scale traders, snack sellers, but also low-ranking public sector employees, constantly have to balance income and expenditure. While money is scarce in everyday situations, shortages can worsen immensely in case of emergency – like sickness, or the death of a close relative – when they have to borrow. While there are many support patterns within the family and the household, it is also important to note *inter*-household support in the wider neighbourhood and on the community level.

Even though I do not talk of security, but of “social support”, I follow Keebet and Franz von Benda-Beckmann when they speak of “the dimension of social organization dealing with the provision of security not considered to be an exclusive matter of individual responsibility” (2000:14). Social support happens on many levels of society, and it is understood as a *collective* undertaking.

Von Benda-Beckmann et al. (1997: 112) distinguish four pillars of a non-state social security system in Kenya; this model makes sense for Myanmar too. The first pillar is based on individual provisions derived from individual economic activities. Since my main concern is with the community level, I will not go into detail on this pillar. The second consists of membership in traditional solidarity networks, including the extended family and neighbourhood units. The third pillar is comprised of membership in cooperative or social welfare associations such as self-help groups, rotating credit associations (ROSCAs), and cultural groups. The last pillar comprises access to the benefits provided by nongovernmental voluntary organizations, religious organizations and charity.

These various arrangements are pieces of one puzzle that are interlinked and work in interaction with each other. A family might, for example, borrow money from a microfinance organisation to pay back a loan it received from a community credit group. Or they might borrow money from a moneylender to finance a religious ceremony, which is expected to include large donations to the local Buddhist monastery. These donations might then be partly used to support a Buddhist orphanage or health care program in the area, and so on. The processes in these support networks involve poor and wealthy community members, in different roles. These structures contain a significant element of redistribution – as when the larger donations to local charity projects come from wealthier members of the community.

Support within communities takes many forms. It does not need to be monetary, but can be offered as care, assistance or advice. Neighbourhood relations consist of many non-formalized, routinized support activities: it is common to cook meals for neighbours, to repair something for them, to offer advice, company or other forms of help, like taking care of children. I spent a lot of time with Mary, an 80-year old woman who lived on her own, as her children went to work in Yangon. Mary's neighbours visited her regularly, to see if she is okay. They cleaned her house and did groceries for her. Mary offered homework help for their children and often cooked more than she needed, to share food with the neighbours. Communities regularly organize pagoda festivals and life-cycle events, which not only serve spiritual ends but also social ones (see my previous blog posts). Sometimes infrastructure projects like the paving of a road are organized (and largely financed) from within communities themselves.

Beside such close neighbourhood relations, many community-level support mechanisms are quite formalized and somewhat more impersonal. This applies for example to funeral groups, ROSCAs and credit groups. People pool their money here to save or to take out loans. These groups are based on very clear structures and rules. Besides group associations, there are other sources of credit, some are more commercially oriented than others. The majority of people do not have access to banks and no interest in using them. Instead they borrowing from friends, relatives, employers, moneylenders and, more recently, microfinance programs. Despite the risk of increasing indebtedness, access to such credit sources cannot be separated from the current social support structures, since it is often indispensable in reacting to financial emergencies, such as an operation.

Charity programs are another crucial part of the patchwork. They are largely donation based and often organized around Buddhist institutions. They include schools, orphanages, elderly care centers, and free health programs, but also responses to emergencies that affect a larger group of people, e.g. to deal with flooding during the rainy season. To donate money and time (volunteering) is extremely common in Myanmar. It is usually justified with religious concepts such as *Dana* and *Metta*. To accumulate merit for a better rebirth, generosity and gift-giving are crucial for Buddhists. This includes gifts to the Buddha and the Sangha, but also to other lay people, especially the poor. The very real need for community based-support structures is combined fruitfully with religious emphasis on the virtue of generosity and responsibility for others. Community members donate money, but also concrete things for their neighbourhood, like water pumps or even ambulance cars. The relationship between community members from different economic backgrounds cannot be understood as one sided: Wealthy community members ensure a certain extent of support for the poor, but the poor give the wealthy an opportunity to make merit. An important aspect about charity is, that it often benefits complete strangers, not a close relative (see also Bowie 1998 on Thailand).

Of course, the anthropologist should beware of romanticizing. I have seen very clearly that the boundaries between receiving and giving, security and indebtedness, can shift quickly. The line here is thin. Support mechanisms have their limitations, including a potential for negative aspects such as control, coercion, and exclusion. Many people in Patheingyi are trapped in debt cycles, and some slip out of the usual support structures. I recall a case where a couple that was infected with HIV did not receive any help from neighbours or relatives. Social marginalization made people avoid them. Their economic situation got so severe, that they had no resources to participate in ROSCAs or larger credit groups. The system demands a lot of patient negotiating. Despite the darker side of the coin, I argue for understanding these structures primarily in terms of support provisioning.



A 100-Kyat note (ca. 7 EUR CENT) (2016).

Broadening a concept

Social support must be understood in a broad sense, detached from state welfare to encompass the broad sphere of the human economy. Compared to some concepts often used in the same realm (e.g. Civil Society, Moral Economy), social support is clearer because it focuses explicitly on *function*. Only strategies, institutions, activities and patterns that serve the function of providing support, some degree of security, or decrease risk and vulnerability, can be gathered under this umbrella. Empirical data shows how manifold, kaleidoscopic and complex such a system is. But once we allow a broader use of the concept, it can help to make important aspects of people's livelihood strategies visible.

Is it social support to repair a road? I would argue, yes, it can be - such community-based undertakings not only improve a neighbourhood's infrastructural condition, but also the social bonds running through it. Economic support structures are often entirely congruent with ordinary social relations, especially those with neighbours, friends, kin (von Benda-Beckmann et al. 1997: 109). Taking part in social events, be it the building of roads or a temple festival, strengthens community ties. In the absence of the state, it is precisely such ties that provide support in moments of need. Unlike state social security, community-based ways of support require a lot of active participation from the people involved (Lont 2005: 7). Personal relations need to be sustained, conflicts have to be solved, wealth is expected to be shared. With all its

complexities, it is important to acknowledge the existence of a community-based social security system in Myanmar, where the state does not offer much for the majority of people.

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Note

ⁱ The World Bank (2015) Strengthening social security provision in Myanmar <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/594461468179672257/Strengthening-social-security-provision-in-Myanmar> , P 18.