

## **End of project popular science description**

Will be uploaded at the Danida Research Portal.

The end of project popular science description must not exceed two pages and include the following:

### **Introduction**

The objective of EverJust was to provide in-depth analysis of how locally legitimate authority is produced in areas with contested statehood and long histories of armed conflict, based on empirical case-studies of everyday justice and security in Myanmar. By mapping out and analysing everyday forms of dispute resolution, justice preferences and understandings, the findings would shed light on larger political issues affecting Myanmar's fragile transition to democracy and peacebuilding. The empirical focus was on contested ethnic border regions, where ceasefires had been made, but where there was still no enduring peace agreement or political settlement and where the central state enjoyed little authority, instead giving way to parallel forms of ethnic state formations.

When EverJust began, there had been no ethnographic studies of everyday forms of justice in Myanmar, partly due to the closure of the country during the many decades of military rule. Simultaneously, the Myanmar government and several international aid agencies and NGOs were beginning to engage in reform of the justice sector, but with meagre understanding of justice provision and dispute resolution outside of the central state apparatus and judiciary, let alone in the ethnic border regions. So apart from contributing to theories on legal pluralism and peace building in areas with contested statehood, the project also aimed to inform justice sector reforms by providing research-based analysis of actual forms of dispute resolution and understandings of (in)justice among local communities and authorities.

Methodologically, Everjust has conducted in-depth ethnographic studies in selected localities, combined with surveys that could help test and quantify the mainly qualitative research findings. Theoretically, the researchers have drawn on a mixture of political and legal anthropology, strongly inspired by legal pluralism approaches.

Another core objective of the research was to help build social science research capacity in Myanmar, which had been strongly undermined by the decades of military rule. In particular the project aimed to support the research NGO, EMReF, and the anthropology department at Yangon University with applying ethnographic methods, engaging in critical academic thinking and in getting international exposure (publishing and dissemination).

### **Results**

We were the first team of researchers to uncover the plurality and dynamics of everyday justice in Myanmar, after decades of closure for independent academic studies. Based on qualitative fieldwork, the project has produced in-depth knowledge of how and by whom disputes, law breaks, and insecurity are dealt with at the local level. We have also analyzed the diverse perceptions of justice and injustices. The main part of the ethnographic studies has been conducted among marginalized urban dwellers and in ethnic-minority areas (Karen, Mon, Naga, Danu, Pa-O). These areas have experienced decades of conflict and been governed mainly by non-state actors, including ethnic armed organizations, customary authorities, religious leaders, and civil society groups. The research has improved understandings of how authority is constituted in such areas with contested statehood through the lens of everyday justice and security provision. One key finding is that most ordinary people prefer to have their disputes and crimes resolved as locally as possible, and that they deliberately evade the state. This is partly due to a deep historical mistrust in the militarized state, and partly due to cultural norms and identity politics. Our research has also brought new insights into the significant role of culture and religion in local understandings of justice, which are also significant for understanding why people often avoid using the formal justice system. The research findings contribute with

important insights into the larger political issues facing Myanmar in the complicated transitional period (2015-2020), such as distrust in official state institutions, the critical effects of identity politics, and the contested avenues to peace and stability.

Theoretically the project has contributed with unique insights to the debate on legal pluralism and how such pluralism affects state formation, peace building and democratization in contested states. We have secured dissemination of the findings through several academic publications, conference participation, public seminars/webinars, policy briefs/reports and workshops.

## **Conclusions**

EverJust research has significantly informed policy debates in Myanmar on justice sector reform (prior to the military coup) and among international actors, through dialogue with and dissemination of findings to NGOs, legal practitioners, ethnic organizations and international development partners, including Danida, the EU and UN organizations. Most importantly, EverJust research has been key in putting legal pluralism on the agenda of debates, bringing attention to the need to base justice sector reforms on already existing justice seeking practices and institutions, rather than focusing alone on reforming and financing centrally governed state institutions.

EverJust has also contributed to social science research capacity building in Myanmar through various training courses, materials, joint field research, publications, and international conference participation. In addition, the involved Myanmar researchers have been able to publish their own work in international academic outlets, while the Danish researchers have shared research-based insights on the critical situation in Myanmar in the media and in government and policy circles. This has been one of the key research capacity building results, at both an individual and institutional level, including advancement in qualitative field-based methodologies, surveys and critical academic thinking. The project has also contributed with library sources and helped build up a library at the Anthropology department of Yangon University. The majority of the EverJust researchers are now involved in a new FFU-funded project, called MyClimate and several have been commissioned to do studies on justice for different international agencies.

## **Recommendations**

Prior to the 1 February military coup, the research findings of EverJust had made avenues into influencing the ongoing efforts to reform the justice sector in Myanmar, advancing its focus on recognising locally based justice practices and forums. A number of international NGOs had already begun to direct its support towards local justice forums, drawing in part on the evidence produced by EverJust and the commissioned studies EverJust researchers were involved in. But the military coup has stalled these developments, as the country is now ravaged by violence and conflict. Ongoing debates within and among the democratic opposition on a future federal democratic union beyond military rule, can however benefit from drawing on the research findings, which point to the decentralised and pluralistic formations of justice avenues and practices in Myanmar. Apart from feeding into these debates, EverJust researchers have also since the military coup contributed with studies and webinars on democratic opposition to military rule, police and military defections, and everyday coping mechanisms, including in relation to COVID-19. We have also been active in informing the Danish public, the MFA and members of parliament on the need to support justice and democracy in Myanmar, based on our research-based insights emanating from EverJust.

In light of recent developments in Myanmar, it is in addition crucial to sustain the academic research capacity that has been built through Everjust and other research partnerships, in order to support a critical mass of scholars and researchers.