



Understanding Practices of Protection and Resilience

Co-producing knowledge among Myanmar scholars-in-exile



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Understanding Practices of Protection and Resilience: Co-Producing Knowledge Among Myanmar Scholars In Exile



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	6
2. Contextual overview	9
2.1 Myanmar’s political turmoil	9
2.2 Distinct zones of settlement: Mae Sot and Chiang Mai	11
2.2.1 Chiang Mai	12
2.2.2 Mae Sot	14
3. Making sense of “protection”	16
3.1 Theoretical foundations and evolution of protection	17
3.2 Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP)	17
3.3 Community-Based Protection (CBP)	18
3.4 Localized protection strategies	19
3.5 The case of Myanmar’s “scholars at risk”	19
4. Research design and method	20
4.1 Developing objectives	21
4.2 The research team	22
4.3 Key methods	23
4.4 Co-producing analytical insights	23
4.5 Ethical considerations	24
5. Findings and thematic analysis	24
5.1 Dynamics of threats and harms	24
5.1.1 Economic struggles	25
5.1.2 Social impediments	26
5.1.3 Cultural barriers	27
5.1.4 Institutional obstacles	28
5.1.5 Limited political space	29
5.1.6 Psychological grief	30

- 5.2 Multiplexity of protection mechanisms and resilience 37**
 - 5.2.1 Proactive agency and resilience 38
 - 5.2.2 Networks of trust and reciprocity 41
 - 5.2.3 Mutual/communal aid 44
 - 5.2.4 Collective action 47
 - 5.2.5 Culminating in rebuilding a sense of the “new commons” 49

- 6. Lessons learned 53**
 - 6.1 Enhancing protection knowledge, strategies, practices and localization 53

- 7. Conclusion and key findings 55**

- References 58**

Executive Summary

The study investigates the protection mechanisms and resilience strategies of Myanmar scholars and communities displaced to Mae Sot and Chiang Mai following the military coup on February 1, 2021. This event triggered a wave of violence and mass displacement, with many fleeing to Thailand without proper documentation, facing significant risks such as arrest, deportation, and severe economic and social challenges. The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar (NPM) collaborated with local scholars to explore protection mechanisms and resilience in these exile communities.

Key findings highlight the importance of proactive agency, networks of trust, mutual aid, collective action, and rebuilding communal spaces in fostering resilience. Proactive agency involves individuals and communities building empowerment through knowledge transfer and peer support. Networks of trust and reciprocity, facilitated through digital and physical platforms, enable the exchange of information and resources, bridging formal institutions and grassroots initiatives. Mutual aid and volunteerism are prioritized over traditional NGO-based approaches, with community-led initiatives addressing local needs effectively. Collective action provides a means for healing and restoring self-esteem, fostering solidarity and social justice.

The study highlights the transformative power of these interconnected elements in enabling communities to confront and overcome socio-political challenges. By fostering a renewed sense of the new commons and inspiring hope, these initiatives help displaced communities reimagine shared spaces and values based on principles of social justice and mutual aid, envisioning a more inclusive and equitable future. The research emphasizes the need for comprehensive, community-driven support systems to enhance protection, resilience and empowerment amidst ongoing adversity.

1.

Introduction

Since the military coup on 1 February 2021, the people of Myanmar have been devastated by escalating violence and widespread conflict. This has led to the loss of thousands of lives, countless numbers facing detention and human rights abuses, and a wave of displacement as civilians seek refuge from the junta's violence. Among the displaced are scholars, many of whom continued to flee across the border into neighboring Thailand, forced to grapple with the challenge of establishing new lives amidst uncertainty and adversity.

For those without legal documentation, the journey to Thailand brings heightened risk and insecurity, including the looming threat of arrest, intimidation, and deportation. Even those with some form of documentation, such as a Myanmar passport or Certificate of Identity (CI), face ongoing uncertainty, complex emotions, and the formidable task of adapting to a new environment. Many of those arriving in Thailand enter out of desperation after facing acute threats to their lives in Myanmar. Yet upon arrival, they struggle to fully comprehend the new complex reality that they must navigate in Thailand's border areas, spaces often described as "states of exception" (Agamben, 2008). Numerous arrivals were respected professionals in their former lives and are forced to navigate a dynamic where they no longer occupy the same social position, have minimal income, and have limited legal space to work, let alone understand local language and customs.

In response to the pressing need to understand and address the vulnerabilities faced by Myanmar refugee scholars – and, by extension, the wider emerging exile community in Thailand - the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar initiated a collaborative research project. Though both organizations have some experience in attempting to support Myanmar people at risk, rather than imposing our external knowledge in the process, the decision was made to undertake a method of coproduction of knowledge (CPK), whereby a group of Myanmar scholars at risk were engaged closely as co-researchers. The study was driven by the scholars towards wanting to understand emergent forms of

community and support which, as we were collectively observing, seemed to be enabling groups in exile to provide critical and holistic forms of protection. These initiatives appeared community-built, grounded in local realities, and responsive to the complex needs of those crossing the border. Most critically, they seemed to be sources of hope amid despair.

Specifically, the research process was initiated through a series of co-production workshops, where research questions and design was collaboratively honed, before each co-researcher undertook two contributions to the research. First, a process of analytical self-reflection of their personal experiences; second, a process of engagement to examine selected case studies – most of which they were already closely embedded in - in order to reveal emergent protection tactics and strategies for protecting themselves and others. The study focuses on Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, the two pre-eminent sites of recent Myanmar exile communities in Thailand, each featuring distinct characteristics which shape the nature of community efforts.

The key research questions developed in the co-production process guided the self-reflection and case studies, focusing on the vulnerabilities faced by scholars at risk, the emergence and efficacy of unarmed civilian protection strategies, and the resilience of these mechanisms amidst adversity. Through the application of CPK, the study aspires to contribute to advancing our understanding of protection, particularly in the context of the military coup and displacement crises. As the research elucidates, the application of CPK in such a context shifts beyond the increasingly popular tendency to label studies as participatory, but rather embeds collaborative efforts into the conception, design and implementation of the research. Thus, the process itself has the potential to spark learning and action among the community of displaced scholar-practitioners.

The research was initiated as an attempt to understand the practices of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) – a methodology of protection championed by NP and other practitioners – in the context of Myanmar exiled communities in Thailand. However, in the process of centering the life experiences of scholars, the study evolved from a focus on UCP, as a distinct method to interrupt violence and provide direct physical protection through the use of nonviolent action, to shed broader light on the resiliency of local protection mechanisms and the evolution of localized resistance strategies in exile. Felicity Gray has explained this as a move from a “capitalised, more bounded, institutionalised version of unarmed civilian protection” to “organic, less technocratic ‘lower-

case' unarmed civilian protection strategies, evident in a range of self- and mutual protection activities that have protected the lives of friends, families, and neighbours" (Gray, 2023). This shift acknowledges the limitations of capitalized UCP in sites which, notwithstanding the significant threats faced by civilians, is not an active conflict zone. It also suggests that, in sites where UCP is not actively applied by designated UCP agencies, unarmed civilian protection initiatives can build from emergent forms of localized resilience.

The significance of this study is emphasized by its positioning in the wider context, where more prominent actors appear unable to properly understand the nature of exile communities, nor seemingly are they able to provide much needed humanitarian access and support. Anecdotally, very few people in exile are within reach of humanitarian and protection actors, and inside Myanmar, it is well-acknowledged that severe access constraints are contributing to a "grim" humanitarian landscape (UNOCHA, 2023). In this reality, it is imperative to better understand the local protection mechanisms that have emerged after the coup, and it is our hope that this study can be the beginning of an effort to produce more informed local knowledge on these initiatives, which can, in turn, spark better and more responsive resourcing.

Going even further, this research explores how local protection mechanisms should not just be understood from an immediate practical perspective. Rather, by understanding how Myanmar people build systems of support amid crisis, we argue that we can gain insights into emergent forms of community-based social systems. At risk of invoking overly ambitious terminologies, this can potentially provide a grounded form of insight into new modes of "governance" for the country's future – in the absence of state responsibility, attention should be paid to how communities are organizing themselves in mutual systems of social support. In short, by unpacking local resistance strategies and amplifying the voices of civilians at the forefront of conflict, displacement, and human rights struggles, the study seeks to inform public discourse, actions, and decisions to enhance protection, and in doing so we unpack contested terms such as "civilian", "protection", "refugees" and "migrants" through the experiences of Myanmar's new exile communities in Thailand.

For clarity, we use the term "scholar" here with broad reference, including former university academics who identify as part of the country's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and others who might be considered as activist-researchers – variously contributing to emerging forms of knowledge as a part of Myanmar's previously burgeoning civil society ecosystem. While

the role of scholars is the foundation of this study, it is acknowledged that they are also part of the broader community of newly displaced Myanmar people in Thailand. Therefore, as the study has progressed, the forms of resilience and protection explored here often makes broader reference to the wider community.

2.

Contextual overview

2.1 Myanmar's political turmoil

In the aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar, the country has been overwhelmed in a chaotic period marked by intensified violence, civil unrest, and widespread atrocities. The military coup, which took place on 1 February 2021, abruptly halted the country's fragile transition to democracy and thrust it into a new era of authoritarian rule. The repercussions of the coup have been profound, triggering a surge in violence and armed conflict across the country. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)/Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), seeking autonomy and recognition, have intensified their resistance against the military regime, leading to a deepening civil war that has enveloped the entire country. The escalation of violence and political instability has forced thousands of Myanmar citizens to flee their homes, seeking refuge in neighboring countries to escape persecution and violence.

The regime's iron-fisted crackdown extends to pro-democracy activists and civilians aligned with democratic movements, labelling them as "enemies" of the state and subjecting them to systematic oppression. Civil servants who join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) face severe repercussions and are threatened and persecuted with their livelihoods at stake (Amporn, 2023). The regime's blacklists, disseminated to passport and immigration offices, as well as private enterprises, serve as a threat to the consequences of dissent. Businesses cower in terror under the regime's pressure, fearing retribution for hiring those who join CDM, known as CDMers, or their supporters who are likewise deemed undesirable.

Recently, there has been a significant increase in civil war and the use of explosive weapons. In 2023 alone, attacks by the military government using explosive weapons rose by 114%, resulting in 2,164 reported civilian casualties from explosive weapons, including 745 fatalities, representing a 121% increase in casualties and a 155% rise in deaths compared to the previous year (AOAV, 2024). The enactment of compulsory military conscription law in early 2024 is already sparking another wave of fraught exile of combat-age civilians (Küng, 2024).

Many individuals, driven by desperation, seek refuge across borders, with Thailand becoming the main site. However, even within its borders, the fear of persecution and deportation remains significant. Thousands of refugees from Myanmar, both with and without proper documentation, struggle to survive, facing numerous legal barriers and security threats. The historical context of the Thailand-Myanmar border region adds complexity to the refugee crisis. Decades of civil conflict have created lasting wounds, further compounded by Thailand's reluctance to comply with international agreements. Efforts by the Thai state to distinguish between "refugees" and "irregular migrants", often based on arbitrary categorisations, have been a feature of this border dynamic going back decades (Grundy-Warr, 2004). Without legal recognition, refugees exist in a state of uncertainty, lacking fundamental rights and safeguards.

Civil society organizations bravely attempt to provide aid and support, yet encounter constraints imposed by oppressive laws and unhelpful authorities. Merely offering assistance poses the risk of imprisonment, serving as a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those challenging the established order. Surveillance and censorship further suppresses dissent, weakening solidarity between refugees and their advocates.

In the realm of academia, a wealth of knowledge exists on resilience among displaced populations, yet gaps persist in understanding the nuances of the current crisis. This study seeks to fill this gap, delving into the vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms of refugees and focusing on scholars at risk in Thailand. By amplifying the voices of those on the frontlines, it aims to shed light on their daily struggles and survival strategies, offering insights crucial to the pursuit of justice and protection in different zones of settlement and struggle.

2.2 Distinct zones of settlement: Mae Sot and Chiang Mai

Along the Thailand-Myanmar border, the prolonged existence of “temporary” shelters has long accommodated displaced people from Myanmar, particularly those originating from eastern ethnic regions such as Kayin, Mon and Shan States. Over the past three years, Mae Sot alone - situated just across the border from conflict-ridden Kayin State – has witnessed a substantial influx of arrivals from Myanmar, potentially reaching up to 50,000 according to informal estimates. This surge has elevated the proportion of Myanmar migrants and refugees in the city’s population to over 60 percent.

Unlike previous waves of displacement stemming from ethnic conflicts or historical episodes of violence, the current wave triggered by the February 2021 political upheaval in Myanmar has a somewhat different demographic composition. Historically, displacement in the region predominantly affected individuals from ethnic minorities, the working class, and other vulnerable communities. However, the recent wave includes a significant number of middle-class professionals and individuals from the majority religious and ethnic group (Buddhist, Bamar) seeking asylum across international borders.

Initially, some sought refuge in Thailand with the expectation of a short stay while continuing the fight for democracy. However, the prolonged uncertainty has left them increasingly vulnerable, with dwindling resources in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. The option of resettlement in a third country is becoming more inaccessible, leading most to consider residing in Thailand. The constrained support for human rights defenders and the absence of protections in Thailand create a challenging environment for displaced activists, who feel entrapped between the military in Myanmar and the authorities in Thailand.

A comparative analysis of the protection dynamics in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot reveals similarities and differences in the challenges faced by exiled scholars, available resources, and the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives. In Chiang Mai, established educational institutions and a more formalized network of support organizations shape the protection landscape differently compared to Mae Sot, where the proximity to the border and the high concentration of undocumented individuals create unique challenges and opportunities for community-based protection. The following sub-sections delve deeper into how these contextual factors influence the emergence and effectiveness of protection mechanisms in each location.

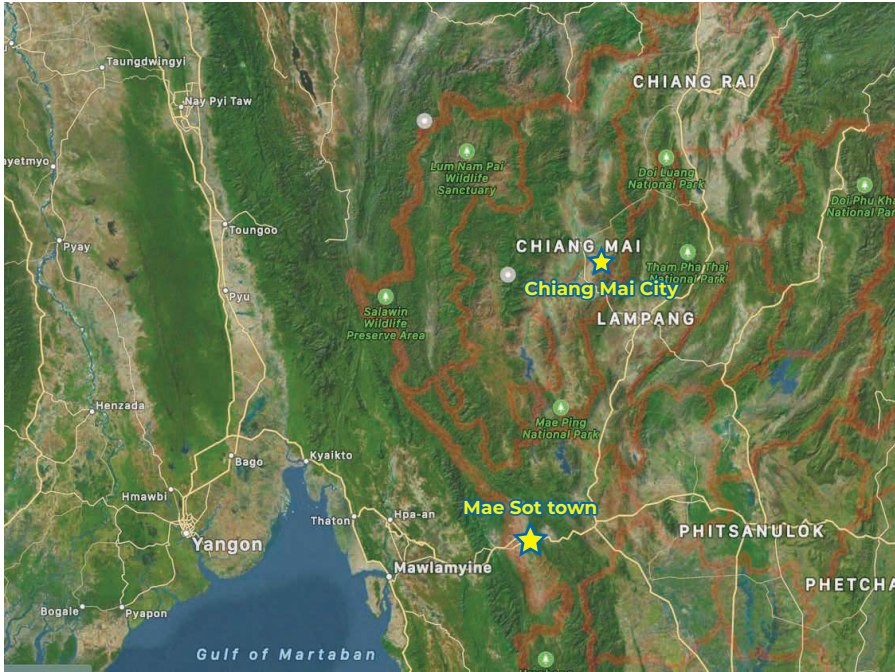


Figure 1: Map showing the location of the two study areas, proximate to important parts of Myanmar.

2.2.1 Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai has become a crucial hub for individuals displaced by the military coup in Myanmar. While those lacking passports or any documentation often settle in Mae Sot, scholars with passports or some legal documentation tend to select Chiang Mai as a hub of safety and a centre of opportunity to pursue activism, humanitarian work, study and research. Because Chiang Mai is not particularly close to the Myanmar border, it tends to facilitate more formalized and institutional arrangements among the migrant community. Chiang Mai's positioning is important to consider. It remains well linked to Myanmar's borders to the north and east, is home to large existing migrant populations, has historically been a base for many local and international organizations working on Myanmar, and was an important space for previous iterations of exile political activism (Duell, 2014). It also possesses well established educational institutions with large numbers of Myanmar students, and has an international airport providing easy access to other regional centres.

The influx of activists and human rights defenders highlights Chiang Mai's role as a sanctuary for those escaping political persecution and violence in Myanmar. These distinctive features of the city means it can offer a supportive environment for collaboration, resource-sharing, and advocacy for social justice causes. Well forged social networks have emerged as crucial elements to help people navigate the risks and challenges posed by the coup and its aftermath. Chiang Mai serves as a hub for fostering such connections, bringing together activists, NGOs, and international organizations dedicated to supporting Myanmar's transition towards peace and democracy.

The stories of individual scholars underscore the resilience and adaptability of people in the face of adversity. While we can generally say the risks faced by those in Chiang Mai are not as acute as those in Mae Sot, they still encounter significant challenges and adversity, including threats to their security and documentation, funding issues, and a lack of access to services such as healthcare. Despite this, those in Chiang Mai demonstrate unwavering commitment to their respective causes. They show an ability to adapt to new environments, engage with diverse stakeholders, and overcome personal hardships. This reflects the resilience ingrained within the activist and humanitarian community in Chiang Mai, which includes scholars, underpinned by a recognition among the community that they are somewhat fortunate to be offered this space to forge revolution amid relative security in exile.

Chiang Mai can therefore be seen as a nexus of global connections and solidarity supporting Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. The engagement of scholars with international organizations, participation in study and fellowship programs offered by Chiang Mai University, and the pursuit of academic collaboration, highlight the interconnectedness of activism and academia. Similarly, these networks and solidarity are key to enhancing skills, sharing knowledge, and sustaining the momentum of the resistance movement. Chiang Mai can be seen as a dynamic and vibrant center for activism, humanitarianism, and solidarity, where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to confront the challenges posed by political repression and social injustice in Myanmar.

2.2.2 Mae Sot

Like Chiang Mai, Mae Sot has emerged as a crucial refuge for scholars and activists at risk of persecution in Myanmar. In the border town, scholars fleeing political unrest and persecution generally face greater insecurity due to their undocumented status, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, threats, and deportation by authorities. Without proper documentation, they are unable to access essential services, legal protection, or formal employment, exacerbating their already precarious situation.

Scholars at risk in Mae Sot face threats and exploitation from both state and non-state actors. Police harassment, surveillance, and intimidation tactics are common, leading to heightened fear and insecurity among scholars and activists. Furthermore, a lack of legal status exposes people to exploitation by different actors, targeting their vulnerability for economic gain and subjecting them to hazardous working conditions. They are at constant risk of deportation back to Myanmar, where they will face persecution, arrest, and imprisonment by the military regime. The threat of deportation looms large, forcing many individuals to live in constant fear and uncertainty about their future. Moreover, the risk of deportation not only deprives them of safety and security, but also separates them from their support networks and livelihood opportunities in Mae Sot.

Additionally, people face significant economic and social obstacles, such as restricted access to education, healthcare, and job prospects. Even with limited documentation like a labour card (commonly referred to as a pink card) Mae Sot exiles frequently encounter barriers to formal employment and endure discrimination and marginalization within the informal economy. This economic instability worsens their vulnerability and impedes their efforts to reconstruct their lives.

The cumulative impact of insecurity, threats, and exploitation takes a toll on the mental health and well-being of scholars at risk and other “migrants”. Constant fear, uncertainty, and trauma stemming from past experiences of persecution and displacement exacerbate mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Access to mental health support and psychosocial services is limited, leaving scholars struggling to cope with their emotional distress and trauma.

These factors highlight the vulnerabilities and harms faced by scholars at risk as part of the broader community. Their undocumented status, coupled with threats from authorities, exploitation, deportation risks, and economic and social challenges, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive protection mechanisms, legal support, and humanitarian assistance to safeguard their rights and well-being. Additionally, addressing the psychological impact of displacement and persecution is crucial to ensuring holistic support.

Academic scholarship on Mae Sot has generally framed the city as reflective of a “state of exception” (Agamben, 2008), meaning it is a space where the normal operation of the state can be suspended. In the Mae Sot context this idea has extended, for example, to the sphere of educational provision to migrants which “involves application of law and extraordinary departure from policy” (Nongyao, 2012). Meanwhile, Pitch (2007) has explored how in Mae Sot this functioning as an exceptional border space creates forms of “partial citizenship”, while Shona Loong (2019) frames it from the perspective of a “neoliberal borderscape” whereby the Thai state exploits the space to capitalize on migrant labour.

However, while such exceptions exist from the perspective of the state apparatus, other scholars have pointed out that this also offers space for the emergence of a “state of exception within a state of exception”, in how “displaced persons can be seen as strategic agents” (Supatsak, 2014), able to themselves exploit and negotiate some space to forge lives and community. From this perspective, Kusakabe and Pearson (2016) have also shown how Burmese migrant women actively utilize the Mae Sot borderland space to juggle life options and responsibilities.

Zooming in to 2024, this scholarship on Mae Sot remains pertinent. The city continues to exist as a state of exception and a zone of uncertainty, but this “grey zone” of state functionality creates a space of opportunity for this new wave of exiles to negotiate their lives and forge community. Despite the risks and uncertainties, scholars in Mae Sot community demonstrate a steadfast commitment to their respective causes, leveraging their skills and resources to address the evolving needs of themselves and other affected communities. Many individuals and scholars have established a conducive environment by adapting to new circumstances, collaborating with like-minded and trusted individuals, and sustaining their activism and humanitarian efforts.

Importantly, Mae Sot's location on the Thai-Myanmar border facilitates cross-border collaboration and cooperation between activists, NGOs, and international organizations. Many individuals and local organisations leverage Mae Sot's proximity to Myanmar to establish networks and partnerships with local groups and entities operating in conflict-affected areas. This cross-border collaboration enhances the reach of humanitarian efforts aimed at supporting vulnerable communities on both sides of the border.

The contextual analysis of Mae Sot highlights its significance as a critical hub for activism, humanitarianism, and cross-border collaboration in response to the crisis in Myanmar. The self-reflections of CDMers illustrate the resilience, adaptability, and international solidarity of individuals working tirelessly to support affected communities and advocate for restoring peace and justice, utilizing the state of exception to their advantage.

3.

Making sense of “protection”

The concept of “protection” has undergone significant evolution, particularly in the context of humanitarian aid and conflict zones. Traditional views of protection have expanded to encompass a broader understanding that includes the agency and capabilities of affected communities. This literature review explores the evolution of the concept of protection, focusing on the development of unarmed civilian protection (UCP), community-based protection (CBP), and localized protection strategies, helping create a space through which we can understand the emergent practices in the research context.

Historically, protection in crisis contexts has been narrowly defined, primarily focusing on physical safety and immediate humanitarian aid (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2018; Betts et al., 2020). This traditional approach is characterized by top-down interventions where external actors provide security and aid to vulnerable populations. Such methods, while crucial for immediate relief, often fail to address the underlying causes of vulnerability and can perpetuate dependency among affected populations.

3.1 Theoretical foundations and evolution of protection

The theoretical foundation of protection has been influenced by a broader understanding of resilience and human rights. Resilience, initially perceived as an individual trait, has evolved into a multidimensional concept influenced by individual, familial, communal, and cultural factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001). This evolution has spurred the development of models that highlight the interplay between risk and protective factors, such as compensatory, protective, and challenge models. Since the first deployment of peacekeepers with a civilian protection mandate in 1999, civilian protection has become a key focus in UN peacekeeping, and Nasu (2011) explained that the later concept of protection was influenced by the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine within UN peacekeeping.

The specific concept gained momentum after 2001, aiming to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Though endorsed at the 2005 World Summit, R2P has been controversial, particularly regarding the legality of armed intervention, and has faced setbacks due to North-South divides (Nasu, 2011). The operationalization of R2P within peacekeeping missions remains a significant policy issue for the UN and many countries. Many operational challenges have persisted, leading the UN Security Council in 2009 to call for comprehensive guidelines for peacekeepers.

3.2 Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP)

Building on this evolving understanding, Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) represents a significant shift from traditional protection strategies. It is also known as (protective) accompaniment, among other synonyms, which generally aim to provide effective nonviolent, civilian-to-civilian alternatives to police- and military-based protection. It can be described as “the practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing, or recent violent conflict” (Bliesemann et al., 2021). It involves “trained international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international or non-local civilians” (Oldenhuis et al., 2021, p. 5). Peace Brigades International, Nonviolent Peaceforce, Meta Peace Team, and Operation Dove are examples of international UCP organizations.

Rachel Julian explores the transformative impact of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping/Protection (UCP) and its potential to demilitarize peacekeeping efforts. UCP challenges the traditional militarized approach to peacekeeping by employing nonviolent methods to protect civilians and prevent violence. Julian highlights the limitations of military peacekeeping, notably how it reinforces cycles of violence, has minimal local engagement, and widespread gender inequality. UCP involves trained civilians working within conflict zones to build relationships, create safe spaces, and intervene nonviolently to de-escalate tensions. Julian argues that UCP not only saves lives and prevents displacement but also supports sustainable peace by fostering local ownership and reducing reliance on military force. The effectiveness of UCP in various global contexts underscores its potential as a viable alternative to military peacekeeping, advocating for a broader recognition of nonviolent strategies in international peace efforts.

Organizations like Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) have been at the forefront of implementing UCP strategies, demonstrating the effectiveness of nonviolent interventions in reducing violence and protecting civilians. Julian (2020) highlights that UCP challenges traditional top-down protection strategies by promoting a bottom-up approach that leverages the agency of local communities. This approach not only provides immediate protection but also builds long-term resilience and empowerment among affected populations.

3.3 Community-Based Protection (CBP)

In parallel, Community-Based Protection (CBP) mechanisms have emerged as an evolution away from traditional protection approaches. CBP emphasizes the active participation of local communities in their protection processes, fostering meaningful partnerships and networks with key local stakeholders (Mballa et al., 2020). UNHCR and their partners practice community-based protection across sectors in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. By decentralizing protection efforts and prioritizing community agency, they argue that CBP enhances the relevance and sustainability of interventions. It centers the capacities, agency, rights, and dignity of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in programming. By regularly consulting with the affected communities, CBP identifies protection gaps and enhances local resources and capacities, leading to more effective and sustainable protection outcomes (UNHCR, 2020). Recognizing and building upon the agency and capabilities of civilians is crucial for promoting empowerment, community resilience, and locally driven protection strategies.

3.4 Localized protection strategies

Complementing CBP, localized protection strategies focus on the specific needs and contexts of communities affected by conflict. These strategies involve collaboration among local civilians, elite members of conflicting parties, and external actors, to enhance protection mechanisms and reduce violence. The study of Nonviolent Peaceforce (2016) in conflict zones like Deir Hafer and Kasab in Syria identified three categories of self and communal protection: survival and coping strategies, adaptive and mitigating strategies, and transformative strategies (Akdedian & Aljaseem, 2024). These strategies highlight the proactive role of communities in navigating their protection needs and building resilience. In various conflict zones, localized protection strategies have led to the establishment of joint monitoring committees and civilian ceasefire monitoring bodies. For instance, in Myanmar, despite changes in the conflict landscape following the 2021 coup, these mechanisms were established to serve as effective protection strategies which are adaptive to the prevailing conflict context (Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2016).

3.5 The case of Myanmar's "scholars at risk"

In the distinct context of Myanmar's scholars at risk residing in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, a notable contingent has actively engaged in non-violent resistance amid the prevailing political upheaval. This proactive involvement is underpinned by a collective consciousness deeply anchored in shared aspirations for the future, a profound connection to a common and inclusive vision, and a robust sense of solidarity among peers. This emergent collective consciousness has unveiled a previously unrecognized capacity for positive agency among these scholars, reflecting their resilience and adaptability in challenging circumstances. Their rallying slogan, "we only have us," characterizes their shared ethos, underscoring the pivotal role of collective responsibility and solidarity in their struggle.

Beyond its symbolic significance, this unity among these scholars at risk, CDMers, and other "refugees" serves as a pragmatic mechanism for mutual support, harm mitigation, and community safeguarding within their new socio-political environment in Thailand. This cohesive approach fosters resilience and facilitates collective empowerment, enabling them to navigate the complexities of displacement and contribute meaningfully to their new community while preserving their cultural identity and values.

Given the critical importance of understanding the experiences and transformations of these scholars at risk in specific contexts, a notable literature gap exists. Despite the attention given to resilience among scholars at risk in the aftermath of the coup, a comprehensive understanding of their experiences remains limited. This study aims to address these gaps in the existing literature by exploring the transformation of this groups to agents of change promoting non-violent action and community-based dialogue, adding valuable insights into the dynamics of conflict resolution and resilience among similar populations. Additionally, the emergence of a collective consciousness about the future among these scholars underscores the resilience and adaptability of individuals facing adversity. By examining the factors that contribute to this collective consciousness, the research can identify key drivers of community cohesion and solidarity, which are crucial for fostering a supportive and protective environment for scholars at risk in their new host communities, and for underpinning hopes for a new Myanmar.

4.

Research design and method

The study adopted a co-production approach to the creation of knowledge, with scholars at risk engaged in self-reflecting on their life experiences and conducting case studies to illuminate protection in the current context. This participatory process deepened their understanding of protection and allowed them to engage in the broader discourse on civilian protection in conflict-affected contexts.

It critically examines the vulnerabilities and adversities confronted by Myanmar scholars at risk, linking them with the protective measures they have employed, both during transit and after subsequent settlement in Thailand. By delving into their lived experiences, this research highlights localized efforts to foster community resilience amidst adversity. Moreover, the research delved into the broader discourse surrounding localized protection, particularly within the unique contexts of Chiang Mai and Mae Sot in Thailand. It aimed to contextualize these practices within the local environment while also drawing

insights from global perspectives on civilian protection strategies. Through this exploration, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of protection and resilience, both in theory and in practice, within the specific socio-political landscape of Northern Thailand.

From this basis, the research undertook an extended co-production of knowledge process, involving an interactive and collaborative process of generating context-specific knowledge and pathways towards a sustainable future. The building of a clear objective, and a design and method of the research which could unpack these questions, was informed by the first co-production workshop, held in Mae Sot in September 2023. A second co-production workshop was held in January 2024, after scholars had engaged in the research, which focused on data analysis. In the initial design workshop, techniques in participatory engagement – particularly the use of set-piece activities where co-researchers had to deliberate in groups – were used to bring out the experiences and perspectives of the research team members. This process emphasized local conceptions and inputs, building from RCSD's tradition in participatory approaches, including the Thai baan methodology (Mahr, 2021).

4.1 Developing objectives

The first workshop helped refine, from the initial research questions, the core objectives of the research. Prior to this engagement, RCSD and NP began the initiative with the overall objective of contributing to scholarly understanding and practical implementation by investigating how Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) principles can strengthen community resilience, particularly in environments affected by the military coup. We also aimed to amplify the voices of marginalized local resistance strategies, which are often overlooked by humanitarian agencies.

Through the initial workshop engagement, in which UCP principles were introduced and examined, the co-researchers shaped the direction of the project towards the understanding of localized protection and reliance strategies, recognizing the limitations of UCP writ-large in the context of the newly re-established displaced exile communities inside Thailand. The workshop process helped refine this towards three key objectives based on the sharing of critical insights by the co-researchers. The first was knowledge based:

1. To enhance knowledge about current (short-term/interim) protection practices, strategies, vulnerabilities and survival techniques based on the experiences of civilian researchers.

The second was process and method based, with the research team collectively interested in how the process of undertaking CPK among a group of ethnically and generationally diverse scholars was itself a space of growth:

2. To foster co-production of knowledge to create an environment for sharing values and building trust.

The final objective reflected a desire among the co-researchers to spark learning and action:

3. By reflecting on our existing practices, empowering ways of thinking for evidence-based decision-making and solutions on protection.

4.2 The research team

The research team comprised ten carefully selected co-researchers, focusing on scholars at risk from diverse backgrounds and with expertise relevant to the study. One principal investigator and two co-investigators led the team. The co-researchers participated in training to improve their proficiency in specific research methodologies, contextual analysis, and the practical application of CPK approaches. The training equipped them with the necessary skills to critically assess protection practices, focusing on conducting self-reflection and case studies.

The selection process prioritized individuals who were either research fellows or affiliated scholars attached to a Thai university and possessed relevant areas of expertise. Additionally, preference was given to individuals with direct experience of relocating to Chiang Mai or Mae Sot after the coup, ensuring first-hand knowledge of the context under investigation. Indeed, many of the researchers had been directly involved in establishing community support mechanisms, so were ideally placed to position these practices as case studies in our enquiry. Importantly, all participants had to express interest in and provide informed consent to participate in the study, ensuring adherence to ethical research practices.

4.3 Key methods

In the first workshop, the co-researchers were involved in selecting the individual methods for study that each co-researcher was to carry out. First, the writing of self-reflection served as a foundational aspect of the research, enabling researchers to critically analyze their life experiences of adversity, vulnerability, and resilience. Through introspection and reflexivity, co-researchers gained deeper insights into their personal perspectives and insights. This method allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of personal life experiences and how they related to the larger context. The team followed up with each co-researcher to provide guidance in the self-reflection process.

Case studies were applied as a complementary methodology to examine notable instances of localized protection mechanisms among the Myanmar exile community in Thailand. Each co-researcher was tasked with investigating one specific case, enabling a thorough exploration of the strategies and practices employed within these contexts. Through direct engagement with these cases – often through observing the initiative in action or interviewing key figures involved – the researchers gained deep insights into the dynamics involved and were able to document and analyze them from different perspectives.

4.4 Co-producing analytical insights

The second co-production workshop brought the co-researchers back together with the aim of integrating their self-reflection and case studies to build a comprehensive picture of the nature of the protection mechanisms. Researchers utilized their personal reflections to enrich their engagement with case studies, leading to a deeper understanding of their lived experiences as scholars at risk and framing their actions and perspectives as grounded forms of protection. By incorporating these methodologies, the research team probed the scholars to critically analyze their insights in the context of protection.

Through extensive facilitation, bringing out the key insights from all ten co-researchers, we were able to build a preliminary understanding of both the key vulnerabilities and harms faced by the community, and the specific empirical characteristics of interest to the study. These form the basis of the forthcoming analytical sections. On the latter, we were particularly interested in grasping how both the particularities of the contexts in Mae Sot and Chiang

Mai, and specific historically formulated cultural aspects of Myanmar (including the differences therein), shaped the characteristic formation of these protection mechanisms and patterns of community resilience.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were of utmost importance. The research team prioritized principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy and dignity. Furthermore, measures were implemented to mitigate harm and safeguard the wellbeing of both researchers and participants, particularly due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and associated risks. The selection of the research team and the carefully deliberated methodology emphasizes this.

5.

Findings and thematic analysis

5.1 Dynamics of threats and harms

In the wake of the military coup in Myanmar, individuals affected by political disorder and displacement have encountered numerous challenges across various dimensions. These challenges, encompassing economic struggles, social impediments, cultural barriers, institutional obstacles, the limited political space, and psychological grief, reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of their experiences. The decision to leave Myanmar, driven by violent threat and a refusal to live under a dictatorial regime, also features social, political, and economic disruptions resulting from instability and crisis.

Upon relocating to Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, individuals have encountered multiple layers of hardships, including financial struggles such as relying on the sale of personal assets to sustain themselves and facing high transportation costs as illegal residents. In particular, CDMers have encountered different forms of violence and threats, highlighting the social and political complications

of opposing authoritarian rule. Cultural adjustments and language barriers further compound the challenges of integration into new environments, particularly for undocumented individuals facing institutional obstacles to accessing essential services. The following sections provide detailed explanation on the main threats and harms identified in the self-reflections and case studies.

5.1.1 Economic struggles

The economic challenges faced by scholars at risk, particularly CDMers, are highlighted by their precarious financial situations in exile, which often has the effect of significantly jeopardizing their safety and wellbeing. These economic threats are intensified when they are unable to afford essential expenses, such as bribes in the case of arrest, or medical costs. This financial precarity increases their likelihood of deportation, putting them at even greater risk, including the potential danger of being killed. CDM scholars' self-reflections reveal profound economic struggles, underscoring the stark disparities between those with legal documents and those without legal status. For example, one prominent CDM scholar was forced to sell her house in Myanmar, but – because of her former status and position – nobody dared to buy it. She sold everything and had to borrow money from a close friend for her survival. Another scholar, previously of a middle class background, recalled having to line up for food distribution at a local organization, and finally found herself fortunate to receive 15 Baht meals from one of the initiatives featured later in this study.

Even among individuals with legal documents allowing them to reside in Thailand, significant economic challenges persist and are exacerbated by the high cost of living. Despite receiving support from friends, relatives, or partial assistance from organizations, as well as stipends from fellowship or scholarship programs, many find it extremely difficult to make ends meet. Their incomes often fall short of covering basic necessities, leaving them financially vulnerable and perpetuating economic hardship after having lost professional lives in Myanmar.

However, those without legal documents face more severe economic struggles upon relocating to Mae Sot. They are excluded from formal employment, study opportunities, and other potential benefits due to their lack of legal status, intensifying their financial constraints. Many resort to informal and often precarious means of earning income, such as odd jobs or informal selling, which offers limited financial stability. Additionally, as “illegal” residents in

the eyes of the state, they encounter additional economic barriers. One example is the exorbitant transportation costs they must bear, due to the need to avoid detection by authorities. One scholar reflected their experience being arrested in Mae Sot for her lack of documentation. She was desperate as she had no money to pay the police, and was only able to overcome the situation with the urgent support of a close network actor. The decision of those in exile to leave Myanmar is driven not only by their refusal to live under a dictatorial regime but also by the economic precarity exacerbated by political instability. The lack of adequate support systems and resources further compounds their financial challenges.

5.1.2 Social impediments

The self-reflections of scholars, particularly those engaged in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), offer valuable insights into the complex social impediments faced by individuals following the military coup in Myanmar, comparing their experiences in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. These reflections highlight the multifaceted challenges encountered by scholars at risk, shedding light on the distinct socio-political landscapes and the difficulties of integrating into local communities in the two locations. While scholars in both Chiang Mai and Mae Sot face social impediments stemming from political instability, displacement, and economic strain, their experiences have some distinct differences.

In Chiang Mai, scholars not only grapple with activism-related risks, financial hardship, and trust issues within the community, but also face challenges in mingling with local communities due to cultural differences and unfamiliar regulations. Establishing trust with local residents and navigating the complexities of cultural differences can be daunting, often hindering their ability to fully integrate and feel accepted. Additionally, finding a secure and affordable place to live becomes a significant challenge. This situation is particularly dire for those who have moved to Thailand with their families, especially those with young children, as they face additional barriers in accessing essential services and support systems.

In contrast, scholars in Mae Sot confront challenges associated with their undocumented status, including legal barriers and economic strains as displaced individuals. While they also face difficulties in integrating into local communities and rebuilding trust, the nature of their social impediments is influenced more directly by their legal status and displacement than by activism-

related risks. Like their counterparts in Chiang Mai, they struggle to find secure and affordable housing and face cultural differences that can complicate their efforts to integrate into the local community.

Furthermore, those in exile encounter significant challenges in reconnecting with their families and communities, as communication can jeopardize the safety of the people they connect with if discovered by the military or local authorities. The fear of reprisals and the high risk of arrest or other unforeseeable harms make it virtually impossible for many to return to their own country, even for those who have passports. This adds another layer of complexity to their social engagement, intensifying feelings of isolation and disconnection from their families and communities.

Overall, the social impediments faced by Myanmar scholars at risk - and much of the broader community in exile - are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with their economic challenges, legal status, displacement, and the risks associated with reconnecting with their families and communities. Addressing these complex issues requires interventions that not only alleviate their economic burdens but also support social integration, facilitate trust-building with local communities, navigate cultural differences effectively, and enable safe communication and reconnection.

5.1.3 Cultural barriers

Social and cultural barriers faced by individuals are likewise significant in both Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. One significant cultural barrier stems from the cultural nuances between Thai and Myanmar communities, which, despite some similarities, exhibit distinct ways of living, socializing, and valuing interpersonal interactions. Thai culture places a strong emphasis on values such as 'respect', 'self-control', and having a 'non-confrontational attitude'. Beyond mere stoicism, losing face by showing anger or telling a lie is a source of great shame for Thai people. This cultural emphasis on maintaining harmony, avoiding confrontation, and preserving one's reputation can pose challenges for Myanmar activists who may have different cultural norms and values, including a more confrontational approach to activism and social change.

While cultural differences and values exist beneath the surface, scholars identified how they often manifested in their daily lives and social interactions. For instance, in Thai local communities, the tolerance for noise, such as children crying loudly or other disturbances, including pets, may be lower compared

to Myanmar. In some cases, this difference in cultural norms and values has led to misunderstandings, with local residents calling the police in response to what they perceive as excessive noise or disturbance.

Many in the Myanmar exile community also express a sense of longing for their cultural heritage, including social interactions, local food, and intimate relationships within their ethnic communities. Their transition to life in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand, exposes them to cultural barriers that go beyond language difficulties. Initially, they grapple with navigating daily activities such as eating, shopping, and mobilizing in a culturally unfamiliar environment. Their adaptation to local customs, including dietary preferences and social norms, reflects the cultural adjustments required when relocating to a new setting. Furthermore, those who are undocumented face additional barriers to accessing essential services and integrating with local communities due to their legal status. These cultural barriers, compounded by legal and economic challenges, highlight the complexities of integration and adaptation individuals face in multicultural settings.

5.1.4 Institutional obstacles

Scholars note encountering significant institutional obstacles in their efforts to secure legal status, access essential services, and integrate into Thai society. These institutional barriers, influenced by both formal regulations and informal rules, create complex challenges for navigating bureaucratic systems in Thailand. In Myanmar, the oppressive military regime poses institutional barriers to freedom of expression and movement, prompting many scholars at risk to flee in search of safety and freedom. Upon arriving in Thailand, they face new challenges related to legal documentation, access to public services, and integration into local communities.

One of the notable institutional barriers is the complex and restrictive regulations governing schooling, employment and business ownership for foreigners in Thailand. Many scholars at risk who have tried to get visas and establish local stores or social interactive spaces encounter difficulties complying with Thai laws and regulations. For instance, Thai law imposes a 4:1 employment ratio, requiring businesses to hire four Thai staff members for every non-Thai employee. Thai Limited Companies must also meet specific requirements, including 2 million THB in registered capital and registration with the Social Security and VAT offices, to support each work permit. However, these requirements are reduced by 50% for foreigners married to Thai nationals,

and BOI (Board of Investment) companies are not subject to hiring restrictions for foreign experts and skilled workers. Many Myanmar people exile face challenges in meeting the legal requirements for maintaining their social and legal status, limiting their opportunities for expanding their social and political movements and creating new lives in Thailand.

In addition to formal regulations, scholars at risk also encounter informal rules and behaviors which complicate their interactions with local authorities and access to basic services. The lack of effective law enforcement contributes to various pressing issues, including poor working conditions, exploitation, human smuggling and trafficking, and transnational crime, further challenging the integration and wellbeing of Myanmar migrants and scholars at risk. Furthermore, the high costs of visas, bureaucratic red tape, and procedures for obtaining proper documentation add to the institutional barriers faced by scholars at risk. In case of facing any legal issues, access to legal aid and other required support is often limited, leaving people vulnerable to exploitation and injustice.

5.1.5 Limited political space

The narratives of scholars in their self-reflection are deeply intertwined with Myanmar's political contests and power struggles. Their involvement in CDM and resistance movements reflects their strong opposition to the military regime's seizure of power and their desire for political change. The targeting of their families due to their political affiliations highlights the personal risks associated with engaging in political dissent. These political challenges manifest in a complex interplay between individual agency and broader geopolitical forces.

The Thai authorities' control over the political landscape, characterized by a policy of non-interference as part of ASEAN, shapes the environment in which scholars at risk live their lives. This policy often limits the Thai government's intervention in the internal affairs of neighboring countries, including Myanmar, creating challenges for scholars and activists seeking refuge and support in Thailand. Additionally, increasing pressure from the Myanmar Embassy to restrict the extension of passports and conduct surveillance on dissidents further complicates the political landscape for the exile dissident community.

Despite these challenges, many continue to actively engage with opposition forces using digital platforms, and scholars seek to conduct research to contribute to further academic dialogues and assemble evidence and forge initiatives for building their idea of an inclusive, post-revolutionary society. The resilience and determination of these scholars reflect their commitment to promoting democracy, justice, and a new future for Myanmar.

The limited political space encountered by the scholar-activist community is not just confined to the domestic context but also involves navigating complex forces and policies that impact their ability to engage in activism and academic pursuits while in Thailand. The constraints imposed by Thai authorities and the Myanmar Embassy, combined with the risks associated with political dissent, create a challenging environment for scholars at risk in Thailand. Here, it is important to support their contributions to academic dialogues and social change by providing them with access to space and necessary support and protections.

5.1.6 Psychological grief

The journey of scholars at risk of fleeing to or residing in Thailand both legally or illegally is marked by profound psychological grief stemming from displacement, isolation, trauma, and political persecution. Their decision to leave Myanmar is fraught with guilt and conflict, as they wrestle with the feeling attached to refusing to stay in Myanmar while their communities face increased oppression from the military regime. Most scholars seek psychological support to address the emotional toll of political persecution and forced relocation, reflecting the challenges of living as a “stateless” individual and navigating uncertain legal status. The concern for colleagues and families at risk in Myanmar adds another layer of emotional burden, amplifying their feelings of helplessness, responsibility, anxiety, and depression. In some instances, the self-reflections of the co-researchers reveal attempts at suicide when their psychological toll becomes so unbearable, reflecting the depth of their despair and the urgency of addressing their mental health needs.

Despite these psychological struggles and uncertainties, scholars at risk demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and familiarity with the contexts in which they operate, allowing them to develop coping mechanisms and strategies to address their emotional challenges more effectively over time. They support each other, fostering a sense of community and rebuilding the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Their ability to adapt and navigate the

complexities of their situation underscores their resilience and determination to uphold their principles, advocate for change, and contribute to building a more inclusive, democratic, and just society in Myanmar and beyond.

Despair is often compounded by the feeling of missing home and worries about the future, highlighting the importance of creating communal spaces that acknowledge their emotional experiences and provide opportunities for healing, connection, and community engagement. By recognizing and addressing the psychological grief faced by scholars at risk through comprehensive support, including counseling, mental health support, and community-building initiatives, they could be supported to navigate their emotional turmoil and build resilience in the face of adversity, while also continuing their important work and contributing to positive social change.

The following self-reflection of a co-researcher case reveals her personal life experiences as a 54-year-old single mother and former educator as she navigates political upheaval, resistance, and personal challenges amidst Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement against the military coup.

Case study: Lay – A CDMer's journey of resistance against the military coup in Myanmar

Lay, a 54-year-old single mother and former educator, has experienced political unrest and upheaval multiple times in her life. From her involvement in the 8888 uprising to the recent Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the military coup, her life story offers a profound insight into the resilience, determination, and multiple layers of renewal and resistance within civil society.

Early Political awakening and the Spring Revolution

Lay's interest in politics traces back to her university days during the 8888 uprising. As an anthropology major student, she witnessed the violent suppression of student protests by the government, leading her to participate actively in strikes and revolutionary activities. Despite facing personal risks and tragedy, including the loss of friends during the protests, Lay's commitment to democracy and justice remained steadfast.

When the military coup took place, disrupting the country's fragile democratic transition, Lay, a mother and educator, found herself once again at the forefront of resistance. Despite the risks, she decided to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) on February 5, 2021, participating in protests and anti-dictatorship marches in Yangon. Faced with threats to her safety and livelihood, Moe Lay eventually returned to her hometown but continued her involvement in the resistance movement.

Escaping to Mae Sot

As the situation in Myanmar deteriorated, Lay and her son faced increasing threats from the military. In July 2022, they made the perilous journey to Mae Sot, Thailand, seeking refuge and safety. The journey was fraught with danger and uncertainty, crossing rivers, roads and jungles, confronting physical and mental challenges. Despite hardship, Lay's determination to protect her son and seek a more secure life did not waver.

Challenges and resilience in Mae Sot

Life in Mae Sot as an illegal immigrant presented its own set of challenges for Lay and her son. From a constant fear of police and immigration authorities, to struggling with language barriers and employment opportunities, the obstacles were frequent. However, Lay's resilience shone through as she sought ways to support herself and her son. She encouraged her son to take the GED exam, and also pursued educational and professional courses herself. Additionally, Lay found solace and a source of income through crocheting, even taking to teaching other CDMers in Mae Sot.

Contribution to the movement

Lay has maintained a deep sense of introspection and commitment to her political beliefs throughout her journey. She has faced personal hardships, including the loss of her job and the confiscation of her belongings, yet remains dedicated to the cause of democracy and justice. Lay's story serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of collective resistance against oppression.

Conclusion

Lay's life journey exemplifies the multiple layers of changes and resistance experienced by individuals caught in the midst of political upheaval. From her early involvement in the 8888 uprising, to her recent participation in the CDM against the military coup, Lay's story highlights the enduring spirit of resistance, resilience, and hope within civil society. Her determination to overcome challenges, support her family, and contribute to the movement underscores the transformative power of collective action and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, individuals affected by the military coup in Myanmar and subsequent displacement to Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, Thailand, face a complex array of challenges across economic, social, cultural, institutional, political, and psychological dimensions. Economic precarity affects both legal and undocumented migrants, exacerbating their vulnerability. Social and cultural barriers complicate integration into Thailand, while institutional obstacles hinder access to essential services and legal protections. Political activism and opposition to authoritarian rule expose individuals to personal risks, layered upon broader geopolitical struggles. Additionally, displacement and uncertain legal status contribute to significant psychological distress. Despite these challenges, the resilience, determination, and collective spirit of the affected individuals remain evident, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems and interventions tailored to address the multifaceted vulnerabilities and harms they endure.

In Chiang Mai, scholars like Aga, Min, Fran, and Sa faced various challenges, primarily stemming from their activism and resistance against the military regime. Their self-reflection stresses the risks of activism, including personal threats and financial hardships due to frozen accounts. Min's journey reflects the challenges of transitioning from academia to humanitarian work and facing dilemmas, skepticism, and funding issues. Fran's experiences highlight the resilience of individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds, facing persecution and advocating for human rights. Sa's reflection emphasizes the importance of maintaining confidentiality and navigating trust issues within the community, particularly among fellow activists.

Despite these challenges, as the forthcoming analysis shows, scholars in Chiang Mai found avenues for resilience and community support. They actively engaged in networks and initiatives to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) and integrate gender perspectives into transitional processes. Participation in fellowship programs and collaboration with international organizations strengthened their skills and connections, reaffirming their commitment to the cause amidst vulnerability and fear.

In Mae Sot, scholars like Htar, Thi, Lay, Thin, and Oo faced distinct social impediments shaped by their status as refugees and displaced individuals. For instance, Htar's reflection illustrates the risks of opposition to authoritarian rule, including defamation charges and surveillance by military forces. Their journey reflects the challenge of balancing activism with personal safety, facing arrest and harassment from the military regime. Lay's experiences highlight the struggles of displacement and adaptation in a foreign land, navigating legal and economic challenges as a refugee.

Thin's self-reflection underscores the importance of education and community engagement in overcoming linguistic and legal barriers, contributing to humanitarian efforts and fostering digital literacy among refugees. Dr Oo's case presents opportunities amidst challenges, showcasing leadership and initiative in addressing ethnic and religious differences and supporting CDM participants.

However, common themes of resilience, community support, and commitment to social change emerge across both locations. Scholars in both Chiang Mai and Mae Sot actively engage in initiatives to promote human rights, support vulnerable communities, and advocate for democracy, demonstrating the transformative power of activism and solidarity amidst adversity.

The following case study underscores the challenges individuals face as they navigate multiple layers of adversity before relocating to Thailand, and their struggles with resettlement.

Case study: Sa – Switching from the path of armed resistance to non-violence

Sa, a 26-year-old Bamar youth activist from Yangon, found herself at a crossroads when Myanmar's political landscape dramatically shifted under the military coup. Prior to February 2021, she had been working for an organization committed to peace process initiatives within Myanmar. However, post-coup, her organization's continued engagement with the junta conflicted with her anti-coup stance. Driven by conviction, Sa chose to resign and she became an active participant in nonviolent street protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Sa's family had a history of political activism. Her grandmother had been imprisoned for his her political involvement, and her father actively supported the CDM. Given the family's political background and their participation in protests, they were forced to disperse and hide to safeguard themselves while continuing their activism.

Threats and escape

With the military's efforts to detain youth protesters intensifying, Sa initially sought refuge in a safe-house in Yangon. Despite the relative safety it provided, she felt continually at risk. Eventually, she reached out to a friend in an area controlled by an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) for assistance. Securing a fabricated identification card and undergoing several disguises, Sa navigated numerous checkpoints to reach the safe zone, embarking on a perilous journey that ended with a newfound sense of purpose.

Shift in strategy and military involvement

Initially skeptical of armed resistance, Sa's experiences of brutal crackdowns and torture changed her perspective. She moved to an EAO-controlled area and joined a defense force. Her determination to participate in the revolution and avoid feelings of guilt propelled her through an intense military training program.

Challenges and sacrifices

Despite the camaraderie and support within the defense force, Sa's health deteriorated due to malaria and the harsh living conditions. Witnessing the death and injury of her fellow people was haunting, yet she remained resolute in her commitment to the revolution. However, concerns over wellbeing prompted discussions with her family and led to her temporary return to Yangon.

Journey to Thailand

With her family's support, Sa managed to travel safely to Thailand. Financial constraints forced her to seek university admission and take out a student loan. Though faced with numerous challenges, including making ends meet and feelings of guilt for being away from the frontline, Sa continued her education and supported the revolution through various means. She utilized networks and expertise to source resources and provide vital support to activists in Myanmar. While juggling part-time jobs and academic responsibilities, Sa volunteered for groups directly contributing to the revolution. Leveraging her professional background and network, Sa also secured a position with an organization documenting the crisis in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Sa's unwavering commitment to justice and her contempt for the coup led her to sacrifice a secure job and become fully immersed in the resistance movement. This journey, marked by danger, resilience, and determination, was supported by comrades, family, and friends. Despite challenges, Sa remains connected to the cause, utilizing her skills and opportunities not only for personal survival but also to bolster the revolutionary network fighting for a democratic and inclusive Myanmar in a non-violent way.

In conclusion, the narratives presented vividly illustrate the profound challenges faced by individuals affected by the military coup in Myanmar, highlighting the intricate dynamics of vulnerabilities and harms across economic, social, cultural, institutional, political, and psychological dimensions. The decision to flee Myanmar reflects not only a refusal to live under an oppressive regime but also the dire social conditions and political instability exacerbated by the coup. Upon relocation to Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, these individuals confront a myriad of hardships, from economic struggles and social impediments to cultural barriers and institutional obstacles, which further compound their vulnerability and marginalization. Despite this adversity, a common thread of resilience, community support, and unwavering commitment to social change emerged across both locations.

5.2 Multiplexity of protection mechanisms and resilience

This section delves into a thematic analysis of the multiplexity of protection mechanisms and resilience demonstrated by individuals and communities in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. Through a comprehensive exploration of various case studies, this analysis illuminates the proactive agency, networks of trust, mutual aid, collective action, and rebuilding of communal spaces that characterize their responses to socio-political challenges.

The first section explores proactive agency as a means of building individual and collective empowerment, emphasizing knowledge transfer and horizontal interactions among peers. The subsequent section delves into networks of trust and reciprocity, revealing the role of social networks through digital and physical platforms by reconnecting through trusted individuals and connections. Following this, the analysis reckons with a common commitment to mutual aid and volunteerism over traditional NGO-ization, underscoring the importance of community-led initiatives in fostering resilience and social cohesion.

Subsequently, collective action emerges as a transformative process of healing, trauma processing, and restoration of self-esteem, providing individuals with a sense of purpose and agency in the face of adversity. Finally, the analysis concludes with rebuilding a sense of the new commons and inspiration of hope, driven by collaborative efforts and solidarity-driven initiatives that envision a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

5.2.1 Proactive agency and resilience

In both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, individual scholars and communities exhibit proactive agency and empowerment through knowledge transfer and horizontal interactions. This proactive approach involves sharing skills, expertise, and resources horizontally among peers and across communities, rather than relying solely on the hierarchical nature of external aid. We refer to this character of the movement as proactive agency as it moves beyond agency – as conventionally referring to the individual's capacity to act – to emphasizing active efforts to build collective agency across the community.

Grassroots initiatives like Humanitarians Without Borders (HWB) exemplify this proactive agency. The organization was established by two research fellows who, after forging a space for themselves in Thailand, were able to utilize their capacity to build a network which provides humanitarian assistance in hard to reach border areas such as Karenni State, as well as in Mae Sot. The fellows, after rebuilding their own agency, quickly shifted their emphasis to collective agency, with HWB not only providing direct assistance, but supporting grassroots actors to build their capacity to act in challenging circumstances with greater confidence. Through such initiatives, individuals have gained valuable skills across areas such as humanitarian aid, gender advocacy, and community organizing, empowering them to address local needs and challenges independently.

Similarly, in Chiang Mai, academic institutions, research centers, and civil society organizations play a crucial role in facilitating knowledge exchange and horizontal interactions among scholars, activists, and practitioners. Platforms such as workshops, seminars, and collaborative research projects foster a culture of shared learning and mutual support, enabling individuals to build collective empowerment and resilience in the face of socio-political challenges.

Central to the process of building individual and collective empowerment is the cultivation of proactive agency among community members. This entails not only the dissemination of knowledge but also fostering horizontal interactions that facilitate mutual learning and skill-sharing. By emphasizing peer-to-peer exchange and collaborative problem-solving, individuals can harness their collective expertise to address common challenges and seize opportunities for growth and development.

The following self-reflection and case study exemplifies proactive agency and resilience.

Case study: Exploring vulnerability, agency, and resilience in the face of political turmoil

Aga is a passionate advocate for gender equality and social justice from an ethnic state in Myanmar which has been tarnished by decades of conflict. After earning her master's degree in Gender and Development Studies in 2012, she dedicated herself to empowering marginalized communities, particularly women and girls. As a gender specialist, Aga worked with Gender Academy Myanmar as interim director of a program where she championed women's rights before the coup.

As a passionate advocate for gender equality and human rights, she found herself thrust into the heart of Myanmar's political upheaval following the military coup. As the founder of "GAM" (pseudonym), she had ambitious plans for her organization and personal growth, but these were abruptly halted by the coup. However, rather than falling into despair, Aga transformed her shock and doubt into proactive action, demonstrating remarkable resilience and agency in the face of adversity.

After the military coup in Myanmar, Aga has resided in Thailand as a research fellow at a university. Now currently pursuing her Ph.D. studies at the university, she examines gender dynamics, conflict resolution, and sustainable development at a deeper level, bridging theory and practice in her quest for positive change. Amidst Myanmar's challenges, Aga's firm commitment to empowerment, advocacy, and scholarship continues to inspire hope and resilience for Myanmar.

Vulnerability and harms

Aga, like many others in Myanmar, faced immediate threats to her safety and livelihood following the coup. Forced detention, atrocities, and extrajudicial killings became daily realities, prompting Aga to flee her home and seek refuge in safer locations. The freezing of her bank accounts by the military junta further exacerbated her vulnerability, leaving her financially strained and unable to access her savings.

Additionally, the intensification of conflict in her hometown forced Aga to evacuate her family to safer areas, highlighting the pervasive harm inflicted by the military regime on innocent civilians.

Active agency and resilience

Despite her immense challenges, Aga refused to be passive in the face of injustice. Recognizing the importance of collective action, she mobilized her networks and formed a platform to support political activists, particularly women, who were at the forefront of the resistance movement. Through grassroots efforts and community organizing, Aga provided vital assistance to vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, lactating mothers, and those who lost their jobs due to political involvement. Her steady commitment to advancing women's rights and gender equality has been a beacon of hope amidst the turmoil.

Aga's resilience excels through her ability to adapt to shifting circumstances and overcome obstacles. Despite the multiple challenges, she persisted in supporting her community by re-engaging with her networks to secure funds and essential supplies. Her determination to find alternative solutions underscores her commitment to the cause and willingness to make a difference.

Protection and support

In 2023, Aga's journey took a significant turn when she was offered the research fellow position at a Thai university. This opportunity not only provided her with social and legal protection but also offered her a chance to relocate to Thailand, where she could continue her advocacy work in a safer environment by reconnecting with her social and professional networks. Her decision to seize this opportunity demonstrates her dedication to safeguarding herself while staying true to her mission of advocating for social justice and supporting vulnerable communities.

Moreover, Aga's initiation in establishing HWB highlights her proactive approach to addressing humanitarian needs and fostering collaboration among local actors. By founding the organization, Aga not only created a platform for collective action but also facilitated access to essential resources for those affected by conflict and displacement. Her leadership

and vision have undoubtedly made a significant impact on the lives of many.

Throughout her journey, Aga mobilizes the support of her trusted network, particularly female allies who provide emotional and psychological support during times of uncertainty. Their solidarity served as a source of strength for Aga, enabling her to persevere. Additionally, the establishment of HWB provided a platform for collective action and mutual support, allowing Aga to contribute to the broader humanitarian effort while receiving assistance from like-minded individuals.

Reflection

Aga's experience reveals the interconnectedness of vulnerability, agency, resilience, and protection in the context of political turmoil. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks, she remained steadfast in her commitment to justice and human rights, demonstrating the transformative power of collective action and solidarity. Her journey is a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring capacity for hope in even the darkest times.

5.2.2 Networks of trust and reciprocity

Networks of trust and reciprocity serve as crucial connectors between institutionalized structures and more loosely formed communities in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. These networks facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and support, bridging gaps among scholars and between individuals and organizations.

In Mae Sot, many CDMers and other Myanmar people at risk utilize digital platforms and social media to connect with volunteers, donors, and beneficiaries, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Additionally, informal networks of trust and reciprocity enable individuals to navigate risks and challenges collectively, spreading influence and amplifying impact through mediation and collaboration.

In Chiang Mai, the role of networking becomes evident in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between formal institutions, such as academic institutions and government agencies, as well as community-based organizations and grassroots initiatives. Social networks are crucial in sharing risks, resources, and influence across different sectors, fostering trust and reciprocity among diverse stakeholders.

Interconnected networks of trust and reciprocity serve as vital channels linking institutionalized structures with more loosely formed community networks, enabling the former to ensure their work is grounded in the community, and enabling the latter to have a degree of protection in undertaking their work. Both digital and physical platforms play a crucial role in facilitating these connections, enabling the crucial exchange of mutually beneficial information.

Case study: Networks of trust and reciprocity in humanitarian protection research

Background: The catalyst for change

Min's journey began with relative stability and academic pursuit in Myanmar. The tragic death of a young girl due to military violence during the coup served as a turning point, propelling him unexpectedly into the realm of activism and humanitarian work. This transition marked not only a career shift but also a profound transformation in his worldview. His mission evolved from promoting youth development through education policy to actively protecting and supporting the younger generation against the military junta.

Transition to humanitarian work

Recognizing the revolution's need for substantial resources, Min strategically moved to Thailand. His aim was to utilize his academic skills to support the Myanmar people and learn from civil society organizations (CSOs) operating along the Thailand-Myanmar border. This decision marked the commencement of his challenging yet fulfilling journey in humanitarian efforts.

Arriving in Thailand: Challenges and realizations

Upon arrival in Bangkok, Min initially faced skepticism and suspicion from the Myanmar labor community who he sought to integrate with.

Despite initial challenges, including a struggle to find a suitable space for his humanitarian work and feelings of hopelessness, he persisted in his mission. His relocation to Mae Sot exposed him to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Mae Tao Clinic, where he learned about the efficient provision of services to displaced Myanmar persons during crises.

Building trust and networks

Min identified trust as the cornerstone of impactful work. He understood the importance of fostering trust among work partners, the community, and most importantly, within himself.

In Mae Sot, Min encountered the CDM group, engaged in creating eco-prints and supporting other Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) activists who remained within Myanmar. Inspired by their resilience and efforts to persevere and assist others, he began assisting them by marketing their products online and in various marketplaces. Despite facing challenges, the CDMers sought external assistance and strived for self-reliance, showcasing their determination and adaptability.

Another significant aspect of Min's humanitarian journey was his support for shelters in Myanmar's conflict-ridden Upper Sagaing region, through a network of trusted friends. His aid efforts positively impacted thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs), earning him trust and recognition as a key intermediary for both the Karenni community and in Upper Sagaing.

Utilizing these networks of trust and reciprocity, Min initiated fundraising efforts for the Karenni people. Collaborating with a like-minded colleague, they began supporting the Karenni community more effectively. As the demand for assistance grew, he began working to establish an organization capable of operating effectively along the border, reflecting his ability to manage larger projects aiding thousands.

Conclusion

Min's journey exemplifies the power of networks of trust and reciprocity in humanitarian protection work and research. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks, his unwavering commitment, resilience, and ability to build and leverage trust-based networks enabled him to make

a significant impact in supporting and protecting Myanmar people. His transformative journey from a policy thinktank to frontline humanitarian work underscores the importance of adaptability, perseverance, and the invaluable role of trust in fostering meaningful change and making a difference in the lives of those in need, particularly showcasing how collective resilience is strongly founded upon the ability of those with more networks, resources and relative security to deeply engage with those on the ground.

5.2.3 Mutual/communal aid

This emphasis on building collective capacity is further explored here as characterized by a strong commitment to mutual aid, communal solidarity, and volunteerism over traditional NGO-ization – a distinctive aspect of the responses across communities of Myanmar people. Both in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, the study found that, rather than relying solely on external aid or institutionalized structures, communities prioritize grassroots initiatives and collective action to address local needs and challenges, implicitly steering away from formal organizational arrangements which might be perceived as being pursued for individual benefit rather than community need.

In Mae Sot, initiatives like the “15 baht per meal” program exemplify this commitment to mutual aid and communal solidarity, as volunteers and community members come together to provide essential support to activists and vulnerable populations. Similarly, in Chiang Mai, the emphasis on volunteerism and *parahita* (selfless service) fosters a culture of collective responsibility and community engagement, transcending the limitations of traditional NGO-ization.

This focus on mutual aid and volunteerism reflects a deep-seated commitment to grassroots empowerment and bottom-up approaches to social change in both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. By prioritizing community-led initiatives and collective action, individuals and communities reclaim agency and autonomy in addressing their own needs and shaping their futures. As revealed in self-reflections and the analysis workshop, a cornerstone of community resilience lies in the ethos of mutual aid and volunteerism, which prioritizes collective welfare over individual gain. This commitment to “*parahita*” – a concept

traditionally synonymous with village social welfare organizations in Myanmar, but which also suggests a cultural inclination towards selfless service to the community – transcends the narrow confines of NGO-isation, emphasizing grassroots initiatives rooted in solidarity and reciprocity. As the case study here explores, mobilizing community resources and fostering a culture of shared responsibility, mutual aid initiatives bolster social cohesion and empower individuals to address their own needs collectively.

However, it is crucial to consider the long-term sustainability and scalability of these initiatives. Factors such as funding, organizational capacity, political support, and changing contextual dynamics can significantly impact the durability and expansion of community-based protection efforts. In the face of protracted crises and resource constraints, grassroots initiatives may face challenges in maintaining operations and adapting to evolving needs. Further research is needed to examine the enabling and hindering factors for sustaining and scaling up these initiatives and identify potential strategies for overcoming barriers to long-term success. By addressing these issues, researchers and practitioners can work towards developing more resilient and adaptable community-based protection models that can withstand the test of time and changing circumstances.

Case study: The “15 baht a meal” campaign in Mae Sot

As people in Mae Sot faced legal precariousness in Thailand as they sought refuge not for economic gain but for personal safety, Thai authorities frequently conducted raids, leading to arrests, bail requests, threats, and even deportations back to Myanmar. The challenges escalated with language barriers, lack of income, and unemployment. For newcomers in particular, accessing wholesome meals was not only financially difficult, but venturing onto the streets sometimes carried particular security risks.

Initiation of the campaign

Ko Min, the former leader of the ABU (pseudonym), envisioned a support system for resilient revolutionaries facing hardships as the revolution persisted. Despite facing detention from February 1, 2021, to February 24, 2022, Ko Min remained undeterred. Drawing inspiration from the “500 kyats a meal” initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic

in Myanmar, he proposed a similar scheme to alleviate the food-related struggles of the displaced revolutionaries. His idea gained traction and received backing from Ko Naing and Ko Ni of the “88 Generation in America.” With an initial funding of 65,000 baht, they officially launched the “15 baht a meal” program on August 8, 2023, commemorating the historic 8888 revolution in Myanmar.

The program commenced with 15 dedicated volunteers who unitedly prepared meals and delivered them to the beneficiaries’ homes via motorcycles. Operating at a loss rather than for profit, the primary objective of the “15 baht a meal” campaign was to address the immediate food-related challenges faced by the displaced CDM participants and other revolutionaries, providing tasty and nutritious food which suited the Myanmar palate, while also instilling a sense of home and community in exile.

The campaign serves as a testament to the unwavering commitment of people both within Myanmar and internationally. It symbolizes global solidarity in the face of the dictatorship’s oppressive rule in Myanmar. Despite the hardships encountered, the people remain steadfast in their beliefs, supporting their comrades in any way possible.

The campaign’s grounded success exemplifies collective action taken by civilians during times of crisis, highlighting proactive agency, resilience, and the spirit of mutual aid. It underscores the power of community-driven initiatives in safeguarding and supporting individuals amidst political upheavals and oppressive regimes. Volunteers continue to cook and transport the 15 baht meals as part of a steadfast selfless commitment to community welfare.

5.2.4 Collective action

Collective action serves as a powerful form of healing, trauma processing, and restoration of self-esteem for individuals and communities in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. By coming together to address shared challenges and advocate for social justice, individuals find solace, solidarity, and validation in collective action. Overwhelmingly, self reflections revealed how it was not sufficient to overcome trauma merely through existing, but that reestablishing a sense of dignity and purpose through collective action was central to coping and forming more sustained resilience in exile.

In Mae Sot, participation in local initiatives provides individuals with a sense of purpose and agency in the face of trauma and adversity. Through collective action, activists and volunteers navigate complex emotions, build resilience, and restore their sense of self-worth and dignity, despite facing persecution and displacement. Similarly, in Chiang Mai, engagement in grassroots activism, advocacy campaigns, and community organizing becomes a source of empowerment and healing for individuals affected by political repression and displacement. By mobilizing collectively for social change, activists confront trauma, reclaim agency, and rebuild their sense of belonging and esteem within their communities.

An example brought out in the research is Joy House, a community space founded in Mae Sot after the coup, also present in other localities in Thailand where there is a notable exile community. Joy House has become a crucial part of life in Thailand for many new arrivals, a space where they can learn languages, practice dance and yoga, access psychosocial support and host community events and workshops, among other things. The space runs on volunteer teachers and is open to all in the community to host new initiatives.

Collective action thus becomes a transformative process of healing and empowerment, enabling individuals to transcend their experiences of trauma and adversity and reclaim agency over their lives and futures. Collective action emerges not only as a means of bringing tangible change but also as a powerful tool for healing and restoration. In the aftermath of trauma and upheaval, communities often grapple with complex emotions and fractured identities. Through collective endeavors, individuals find solace in solidarity, confronting their shared experiences and reclaiming agency over their lives. This process of collective healing fosters a sense of belonging and restores a collective sense of esteem, empowering individuals to envision a brighter future. One such example of collective healing is shown in the case study here.

Case study: Loot Lat Yay Café – A beacon of support and collective healing in Mae Sot

In the midst of Myanmar’s escalating civil war, the tea shop “*Loot Lat Yay*” (Freedom) in Mae Sot, Thailand, emerged as a sanctuary for exiles seeking solace and community. The café exemplifies the power of civilian-led initiatives in fostering resilience, providing emotional support and addressing the multifaceted needs of those displaced due to political turmoil.

Win, recognizing the dire need for employment and community among recent political migrants, invested his savings of \$6,700 to cover the initial rent and convert a two-story building into a tea shop. On 1 August 2021, the doors of Loot Lat Yay were opened, aiming to serve as both a business and a refuge. The ground floor functions as a restaurant, offering traditional Myanmar dishes like *kyayoh* noodles with pork and egg and *mohinga*, a fish soup. The second floor, a 200-square-meter open-air space, is dedicated to hosting activities and events for the diaspora.

Community engagement and healing

The ambience of the tea shop resonates with stories of past events and hopes for the future. While the café provides a platform for political discussions and gatherings, it also serves as a safe space and gives an essence of home for those grappling with homesickness and trauma. The lush greenery and vegetable gardens planted within the shop aim to reconnect patrons with nature, providing a sense of calm and peace.

Supporting political activism and entrepreneurship

Loot Lat Yay actively supports political migrants by allowing them to sell their products, such as clothes, food, souvenirs, and books, within the shop. The café also employs seven individuals, all of whom are exiles from the Spring Revolution and Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Half of the café’s profits are allocated to sustain the staff, while the remaining half is sent back to Myanmar to aid displaced individuals.

Inclusive and supportive initiatives

To ensure accessibility, the café offers 20 free food tickets daily, allowing individuals to enjoy tea even if they cannot afford it. In cases of emergencies, such as arrests by Thai police, Loot Lat Yay collaborates with other donors to provide interest-free emergency loans, promoting mutual support and solidarity within the community.

Cultural and artistic space

The top floor of the café houses an art gallery showcasing the works of local artists. Loot Lat Yay also facilitates meetings, memorial events, dinners, and monthly political discussions, with a portion of the proceeds contributing to event organization.

Conclusion

Loot Lat Yay Café stands as a testament to the transformative power of collective action and civilian-led initiatives in addressing the complex needs of those affected by political upheaval. By fostering a sense of community, providing emotional support, and promoting economic empowerment, the space not only serves as a social business but also as a symbol of resilience, hope, and solidarity. As the Myanmar revolution continues, Loot Lat Yay is destined to remain a cherished and memorable institution in Mae Sot, embodying the spirit of freedom, unity, and mutual aid.

5.2.5 Culminating in rebuilding a sense of the “new commons”

Ultimately, the culmination of proactive agency, networks of trust, mutual aid, and collective action in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai leads to the rebuilding of a sense of the new commons and the inspiration of hope. Through collaborative efforts and solidarity-driven initiatives, individuals and communities reimagine and redefine shared spaces, values, and aspirations, fostering a renewed sense of common purpose and collective identity.

In Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, the establishment of innovative initiatives like RCSD’s fellowship and scholarship programmes, conferences and dialogues, Humanitarians Without Borders, Loot Lat Yay Café, Joy House, and the 15 Baht

a Meal program creates spaces for collective engagement, dialogue, and collaboration, shaping a “new commons” based on principles of solidarity, reciprocity, and social justice. Across both sites, activism and civil society engagement inspire hope and resilience among individuals and communities affected by political unrest and displacement, igniting a sense of collective agency and possibility for positive change.

This renewed sense of the new commons and inspiration of hope reflect the transformative power of collective action and community resilience in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, transcending the boundaries of individual suffering and adversity to envision a more inclusive, equitable, and hopeful future for all. The collective efforts lie in the rebuilding of a new commons — a shared space characterized by inclusivity, sustainability, and collective well-being. Through collective action and mutual support, communities reimagine their social fabric, building bonds of solidarity and resilience. In doing so, they inspire hope for the future, reassuring individuals to confront adversity with resilience and optimism. This renewed sense of agency and community engenders a vision of a more equitable and compassionate society grounded in the principles of mutual aid and collective empowerment.

By synthesizing these thematic elements, this analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the intricate web of protection mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by individuals and communities in navigating complex socio-political landscapes. The exploration of these themes provides deeper insights into the dynamic interplay between individual agency, collective action, and community resilience in the pursuit of social justice and positive change.

The analysis highlights the multidimensional nature of protection mechanisms and collective resilience strategies which individuals and communities apply. Through proactive agency, networks of trust, mutual aid, collective action, and the rebuilding of communal spaces, residents of these regions demonstrate a remarkable capacity to confront and overcome socio-political challenges.

Proactive agency emerges as a driving force behind individual and collective empowerment, as community members engage in knowledge transfer and horizontal interactions to address local needs independently. Networks of trust and reciprocity serve as vital connectors between formal institutions and grassroots initiatives, facilitating the exchange of information and resources across digital and physical platforms. Moreover, the commitment to mutual aid and volunteerism over traditional NGO-ization reflects a deep-seated

dedication to grassroots empowerment and community-led initiatives. Collective action emerges as a transformative process of healing and empowerment, enabling individuals to confront trauma and rebuild their sense of self-worth and dignity.

Ultimately, the accumulation of these efforts leads to the rebuilding of a new commons — a shared space characterized by inclusivity, solidarity, and hope. The following case study entails the transformative initiative of fostering a “new commons”, rekindling hope through attempts to envisage possibilities for a future Myanmar based on the existing foundations of community support.

Case study: Building a “new commons” in Myanmar through scholar-led initiatives

Amidst Myanmar’s political upheaval and civil unrest, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, has embarked on transformative initiatives to foster a new future and reignite hope for Myanmar. This approach has enabled individuals and communities to reimagine and redefine shared spaces, values, and aspirations, laying the groundwork for a democratic, inclusive, and resilient future in Myanmar.

Myanmar Research Fellowships and other scholarship programs

Recognizing the profound impact of political instability on Myanmar’s academic and research community, RCSD initiated the Myanmar Research Fellowship, and other scholarship and training programs. These programs offer emerging scholars and students a sanctuary and supportive environment to continue their academic pursuits, providing them an opportunity to contribute to the creation of a shared commons essential for protection, resilience, and the envisioning a new future for Myanmar. The Myanmar Research Fellowship invites emerging scholars with a robust research background to undertake a one-year research project at RCSD, providing comprehensive support including visa assistance, monthly fellowship payments, medical insurance coverage, dedicated working space, tailored research training and mentorship, and opportunities to participate in academic events, conferences, and field trips.

Myanmar Interactive Dialogues (MIDs)

The MIDs, initiated by RCSD, serve as a platform for fostering open dialogue, collaboration, and the creation of interactive pace. These dialogues convene the CMU-affiliated community of academics, students, research fellows, and practitioners working on Myanmar to address critical issues such as federalism, peace, ethnicity, identity, and inclusion. Consecutive MIDs sessions have stimulated illuminating discussions, drawing diverse perspectives and highlighting the complex realities and critical considerations associated with federalism and governance in Myanmar. These events enable participants to share experiences, identify common challenges, and anticipate potential solutions, strengthening critical thinking, intellectual coherence, and collaborative networks among stakeholders.

Burma/Myanmar conferences & protection research

The International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, organized by RCSD, serves as another cornerstone in fostering future potential by providing a platform for scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders to exchange ideas, present research findings, and collaborate on critical issues affecting Myanmar. Additionally, RCSD's protection research initiatives aim to understand the challenges faced by scholars and communities in Myanmar and develop strategies to address them, thereby contributing to the creation of safe and conducive environments for academic pursuits.

Engagement with CDMers

RCSD's engagement with CDM participants enriches the "new commons" by fostering solidarity-driven initiatives and the co-production of knowledge. By collaborating with and supporting CDM participants, RCSD strengthens resilience and protection mechanisms, empowers individuals and communities, and contributes to rebuilding a sense of common purpose and collective identity in Myanmar.

Fostering "new commons"

These initiatives collectively contribute to cultivating the "new commons" – collaborative and inclusive platforms where scholars and stakeholders can seek protection, share resources, knowledge, and experiences, and co-create solutions to address pressing challenges facing Myanmar.

These “new commons” facilitate:

- **Protection and safety:** Providing a safe and conducive environment where scholars and communities can continue their pursuits without fear of persecution or reprisal.
- **Resilience and empowerment:** Empowering scholars and communities to become active agents of change, fostering resilience, and driving resistance and protection mechanisms through collaborative research, networking, and knowledge exchange.
- **Envisioning an inclusive future:** Encouraging scholars and stakeholders to engage in critical thinking, dialogue, and collaboration to envision and shape an inclusive future for Myanmar grounded in shared values, understanding, and common goals.

6.

Lessons learned

6.1 Enhancing protection knowledge, strategies, practices and localization

Based on the thematic analysis presented in the previous part, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance protection knowledge, strategies, practices, and localization in conflict-affected regions:

1. Promote proactive agency and horizontal interactions

Encourage knowledge transfer and capacity-building concerning localized protection strategies and practices. Foster a culture of shared learning and mutual support among individuals and communities by emphasizing peer-to-peer exchange and collaborative problem-solving.

2. Foster networks of trust and reciprocity

Strengthen networks that bridge formal institutions with grassroots initiatives, both digitally and physically. Facilitate dialogue and cooperation between diverse stakeholders through mediation, thus sharing risks, resources, and influence. Build platforms for information exchange, resource-sharing, and support networks to enhance community resilience and localize protection mechanisms.

3. Prioritize mutual aid and volunteerism over NGO-ization

Support initiatives that prioritize mutual aid, communal solidarity, and volunteerism, alongside conventional aid through NGOs and INGOs. Empower individuals and communities to address local needs and challenges independently, fostering grassroots empowerment and bottom-up approaches to protection.

4. Enhance collective action for healing and empowerment

Promote collective action as a means of healing, trauma processing, and the restoration of self-esteem. Facilitate opportunities for individuals and communities to come together, advocate for social justice, and confront shared challenges. Provide platforms for collective engagement, dialogue, and collaboration to foster solidarity and resilience.

5. Rebuild a sense of the new commons and inspire hope

Support initiatives that reimagine and redefine shared spaces, values, and aspirations based on principles of solidarity, reciprocity, and social justice. Foster a renewed sense of common purpose and collective identity through collaborative efforts and solidarity-driven initiatives. Encourage scholar communities to envision a more inclusive, equitable, and hopeful future grounded in mutual aid and collective empowerment.

6. Strengthen community based protection

The study shows the importance of community-based approaches to protection, drawing from the Community-Based Protection (CBP) tradition and incorporating CPK methods. It highlights the challenges of diverse methodologies under CBP and proposes the Integrated Framework of Protection (IFP) as a structured yet adaptable solution. Additionally, it discusses the role of the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in enhancing community safety. Overall, integrating insights from CBP, IFP, and NP can lead to more effective strategies for safeguarding vulnerable populations and promoting resilience.

7. Shining a light on scholars as agents of protection

While there has been some attention paid towards the role of scholars in studying UCP and thinking and writing about UCP, the research poses the potential for scholars to act as protection practitioners in the way they do research and protect each other in their capacity as scholars. This can help break down the perceived dichotomy between traditional activists that protect and scholars that analyse these efforts.

7.

Conclusion and key findings

This collaborative research has provided an in-depth understanding of the threats and harms, and the forms resilience and protection mechanisms for Myanmar refugee scholars and the wider emerging exile community in Thailand. Through the method of coproduction of knowledge (CPK), a group of Myanmar scholars at risk were engaged closely as co-researchers, driving the study towards understanding emergent forms of community and support that provide critical and holistic forms of protection. The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of proactive agency, interconnected networks of trust, and mutual aid in fostering resilience and empowerment within communities facing adversity, elucidating these key findings:

Proactive agency and empowerment

The cultivation of proactive agency among community members emerged as a central tenet of resilience-building efforts. By fostering knowledge transfer and horizontal interactions, individuals were able to harness their collective expertise to address common challenges and seize opportunities for growth and development.

Networks of trust and reciprocity

Interconnected networks of trust and reciprocity played a crucial role in linking institutionalized structures with more loosely formed community networks. Digital and physical platforms facilitated the exchange of information,

resources, and support, while mediation emerged as pivotal in sharing risks and spreading influence within and across these networks.

Mutual aid and volunteerism

The ethos of mutual aid and volunteerism emerged as a cornerstone of community resilience, transcending the narrow confines of NGO-isation of aid. Through grassroots initiatives rooted in solidarity and reciprocity, individuals mobilized community resources to address collective needs and empower themselves to confront adversity collectively.

Collective action for healing and restoration

Collective action emerged not only as a means of effecting tangible change but also as a powerful tool for healing and restoration. By confronting shared experiences and reclaiming agency over their lives, communities found solace in solidarity and restored a collective sense of esteem, inspiring hope for the future.

This study makes several key contributions to the existing literature on community resilience and empowerment, notably:

- It provides empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of proactive agency, interconnected networks of trust, and mutual aid in fostering resilience, protection and empowerment within scholar communities facing adversity.
- By highlighting the role of locally-led initiatives in transcending the limitations of traditional NGO-based approaches, this study offers insights into alternative models of protection mechanisms and social change.
- Through its focus on collective action as a means of healing and restoration, this study sheds light on the transformative potential of solidarity and collective empowerment in the aftermath of trauma and upheaval.

While this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of community resilience and empowerment, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- The study's scope was limited to a specific context and targeted scholar groups, and findings may not be generalizable to other settings. Future research could explore the applicability of these findings in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

- The study focused primarily on the perspectives of scholars at risk, with limited exploration of the perspectives of external stakeholders. Future research could more incorporate diverse voices to understand the dynamics at play further.
- Finally, future research could explore the long-term impacts of community resilience-building efforts, including their sustainability and scalability over time. By tracking outcomes longitudinally, researchers can better assess the lasting effects of these localized initiatives and identify areas for continued improvement.

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Violence and political instability following the 2021 coup-d'état has forced thousands of Myanmar people to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighboring Thailand. Upon arrival, these communities in exile – which includes many scholars and academics at risk – take proactive steps to collectively adapt and survive with everyday threat and adversity. The research contained in this report, based on a co-production of knowledge process conducted with and by the scholars themselves, aims to showcase the multidimensional nature of “protection” mechanisms and collective

resilience strategies which individuals and communities apply. Seeking to contribute to a shift in the scholarship away from prioritizing institutionalized and technocratic approaches to protecting civilians, and towards localized and organic mutual protection activities, the research accounts for distinct characteristics of this exile network. We explain how proactive agency, networks of trust, mutual aid, and collective action are everpresent features, potentially giving insight into the emergence of inclusive communal spaces for forging a future Myanmar.

