Development and Change
Published on behalf of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

Foreign Aid, Civil Society and Post-colonial Statebuilding in the Thai–Myanmar Borderworld

Shona Loong

ABSTRACT

Foreign aid is often used to promote good governance and to strengthen civil society, yet it can reproduce the uneven geographies of post-colonial statebuilding. This article provides a relational and interpretivist analysis of foreign aid in southeast Myanmar between 2012 and 2021, when Western donors backed the country's democratic transition. The aid influx generated tensions between donors and long-standing border organizations — civil society actors that had operated in conflict areas from across the Thai border for decades — who felt increasingly sidelined. This article makes three contributions to critical development studies and political geography. First, it shows how aid disbursed under the good governance agenda is embedded in contested relations between centre and margins — a dialectic central to post-colonial statebuilding. Second, it unpacks tensions between donors and border organizations, revealing competing political projects: while donors aimed to reform the Myanmar government, border organizations resisted post-colonial statebuilding itself. Third, the article shows that margins, though subject to state violence, were foundational to border organizations' work. The article conceptualizes border organizations as leveraging and seeking to expand the Thai–Myanmar borderworld — interlinked and interstitial spaces, including refugee camps, frontier towns and conflict areas, that confound a distinction between state and non-state.

INTRODUCTION: AT THE MARGINS OF A 'DEVELOPMENT DARLING'

Per capita, official development assistance (ODA) commitments to Myanmar increased roughly 10-fold between 2010 and 2015 (Carr, 2018: 8), causing journalists and scholars to dub the country the world's latest 'development darling' (e.g. Patteran, 2014; Strefford, 2015). This aid influx was triggered by what the World Bank (2019: 4) termed a 'triple transition', encompassing Myanmar's transition from junta rule to democracy, civil war to ceasefires and state-led socialism to market capitalism. This article explores how this aid influx shaped the civil society landscape in southeast Myanmar, situated near the Thai border and the site of a multigenerational armed conflict between the Myanmar military and an ethnonational group,

Development and Change 57(2): 289–314. DOI: 10.1111/dech.70047

the Karen National Union (KNU). In this region, border organizations, which are civil society organizations with logistics and management bases across Myanmar's border with Thailand (Décobert, 2016), have long leveraged foreign aid to serve and advocate for conflict-affected people.[1]

Specifically, this article discusses the relationship between post-colonial statebuilding and foreign aid disbursed to civil society organizations in the name of 'good governance'. Scholars argue that post-colonial statebuilding can be understood through a dialectical relationship between centre and margins. While experiencing state violence and exclusion, margins constitute the post-colonial state 'as the exception is a necessary component of the rule' (Das and Poole, 2004: 4; see also Cons and Sanyal, 2013; Karrar and Mostowlansky, 2018; Rajaram, 2015). At the same time, marginalized actors leverage this position in efforts to undermine the 'very social categories that peripheralize [their own] existence' (Tsing, 1994: 279). This article takes an interpretivist approach to how centre–margin relations are shaped by the international aid regime, encompassing Western donors seeking to channel foreign aid into civil society organizations in the post-colonial world. Here, the term Western donors refers to international organizations, international NGOs (INGOs) and Western governments disbursing public funds in the interests of 'good governance' in the Global South, while civil society refers to organizations embedded as such in the aid regime. In other words, this article is about civil society as an object and agent of aid interventions and not non-state organizations writ large.

Ultimately, foreign aid disbursed to civil society organizations is bound up in unequal, violent and contested processes of post-colonial statebuilding. This article, written from the vantage point of southeast Myanmar from 2012 to 2021 and focusing on the perspectives of border organizations, contributes to critical development studies and political geography in three ways. First, it advances a relational approach to the intersections between foreign aid and post-colonial statebuilding, situating aid interventions directed at good governance within a dialectical relationship between centre and margins. Second, it documents a tension between donors' and civil society organizations' views of post-colonial statebuilding. Western donors often presumed that building up civil society in centres of state power could steer central governments onto the path of liberal democracy (Duffield, 2002). In contrast, border organizations sought not to make the central government better, but to challenge statebuilding itself. Third, the article shows that although margins are targets of state violence, border organizations saw marginal spaces as central to their practice of leveraging

1. Border organizations often refer to themselves as 'community-based organizations' (CBOs). This article uses 'civil society' in order to engage in ongoing debates about civil society as a target and agent of aid interventions. However, as I will show, the article recognizes that border organizations often have political projects that exceed or contradict the goals of aid donors.

aid to contest the violence of post-colonial statebuilding. Their strategic use of marginal spaces distinguished border organizations from civil society organizations operating 'inside' Myanmar — which is to say, organizations with headquarters and most of their activities located in Myanmar government-controlled areas — which were also entangled in aid politics in varied and contested ways (see Matelski, 2024).

True to an interpretivist approach, my findings are situated in a particular context while they also aim to expand the wider conversation on civil society and foreign aid (see, for example, Fujii, 2018; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).[2] For a decade before the 2021 coup, there was a heated and polarized debate about aid and civil society in southeast Myanmar (Décobert, 2014). Keen to back the 'triple transition', donors sought to grow the civil society landscape inside Myanmar and so urged border organizations to relocate their headquarters into the country (Olivius, 2019). However, many border organizations were reluctant. This article takes their views seriously, discussing how, for border organizations, challenging post-colonial statebuilding required working in and through the Thai–Myanmar *borderworld* (following Sadan, 2013) — an interstitial space between Thailand and Myanmar, encompassing KNU-controlled territories, refugee camps and frontier towns. Border organizations did not only work 'across' the border; rather, through relational networks with the KNU and war-affected Karen communities, they sought to build spaces beyond the reach of the post-colonial state — the borderworld. By contrast, donors adopted a state-centric approach to aid and civil society. Within this framework, they could not recognize that the Thai–Myanmar borderworld made the work of border organizations possible.

This article is based on multi-sited ethnographic research in southeast Myanmar from 2018 to 2019. This entailed participant observation at two Karen-led civil society organizations, a border organization and an organization on the 'inside', for a period of four months each. The author conducted 78 interviews with donors, civil society actors and KNU officials and analysed reports produced by donors and civil society organizations. Most interviews were conducted in English, the lingua franca of the aid regime and a reflection of its colonial heritage.[3] All names are pseudonyms. Completed before the 2021 Myanmar coup, this research nevertheless speaks to the entanglements between foreign aid and resistance since. Today, borderland areas seized by resistance forces, informally armed

2. As I will show, border organizations emerged out of the specific history of the Thai–Myanmar border (see Banki, 2025; Jagger, 2018; Loong, 2025b; Olivius and Hedström, 2025). Activism in Myanmar's other borderlands has by contrast been constrained due to remoteness or securitization.
3. Burmese is a contested language in this area and some staff of border organizations cannot speak the language. The Karen language, conversely, comprises several dialects, which were not always spoken by Karen interviewees from Myanmar government-controlled areas.

revolutionaries and civil society actors that aim to upend military rule. This has 'raised the stakes' of aid partnerships in Myanmar, as civil society groups working through non-state territories seek out sympathetic donors while struggling to be heard within a depoliticized and state-centric aid regime (Wells and Pyae Phyo Maung, 2024: 869; see also Barter and Gun Mai Sumlut, 2023; Décobert, 2025).

This article is organized as follows. The next section explains how post-colonial statebuilding produces a dialectical relationship between centres and margins. The third section discusses the rise of funding disbursed to civil society in international aid programming and argues for situating these aid flows within the contested geographies of post-colonial statebuilding. The fourth section then historicizes the aid influx into southeast Myanmar. The fifth section discusses the Thai–Myanmar borderworld using ethnographic material. The article shows how this space gave rise to the emergence of border organizations and also how these organizations have sought to maintain and expand the borderworld into spaces not fully controlled by the KNU. The penultimate section unpacks donors' perspectives: bound to the goal of global liberal governance, donors often invisibilized the centrality of marginal spaces to border organizations' work. The final section concludes by returning to this article's contributions and reflecting on foreign aid and civil society after the coup in 2021.

POST-COLONIAL STATEBUILDING AND THE RELATION BETWEEN CENTRES AND MARGINS

Post-colonial statebuilding is characterized by a dialectical relationship between centre and margins. In this conceptualization, margins are not only dominated by the centre; the centre is also dependent on, defined by and contested by the margins. In other words, margins are an 'outcome of the interplay of multipolar forces that work toward constituting centre and periphery' (Karrar and Mostowlansky, 2018: 66). Rather than using the terms 'borderlands' or 'frontiers' (see Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013: 10), this article makes use of the word 'margins' to accentuate the dynamic, contested, unequal but nonetheless co-constitutive nature of the relationship between poles. Margins cannot be understood in isolation, but only in the context of the dynamic social processes that delineate margins from the centre, while also defining that centre from which the margins are excluded (Das and Poole, 2004; Rajaram, 2015). Moreover, margins are not characterized by the absence of authority but are spaces where state authority is challenged by non-state actors' plural claims to authority (Tsing, 1993).

The centre–margin dialectic in post-colonial states follows from the uneven geographies of colonial rule. In British Burma and elsewhere, colonial rule was not uniform. Often, colonizers imposed a mixture of direct rule (whereby the colonial state ruled without intermediaries) and

indirect rule (whereby the colonial state delegated governance to local power holders) on places they conquered (see Callahan, 2002; Mukherjee, 2018; Naseemullah, 2014; Naseemullah and Staniland, 2016). Likewise, British Burma was characterized by direct rule in Burma Proper, lowland plains with a Bamar majority, and indirect rule in Frontier and Excluded areas, hilly areas populated by other ethnic groups. Effectively autonomous under the previous Konbaung Kingdom, colonization brought the latter areas into a single polity with Bamar-dominated areas (Callahan, 2003: 26). As it 'produced divergent upland and lowland political aspirations' (McCarthy, 2023: 28), this geographical division shaped post-colonial statebuilding long after independence. The legacies of colonial rule on contemporary Myanmar cannot be fully unpacked here (see, for example, Ferguson, 2014; Fujimura, 2022; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2019). Suffice to say that because lowland Bamar people experienced the most totalizing forms of colonial rule, they also led the fiercest forms of anti-colonial resistance and faced brutal crackdowns as a result (McCarthy, 2023: 28–32). During this process, some Bamar anti-colonial leaders began to frame various minorities — who besides escaping the most intrusive forms of colonial rule, had also been preferentially recruited into the colonial civil service and army — as colonial sympathizers and enemies (see Bowser, 2021).

After independence, post-colonial states often took on the most repressive and violent aspects of colonial rule and turned them on the state's margins. Beset by an anxious need to prove their legitimacy while suspended 'in the space between the "former colony" and "not-yet-nation"' (Krishna, 1994: 508), in these areas post-colonial states sought to acquire not consent but 'subjection, order, and obedience' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005: 3; see also Brenner, 2024; Kakati, 2023). This dynamic undergirds the Burmese military's role in post-colonial statebuilding. Tracing its origins to anti-colonial forces that won it 'the mantle of an army of national liberation and a reputation for brutality among ethnic-minority populations' (Connelly and Loong, 2024: 30), the Burmese military has regularly intervened in Myanmar politics — most recently in the 2021 coup — on the basis that Burma/Myanmar is a fragmented country that it must unify by force (Callahan, 2003; Saw Eh Htoo and Waters, 2024).

Yet post-colonial states have not been fully successful in their efforts to incorporate the margins into the centre. At the margins, new networks, alliances and identities have arisen to refuse the hegemony of the state (e.g. Damonte, 2018; Kikon, 2019). This oppositional dialectic — of violent suppression and resistance — lies at the heart of post-colonial statebuilding. This is true of Burma/Myanmar too. Since the country gained independence in 1948, armed and unarmed groups have long opposed statebuilding from the country's margins, often pursuing ethnic self-determination in tandem with demands for the end of military rule (Brenner, 2019; Loong, 2021, 2025b). Even so, these forms of resistance have also been co-opted by the military-state to further repression. This manifests not only in brutal

counterinsurgency campaigns, but also in other guises such as the stalling of ethnic political demands and the role of military-linked companies in accumulation by dispossession (Bertrand et al., 2022; Woods, 2011). Moreover, control over land lies at the heart of both the Burmese military-state's efforts to 'pacify' the margins and the mobilization of resistance against the state. Land grabs, Aung Naing (2024: 10) writes, are 'a symptom of the centuries-old drive by the "center" to dominate the periphery', while oppositional actors — among them ethnic armed organizations and civil society groups — have striven for alternative ways of managing and organizing land, such as through recognizing customary land rights and forming social movements respectively (Malseed, 2008; Suhardiman et al., 2021).

This article discusses how foreign aid plays into post-colonial statebuilding and its characteristically fraught relationship between centre and margins. It rests on three premises. First, margins provide a critical standpoint for understanding post-colonial statebuilding. At these sites, challenges to state rule arise and are violently suppressed, but they are not fully quelled. Second, post-colonial statebuilding is best understood relationally. While the literature has focused on centre–margin relations within a country's territory, this article illuminates the role of international aid dynamics therein. It adds to an ongoing scholarly conversation about how international actors active in Myanmar — the literature, for example, has discussed conservation organizations and peace donors — have shaped post-colonial statebuilding (Bertrand et al., 2022; Palmiano Federer, 2024; Woods and Naimark, 2020). Third, as I explore next, post-colonial statebuilding can be propelled not only by technocratic or extractive aid interventions, but by funding disbursed to civil society in the name of 'good governance'.

'GOOD GOVERNANCE' AND CIVIL SOCIETY AS AN OBJECT OF AID INTERVENTIONS

With the involvement of foreign actors, post-colonial states have often sought to extend their authority over their frontiers in the name of development, in the guise of economic zones, infrastructure projects and extractive industries (e.g. Hung and Baird, 2017; Mostafanezhad et al., 2022). Extending these insights, this article discusses the extent to which the aid regime's seemingly kinder and gentler face — exemplified in funding for civil society — also shapes the contested relationship between post-colonial states and their margins. It combines a relational conception of post-colonial statebuilding with a relational approach to aid (e.g. Mosse and Lewis, 2005; Roberts, 2014). In this conceptualization, foreign aid produces hierarchical relations between donors, intermediaries and beneficiaries, yet its relational effects spill out of this chain too, into everyday social relations (Kothari, 2005; Ruwanpura, 2007).

Aid disbursed in the interests of 'good governance' emerged at a particular conjuncture in the history of international development. In brief, ODA was inaugurated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in the mid-20th century, as part of an international system that obligated 'developed' states to intervene in the affairs of their 'underdeveloped' counterparts (Arndt, 1987; Latham, 2010). While donors initially used ODA to push for structural adjustment, backlash against the unfettered austerity of neoliberal reforms and the end of the Cold War led to the rise of aid disbursed in the name of good governance in the 1990s. In pursuing this agenda, donors upheld civil society as 'the arena in which a host of development objectives are to be achieved' (Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 247; see also Frewer, 2013). This is because donors saw civil society as exerting democratic pressure on authoritarian states (Mercer, 2002).

After the Cold War, aid flowed into civil society and thus became a tool of 'global liberal governance' (Duffield, 2002; see also Chandler, 2006): on the one hand, donors aimed to create capitalist liberal democracies out of post-colonial states; on the other hand, they sought to prevent the emergence of so-called 'failed states'. From the outset, ODA had been used to impose state structures on parts of the world perceived as backward, disorderly and incapable of self-government (Essex, 2013). Post-Cold War, aid remained married to statebuilding, although it was reconfigured to suit the spread of capitalist liberal democracies: 'rather than forming alliances with states, the aim [was] now to modulate and change the behaviour of the populations within them' (Duffield, 2002: 1063). At the same time, the good governance agenda also allowed donors to respond to new, post-Cold War concerns within an established framework of ODA. Concerned about putative proliferation of civil wars fuelled by ethnic hatred and barbarism and driven by criminal elites (see Woodward, 2017: 5–6), donors used aid to make states more responsive to diverse populations. This is why their focus shifted from creating top-down state institutions to developing checks and balances within society, such as civil society and electoral systems (Duffield, 2002: 1067). Ultimately, donors sought to reconcile older aspirations for capitalist statebuilding and neo-colonial international relations with the apparent 'triumph' of liberal democracy at the time (Hart, 2010). Notably, for donors, the pursuit of liberal democracy was always conjoined with statebuilding. Haunted by the prospect of state failure, donors did not seek to upend statebuilding itself, but rather to steer existing states onto the path of good governance.

Moreover, in directing aid to civil society, donors did not set out to transform the centre–margin dialectic set out above, which is not only central to post-colonial statebuilding but also, according to scholars, a driver of the armed conflicts that characterize 'failed states'. Indeed, scholars have debunked the 'failed state' idea as reductionist and ineffective in treating the root causes of armed conflicts (e.g. Barakat and Larson, 2014; Woodward, 2017). They have also shown that insurgencies in the post-colonial world are often driven not by ruthless elites and ancient enmities but rather by

post-colonial states' efforts to violently occupy or control their margins (e.g. Callahan, 2002; Kanjwal, 2023; Parashar, 2019). Even so, aid disbursed to civil society remains lodged within an approach that sees statebuilding as paramount — donors' support for civil society is, put simply, an effort to promote regime change at the centre. A relational approach then begs the question of how this form of aid plays into the contested *relations* between centres and margins.

In pursuing this inquiry, this article does not debate what civil society is nor whether it contributes to democratization (e.g. Bebbington, 2004; McIlwaine, 2007). I recognize that many non-state organizations in Myanmar fall outside of donors' narrow definitions of civil society (e.g. Griffiths, 2019; McCarthy, 2023). However, my analysis focuses squarely on organizations that the aid regime classifies as part of 'civil society', even if such organizations may reject this label or strategically engage with aid to pursue their own political projects. Nor is my concern whether civil society fosters democratization — a question that presumes, as Western aid agencies often do, that civil society should advance liberal democratic ends. Instead, I examine how global liberal governance, which positions civil society as an object of aid interventions, can become entangled in contested and relational processes of post-colonial statebuilding.

In this, I add to the scholarship on how post-colonial states style interventions into marginal places as improvement, progress and development; interventions often animated by the strategic use of foreign aid (Li, 2007). This pattern is visible in Myanmar too, where development initiatives by the military-controlled Ministry of Border Affairs were highly contested. Whereas existing literature focuses on energy and transport infrastructure and capital-intensive extractive industries, showing how the military-state has used foreign aid to co-opt borderland elites in pursuing coercive forms of development (e.g. Jones, 2014; McCarthy and Farrelly, 2020; Suhardiman and Middleton, 2020; Woods, 2011), this article focuses on how donors' aspirations for global liberal governance play into the contested relations between centre and margins.

THE AID INFLUX AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST MYANMAR

By the time journalists christened Myanmar a 'development darling', the country had been internationally isolated for four decades. Between 1948, when Burma became an independent parliamentary democracy, and the 1962 military coup, Burma received substantial ODA. However, in 1962, General Ne Win's junta sought increasing isolation. The junta's 'aid orphan' status was reinforced in 1988, when it violently suppressed mass uprisings, prompting a barrage of Western sanctions (Holliday and Zaw Htet, 2018).

The year 2012 was a turning point in Myanmar's integration in the international aid regime. Western donors re-engaged, driven by an alleged turn

from military authoritarianism to liberal democracy.[4] This enabled donors to legitimize the central government and support its statebuilding efforts. To be sure, earlier signs of Myanmar's reopening had emerged in 2008, when Cyclone Nargis prompted humanitarian cooperation with the junta. However, the large-scale provision of aid beyond emergency relief only occurred after the controversial 2010 general elections brought the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) into power. The USDP liberalized Myanmar's economy and made two gestures that were welcomed by Western governments: Aung San Suu Kyi's election to parliament in the 2012 by-election, and a ceasefire with the KNU that same year, a precursor to the country's first multilateral ceasefire three years later. All this led aid commitments to Myanmar to peak in 2013 at US$ 6 billion (Carr, 2018: 5). In 2015, the National League for Democracy's electoral victory prompted donors to offer more direct support to the central government. Although aid commitments wavered after the 2017 Rohingya crisis (Décobert and Wells, 2020), donors' hopes were only emphatically derailed after the coup in 2021.

During this near decade-long aid influx, in line with norms guiding donors towards the pursuit of global liberal governance, donors sought to grow the civil society inside Myanmar to hold the central government accountable to its people (Matelski, 2024). Importantly, donors such as Australia, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) often framed their contributions to civil society as part of statebuilding. For example, Australia stated, 'We will also support civil society strengthening in-country, to help ensure engagement with the Myanmar Government is balanced by strengthening the capacity of people to *hold it to account*' (AusAid, 2013: 14, emphasis added). The EU said, 'The EU attaches great importance to the involvement of civil society in building the institutions that are necessary for a modern inclusive democracy … encouraging the Government and institutions in reaching out and *supporting interactions between the state and civil society*' (Council of the European Union, 2013, emphasis added). And the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that 'We are working with civil society organizations and other non-state actors to *engage the state machinery* on important issues and hold it to account … [including] "core funding" grants to build the organizational capacity of local civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in social and policy change' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014: 7, emphasis added).

Likewise, several reports typologized civil society organizations across the country to guide donors towards partnerships that could create more liberal state–society relations (e.g. Lanjouw et al., 2016; Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, 2014; Petrie and South, 2013). One, for example, documented how civil society organizations formed countrywide networks

4. Given that the military continued to intervene in politics, scholars (e.g. Bertrand et al., 2022; Connelly and Loong, 2024) have debated whether Myanmar was truly on a path to 'democratization'.

and conducted policy advocacy to take hold of opportunities in the reform process, even as it recognized the limits of this process, such as the military's constitutionally mandated control over three key ministries (Lanjouw et al., 2016).

Yet in southeast Myanmar specifically, there existed another civil society landscape — civil society on the 'border' — which seemed not to reap the benefits of the aid influx. In 1988, when the junta cracked down on mass uprisings in Burma, many prominent activists fled to Thailand. Their presence on the Thai border attracted the attention of Western donors critical of the military regime in Burma, who provided the funds necessary for the establishment of border organizations — so named because these organizations operated illicitly from headquarters in Thailand (Décobert, 2016; Olivius and Hedström, 2025). Besides advocating for those under military rule, border organizations also provided healthcare, education and humanitarian aid to conflict-affected people. Although they strove to reach people all over southeast Myanmar, border organizations' activities were concentrated in KNU areas as they were doubly limited by the junta's crackdown on civil society countrywide, and the ongoing conflict between the Burma Army and the KNU, as well as other armed groups operating in the area (Jagger, 2018; Loong, 2025a). For Karen people enduring a protracted civil war, border organizations were vital to sustaining their lives and ensuring that news of their predicament was communicated to the wider world.

However, after 2012, when donors began supporting civil society inside Myanmar — including central government-controlled areas of southeast Myanmar — border organizations grew frustrated. For one, they were aware of an increasingly difficult funding environment. Border organizations reported having to rely on more donors, each offering smaller sums of money, and increasingly on project-based funds rather than core funding. One prominent sub-granting organization for border organizations reported the withdrawal of funds from seven Western governments since 2012, most of whom had started supporting in-country projects.[5] Furthermore, donors pressured border organizations to move 'inside' Myanmar. Some opened sub-offices inside Myanmar, in part to satisfy donor demands, but most refused to relocate their headquarters into the country, causing tensions with donors. Hence, the aid influx contributed to perceptions among border organizations that their work was under threat.

Why were border organizations so staunch in their refusal to move 'inside' Myanmar? Conversely, why were donors so quick to shift tack towards civil society on the 'inside'? In exploring these questions, I argue that the problem ran deeper than Myanmar. Due to the state-centric manner in which donors used aid to sustain global liberal governance, donors had focused on regime change in the centre and failed to see how being *in the margins* was so

5. Interview, George, INGO representative, Yangon, 4 September 2018.

crucial to the challenges that border organizations sought to mount against post-colonial statebuilding. Crucially, border organizations were not merely working *across* international borders, as donors assumed, but rather they were seeking to expand the borderworld: a marginal and interstitial space between state and non-state dually constituted by repression and resistance.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE THAI–MYANMAR BORDERWORLD

The term 'border organizations' could conjure images of groups that work across a pre-defined international border. The same can be said of a related term — cross-border aid — which usually refers to funds flowing into organizations based in Thailand and which have beneficiaries across the border. Yet, post-colonial borders are not fixed, zero-width lines; rather, they are often transgressed or contested by actors who refuse state authority. In these marginal spaces, 'lifeworlds of mobility, identity, and citizenship … are perennially in the making' (Sur, 2021: 6).

Hence, while one might say that Myanmar and Thailand share a 2,400 km-long borderline, this state-centric description does not capture the diverse non-state polities that exist in this area (Loong, 2025b). In such spaces, forms of non-state rule pre-date colonial rule in Burma, although they have been transformed by it and subsequently by post-colonial state-building. For example, the KNU has both been shaped by and challenged the legacies of colonial rule. The KNU's origins are often traced to Karen Baptist intellectuals in the late 19th century, who sought not to dismantle colonization but rather to ensure that British authorities recognized the Karen as a nation (Fujimura, 2022). Yet in 1949, after independence and amidst growing hostility between British and Bamar populations, the KNU became the first ethnic armed organization to take up arms against the new Burmese government. Since then, it has administered Karen territory ('Kawthoolei') close to the border, establishing healthcare, land management and education systems, for example, while fending off state violence (Mark, 2022; Oh et al., 2021).[6] Yet, the KNU is not a homogeneous organization nor the sole actor in non-state governance. As I argue elsewhere, various civilian actors including border organizations have participated and remade KNU-controlled territories (Loong, 2025a).

A dialectic between statebuilding and resistance has made the Thai–Myanmar borderworld heterogeneous and dynamic, continually under threat but also continually in-the-making. Even so, there is value in analysing it as an aggregate space from which border organizations operate. In the

6. The KNU's definition of a Karen territory, or Kawthoolei, is much more expansive than the Myanmar government's definition of Kayin State (see Brenner, 2019: 49–50). Border organizations often used the KNU's definition of Karen territory in their work, at times referring to it in English as Karen State.

period covered in this article, the borderworld consisted, first, of conflict-affected areas, often divided into Myanmar government-controlled areas, KNU-controlled areas, and contested or 'mixed-control' areas; a distinction I adopt for its brevity, although spaces of control were fluid in practice (Kyed, 2022).[7] Second, the borderworld also consisted of displacement sites to which many have fled from war, including formally designated camps and Thai border towns, where the Thai state's authority is known to be patchy, shifting and inconsistent (e.g. Banki, 2025; Loong, 2019; McConnachie, 2014).[8] In working across these sites, border organizations do not merely cross the border, but contribute to creating and maintaining an alternative geography that withstands and resists the impositions of post-colonial statebuilding on social and political lives in the area — a borderworld.

The Emergence of Border Organizations

Sadan (2013: 4) writes about the history of the Kachin as they have lived 'within, between, and across multiple national boundaries' — which is to say, as part of a borderworld characterized by multiple points of friction between state and non-state actors (see also Dean, 2020; Hong, 2017). Sadan's conceptualization of the borderworld critiques Scott (2009), who wrote about highland Southeast Asia ('Zomia') as a refuge for hill peoples escaping lowland states. To Sadan, Scott's account of Zomia draws too sharp a boundary between state and non-state. Rather, borderworlds are 'not part of a state' but have developed 'in interaction with these systems' (Sadan, 2013: 34). Borderworlds do not only facilitate escape; they also give rise to social systems borne out of creativity and ingenuity, as their inhabitants negotiate statebuilding from the margins.

Border organizations emerged in the fraught space between the state and non-state evoked by Sadan (2013). On the one hand, border organizations are a response to state violence. All the Karen representatives of border organizations I interviewed recounted being repeatedly displaced by state violence. This drove them to dedicate their lives to challenging the Myanmar state. On the other hand, the emergence of border organizations was an act of resistance, facilitated by spaces — especially refugee camps — created by these same instances of state violence. By 2004, the Myanmar military had forced 140,000 Karen people into refugee camps in Thailand and many others into hiding in Thai border towns (Burmese Border Consortium, 2004). Neither Thailand nor Myanmar had complete jurisdiction over these spaces, nor over the border area more broadly, where

7. A few other Karen armed groups are also active in the area, many of which are splinter groups of the KNU.
8. Thailand does not recognize the term 'refugees' and instead refers to these nine camps as 'temporary shelters', which currently house more than 90,000 people from Myanmar.

a configuration of I/NGOs, religious organizations and local bureaucrats regulated the everyday lives of displaced people (Banki, 2025; Horstmann, 2014; McConnachie, 2014; Saltsman, 2022). Border organizations began in displacement sites in the 1990s and then became active in a patchwork of spaces — KNU-controlled territories, refugee camps, frontier towns and migrant settlements — in which the Myanmar state's authority was limited, at a time when donors were increasingly funding civil society as a means of pursuing global liberal governance.

Specifically, the Thai–Myanmar borderworld afforded the emergence of border organizations in three ways. First, displaced youth communed with one another in densely populated refugee camps, creating a basis for collective action that had been hitherto unavailable in the scattered villages of southeast Myanmar. Two representatives of border organizations, Naw Poe Mu and Saw Way Htoo, spent their youth in refugee camps. They spoke affirmatively about their experiences with a student network operating across all nine camps — the Karen Student Networking Group (KSNG) — in the 1990s and 2000s. According to Naw Poe Mu:

> [KSNG] is the foundation for the students to learn more about the situation, [to] learn more to prepare to be a leader, and [to] learn about politics …. We had the chance to meet with [KNU] leaders to talk about the situation. The first time, I was so nervous, shaking, what can I do? Step by step, I had the confidence … KSNG was like my university.[9]

Saw Way Htoo said '[KSNG] helped me a lot, because we learnt a lot about leadership and we learnt from each other, different students, about how to mobilize ourselves. This is very fundamental, the first step'.[10] Through KSNG, Naw Poe Mu and Saw Way Htoo made sense of the political forces that resulted in their displacement, and in dialogue with other students, found that these experiences were shared.

Second, in the borderworld, besides learning 'about' the situation in southeast Myanmar, displaced youth learned how to dialogue with KNU leaders and to critique them, allowing them to push back against some aspects of the KNU's authority. In the quote above, Naw Poe Mu describes meeting KNU leaders and says that KSNG was like her 'university' — statements meaningful in the context of the Karen conflict. In the mid-1990s, as the KNU was suffering huge military losses, accusations emerged that, 'the KNU had never tried to politically educate the villagers or get them politically involved in the revolution, so they didn't even properly understand what the KNU was fighting for; instead, they only knew they had to give rice to KNU forces, their sons to the KNU Army, and see their villages burned' (Karen Human Rights Group, 1995). When border organization representatives spoke about learning, leading and mobilizing in the camps, they implied that they — without taking up arms — had

9. Interview, Naw Poe Mu, border organization representative, 22 March 2019.
10. Interview, Saw Way Htoo, border organization representative, 27 March 2019.

become *collectively* and *politically* involved in the Karen rebellion to an extent impossible before the mid-1990s.

Third, the borderworld put young Karen people in contact with the aid regime, affording them funding, expertise and international exposure, at a time when the good governance agenda was ascendant and when Western governments refused to engage with the military regime. For several years after 1988, at the KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw, Karen revolutionaries, Bamar democracy activists and resistance leaders from other ethnic groups convened to challenge the Myanmar military, where they were joined by sympathetic Western activists. After Manerplaw fell in 1995, these Western visitors escaped to Thailand, setting up sub-granting organizations that channelled aid from Western governments into newly established border organizations. The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), for example, flourished in this way. It emerged from a group of Karen refugee youths interested in environmental issues, who sharpened their approach to environmentalism and their critiques of the KNU's environmental policies in conversations with Western activists. These contacts also afforded them funding and knowledge of how to navigate the bureaucratic aspects of the aid regime.[11] The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) formed as part of the KNU but became more independent of the KNU and internationally renowned after being forced out of Manerplaw and onto the Thai border.

Border organizations formed at a historical conjuncture when Western governments were determined to shun Myanmar's military regime, and when civil society had just become a mainstay of aid programming. To be sure, border organizations' views and experiences were not representative of all Karen people in southeast Myanmar, especially those in Myanmar government-controlled areas, spared the insecurity and violence endured by their counterparts while facing discrimination and assimilation into the dominant Bamar culture (Thawnghmung, 2012: 114–20; see also Loong, 2023). Nevertheless, until 2012, border organizations were a rare channel through which donors could use funds to challenge military rule in Myanmar, as talk of politics was foreclosed within the country. Furthermore, as I will show, border organizations were determined to reach out to those outside of KNU-controlled areas but faced great risks in seeking to do so.

Expanding and Maintaining the Borderworld

Border organizations did not only emerge in the borderworld, but they also contributed to expanding and maintaining it through relations forged with various actors marginalized by the Myanmar state, including KNU officials, villagers in KNU and mixed-control areas and activists. This

11. Interview, border organization representative, 28 March 2019.

practice continued even after 2012, when donors decided to back the democratic transition in Myanmar with an influx of aid. In this article, I adopt a relational approach that sees space as an 'ongoing product of interconnections' that is always becoming (Massey, 2005: 221). In other words, the relationships border organizations cultivated in and through the Thai–Myanmar borderworld helped produce it as a marginal space where state power was incomplete. This is evident in the narrative of Saw Dah Nay, who was part of a border organization focused on exposing military abuses in southeast Myanmar.[12] His and his organization's efforts to challenge a military-linked land grab in a mixed-control area illustrate how border organizations operated beyond KNU strongholds, expanding the borderworld into spaces where the KNU had not consolidated its authority.

The Myanmar military has driven post-colonial statebuilding through both direct violence and land seizures (Aung Naing, 2024). This has been enabled not just by the military's repeated interventions in politics and law — marked by coups in 1958, 1962, 1988 and 2021 — but also by its institutional and financial autonomy. Military-linked business conglomerates are active in many industries and, working with foreign investors and local elites, have been implicated in land grabs countrywide (Mark, 2016; Woods, 2011). Beginning in 2012, amidst the aid influx, land seizures intensified (Doi Ra et al., 2021; Faxon, 2017). Meanwhile, land reforms initiated by the central government were subject to intense contestation led by countrywide networks (Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju, 2021; Faxon, 2017). These networks accused the central government of fuelling capital accumulation at the expense of rural populations, who sought not only land use or ownership but 'an end to the exclusionary logics that made such dispossession thinkable in the first place' (Wittekind, 2018: 310).

In southeast Myanmar, land contestations were shaped by particular subnational dynamics. First, land seizures sustained the centre's dominance over the margins despite reduced armed violence between the military and the KNU. Ceasefires signed in 2012 and 2015 pleased Western donors and quelled fighting in most (but not all) of southeast Myanmar. Yet these agreements intensified land seizures as they made former war zones 'open' for investment (Karen Human Rights Group, 2013, 2015). Second, land governance in southeast Myanmar involved plural state and non-state authorities. The KNU has a robust land policy, reformed several times, which by then allowed for both individual and collective land tenure (Hong, 2017: 234). Because land issues remained unresolved in the ceasefires, villagers in mixed-control areas could in theory apply for both KNU and Myanmar government titles (Mark, 2022). Third, southeast Myanmar had been long served by border organizations which, before the land rush,

12. For security reasons, I have obscured some details in this narrative.

had already helped villagers to document and survive the military state's encroachments on lands and livelihoods (Malseed, 2008).

This is the context in which Saw Dah Nay recounted a land grab he had worked to challenge. Like many other representatives of border organizations, Saw Dah Nay grew up in southeast Myanmar before fleeing to Thailand, where he eventually joined a border organization. By the time these events took place, between 2011 and 2015, he had worked there for nearly a decade. The following account, reconstructed from a two-hour interview, illustrates how border organizations sought to expand the Thai–Myanmar borderworld by establishing and maintaining social relations not tethered to either state.

After learning that a military-linked company had confiscated thousands of acres of land for a rubber plantation, Saw Dah Nay lobbied successfully to place it under US sanctions. Once the company learned of the sanctions, it offered a small amount of compensation to 90 villagers. Around the same time, a contact in Yangon warned Saw Dah Nay that the company was accusing him of spreading false information. Seeking to challenge this accusation through the media, Saw Dah Nay arranged to travel with a journalist to interview villagers affected by the land grab. His presence assured villagers that they could trust the journalist. Midway through an interview, however, a villager warned Saw Dah Nay about Myanmar military soldiers nearby. 'You should leave the village. Run away', the villager said, 'you will be in trouble in a few minutes'. They promptly finished the interview and drove to a nearby town, where one of Saw Dah Nay's contacts picked them up in a new car to avoid being followed. They escaped to another town several hours away. Eventually, the head of the military-linked company admitted to the land confiscations. While recounting this episode, Saw Dah Nay emphasized the winding routes he had taken, drawing circles on a piece of paper to prove his point. 'There's the US here, the [border organization], the villagers, [the military-linked company], lawyers, and then journalists', he said, pointing at his makeshift diagram. Saw Dah Nay also stressed that the trust he had cultivated with villagers kept him safe: 'we escaped with the villagers' help'.[13]

Saw Dah Nay's account exemplifies two aspects of how border organizations worked to expand and maintain the Thai–Myanmar borderworld. First, Saw Dah Nay's organization sought to challenge post-colonial statebuilding not only in KNU-controlled areas but also in mixed-control areas, where his personal security was more precarious. 'We are an illegal organization [to the Myanmar government]',' he noted, 'but I will take any risk … to tell the truth'.[14] Like many other border organizations, Saw Dah Nay and his colleagues saw his work in mixed-control areas not as a means of bringing them into the state's orbit or to inform them about ongoing land reforms, but as a means of contesting post-colonial statebuilding in a way that resonated

13. From an interview, Saw Dah Nay, border organization representative, 29 November 2018.
14. Ibid.

with villagers' experiences. They did not aim to overcome marginality, but to sustain social relations not tethered to the state. Second, Saw Dah Nay's ability to work in mixed-control areas depended on networks spanning the borderworld in which plural non-state authorities operated. These relationships, like those cultivated between many border organizations, the KNU and villagers across southeast Myanmar, offered him protection and escape routes when needed.

Saw Dah Nay's fears of being hunted by the Myanmar military were well-founded and shared by many border organizations. Months after our interview, there was a spate of arrests of Karen activists inside Myanmar. In September 2019, three were arrested in Yangon for commemorating Karen Martyrs' Day without a permit. Later, in March 2020, the Myanmar police attempted to arrest Saw Tha Boe of the civil society organization, Karen Rivers Watch, for organizing a prayer ceremony protesting against pollution from a coal-powered cement factory. Significantly, Saw Tha Boe fled to 'an area along the border with Thailand … controlled by one of the country's ethnic groups' (Vanderklippe, 2020). This is another example of how the borderworld provided an escape route for activists seeking to critique the Myanmar state.

Collectively, these accounts show how border organizations wove together a constellation of spaces that lay beyond the state's immediate reach: headquarters across the Thai border where they evaded the Myanmar state's control despite having precarious legal status; refugee camps where many survivors of state violence organized and received an informal political education; KNU-controlled areas where they operated under the threat of violence but with relative freedom; and mixed-control areas where they sought to embed themselves with villagers despite significant personal risk. These interlinked sites constituted the Thai-Myanmar borderworld, a marginal and interstitial space between state and non-state, characterized by both repression and resistance. Moreover, through the relations they built and by leveraging foreign aid, border organizations not only sustained this borderworld but sought to maintain and expand it beyond areas controlled by the KNU.

INVISIBILIZING THE BORDERWORLD: THE ROLE OF DONORS

I have shown that between 2012 and 2021 donors committed aid to Myanmar to promote good governance and that they saw civil society as a means of keeping a democratizing government in check. Focusing on donors' views, this section traces tensions between donors' presumptions — that through engagement with the Myanmar government, civil society could steer statebuilding onto a liberal democratic path — and the *raison d'etre* of border organizations discussed in the previous section.

In essence, donors were interested in redressing state violence, but they did not diagnose this as an outcome of post-colonial statebuilding itself,

but rather as an outcome of Myanmar's incomplete transition to liberal democracy. Yet seeking to resolve state violence through central government reform gives short shrift to how state violence is produced through *relations* between the post-colonial state and its margins. One example is a 2016 report by the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU) and the Peace Support Fund (PSF), supported by five donors: Australia, Canada, the EU, Sweden and the UK.[15] The 160-page report, 'Situation Analysis of Southeastern Myanmar', surveyed issues and trends in the area, although the consultations that informed this document involved only Yangon-based actors (MIMU and PSF, 2016: 8). At times, the report acknowledges the effects of post-colonial statebuilding without naming them as such, stating for example that development projects had been a 'tool of pacification' (ibid.: 64). Nevertheless, the report tends towards depoliticized portrayals of the struggles against the state waged by the KNU and other ethnonational groups. It calls these 'non-state actors', defined as 'an armed group in ethnic minority areas', without acknowledging their political goals (ibid.: 6).

Moreover, the 'Situation Analysis' report attributes civil society activity in southeast Myanmar to democratization at the centre, rather than to border organizations' long-standing networks in the borderworld. It states that the 'opening of political and public space' allowed civil society groups to contest the adverse impacts of infrastructure mega-projects (ibid.: 70). The example provided is a Karen Peace Support Network report (KPSN, 2014) calling for a moratorium on large-scale development projects in southeast Myanmar. The KPSN is, as the 'Situation Analysis' document states, a network of 30 organizations. But the report does not mention that most of these are border organizations, formed long before the democratic opening and active in the Thai–Myanmar borderworld. KPSN members include the KWO (founded in 1949 as the women's wing of the KNU and reorganized in 1985), camp-based organizations such as the Karen Refugee Committee (founded 1984), and prominent border organizations engaged in advocacy such as KESAN (founded 2001). KPSN's work was not evidence of good governance at the centre, but the product of more than three decades of collective organizing in marginal spaces outside the state's purview. Effectively, the 'Situation Analysis' report did not acknowledge the importance of the Thai–Myanmar borderworld to the work of border organizations, a situation created by the contested centre–margin dialectic characteristic of post-colonial statebuilding.

Moreover, donors' invisibilization of the borderworld presumed that civil society should both improve statebuilding *and* be situated within state territory in order to do so. This reflects a dominant foreign policy conception that

15. Both the MIMU and the PSF were products of the aid influx into Myanmar. MIMU is a United Nations-supported information management service set up to support Myanmar's development sector, while the PSF is a multi-donor platform for supporting Myanmar's peace process, later renamed the Paung Sie Facility.

state territory 'contains' society and that state territories are separated from others by sharply delineated borders (see Agnew, 1999) — a perception that contrasts with how border organizations viewed and produced the borderworld as a set of interlinked sites that eschewed a sharp distinction between state and non-state. Take, for example, John, a foreigner working in the Yangon office of an INGO. John saw border organizations as separate from local communities because they operated across an international boundary: '[Border organizations] had never any sense of engagement or a location inside of the country … how can you speak for the Karen communities when you don't actually live with them? … [Border organizations] say that they represent communities that they've never set foot in'.[16]

John portrayed the border as a line that cut border organizations off from their beneficiaries. As such, John underestimated the extent to which the Thai–Myanmar borderworld *allowed* border organizations to remain connected to communities in margins. Border organizations, by contrast, prioritized 'setting foot' in southeast Myanmar. Indeed, people in border organizations — themselves displaced by conflict — perceived themselves as *sharing* the borderworld with the people they advocated for, along with attendant experiences of state brutality. Ultimately, donors saw marginal areas as beset by violence, but they did not fully apprehend the post-colonial state's role in this, nor did they see the margins as a space from which civil society could withstand the impositions of the post-colonial state.

CONCLUSION: BORDER ORGANIZATIONS, BORDERWORLDS AND THE SPRING REVOLUTION

This article contributes to critical development studies and political geography by offering a relational account of how foreign aid intersects with post-colonial statebuilding, especially regarding aid disbursed to civil society in the pursuit of good governance. Building on how post-colonial statebuilding produces a dialectical relationship between centre and margins (e.g. Cons and Sanyal, 2013; Das and Poole, 2004), the article examines how civil society actors in the Thai–Myanmar borderworld have navigated and contested post-colonial statebuilding since the 1990s. Border organizations have leveraged foreign aid to operate not from centres of power, but through interstitial spaces (for example, KNU-controlled areas, mixed-control areas, Thai border towns and refugee camps) that confound the binary between state and non-state. Furthermore, by embedding themselves within local communities, border organizations sought to expand the borderworld into spaces that armed resistance groups did not fully control.

This article also examines tensions between donors' and border organizations' views, which came to a head between 2012 and 2021 in

16. Interview, John, INGO representative, 12 September 2018.

Myanmar, when donors deployed aid to spur on Myanmar's supposed transition to liberal democracy. Although both donors and border organizations sought to redress state violence, they traced this to different sources. For donors, this was a question of government, to do with Myanmar's as-yet incomplete transition to liberal democracy, whereas for border organizations, this was a question of post-colonial statebuilding and its drive to subdue marginal peoples and places. Moreover, the article shows that the problem ran deeper than Myanmar. By holding to an international consensus that aid should serve global liberal governance (Duffield, 2002), donors adopted a state-centric approach to aid, invisibilizing the role of the borderworld in allowing southeast Myanmar's civil society landscape to flourish. This article therefore highlights the limits of donor visions that equate civil society with liberal democratic statebuilding; showing how such an approach can sideline actors whose work hinges precisely on maintaining a critical distance from the state.

In the context of Myanmar studies, this article furthers understandings of the spatial politics of aid and resistance — a timely conversation since the 2021 coup. Between 2012 and 2021, state-centric aid flows overlooked the political significance of the borderworld. Border organizations' reluctance to relocate into the country was not a nostalgic attachment to the past, but a calculated response to both personal and collective histories of displacement, war and violence. Since the 2021 coup, borderworlds have been critical to sustaining both armed and unarmed resistance to the military regime, as the regime's control of all but major cities has been disrupted. Spaces controlled by resistance forces, including the KNU, have not only maintained efforts to defeat the military but have also attempted to fundamentally alter the centre–margin relations that have driven post-colonial statebuilding in Myanmar (Loong, 2021). This has prompted a reckoning among aid actors who face pressure to disengage from the regime. Critics of the aid regime propose that border organizations be recognized as part of an 'ecosystem' of resistance and call for aid to be disbursed in the interests of solidarity rather than technocratic neutrality (Kamal and Fujimatsu, 2024). In this context and beyond, this article offers a cautionary tale, showing how aid disbursed in the name of 'good governance' can entrench the violence of post-colonial statebuilding if it is blind to the political geographies in which civil society operates.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many others have contributed to the research on which this article is based. I thank my doctorate supervisors, Professor Fiona McConnell and Professor Anna Lora-Wainwright. I also thank participants at the 2024 Myanmar Laboratory, organized by the Political Geography Group at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, for workshopping this article. Three anonymous

reviewers provided thoughtful feedback. Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to my interviewees and to many others on the Thai–Myanmar border with whom I have exchanged ideas in the course of this research. I have learned so much from all of you.

Open access publishing facilitated by Universitat Zurich, as part of the Wiley - Universitat Zurich agreement via the Consortium Of Swiss Academic Libraries.

REFERENCES

Agnew, J. (1999) 'Mapping Political Power beyond State Boundaries: Territory, Identity, and Movement in World Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28(3): 499–521.

Arndt, H. (1987) *Economic Development: The History of an Idea*. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.

Aung Naing (2024) *Land, Violence, and Subjugation in Myanmar*. Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University.

AusAid (2013) 'Australia–Myanmar Aid Program Strategy'. Canberra: Australian Agency for International Development.

Banki, S. (2025) 'Porosity on the Thailand–Myanmar Border: Before and After Myanmar's 2021 Coup', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51(2): 526–45.

Barakat, S. and A. Larson (2014) 'Fragile States: A Donor-serving Concept? Issues with Interpretations of Fragile Statehood in Afghanistan', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 8(1): 21–41.

Barter, D. and Gun Mai Sumlut (2023) 'The "Conflict Paradox": Humanitarian Access, Localisation, and (Dis)empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland', *Disasters* 47(4): 849–69.

Bebbington, A. (2004) 'NGOs and Uneven Development: Geographies of Development Intervention', *Progress in Human Geography* 28(6): 725–45.

Bertrand, J., A. Pelletier and A.M. Thawnghmung (2022) *Winning by Process: The State and Neutralization of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bowser, M.J. (2021) '"Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps": Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38', *Modern Asian Studies* 55(4): 1112–50.

Brenner, D. (2019) *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Brenner, D. (2024) 'Misunderstanding Myanmar through the Lens of Democracy', *International Affairs* 100(2): 751–69.

Burmese Border Consortium (2004) *Between Worlds: Twenty Years on the Border*. Bangkok: Burmese Border Consortium.

Callahan, M.P. (2002) 'State Formation in the Shadow of Raj: Violence, Warfare and Politics in Colonial Burma', *Southern Asian Studies* 39(4): 513–36.

Callahan, M.P. (2003) *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.

Carr, T. (2018) 'Supporting the Transition: Understanding Aid to Myanmar since 2011'. San Francisco, CA: The Asia Foundation.

Chandler, D. (2006) *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building*. London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.

Connelly, A. and S. Loong (2024) *New Answers to Old Questions: Myanmar before and after the 2021 Coup d'État*. London: Routledge.

Cons, J. and R. Sanyal (2013) 'Geographies at the Margins: Borders in South Asia — An Introduction', *Political Geography* 35: 5–13.

Council of the European Union (2013) 'Council Conclusions on the Comprehensive Framework for the European Union's Policy and Support to Myanmar/Burma'. Brussels: Council of the European Union. www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/140115.pdf (accessed 29 October 2025).

Damonte, G.H. (2018) 'Mining Formalization at the Margins of the State: Small-scale Miners and State Governance in the Peruvian Amazon', *Development and Change* 49(5): 1314–35.

Das, V. and D. Poole (2004) 'State and its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies', in V. Das and D. Poole (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, pp. 3–34. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Dean, K. (2020) 'Assembling the Sino–Myanmar Borderworld', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61(1): 34–54.

Décobert, A. (2014) 'Sitting on the Fence? Politics and Ethics of Research into Cross-border Aid on the Thailand–Myanmar/Burma Border', *The Journal of Burma Studies* 18(1): 33–58.

Décobert, A. (2016) *Politics of Aid to Myanmar: A Humanitarian Struggle on the Thai–Burmese Border*. New York: Routledge.

Décobert, A. (2025) 'Healthcare, Solidarity, and Moral Community in Myanmar's Humanitarian Crisis and Revolution', *Disasters*. DOI: 10.1111/disa.12682.

Décobert, A. and T. Wells (2020) 'Interpretive Complexity and Crisis: The History of International Aid to Myanmar', *The European Journal of Development Research* 32: 294–315.

Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju (2021) '"Nothing with Us, Without Us": Reflections on the Challenges of Building Land in Our Hands, a National Land Network in Myanmar/Burma', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(3): 497–516.

Doi Ra, Sai Sam Kham, M. Barbesgaard, J.C. Franco and P. Vervest (2021) 'The Politics of Myanmar's Agrarian Transformation', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(3): 463–75.

Duffield, M. (2002) 'Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance', *Development and Change* 33(5): 1049–71.

Essex, J. (2013) *Development, Security, and Aid: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics at the US Agency for International Development*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Faxon, H.O. (2017) 'In the Law and on the Land: Finding the Female Farmer in Myanmar's National Land Use Policy', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(6): 1197–214.

Ferguson, J.M. (2014) 'The Scramble for the Waste Lands: Tracking Colonial Legacies, Counterinsurgency and International Investment through the Lens of Land Laws in Burma/Myanmar', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35: 295–311.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2014) 'UK Activities in Burma'. London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office UK, HM Government. www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-activities-in-burma (accessed 29 October 2025).

Frewer, T. (2013) 'Doing NGO Work: The Politics of Being "Civil Society" and Promoting "Good Governance" in Cambodia', *Australian Geographer* 44(1): 97–114.

Fujii, L.A. (2018) *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. London: Routledge.

Fujimura, H. (2022) 'The Twofold Challenge for Karen Baptist Intellectuals in Colonial Burma: A National Claim and its Failure', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 53(3): 488–511.

Griffiths, M. (2019) 'Networks of Reciprocity: Precarity and Community Social Organisations in Rural Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49(4): 602–25.

Hansen, T.B. and F. Stepputat (eds) (2005) *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hart, G. (2010) 'D/developments after the Meltdown', *Antipode* 41(1): 117–41.

Holliday, I. and Zaw Htet (2018) 'International Assistance', in A. Simpson, N. Farrelly and I. Holliday (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, pp. 347–54. London: Routledge.

Hong, E. (2017) 'Scaling Struggles over Land and Law: Autonomy, Investment, and Interlegality in Myanmar's Borderlands', *Geoforum* 82: 225–36.

Horstmann, A. (2014) 'Stretching the Border: Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29(1): 47–61.

Hung, P-Y. and I. Baird (2017) 'From Soldiers to Farmers: The Political Geography of Chinese Kuomintang Territorialization in Northern Thailand', *Political Geography* 58: 1–13.

Jagger, S. (2018) 'Developing Civil Society in the Non-state Sphere: Welfare and Rights-based Organisations Associated with Ethnic Armed Groups in Myanmar', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29(2): 316–43.

Jones, L. (2014) 'Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery Is Central', *Democratization* 21(5): 780–802.

Kakati, A.K. (2023) 'Limits of Sovereignty: Developing Blank Spaces in Asian "Borderedlands" after the Second World War', in M. Thomas and G. Curless (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Late Colonial Insurgencies and Counter-insurgencies*, pp. 597–615. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kamal, A. and R. Fujimatsu (2024) 'From Humanitarian Resistance to Resilience: Nation-building in Active Conflict'. HPN Paper No. 88. London: Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI Global. www.odihpn.org/en/publication/from-humanitarian-resistance-to-resilience-nation-building-in-active-conflict/(accessed 29 October 2025).

Kanjwal, H. (2023) *Colonizing Kashmir: State-building under Indian Occupation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Karen Human Rights Group (1995) 'SLORC's Northern Karen Offensive'. Karen Human Rights Group. www.khrg.org/1995/03/khrg9510/slorcs-northern-karen-offensive-0 (accessed 29 October 2025).

Karen Human Rights Group (2013) 'Losing Ground: Land Conflicts and Collective Action in Eastern Myanmar'. Karen Human Rights Group. www.khrg.org/2013/03/losing-ground-land-conflicts-and-collective-action-eastern-myanmar (accessed 12 December 2025).

Karen Human Rights Group (2015) '"With Only Our Voices, What Can We Do?": Land Confiscation and Local Response in Southeast Myanmar'. Karen Human Rights Group. www.khrg.org/2015/06/with-only-our-voices-what-can-we-do-land-confiscation-and-local-response (accessed 29 October 2025)

Karrar, H.H. and T. Mostowlansky (2018) 'Assembling Marginality in Northern Pakistan', *Political Geography* 63: 65–74.

Kikon, D. (2019) *Living with Coal and Oil: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Korf, B. and T. Raeymaekers (eds) (2013) *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kothari, U. (2005) 'Authority and Expertise: The Professionalisation of International Development and the Ordering of Dissent', *Antipode* 37(3): 425–46.

KPSN (2014) 'Critique of Japan International Cooperation Agency's Blueprint for Development in Southeastern Burma/Myanmar'. Chiang Mai: Karen Peace Support Network. www.burmapartnership.org/2014/09/critique-of-japan-international-cooperation-agencys-blueprint-for-development-in-southeastern-burmamyanmar/ (accessed 29 October 2025).

Krishna, S. (1994) 'Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 19(4): 507–21.

Kyed, H.M. (2022) 'Frontier Governance: Contested and Plural Authorities in a Karen Village after the Ceasefire', *Modern Asian Studies* 56(2): 603–38.

Lanjouw, S., Choo Phuah and La Phan (2016) 'The Art of Networking: A Study of Civil Society Networks in Myanmar'. Myanmar Information Network Unit (online). www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/assessment_file_attachments/A_Study_of_Civil_Society_Networks_in_Myanmar_-_EU_2016.pdf

Latham, M.E. (2010) *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and US Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Li, T.M. (2007) *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Loong, S. (2019) 'The Neoliberal Borderscape: Neoliberalism's Effects on the Social Worlds of Migrants along the Thai–Myanmar Border', *Political Geography* 74: 102035.
Loong, S. (2021) *Centre–Periphery Relations in Myanmar: Leverage and Solidarity after the 1 February Coup*. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
Loong, S. (2023) '"We Have Big Ideas, but Only Small Words": The Post-war Geographies of Civil Society and Community in Karen State', *Geoforum* 147: 103891.
Loong, S. (2025a) 'More-than-rebel Territory: War, Resistance, and Relations in the Salween Peace Park', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 115(5): 1165–84.
Loong, S. (2025b) 'Thai–Myanmar Borderland as a Frontier Space', in K. Gray (ed.) *Global Encyclopedia of Territorial Rights*. Cham: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68846-6_854-1
Malseed, K. (2008) 'Where There is No Movement: Local Resistance and the Potential for Solidarity', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8(2): 489–514.
Mark, S. (2016) 'Are the Odds of Justice "Stacked" against Them? Challenges and Opportunities for Securing Land Claims by Smallholder Farmers in Myanmar', *Critical Asian Studies* 48(3): 443–60.
Mark, S. (2022) 'The Forging of Legitimate Authority in the Ceasefire Mixed-control Karen Areas of Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52(2): 226–46.
Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications.
Matelski, M. (2024) *Contested Civil Society in Myanmar: Local Change, Global Recognition*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
McCarthy, G. (2023) *Outsourcing the Polity: Non-state Welfare, Inequality, and Resistance in Myanmar*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
McCarthy, G. and N. Farrelly (2020) 'Peri-conflict Peace: Brokerage, Development and Illiberal Ceasefires in Myanmar's Borderlands', *Conflict, Security & Development* 20(1): 141–63.
McConnachie, K. (2014) *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
McIlwaine, C. (2007) 'From Local to Global to Transnational Civil Society: Re-framing Development Perspectives on the Non-state Sector', *Geography Compass* 1(6): 1252–81.
Mercer, C. (2002) 'NGOs, Civil Society and Democratization: A Critical Review of the Literature', *Progress in Development Studies* 2(1): 5–22.
MIMU and PSF (2016) 'Situation Analysis of Southeastern Myanmar'. Yangon: Myanmar Information Management Unit and Peace Support Fund. www.themimu.info/se-situation-analysis (accessed 29 October 2025).
Mohan, G. and K. Stokke (2000) 'Participatory Development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism', *Third World Quarterly* 21(2): 247–68.
Mosse, D. and D. Lewis (eds) (2005) *The Aid Effect: Giving and Governing in International Development*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
Mostafanezhad, M., T. Sebro, E. Prasse-Freeman and R. Norum (2022) 'Surplus Precaritization: Supply Chain Capitalism and the Geoeconomics of Hope in Myanmar's Borderlands', *Political Geography* 95: 102561.
Mukherjee, S. (2018) 'Colonial Origins of Maoist Insurgency in India: Historical Institutions and Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62(10): 2232–74.
Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (2014) 'Civil Society Organizations and the Extractive Industries in Myanmar – A Brief Overview'. www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/pdf/2014-10-11-Briefing-Paper-CSOs-and-Extractives-Industries-Myanmar.pdf (accessed 29 October 2025).
Naseemullah, A. (2014) 'Shades of Sovereignty: Explaining Political Order and Disorder in Pakistan's Northwest', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 49(4): 501–22.
Naseemullah, A. and P. Staniland (2016) 'Indirect Rule and Varieties of Governance', *Governance* 29(1): 13–30.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2019) 'Adulteration of Pure Native Blood by Aliens? Mixed Race *Kapya* in Colonial and Post-colonial Myanmar', *Social Identities* 25(3): 345–59.
Oh, S-A., M. Walker and Hayso Thako (2021) 'Karen Education and Boundary-making at the Thai–Burmese Borderland', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 36(4): 637–52.
Olivius, E. (2019) 'Time to Go Home? The Conflictual Politics of Diaspora Return in the Burmese Women's Movement', *Asian Ethnicity* 20(2): 148–67.
Olivius, E. and J. Hedström (2025) '"On the Border, I Learned How to Advocate": Borderlands as Political Spaces for Burmese Women's Activism', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 38(2): 326–39.
Palmiano Federer, J. (2024) *NGOs Mediating Peace: Promoting Inclusion in Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Parashar, S. (2019) 'Colonial Legacies, Armed Revolts, and State Violence: The Maoist Movement in India', *Third World Quarterly* 40(2): 337–54.
Patteran, D. (2014) 'Foreign Aid in Myanmar: A Precarious Balance', *Devex* 3 June. www.devex.com/news/foreign-aid-in-myanmar-a-precarious-balance-83521 (accessed 29 October 2025).
Petrie, C. and A. South (2013) 'Mapping of Myanmar Peacebuilding Civil Society'. Brussels: Civil Society Dialogue Network, European Peacebuilding Liaison Office. www.ashleysouth.co.uk/files/EPLO_CSDN_Myanmar_MappingMyanmarPeacebuildingCivilSociety_CPetrieASouth.pdf (accessed 29 October 2025).
Rajaram, P.K. (2015) *Ruling the Margins: Colonial Power and Administrative Rule in the Past and Present*. New York and London: Routledge.
Roberts, S.M. (2014) 'Development Capital: USAID and the Rise of Development Contractors', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104(5): 1030–51.
Ruwanpura, K.N. (2007) 'Awareness and Action: The Ethno-gender Dynamics of Sri Lankan NGOs', *Gender, Place & Culture* 14(3): 317–33.
Sadan, M. (2013) *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Saltsman, A. (2022) *Border Humanitarianism: Gendered Order and Insecurity on the Thai-Burmese Frontier*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Saw Eh Htoo and T. Waters (2024). *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar: The Challenge to Peace in the Twenty-first Century*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
Schwartz-Shea, P. and D. Yanow (2012) *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. London: Routledge.
Scott, J. (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Strefford, P. (2015) 'Foreign Aid for Myanmar's Transition: Capacity Takes Precedence', *Asian Journal of Public Affairs* 8(1): 1–23.
Suhardiman, D. and C. Middleton (2020) 'The Salween River as a Transboundary Commons: Fragmented Collective Action, Hybrid Governance, and Power', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 61(2): 301–14.
Suhardiman, D., J. Bright and C. Palmano (2021) 'The Politics of Legal Pluralism in the Shaping of Spatial Power in Myanmar's Land Governance', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(2): 411–35.
Sur, M. (2021) *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India–Bangladesh Border*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Thawnghmung, A.M. (2012) *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
Tsing, A.L. (1993) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Tsing, A. (1994) 'From the Margins', *Cultural Anthropology* 9(3): 279–97.
Vanderklippe, N. (2020) '"They Think I Make Trouble": Myanmar Man on the Run Is the Latest Attack on Civil Society', *The Global and Mail* 11 March. www.theglobeandmail.com/world/

article-they-think-i-make-trouble-myanmar-man-on-the-run-is-latest-attack/ (accessed 29 October 2025).
Wells, T. and Pyae Phyo Maung (2024) 'International Aid Partnerships amidst Myanmar's Revolution: Solidarity or Self-preservation and Compliance?', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 54(5): 867–86.
Wittekind, C.T. (2018) 'Road Plans and Planned Roads: Entangled Geographies, Spatiotemporal Frames, and Territorial Claims-making in Myanmar's Southern Shan State', *Journal of Burma Studies* 22(2): 273–319.
Woods, K. (2011) 'Ceasefire Capitalism: Military–Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military–State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(4): 747–70.
Woods, K.M. and J. Naimark (2020) 'Conservation as Counterinsurgency: A Case of Ceasefire in a Rebel Forest in Southeast Myanmar', *Political Geography* 83: 102251.
Woodward, S.L. (2017) *The Ideology of Failed States: Why Intervention Fails*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
World Bank (2019) 'Myanmar — Economic Transition amid Conflict: A Systematic Country Diagnostic'. Washington, DC: World Bank. www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmar-economic-transition-amid-conflict-a-systematic-country-diagnostic (accessed 29 October 2025).

Shona Loong (shona.loong@geo.uzh.ch) is Senior Scientist in Political Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Her research focuses on conflict, peacebuilding and the politics of foreign aid in Myanmar and its borderlands. Her research has also been published in *Annals of the American Association of Geographers, Political Geography* and *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.