THE RISE OF AN ANTI-POLITICS MACHINERY: PEACE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE FOCUS ON RESULTS IN MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

Impact, value for money, effectiveness and similar buzzwords have become common ground in development cooperation and peacebuilding. The application of technical instruments to manage and measure societal transformations is hardly questioned anymore: it is presented as a minor adaptation to improve policy and practice. This paper argues that there is far more to this shift: Enabled in a set of discourses, a machinery of practices and institutions has been installed, which is removing political questions on development or peace from the political realm and firmly placing it under the rule of technical experts. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse analysis, this paper analyses how this machinery prioritises gradual reform, subjugates other approaches to societal change, and re-produces power/knowledge networks in both the global South and North. Based on ethnographic field research in Myanmar, it also explores discursive strategies of local actors in a specific context; and how they are aiming to create spaces for agency to challenge this machinery. ¹

¹ This article is part of an ongoing PhD-research project analysing discourses on results-orientation and their effects in the fields of peacebuilding and development cooperation.
1 INTRODUCTION

Not many developing countries can compete with the level of attention that Myanmar\(^2\) has enjoyed over the last years. Business actors, governments, international aid agencies, bi- and multilateral donor organizations alike are scaling up on investments, emphasising good cooperation, growth, and aid programmes. After the former military leadership formally handed over power to a civilian government, Myanmar has seen a substantial influx of a range of actors. It could be described as a proper ‘gold rush’. The reform path sketched out by the new government is ambitious: strengthening democracy, fostering economic growth, development, and peace with the various armed groups in the country; all in controlled, gradual and projectable manner.

If one compares these plans to the narratives that dominated in the times in another one of Burma's path-breaking historical period, namely the democratic uprising in 1988, the difference is striking. Back then, the scene was dominated by the confrontation of political activists with the military regime of Ne Win, street protests, concepts of revolution and immediate elections. Nowadays, if one looks at the different statements, reports, rationales in project documents produced by organizations in the international aid architecture, the picture is another one. The narrative of Myanmar’s situation that dominates the scene today is essentially a narrative of lacking capacities, weak institutions, and an underdeveloped civil society. The language used both by the government and international agencies invokes a process that has to be properly managed, but where all actors work towards a common, uncontested goal.

Back then and now, the problems and questions arising from such a far reaching transformation in the context of Myanmar are closely related to political representations of Myanmar as a union, its statehood, the legitimacy of different actors and their actions. Most importantly, all of these concepts are necessarily contested in an environment that has known ongoing armed conflict – over more than six decades in some areas. All aspects of such a situation point to a process that is hardly foreseeable, marked by different periods of progress and impasse, linking a range of societal change processes in complex ways. So, how became it possible that today’s discourse of this transformation is dominantly depicted in the way of a manageable, gradual, and uncontested transition?

In this paper, I argue that the structures and organisations of the international aid architecture have a) undergone an increasing technocratisation and managerialisiation with the emergence of the ‘focus on results’ over the last years; and b) can be analysed as a dispositif that through

\(^2\)To use either ‘Myanmar’ or ‘Burma’ to name the country in question is often interpreted as showing political colour. Therefore, the use of both terms in this paper is a conscious choice: Not to imply the possibility of keeping an objective or neutral academic position on this issue; but because the analytical value of how different actors and discourses use these names is prioritized over coherence in writing.
bureaucratisation and professionalisation is re-producing and stabilising existing power/knowledge networks in the global South and North. It prioritises gradual reform and stability over abrupt societal change, and de-politicises development and peace by placing inherently political processes in the realm of technical experts. In short, it acts as a sophisticated anti-politics machinery.

The following section 2 provides an overview of the theoretical framework and methodological approach of this paper. Section 3 discusses the changes in discourses on development and peacebuilding over the last years, before section 4 describes the elements and power effects of the anti-politics machinery. Finally, section 5 discusses resistance and struggles for legitimacy among different actors on this scene.

2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The starting point for this analysis are theoretical and methodological elements of Foucault’s oeuvre, namely his understanding of discourses (Foucault, 1966, 1969, 1971), the concept of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1976, 1982) and governmentality (2004a, 2004b). This understanding of discourses emphasizes that what actors perceive as “the way to see or do things” is always a historically and spatially contingent construction. Things could always be constructed in different ways; and what we perceive as ‘truth’ has more to do with dominant discourses and networks of power than with something that could be called ‘objective’ truth.

Following these concepts, this paper starts from a few specific assumptions; both theoretical and methodological in nature. Firstly, I start from the assumption that in each field, speech and language are ordered by sets of rules determining how things are said, what can be said, and what is excluded from being said. These structures in language are called discourses. These grids are constructed, but strongly influence our ways of thinking, and acting. They influence what is considered ‘truth’, who is seen as being a legitimate speaker on certain subjects, and are constituting the things they speak of in specific ways. Although these structures often go unnoticed, they can be subjected to critical analysis (Foucault, 1969, 1971).

Secondly, discourses are crucial to understand what at different points in time and space is considered ‘truth’ in a society. According to Foucault (in Faubion, 2000, p. 132), “‘truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it - a "regime" of truth.” This implies that also knowledge or ‘truth’ produced in science cannot be considered as a more objective knowledge per se – although in our contemporary societies, a specific place is considered for academia in the production, regulation and circulation of
knowledge. On the contrary: What is considered ‘truth’ is the subject of political debates and social confrontations (Foucault, 2001, p. 159).

Thirdly, this makes clear that knowledge, or truth, cannot be separated from power. Although discourses play a role in the production of power/knowledge networks, they are interacting with the *rapports de force* in a given society. This is at the heart of the interest of this paper: Not only to analyse how specific discourses came into being, but even more so how they realize their power effects into worldly, tangible consequences. Therefore, the analysis here does not exclusively focus on language, as it would be the case in linguistics. As Carabine (2001, p. 276) puts it, the approach followed here is “[...] concerned with describing the procedures, practices, apparatuses and institutions involved in the production of discourses and knowledges, and their power effects. [...] this is not simply about exposing the processes through which discourses are produced, but also about establishing the ways that those discourses are practiced, operationalized and supported institutionally, professionally, socially, legally and economically.”

All elements, discursive or not, can be analytically grouped in ensembles that Foucault (1977) called *dispositifs*, and can be analysed in order to understand more about their relation.3 Discourses constitute things in specific ways, and make them amenable to certain problematisations, practices and solutions whose meaning is only enabled in interaction with other parts of the *dispositif* in question.

In this sense, the assumptions and concepts just outlined allow thinking the nexus between ideas, practice and policy in different ways: They enable to analyse how certain practices became possible and seen as appropriate by different actors, how legitimacy for certain solutions is produced, and how networks and structures of power are reproduced in every instance of social practice. Not least, this analytical perspective provides fertile ground to critically analyse a field that presents itself as largely untouched by struggles of power: interventions aiming at building peace and bring about development.

These assumptions define the specific approach to analyse discourses and practices, as well as their implications for policy and practice of development cooperation and peacebuilding. In the following, more concrete analyses using a similar approach provide elements to complete the theoretical framework of this paper.

The role of discourses and networks of power/knowledge in shaping policy and practice of development cooperation and peacebuilding have been emphasised for quite some time. Typically, authors would criticise the grounds on which interventions aiming to bring about development and peace construct their legitimacy, as well as their claim to universal values. In

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3 See also section 4.
this vein, Cowen and Shenton (1996) have retraced the origins of current ideas underpinning development policy to the (European) project of modernity in the 19th century. Hence, they show that although presented as universal values, most ideas shaping development policy are of a specific origin; namely the global North. Escobar (1984, 1995) highlighted the role of discourses in constituting the problem of ‘underdevelopment’, and how ‘developing countries’ are made amenable to the solutions proposed by specialized institutions and development policy. With this, he also problematized the role of the emerging development studies and the ‘scientific’ solutions it proposes in reproducing a global order that sees the global South dominated by a global North.

Ferguson (1990; also Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994) drew attention to the particular understandings of the problems of development and their role in depoliticising development. By analysing the strategies of international actors to bring about development in Lesotho, he showed that their discourses constituted the problems to solve as problems residing inside the country. Accordingly, solutions proposed were excluding aspects going beyond its borders – namely Lesotho’s relation to South Africa under apartheid – and thus constantly failing. He shows how criticism of development discourses can only take place in the name of doing development ‘better’. Questions outside this narrow frame are excluded from being asked by the development discourse; thus replacing political or ideological considerations with the specialized knowledge of development experts. A depoliticisation of development is the consequence, where debate is restricted to improving technical solutions without revisiting larger, underlying assumptions and worldviews. In this sense, the dispositif of development is often reproducing the very same order and problems it aims to solve.

In a similar criticism levelled at peacebuilding, Heathershaw (2008) identifies the production of solutions in peacebuilding that are constantly failing to live up to its ideals. By merging different political agendas in the name of finding pragmatic solutions, peacebuilding discourses exclude political questions from debate: its neoliberal foundations cannot be questioned anymore, and are projected into developing countries. It is in this vein that different authors have placed the technical evolution of the field: Duffield (2001, 2007) speaks of a merging of development and security, which allows Western states to project authority beyond their territory through non-state actors like NGOs. In this perspective, the increased reliance of states on non-state actors is seen as privatization and marketization; which is “synonymous with new discursive practices and technologies of power through which metropolitan states are learning how to govern anew”

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4 A conclusion similar to Foucault’s (1975) observation related to the constant failure of the prison in solving the problem of criminality; which contrasts with its long-term stability as an institutional solution to the very same problem.
It is also in this context that he understands the advent of ever more complex subcontracting arrangements, auditing techniques and what he calls "the introduction of 'new public management' [...] to the public-private networks of aid practice" (Duffield, 2001, p. 316). With this, he also opens a strand of critique to current peacebuilding practice which points out processes of 'bureaucratization' (Goetschel & Hagmann, 2009) through the use of managerial tools and the focus on effectiveness (Denskus, 2007; Eyben, 2010), or even a 'technocratic turn' (Mac Ginty, 2013). At the heart of this argumentation is that peace is increasingly framed as an apolitical concept, which can be 'built' and 'measured' following a 'managerial project logic' (Goetschel & Hagmann, 2009).

In sum, the elements just outlined provide the means to sharpen the critical gaze on the set of practices that are the central interest of this paper. In this light, focusing on results, managerial practices, and evidence-based policy as discursive elements and practices can be analysed in ways that go beyond criticising them in the name of 'doing it better'. Rather, this framework allows to look behind what Mosse (2004, p. 641) called "a cloak of rational planning" that masks these practices. The questions emerging from this are then evolving around how such practices became possible in the first place, and around their role in the reproduction of existing power/knowledge networks.

3 FOCUS ON RESULTS: A NEW REALITY

Over the last decades, the discourses present in the international aid architecture have known a substantial shift: What can be said about development cooperation and peacebuilding, which concepts are regularly invoked in combination, which elements are omitted or excluded from debate. More and more, the question of achieving 'results' has moved to the foreground in documents produced by INGOs, UN agencies, or bi-lateral donor organisations. Legitimacy is sought more and more by showing that one's projects deliver results, meaning changes in the broader context going beyond the implementation of activities. Almost unanimously, actors emphasize their commitment to manage and monitor for results, focus on impact, and keep an eye on efficiency. The focus on results has become a 'reality' in the field of international cooperation to which all actors have to adapt if they want to be perceived as legitimate or professional actors.

This development can be easily observed in the standard-setting agreements stemming from high-level meetings, were better ways to bring about development were discussed: The Paris declaration on aid effectiveness (2005), the Accra agenda for action (2008), the Dili declaration

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5 For the field of development cooperation, Abrahamsen (2004) raises a similar critique when analyzing the power relations in which instruments of development cooperation are embedded.
on peacebuilding and statebuilding (2010), the Monrovia roadmap (2011), and the new deal for engagement in fragile states (2011) all firmly place the spotlight on the question of results. While this events and the signing of declarations on the modalities of delivering aid have been largely interpreted as technical exercises for donors, they have been tremendously instrumental in steadily shifting the discourses on development towards the questions of the results and technicalities of development cooperation. In 2013, also the Myanmar government has issued a document setting out the parameters for partnership with its development partners, explicitly following the same principles as the above mentioned agreements: The Nay Pyi Taw accord for effective development cooperation.

But although most actors take these developments for granted and see them as an almost natural evolution of these fields, they are still contingent – and historically specific. The origins of the discourse on results-orientation are manifold, and are drawing on several discourses that have been observed in the global North since the 1970s. A full genealogy of the making and forging of these discourses would go beyond the scope of this article; I restrict myself to sketching the basic structuring forces of these discourses. Overall, the emphasis on results can be situated as part of a larger development that Foucault (2004a) has analysed as the rise of neoliberal governmentality. The basic feature of this form of governmentality is an overarching mistrust towards the effectiveness of state action. Every form of (social) policy is submitted to the sneaking suspicion of being ineffective, and that there might be more efficient ways to address the identified problem with market-based solutions. In short: While in Keynesianism, the state was thought to oversee and regulate the market, neoliberal governmentality proposes that the state is overseen and regulated by the market. The laissez-faire has been converted in a ne-pas-laissez-faire le gouvernement (Foucault, 2004a, p. 253), and market principles are now applied to judge the necessity and effectiveness of state actions. Furthermore, these same principles of market rationality, schemes of analysis, and decision-making criteria, are extended to the sphere of the political, but also to society (Foucault, 1989, p. 119). As a consequence, discourses drawing on these principles have realized their power effects in virtually every domain of policy-making.

A particularly illustrative instance of the discourse on results-orientation in development cooperation that has made it to global prominence is the framework of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000). A collection of clearly defined goals, each coming with specific and measurable targets, imply that the ‘problem’ of development can be dissected into manageable units or goals. These little pieces can then be addressed individually, and progress in each sector can be measured to assess the overall picture.

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6 For a more extensive analysis of the origins of these discourses, see Eyben (2013).
That such a conceptualisation of measuring societal change processes is simplifying the complex environments where development cooperation or peacebuilding take place has been taken up in a considerable body of more practice-oriented literature. Drawing mainly from the fields of evaluation and policy research, this strand is dealing with the challenges that evaluation, results-orientation, and project management tools are facing in conflict-affected (and developing) contexts, and is proposing ways to overcome them in order to improve peacebuilding results. In this literature, the debate has started from the problem of the ‘attribution gap’ (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 1999) because of the large number of other factors influencing peace on the macro-level besides programming practice on the micro-level (Anderson & Olson, 2003; Spencer, 1998) and now revolves around what could be described as different ontologies and epistemologies of evaluation approaches. Especially since the emergence of a strand of publications drawing on insights from systems thinking and complexity science, the debate on linear and non-linear understandings of social change processes has spread to all fields of design, monitoring and evaluation of interventions in conflict-affected contexts (Neufeldt, 2011). Although this strand is still far from forming a coherent approach, concepts of systemic thinking have been employed in various fields of social programming (Forss, Marra, & Schwartz, 2011; Williams & Imam, 2007), including development (Ramalingam, 2013; Ramalingam, Jones, Reba, & Young, 2008). Evaluation approaches drawing on elements of systems theory emerged in the last decade, for instance ‘developmental’ evaluation (Patton, 2011), ‘outcome mapping’ (Earl, Carden, & Smutylo, 2001), or ‘contribution analysis’ (Mayne, 2001); preparing the ground for the current omnipresent interest in ‘Theories of Change’ and approaches to integrate systemic thinking in peacebuilding (Körppen, Ropers, & Giessmann, 2011; Wils, Hopp, Ropers, Vimalarajah, & Zunzer, 2006; Woodrow & Chigas, 2008). For the time being, the debate in the field of interventions in conflict-affected contexts has mainly stressed the challenges of reconciling these alternative approaches with more traditional project management tools and organizational questions (for instance, see Bächtold, Dittli, & Servaes, 2013; Campbell, 2011).

Two things can be drawn from this synopsis: Firstly, there is lively debate around methods, approaches, and tools to improve results-orientation of current practice in development cooperation and peacebuilding. On the other hand, the trend of results-orientation itself is mostly excluded from debate, and is not questioned anymore. Secondly, the debate is evolving into the realms of specialized experts that have the necessary academic background to follow, understand and contribute to these debates. Legitimate speaking positions on these topics are

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7 A range of publications deal with challenges that evaluation is facing in conflict-affected contexts, see for instance Scharbatke-Church (2011), Quack (2007), or Stave (2011).

8 As an exception to this rule, Natsios (2010) prominently criticizes the focus on quantitative measurements of success for development projects; a tendency he subsumes under the term of “Obsessive Measurement Disorder”.

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regulated and restricted to experts, which debate and define standards, conceptualisations and best practices.

Furthermore, by looking at the synopsis above, one can imagine that results-orientation reinforces the tendency of development or peacebuilding discourses to constitute their respective objects not in the sense of a state to describe a situation in a specific country at a given time, but as processes. Development therefore becomes something that can be fostered, and peace can be built, which makes these problems amenable to a range of specific practices, tools, guidelines, concepts, and instruments (cf. also Goetschel & Hagmann, 2009; Heathershaw, 2008). How these then translate these specific discourses into worldly consequences is shown in the next section.

4 THE ANTI-POLITICS MACHINERY: BUREAUCRATISATION, DE-POLITICISATION, AND TECHNOCRATIC APPROACHES

After sketching out the discourses present among actors of the international aid architecture, this section shows how these discourses are operationalised, and how they realise their power effects. Here, Foucault’s (1976, 1977) concept of a dispositif is central to show what worldly consequences entailed by the shift towards results-orientation in the specific example of Myanmar.9 A dispositif is what Foucault (Foucault, 1977, p. 299) calls a heterogeneous ensemble, a system of relations in which both discursive and non-discursive elements interact. Such an ensemble can encompass discourses, but also practices, architecture, scientific propositions, etc. that have a strategic function. A dispositif is therefore initially responding to a certain societal problem at the historical moment of its emergence, but further develops in a complex interaction with other societal processes, including the effects it produces itself. In the case here, the development and peacebuilding dispositif encompasses, among others: discourses constituting development and peace as the consequence of development cooperation and peacebuilding; specific formations of discursive objects like effectiveness, or sustainability; the institutions of the international aid architecture; practices like programming, evaluation, auditing; but also scientific propositions to improve practice and to make policy ‘evidence-based’. Initially after World War II, this dispositif was instrumental in maintaining domination of the global North over the global South and enabling the latter’s economic exploitation (Escobar, 1984), but its strategic function has considerably evolved over time. Some elements of it still can be interpreted as ways in which Northern states govern Southern states (Duffield, 2001). But I would argue that its main function after the emergence of the focus on results is to stabilise and reproduce neoliberal notions of market-based solutions both in the global South and the global

9 The following reconstruction of discursive strategies of actors is based on ethnographic field research in Myanmar, involving more than sixty qualitative interviews that have been conducted in 2013 and 2014.
North. Interacting with policy processes in the global North in a circular way, practices and approaches developed for development cooperation and peacebuilding also feed back into their societies of origin; realising their power effects back ‘home’. This points to this dispositifs main strategic function: prioritizing gradual reform within the limits of technical approaches, whilst subjugating more radical political actors and the abrupt societal changes and revolutions they convey. This simultaneously happens in the global North and South: By tying INGOs closely to their (government) funders in the North, but also by modelling Southern civil societies after their Western counterparts and subjugating other, more political forms of societal change; as I will show in the following.

Myanmar offers a particularly interesting case to study the shift in the discourses towards the focus on results; the consequences for the above described dispositif and the realisation of its power effects. Large parts of the country have been sealed from widespread exposure to the international aid architecture for decades\textsuperscript{10}. It is only in the current political opening process and its related influx of international actors that the typical architecture of international aid is put in place. As this process is still in the making, it is the ideal moment to observe and analyse the struggles for legitimacy that come with the setup of this system before its structures crystallise and are taken for granted.

That said, the deployment of the typical international aid architecture typically already comes with clear structures: a hierarchy among different kinds of organisations that is deployed in any given country context. Although the discourses on development and peacebuilding emphasise the importance of partnership, plurality of perspectives and inclusive decision-making, they continuously reproduce a hierarchy that places bi- and multi-lateral donor organizations on top; followed by international aid agencies, and their local partner organisations. The same structures can be observed in Myanmar.

The shifts in the discourses in development cooperation and peacebuilding are important elements that stabilise and reproduce this hierarchy through daily practices. The focus on results entails specific formations of discursive objects that can be found in discourses on development cooperation and peacebuilding, but also are crystallised in procedures, contracts, and even specific institutions. One formation consists of linking the notions of performance, results, and accountability, to the disbursement of funding. Funding disbursed by donor organisation for specific projects comes with a range of requirements, with which the organisations at the lower levels of this hierarchy have to comply. In exchange for funding, INGOs and national NGOs have to show that they are using the funding according to the agreed plan. This typically happens in the form of regular reporting on all activities, but also takes the

\textsuperscript{10} See, for instance, Duffield (2008); Holliday (2011); Smith (1999, 2007); South (2008).
forms of mid-term and end of project evaluations, as well as financial audits. All of these requirements demand specific technical knowledge on behalf of the contracted organisations.

To live up to these requirements is often only possible for larger local organisations that are professionalised to a certain degree. This means that in the specific case of Myanmar, only a small number of national organisations are able to meet typical donor requirements. These have been put under considerable strain with the influx of a large number of donor agencies: donor agencies quickly identified the organisations that are able to meet their technical demands, and inundated them with propositions for project implementation. The bureaucratic workload that comes with project implementation for several different donor organisations and their differing frameworks and requirement is substantial. Some organisations are saying that they have been so busy with reporting and fulfilling other requirements that it actually kept them from doing their essential work.

Here, another characteristic formation of discursive objects comes into play, linking the notions of local ownership, and sustainability with the involvement of a national partner organisation. International aid discourse sets the standard for good programming not only as a function of the achievement of results, but also as a function of the ‘sustainability’ of these results. While ‘sustainability’ is used in a variety of ways, it also gave way to a specific strategies that are generally accepted by international organisations as bearing a larger potential to achieve lasting impacts. Typically, these involve the fostering of ‘local ownership’ for a specific project, which is often used equivalently with contracting a national NGO to be involved in the implementation of activities. Accordingly, all international agencies in Myanmar need national or local partner organisations for the implementation of their projects. This leads to a shortage of national organisations to meet their demand.

Consequently, civil society building comes in handy. This discursive formation emerged in the mid-1990s as a specific form of peacebuilding. Its specific meaning is only enabled as a part of the discursive formation of peace and democratisation; which is part of the liberal peace framework. In this formation, the creation or strengthening of civil society is seen as a precondition for sustainable peace, assuming that these organisations would serve as a counterbalance and watchdog for the government (Heathershaw, 2008). Of importance here is that ‘strengthening civil society’ is in fact mostly practised as ‘strengthening civil society organisations’ that reproduce the organisational form of Western NGOs. While a focus on creating or strengthening national NGOs helps reducing the ‘shortage’ of ‘partner’ organisations in Myanmar, this strategy has far-reaching consequences: It excludes other forms of what would typically be considered as parts of the civil society, most importantly, political activism. As long
as it is not taking an institutionalised form, political activists are generally excluded from the international aid hierarchy, from funding, and other support.

This can be interpreted as an effect that the development cooperation and peacebuilding dispositif realises on practice: With the bureaucratic demands that have to be met by national partner organisations, INGOs or donor organisations are facing practical constraints when partnering with activists. The latter are hardly in the position to meet the technical standards of project implementation and accountability; and their activities are seldom fitting the typical project cycle management, planning, and predictability that is characteristic for the development and peacebuilding dispositif. Equally, this excludes them from delivering results or impacts that could be measured with the traditional, technical methods11— or to successfully pass an audit.

The narrow definition of ‘civil society’ as ‘civil society organisations’ therefore specifically became possible in the dispositif of development cooperation and peacebuilding dispositif, and is reinforced with the shift towards focusing on results. With the discourses of development cooperation and peacebuilding constituting ‘development’ and ‘peace’ as the result of ‘development cooperation’ and ‘peacebuilding’, discourses that would enable other activities or means to bring about societal change are subjugated. Political activism, for instance, is excluded from a legitimate speaking position on topics of ‘peace’ and ‘development’; as the legitimate speaking position is closely tied to discursive formations of professional and technical standards associated with a stable organisational form, and the integration into the aid hierarchy. This, in turn, reveals the strategic function of the development and peacebuilding dispositif. ‘Development’, and ‘peace’ as concepts are de-politicised; in the discourses of the development and peacebuilding dispositif, these can only be the result of the accepted forms of development cooperation and peacebuilding. The discourses further narrow down debate about the broader concepts of ‘development’ and ‘peace’ to the means by which they can be achieved inside the limits set and continuously reproduced by the dispositif – following the technocratic approach. More political debates about the different visions of ‘development’ and ‘peace’ are structurally excluded.

Consequently, the development and peacebuilding dispositif has an overall stabilising and reproducing effect on the rapports de force in a given society, by subjugating more radical approaches to societal change. What is enabled in terms of societal change is gradual reform through technical approaches, whilst at the same time, revolutions and abrupt changes are excluded from what can be said in these discourses. Also the often-declared goal of fostering local ownership for societal change processes rings hollow against this backdrop: local

11 On the difference between traditional, linear methods of results measurement and non-linear or systemic concepts, as well as the different legitimacies that are ascribed to them in the fields of development cooperation and peacebuilding, see Bächtold et al. (2013) and Natsios (2010).
ownership is only allowed as long as it stays in the prescribed limits of technical, gradual reform. In short, this dispositif is acting like an anti-politics machinery in the sense of Ferguson (1990): bureaucratising, de-politicising, and making countries amenable to be developed and ‘peace’ to be ‘built’.

In the context of Myanmar, the consequences are striking. First, it means that large parts of civil society are excluded from either being recognised as legitimate actors for societal change by most international agencies, or from their support. This concerns, among others, the sangha – the Burmese monkhood; informal self-help organisations; and groups of political activists that refuse to take on the institutional form of a Western NGO. Further, many local organisations that are in fact similar to the prescribed organisational form are facing challenges, because they have been operating underground and are not officially registered. This in turn poses substantial problems for them to enter into partnership with organisations of the aid architecture.

That these parts of civil society are not negligible for larger societal change processes can easily be shown with Myanmar’s history. Following the discourses of development cooperation and peacebuilding and the dispositif in which they are embedded, the political activists of the 8-8-88 movement would have been neither eligible for support by the international aid architecture; nor even recognised as legitimate agents of change. Nevertheless, they were pivotal in triggering the democratic uprising in 1988, long before some of them took on an institutionalised form.12

In sum, the discourses of development cooperation and peacebuilding constitute legitimate actors for societal change in terms of their technical capacities to comply with the demands, standards and approaches of the international aid architecture. Other forms that could be seen as producing legitimacy – for instance, popular support, numbers of members – are excluded from this calculation. While this modelling of a Burmese civil society after Western standards often shows traits of orientalism, it also bears the danger of choosing the wrong partners – just because they take the organisational form prescribed (cf. Maung Zarni, 2011). In any case, the technical expertise needed to be eligible for integration into the international aid architecture restricts people and organisations to a small elite that had the privilege of higher education. The exclusion of all other actors from being recognised as legitimate agents for societal change may not be in the intention of the organisations in the aid architecture, but de facto takes place – and is clearly at odds with their self-declared goals of inclusive development, participation, empowerment, and so forth.

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12 For extensive accounts of the events in 1998, see Smith (1999) or Lintner (1994).
5 RESISTANCE AND STRUGGLES FOR LEGITIMACY

Although this dispositif just outlined is infused with power/knowledge, crystallised in large organisations, supported by scientific propositions, and vested with interests, it is still a contingent construction. Even if it may often seem unchangeable and static, it is still the result of a complex interaction of all actors involved. And therefore, it can be changed (cf. also Foucault, 1976, 1977, 1981). Struggles for legitimacy of different actors most often reproduce the same discursive order, but also can lead to gradual shifts in the societal rapports de forces.

One particularly striking arena to show the power effects of the results-orientation discourse in Myanmar are the discursive struggles for legitimacy opposing international actors and local civil society organizations. Here, the discursive strategies employed are clustering mainly around the question of expertise and, more widely, of who is in charge for development and peace in the country.13

For international actors embedded in the international aid hierarchy, the answer is relatively straightforward: Development and peace are brought about in an architecture where international donors provide funds, international NGOs implement programs and projects in collaboration with local civil society organizations. Ideally, this happens in consultation with the government and in an effective, results-oriented way fulfilling the international standards of delivering aid. Accordingly, the problematisation of Myanmar’s current situation in their discourse is focusing on a ‘lack of capacities’ in local civil society organizations to bring about development in line with international standards. Consequentially, the overarching solution to this problem is to ‘build the capacity’ of local organizations, to ‘enable’ them to comply with the standards of the international aid architecture. In practice, this makes local organizations a legitimate target to be acted upon in the form of trainings, coaching, and capacity building in strategic planning, analysis, financial accounting, reporting, proposal writing, and so forth. The discursive formation linking technical capacity to a legitimate speaking position on questions of development and peace has proven very effective in structuring the interaction between international and local actors.

While it may be true that only a handful of local civil society organizations in Myanmar have the capacity to cope with the highly sophisticated technical demands of the international aid system, it still has to be emphasised that this common way to problematise Burma’s current situation is contingent. Firstly, it clearly confines the ‘problems’ of development and peace in Myanmar to

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13 The following reconstruction of discursive strategies of actors is based on ethnographic field research in Myanmar, involving more than sixty qualitative interviews that have been conducted in 2013 and 2014. The focus in the following analysis lies on struggles for legitimacy inside of the above described dispositif but will be extended to the other actors whose positions are commonly subjugated in further research papers.
the technical realm, where the overall goal of development cooperation and peacebuilding becomes restricted to bringing local actors 'up to speed' with the international architecture; and ‘building civil society organisations’. Broader questions about the international aid architecture, the origin and causes of conflict, and what a vision of Myanmar’s future would look like are excluded. Secondly, it degrades local civil society organisations to ‘junior’ partners in the transition, which is clearly at odds even with the self-declared goals of international aid agencies.

On the other hand, civil society organizations in Myanmar show reservations to be uncritically embedded in the partnership with international actors and government authorities. Considering the decades of active suppression of these organizations by the regime, and not least the experience of the crackdown on the democracy uprising in Summer 1988, this is more than understandable. This points to another problematic aspect of this problematization of fragile states conveyed in the New Deal: As this problematization is strictly technical, it fails to recognize the historical and political dimensions of conflict. Hence, it assumes that with capacity building support for all actors, more inclusive dialogue, it is possible to build mutual trust, overcome differences among actors in dialogue, and to directly move on to develop a common vision of the future. While this is not impossible, it is a strong assumption in highly politically contested environments where there are different visions and contestation per definition.

Nonetheless, the discourses confining international actors to the technical realm offers an entry points for discursive strategies of local actors. First of all, to construct a more important role for themselves. Given that international actors mainly frame themselves as technical experts, local organizations construct themselves as experts of the local context, with an in-depth understanding of the complex local political realities that are difficult to grasp for outsiders. By positioning themselves as experts, they appropriate the legitimate speaking position that in the development cooperation and peacebuilding discourses is reserved to expert knowledge. Furthermore, they can draw on extensive experience in navigating the spaces for action in a complex environment; marked by the uncertainty of what is allowed by a regime in transition and what not (cf. Prasse-Freeman, 2012). This discursive strategy provides legitimacy for local organizations to play a more active role in the international aid architecture, and is trying to counter the technical discourse on results-orientation. Nevertheless, while this strategy can counterbalance a few stifling effects of the development cooperation and peacebuilding dispositif, its scope is unable to put the larger aid architecture into question.

This example shows that discourses and their power effects cannot be understood as merely deterministic concepts. Using elements of international discourses to strengthen their own positions, local civil society organizations are successfully claiming spaces and legitimacy for
their proper role to counter the subjugating effects of the *dispositif* of development cooperation and peacebuilding. In the end, it is exactly in these kinds of struggles where the structure of discourses is constructed.

6 CONCLUSION: PEACE AS A RESULT?

In this paper, I have argued that there is more to the changes in the discourses of development cooperation and peacebuilding that have taken place over the last years than just minor adaptations to professional practice. Drawing on a foucauldian understanding of discourses, power/knowledge networks, and *dispositifs*, I have shown how the debate around the focus on results, measurability and impacts is instrumental in placing debates on development and peace in the realm of technical experts. Accompanying practices like evaluation or audits constitute legitimate actors for societal change as actors that are adhering to professional standards defined by the international aid architecture. ‘Peace’ and ‘development’ are constituted as the result of ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘development cooperation’. This excludes other forms like political activism from being recognised as legitimate forms for societal change. The discourses, scientific propositions, institutions and practices of the international aid architecture are forming a *dispositif* that de-politicises broader societal change processes, and makes them amenable to the solutions proposed by the very same institutions. Overall, this is re-producing power/knowledge networks both in the global North and South by bringing civil society organisations under closer control of bi-lateral donor organisations, and hence, the governments of ‘giving’ and ‘recipient’ countries. This *dispositif* prioritises gradual reform and stability over abrupt societal change, and de-politicises development and peace by placing inherently political processes in the realm of technical experts. In short, it acts as a sophisticated anti-politics machinery.

Nonetheless, these structures – as crystallised and impenetrable they may seem at first glimpse – also offer spaces for resistance. Drawing on ethnological field research in Myanmar, I have shown strategies by local organisations to carve out space for agency that allow challenging the development cooperation and peacebuilding *dispositif* - at least at its margins.


