

## **The Challenge of Tracking Social Change Outcomes: Civil and Political Rights in Burma**

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Burma has recently undergone some of the most dramatic changes the country has seen since the current regime came to power in 1962. At the root of this change are civil society organizations in Burma and in exile that have, over many years, steadily built a movement to promote civil and political rights. American Jewish World Service (AJWS) began funding several of these groups along the Thai/Burmese border in 2002 and, today, funds 30 organizations working along Burma's borders and inside the country. AJWS recently took a step back to reflect on how the landscape of civil and political rights has shifted in Burma from 2002 to present.



Photo Credit: Beth Jones

By way of background, over the past half century, the military regime in Burma has quelled dissent, free speech and civil and political rights, and has waged a violent campaign against Burma's ethnic minorities, causing hundreds of thousands to flee to refugee camps on the Thai/Burmese border. In 2010, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the iconic democratic opposition leader whom the regime put under house arrest in 1989, was finally released and won a seat in parliament when by-elections were held in April 2012. In January 2012, the Burmese government released hundreds of political prisoners and signed preliminary cease-fires with several ethnic armed resistance groups.

AJWS's grantmaking is centered around four principles: (1) Marginalized communities are powerful agents of change and development when mobilized from within; (2) Communities, through representative grassroots organizations, are best placed to envision, articulate and implement strategies for their own development; (3) Community development cannot take place when human rights are denied; and (4) Women, fully empowered, are critical drivers of community development and change. As such, the outcomes, or indicators of progress, which AJWS tracks are related to the formation of social movements and social change.

Over the past couple of years, AJWS has developed a robust monitoring and evaluation system for its grantmaking, creating strategies for each issue area that the organization works on -- civil and political rights, sexual health and rights, and natural resource rights -- in each country where it works. These strategies contain baseline data, long-term (10-year) goals, grantmaking strategies to achieve these goals, and short-term (3-5 years) outcomes that program officers expect or hope to see if they are on the right path. In this strategy development process, AJWS engaged Barbara Klugman, a consultant who supports social justice grantmakers and NGOs in developing clear strategies and related monitoring systems.

In reflecting on AJWS's grantmaking in Burma over the past ten years, AJWS's Asia grants staff analyzed changes that occurred in every outcome category they are tracking, for each year of grantmaking. They

looked for outcomes to which one or several grantees have contributed, and which were funded in whole or in part by AJWS as part of a broad social change movement.

For example, one of the outcome categories grants staff are tracking is a “shared problem definition” (or an “increased standardization of the articulation of the problem and potential policy options,” to address it), particularly problem definitions that are “drawn from and talk to those most affected.”<sup>1</sup> In this outcome category for 2003, the Asia grants staff noted that following years of AJWS grantees and other organizations documenting patterns of sexual and gender-based violence and ethnic cleansing,<sup>2</sup> the U.S. government passed the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act. This confirmed that the regime was, in fact, using rape as a weapon of war and that the regime was engaged in ethnic cleansing -- hence, broadening recognition of the problem.

Another outcome category AJWS grants staff are tracking is “strengthened alliances” between organizations or networks that develop shared priorities for action, leading to perceived legitimacy by those AJWS and its partners seek to influence. In the words of Barbara Klugman, “As an advocacy process gets under way, different organizations representing different interests and bringing in a wider range of insights, contacts, and relationships will almost certainly need to be mobilized.”<sup>3</sup> For this outcome category for 2011, the Asia grants staff noted that a network of women’s organizations operating in exile on the Thai/Burmese border began to connect with a network of Rangoon-based women’s organizations. This was significant as groups on the border and groups inside the country had for years worked relatively independently.

Looking at all of these individual outcomes together, major shifts in Burma that AJWS distilled are:

- Increased cooperation among groups on an expanding range of issues, including the rights of persecuted ethnic minorities and the pursuit of democracy;
- Improved capacity of groups to document and expose human rights violations; and
- Increased coordination between groups working inside the country and along its borders.

In achieving these outcomes, civil society organizations worked within an extremely repressive environment, which made community organizing difficult. For instance, the junta blocked or carefully censored all media. To work around this, grassroots groups shared information about what was happening inside the country through radio, cassette recordings and educational pamphlets. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution, when a pro-democracy protest broke out and the junta beat, arrested, and killed peaceful demonstrators, groups that had built up deep networks over the years through trainings in human rights, community organizing, and non-violent tactics, were able to channel information and transmit messages about the revolution to each other and to the outside world.

Once all of the outcomes -- small steps to affect social change -- were identified, AJWS wrote a case study report, “The Story of Our Impact: Supporting the Movement for a Free and Democratic Burma 2002-2012.” In preparing the case study, AJWS’s Asia grants staff interviewed eight grantees and subsequently shared the case study with the fourteen AJWS grantees mentioned in it to get their

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Klugman, “Is the Policy Win All? A Framework for Effective Social-Justice Advocacy,” *Foundation Review*, 2011 Vol 2:3, 93-107.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see “License to Rape,” a report by Shan Women’s Action Network and Shan Human Rights Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Klugman (2011).

feedback and to further refine the story of the civil and political rights movement in Burma. Externally, the case study has value for engaging and sharing information with AJWS's constituents; internally it will be used to inform future strategy development. AJWS grantees also reported that the process of reflection encouraged them to make sense of how they got to where they are today at a time when they are very focused on crafting future strategies.

**Resources for funders:**

AJWS's case study on Burma: "[The Story of Our Impact: Supporting the Movement for a Free and Democratic Burma 2002-2012](#)"

Barbara Klugman's article, "[Is the Policy Win All? A Framework for Effective Social-Justice Advocacy](#)" and her website on evaluating advocacy: <http://barbaraklugmanevaluatingadvocacy.blogspot.com/>

For more information on Burma:  
<http://www.burmapartnership.org/>