

Building Sustainable Peace in Burma



KESAN

Millions of Karen and other Indigenous peoples rely on the Salween River for their food sovereignty, livelihoods, transportation, and spiritual practices.

Peace Parks: A political tool for self-determination

As Burma's first Indigenous protected and conserved area, the Salween Peace Park is a vibrant example of grassroots self-determination. In stark contrast to the highly centralized and militarized governance structures typical in Burma, the Peace Park is people-centred and community-driven. Managed through a democratic and gender-balanced governance structure, it asserts the inherent right – and responsibility – of Karen people to steward their own lands.

The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), a long-term counterpart of Inter Pares, played an instrumental role in the development of the Salween Peace Park. KESAN has spent years fostering grassroots mobilization, facilitating community consultations, providing insights on democratic management structures, and sharing lessons from Indigenous protected areas around the world, including in Canada. To expand the potential impact of this initiative, [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

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In Their Own Words: Burma's independent Indigenous news



KACHIN NEWS GROUP

The Kachin News Group conducts an interview at the confluence of the Irawaddy River, considered the birthplace of the Kachin, one of Burma's largest Indigenous peoples.

In a country where information has long been used as a propaganda tool to stifle dissent, Indigenous media effectively harness the power of information to expose injustice.

“SWRR ministry continues humanitarian support to IDP camps.” “‘Not Enough Water to Wash Our Hands,’ Say Kachin IDPs Bracing For COVID-19.” These starkly different headlines reveal the gulf between state-sponsored media outlets and Burma News International (BNI), an independent news association of Indigenous media outlets that is supported by Inter Pares.

There are significant barriers to freedom of information in Burma. Journalists can be arrested, charged with breaking censorship laws, and even tortured; currently two BNI editors have warrants out for their arrest. A months-long Internet blackout continues in war-ravaged Arakan and Chin States, raising suspicion that the military is covering up evidence of genocide and war crimes. Earlier this year, the government ordered hundreds of news websites, including 3 BNI outlets,

blocked on “fake news” charges, and directed telecoms providers to cancel millions of SIM cards at the peak of the coronavirus crisis.

In this difficult context, BNI regroups independent Indigenous news outlets from across the country. Its members produce news in Indigenous languages, by and for Indigenous people, who make up 40% of the country's population. This news reflects their realities and perspectives on current events, which are sorely underrepresented in government and corporate media. They also publish online in English, making information accessible to non-Indigenous readers.

Some BNI members print local news for Indigenous people in low-connectivity rural areas. Several jointly run Ethnic-Language Television (ELTV), a national TV program that brings Indigenous news, languages and perspectives to homes across the country. In the context of a national assimilation project, ELTV highlights Burma's diversity and, through its very existence, insists Indigenous people be included in Burma's national conversations.

It is in the freedom of the Internet, however, where BNI members can be the most hard-hitting. Free of government oversight and censorship, they expose human rights abuses faced by Indigenous people. In a country where information has long been used as a propaganda tool to stifle dissent, Indigenous media effectively harness the power of information to expose injustice.

BNI members have lost hope that access to information would improve under the current government that replaced the dictatorship. However, BNI members persevere – experimenting with new channels; training journalists, particularly young women; and advocating for press freedom. Most importantly, they keep producing news, upholding their belief that shining a light on injustice is the best way to fight it. 

A Transformative Vision for Gender Justice

BY REBECCA WOLSAK, PROGRAM MANAGER

We were a small group of mostly women, sitting in the afternoon heat of western Burma. Khin* had travelled for two days over mountainous dirt roads to share her story with us. In an unwavering voice, she told us of the abuse she'd experienced at home, and her fear of speaking about it. She told us of the moment she discovered other women in her village living with the same fear. Khin explained how this began a slow, careful process of mobilizing and creating safe spaces where Indigenous women could support each other.

Despite living in isolated patriarchal villages, Khin and her colleagues have achieved stunning results. They surveyed over 3,000 people on domestic violence, and spoke with their communities about related customary laws. The women then successfully advocated for changes to laws, including the right for daughters to inherit property.

Our partners in Burma are trusted local organizations that use a comprehensive approach to help thousands of women, men and children lead safer and healthier lives.

On the opposite side of Burma, another Indigenous women's organization that Inter Pares supports works to improve local laws, similarly informed by their crisis support work. In 2019, as a result of their interventions, their Indigenous governance body approved sweeping changes to its criminal laws, improving legal respect for women's rights. Changes include stronger sanctions for physical abuse and sexual violence.

These efforts to provide safe space, crisis support and legal advocacy are part of Inter Pares' collaboration with many local organizations throughout Burma that promote

sexual and reproductive health and rights. Indigenous health organizations also play a central role: training traditional birth attendants and midwives, and providing family planning services. They recently began developing sex education curriculum with local teachers. In a context of legitimate fears of ethnic cleansing, all work on reproductive rights must be locally initiated and carefully conducted.

At Inter Pares, we recognize that the interconnected issues impacting sexual and reproductive health and rights require a wide range of action. Our partners in Burma are trusted local organizations that use a comprehensive approach to help thousands of women, men and children lead safer and healthier lives. We are honoured to accompany activists, social workers and healthcare providers as they work toward culture and system change – a transformative vision for gender justice that we share. 



A community consultation on drafting a law on violence against women.



Women discuss and map out their livelihood activities.

*Due to risks activists and civil society face in Burma, names have been changed or withheld to protect their identity.

Peace Parks: A political tool for self-determination

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KESAN is now connecting Salween Peace Park leaders with Indigenous communities from across Burma who are interested in developing their own parks.

Located in one of the most biodiverse areas in the Asia-Pacific region, the park spans 5,485 km² and encompasses more than 340 villages, 226 demarcated *kaw**, 27 community forests, four forest reserves, and three wildlife sanctuaries.

Aspirationally named, the Peace Park is also witness to ongoing violence: military offensives, forced displacement, rampant land confiscation, and resource extraction. In fierce opposition to the type of development desired by affected communities, the central government has plans to build disastrous mega-dams on the Salween River, the longest remaining free-flowing river in Southeast Asia.

The Salween Peace Park is more than a conservation initiative. It is a political mechanism to build lasting

peace, protect lands and environmental sustainability, and safeguard cultural identity. It asserts Karen self-determination from within, by embracing and affirming Karen values, worldviews, and visions for peaceful coexistence.

Indigenous peoples in Burma have long struggled for decentralized governance – be it in education, health

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“The [Salween Peace Park] Charter enshrines the right of the Indigenous Karen people to self-determination over how to manage and govern their natural resources and lands, and how to guide the sustainable development of their communities.”

(SPP Charter Introduction)

care, or the management of land and natural resources in their territories. At the heart of Indigenous peoples’ rights is self-determination: the right of all peoples to shape their own economic, social, and cultural development. This includes the ability of all Indigenous peoples in Burma to access culturally appropriate medical services in their own languages; land titling that reflects centuries of customary practices; and development that respects holistic visions of a healthy environment, sustainable livelihoods, and cultural survival.

At Inter Pares, we see the devastating impacts of failing to uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada. As part of our solidarity approach, we help to connect Indigenous activists from around the world, to build relationships and exchange approaches around shared struggles. Both at home and internationally, Indigenous protected areas are increasingly recognized as essential for the conservation of our ecosystems, climate change mitigation, and the realization of Indigenous sovereignty – and we are honoured to support our partners in these initiatives. 

**Kaw* is the Karen term for ‘customary lands’ – locally recognized and managed territories.



Top: A Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO) representative signs the Salween Peace Park Charter in Mutraw District, Karen State.

Bottom: The community-led Peace Park demonstrates how Indigenous Karen people can sustainably manage their lands, forests, and waters, as well as protect endangered species.

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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