

FINAL VERSION

Executive Summary

EVALUATION REPORT

REGIONAL COORDINATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

AND

COUNTRY PROGRAM MYANMAR

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Executive Summary

In the first half of 2019, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (hereafter: HBF, or Heinrich Böll Foundation) Asia Division launched the external evaluation of two historically linked HBF offices in Southeast Asia: The Southeast Asia/ASEAN office based in Bangkok and the Myanmar country office based in Yangon. The period under evaluation extended from 2015 to mid-2019. For both evaluations, formulating conclusions in preparation for a potential program adaptation as well as the program goal setting for the program cycle 2021-2023 was part of the aim.

The evaluation of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia was designed to determine whether the transformation of HBF Bangkok into a regional office has been successful. The new regional program should be assessed by itself and its components reviewed based on the defined goals. Furthermore, the evaluation should analyse the process of establishing the new, regional program and extract lessons learned from this process. Within this context, the cooperation between the regional office in Bangkok and the HBF offices in Yangon and Phnom Penh was also subject to the evaluation.

Since the HBF program in Myanmar is relatively new, the effectiveness of its goals should be evaluated separately. The evaluation should show whether the program goals were achieved and should examine whether its objectives are relevant and realistic for the country, for the region, and for political dialogue with Germany and Europe. The Cambodia office was not subject to the evaluation other than through the lens of regional coordination.

Methodology

The evaluation took place in three phases consisting of a desk review of program and project documents for both offices concerned; a fieldwork period in two parts: two weeks in Thailand (7 to 18 October) 2019 and one week in Myanmar (19 to 27 October), with visits outside the major city in both countries; and a write-up phase, with a draft report provided for comments on 26 November. Apart from the review of program documents, qualitative semi-structured interviews constituted the primary methodological tool. The evaluation comprised 53 interviews, extending to 16 interviews with HBF personnel, 29 interviews with HBF partners or affiliates, and 8 conversations with external experts. In addition to interviews, the evaluator used a mix of participatory tools to engage with the HBF teams who also had the opportunity to comment on the preliminary findings. The conclusions and recommendations of the report were presented at HBF Headquarters on 19 December.

Political Context

The cultural and political space of Southeast Asia is comprised of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Vietnam – a great mix of countries with a total population of more than 655 million people. The region, which is commonly divided in insular and mainland Southeast Asia, hosts a variety of political regimes ranging from young democracies via (semi-)authoritarian to one-party states; some analysts speak of “competitive authoritarianism”. All nations are represented in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with the exception of Timor-Leste which is an aspiring member of the regional organisation. The region is connected in the expansion of capitalist markets with the aim for economic integration, as well as through migration patterns, and is globally on the cutting-edge of digitalisation. It also shares common environmental problems and climate change challenges, including the exploitation of natural resources, the need for sustainable energy and waste management solutions, transnational haze and deterioration of air quality, maritime pollution, and global warming. The period under consideration has seen elections with regional significance across the region.

In 2017, ASEAN celebrated its 50-year anniversary, but it is weakly institutionalized. Political interaction between its members is characterized by the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, which is enshrined in the 2007 ASEAN Declaration. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), formally the region's most important human rights body inaugurated in 2009, is considered toothless. As ASEAN institutions are weak, it is important to reach decision makers at national level. There are several cross-regional civil society networks, with various degrees of capacity, which HBF is liaising with. However, civic space for civil society is shrinking across the region. Events in which HBF is involved can be subject to surveillance, tight security controls, or dissolution. Most of the countries also show a downward trend regarding the freedom on the net, as censorship and infringements to the freedom of expression increasingly pertain to online reporting and social media. The respective national situation can be particularly critical ahead of elections. Gender-based discrimination is also still widespread in Southeast Asia.

Thailand as host country of the regional program is a case in point for shrinking space of civil society. In 2014, the Thai army staged a coup d'état, ushering in a new phase of repression under the regime of the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha. The fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly became severely restricted. The NCPO destroyed the existing democratic culture and established the power of (authoritarian) bureaucracy, implemented through the civil service and the military structure. Following disinformation campaigns, the NCPO organized a referendum to pass a new Constitution in 2016 and staged an election with an unlevel playing field and a non-transparent results consolidation process in 2019. However, Thailand shows a yet more brutal face. Physical assaults on activists are on the rise, leading to increased self-censorship of journalists and activists. At the same time, ethnic minorities in Thailand remain vulnerable, and the conflict in the deep south has flared up again violently.

The HBF office in Myanmar was opened against the backdrop of the larger opening of the country and the subsequent return of the international community up to 2015. Many, often unrealistic expectations in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her leadership remained unfulfilled. Within a year, she had alienated supporters, including civil society organisations. Although the peace process formally continued, the ethnic armed groups lost their trust in the process. The central government and the military face a new frontline with the Arakan Army (AA) in the west of the country.

The greatest crisis of Myanmar's modern history occurred in August 2017 when military manoeuvres against Islamist extremists in northern Rakhine State led to the mass exodus of about 700.000 Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The undeniable human drama led not only to a new chapter in decades of unsettlement and displacement of the population concerned, leading to new dimensions of a prolonged humanitarian situation, the crisis also changed the relations between Myanmar and the international community in the long term. The latest step in this dramatic process is the filing of a lawsuit against Myanmar before the International Court of Justice, accusing Myanmar of genocide on the basis of the 2018 UN Fact Finding Mission (FFM). At the same time, there is hardly any solidarity with the plight of the Rohingya inside the country, and there are no perspectives for safe returns.

Climate change effects in Myanmar have become visible through increased floods and drought, salt water in the Ayeyarwaddy delta, changing water levels, and the extinction of endemic species, and are related to economic practices such as land grabbing, illegal logging, and mining for minerals and coal. Among the many environmental threats and themes, interlocutors have flagged deforestation as a key issue. Illegal logging is a powerful and dangerous business, with armed actors entangled in the trade. Resistance from local communities can be dangerous for the activists involved. The "silencing" of environmental activists in Thailand had a deterring effect on environmental action in Myanmar and reveals broader dimensions of shrinking space for civil society in the country and the region.

Although the overall number of civil society organisations, their scope of action and international support have grown considerably over the last decade, shrinking space for civil society returns in various forms, online and offline. Since 2016, a significant shift in policy occurred with new infringements to the freedom of expression. The military and government have made repeated use of defamation provisions, in particular article 66d of the telecommunications law. Myanmar is on the forefront of international debates about digitalisation and the need to regulate the use of social media in view of disinformation, incitement to hatred and fake news. There are also positive societal developments and openings, including for gender-democratic realities as the success of LGBTIQ campaigns demonstrate: 15.000 people have attended the 2019 &Proud rally in Yangon, with permission at ministerial level.

Organisational Setting

Since 2016, the HBF office in Thailand is responsible for a regional program, focusing on Social and Ecological Justice, as well as on Democracy and Participation, with partners in the region on a cross-country basis. Myanmar had been covered remotely from Bangkok until 2015, with a project office in Yangon with local staff since 2012. Since 2015, however, HBF Myanmar acts as an independent office with its own country program. Its programmatic focus is on Environmental Governance and Resource Politics, as well as on Political Culture and Human Rights. With the Myanmar office becoming independent, the Bangkok office was freed of all responsibilities for regional administration, with the exception of financial transactions in behalf of HBF Yangon.

The decision to develop a new, regional program was based on the understanding that ASEAN would take a growing political and economic role in the region and on the international stage. The current team composition and its operational capacity are the result of a considerate, step-by-step process with strategic decisions to forge a strong, gender-balanced and regional team. In addition to administrative personnel, it comprises two program coordinators as well as a program manager from Germany (“Zweitentsendung”) and a research manager. The latter two positions equip the regional office with the possibility to do more than a country office can normally provide. Director Manfred Hornung has been in charge of leading the office’s transition and has probably shaped the regional program like no other person to date. His term is scheduled to end in 2020. The recruitment of the next regional director should be considered timely and handled with care, including a proper handover period.

The Bangkok office registration with the Ministry of Labour has to be renewed every two years. In the past this did not pose any challenges, but during the military interregnum it became more difficult than before. As a consequence, public communications, HBF visibility and risk management strategies have to be discussed with the partners in more detail than before. Preparations have already started for the renewal of the office registration in early 2020.

The HBF country office in Myanmar has seen a number of changes during its first five years and appears to be in a process of consolidation. Before 2015, the country program was managed from Bangkok. Thailand office director Manfred Hornung started to steer the program into a new era. During the first half of 2015, he spent up to 40 per cent of his time in Myanmar while his primary responsibility lay in the development of a new regional program out of Bangkok. The first resident country director, Mirco Kreibich, took office in August 2015. He developed the programmatic framework further, recruited the current program coordinators and identified a new office building. Mirco Kreibich left Myanmar before the end of his term. There was a handover to the new country director, Dr. Axel Harneit-Sievers, but a five-months gap between the two directors led to another period during which the office was without an international head. Past experiences with gaps in the international management of the office have shown that such situations slow down operations and should be avoided in the future.

The current HBF Myanmar team seems to be fit for purpose. The program coordinator for environmental governance and development is an expert for renewable energies and was recruited for her expertise. The evaluation found that an additional staff member – a program or finance assistant – could be useful, in particular to assist the program coordinators in facilitating out-of-office events and to assist the finance team in training and supporting partners in finance and administrative requirements.

The office registered as a business in Myanmar in November 2018 and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on technical cooperation with the Environmental Conservation Department (ECD) of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation in August 2019.

Short Programme Description

The transition to a regional program managed from Bangkok occurred in multiple phases. Its first phase from the beginning of 2015 to mid-2016 (18 months) was dedicated to planning and formulating the new program. The remaining period of the same GOPP cycle, from mid-2016 to end 2017, was partly used to continue existing partnerships under the context of the new program, in particular in Thailand, and to piloting and building new partnerships and approaches across the region. To evaluate options in Indonesia and Vietnam, the office contracted country mappings of the respective civil society landscape. The complementary application of mid-2016 for the remaining GOPP period till the end of 2017 clarified that the program, although taking place against the background of ASEAN integration, will not be aligned to ASEAN institutions, but rather focus on the socio-economic, political and development paradigms under which it takes place in order to provide critical alternatives. Under program component A, ecology and social justice, the program intended to follow and analyse large-scale investments in the region and to enable engagement between civil society and political decision makers, various discussion fora, academic reflections and publications on this topic in a second stream. Under program component B, democracy and participation, the new program planned to work on the freedom of expression and on human rights on a regional scale. A second, new focus was set on labour migration and refugees in the region. The politics and effects of digitalization in Southeast Asia have hitherto not been prominently addressed in regional programming.

Similar to the regional program, the Myanmar country programme consists of two broad components. They have been further developed by each office director since 2015 and are now called environmental governance and development (A) and political culture and human rights (B) respectively. Component A includes the themes of large hydro-dam projects; land grabbing and reform; resource conflicts as well as revenue sharing from natural resources. Since 2017, the focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) and official development assistance (ODA) for infrastructure projects in the energy sector was made more explicit. Axel Harneit-Sievers added to this a focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under component B, a gender mapping process was launched and the field of media development further explored. The focus on LGBTI rights on the one hand and on digital rights and social media on the other was further deepened, and the focus on the freedom of expression was made more explicit. Hitherto there is little interaction between the two programme components, however, the upcoming electoral year might provide opportunities to create synergies and fill this gap.

HBF programming for Myanmar includes a scholarship program for Myanmar students to study in Thailand. This program has been an integral, and highly visible, element of HBF action in Southeast Asia since 2004. It was founded by HBF's first representative in Thailand, Heike Löschmann, and originated at a time when programming inside Myanmar was hardly possible for political reasons. Since its beginnings, a network of over 70 alumni has originated from the scholarship program.

Observation Results

Relevance

The regional program is relevant in principle; however, it is work in progress and HBF should continue to develop it further. The current regional program goals appear not always fully understandable. Limitations to the clarity of the goals might be, to some degree, based on overly long-winded German-English language translations. When viewed together, it appears that both goals and hypothesis of component B have been more clearly expressed than those of component A. Furthermore, they appear to express their logic at somewhat different levels, tending to confuse the reader. All sub-goals emphasize gender, e.g. they should be implemented “along gender-democratic concepts” or “in a gender-responsive way”, while neither the corresponding program documents nor the corresponding hypothesis provide further detail on how this will or should be implemented. However, the fact that the program goals are not always formulated in a clear, coherent and realistic manner does not imply that the underlying intentions, the pursued actions, and the achieved results are irrelevant. All goals are relevant for the political context; the question is rather how the efforts between component A and B, between one theme or another, between Thailand and the larger region are balanced. Achievements were made in various fields as the sections below will demonstrate.

In Myanmar, the overall program goals were relevant in principle to the country context during the period 2015 to mid-2019. Under program component A, HBF can make a difference with critical approaches to development, e.g. foreign direct investments, as well as with its specific attention to resource extraction, renewable energies, and other “green” themes. Under program component B, HBF can contribute to concepts and ideas for a pluralistic, gender-democratic society in public discourse. The fulfilment of the set goals, however, was partly hampered by structural factors pertaining to the office, and was also limited due to a range of contextual factors. While the HBF country office does not work on peacebuilding explicitly, the peace process is nonetheless relevant for HBF’s work, in particular for the question of just resource governance. The 2020 elections were not taken into account in the last programme application. It is advisable to adjust programming to give consideration to this situation.

The scholarship program became a highly visible part of HBF programming in Southeast Asia, and was widely considered as an impactful measure. The program did not only allow out-of-country education for students, but built a pool of alumni socialised in the values and themes of HBF who potentially became agents of change. Many of the (former) Myanmar country staff had in fact been recipients of scholarships beforehand. HBF scholarships have supported otherwise disadvantaged students and contributed to research on ethnicity, communities, gender and social justice, among other themes. A distinctive feature of the MAIDS program at Chulalongkorn University is that it connects politics with environmental thinking, and its graduates usually return to work in applied fields rather than joining the academia.

Despite the fact that the context has changed, with more opportunities for HBF inside the country and more international opportunities for prospective students, there is still a value in a scholarship program in Thailand, not least for students who are not ready to join academic institutions further abroad. How this value coincides with the future goals of HBF in Myanmar is a different question and must be measured against the costs incurred. The program does not need to stay in its current form; one of the options discussed was transforming the scholarship program into stipends for research. More efforts could also be made to use the existing alumni network and enhance the opportunities to remain in touch with the office. Before the scholarship program would close – after its 15-year benchmark in 2019 or at a later stage – its success and the legacy of its alumni could be well documented in a film or text publication, to preserve the memory and lessons learned of this important program.

Planning and Coherence

The regional program is still young, and the program needs more time to unfold and consolidate. Individual elements of the program can be better calibrated, and the program components can yet become better balanced towards each other. Some parts of the program could benefit from further cohesion among its different elements, at least within the programmatic components. The program could also profit from more exchange and joint projects with the other HBF offices in the region. Among the key issues addressed by the regional program, the following areas stand out the most with potential for re-calibration:

For program component A, with all difficulties pertaining to address and reach ASEAN at the institutional level, further efforts could be made to explicitly target regional human rights policies, as well as ASEAN environmental policies. Furthermore, it could be made clear ahead of the next GOPP process what impact the approach to follow foreign investments across the region has so far achieved, and how the focus on “following the money” should continue.

In program component B, it appears that the focus on the freedom of expression in particular, with few exceptions, remained concentrated on Thailand. With the overall shrinking civic space situation in mind, this is an element of the program that could be further developed at regional level, with a focus on digital rights in particular. The focus on migration and refugees is new, and the office is in a process of learning. It has supported a study on undocumented working migrants, and the question arises how this will be followed up. This could also include the topic of statelessness.

Based inter alia on the experiences of the office director tasked to implement the transition, lessons learned from building a regional office have been collected to become transferable for similar processes elsewhere. They include, but are not limited to: It was vital to have an 18-month period to develop new conceptual approaches and partnerships. The transitioning office should receive both strategic and administrative guidance and autonomy during the process. It should be equipped with sufficient resources (including personnel) for the new tasks, but not be overburdened with financial management during the transition. National staff should be well aware of the new direction, including the possibility to opt out.

Despite good efforts in various directions it is uncertain whether the HBF country office in Myanmar has found a recognizable niche during its first five years that is not occupied by others. The sum of projects under component A probably comes closest to this, whereby the profile of inserting “green themes” in the contemporary Myanmar political and everyday discourse could be further sharpened.

From the perspective of the office leadership, the monitoring tools used by the office are functional and sufficient. Nevertheless, there seem to be shortcomings worthwhile addressing, in particular with regards to communications between the programme and the administration and finance team, as well as with regards to communications with partners. More face-to-face time outside the office for the administrative and finance team could have positive effects on the longer-term relations between HBF and its partners. The experiences of partners with the strict HBF reporting requirements appear to pose risks for successful partner relations which should be addressed as a priority.

Effectiveness

The overall regional portfolio combines a variety of projects and approaches to support civil society in Southeast Asia, with different degrees of success or consolidation. The programmatically most significant aspect of regional programming lies in the support to regional networks, which is apparently rare among donors and therefore appreciated by partners. The types of networks supported by HBF are large in terms of membership structure

but small what concerns their respective secretariats and financial volumes. All in all, there seems to be a good mix between HBF-initiated projects and supporting the work of others. The effectiveness of particular projects has to be assessed case by case; this report provides several examples.

It is also a challenge to develop and implement a regional program; it cannot be expected that the office personnel grasps issues of regional significance equally well for each country under consideration. Contextual factors have hampered the effectiveness of rolling-out the new program, in particular during its early phase which saw significant changes of personnel. The period for which the development of the regional program took place was also a challenging time for running an office in Thailand. The program felt the impact of shrinking space and, for the first time, was “under watch”. HBF had to revise their visibility and public communications strategy, and partners had to adjust to these conditions. The program had to strike a delicate balance of risk management: Providing continuous support to vital partners in Thailand under the challenging conditions of military rule while building a new regional program with the desire to produce tangible results within the first program cycle. The political conditions in the region will remain demanding.

The office’s website, Facebook page and YouTube channel have become key public relations tools, the effectiveness of which is growing over time. The office newsletter is now distributed to around 500 individuals. The greatest public information success to date was a short video at the occasion of 50 years ASEAN explaining ASEAN in five minutes, which attracted over 60.000 viewers. The efforts put into such public outreach measures are rewarded with enhanced visibility for the HBF regional program, as well as with an expansion of its networks.

In Myanmar, the period between 2015 and 2017 was seen as an inception period of the in-country office, including the testing of relationships with various partners. Operational requirements extending to the identification of appropriate office space, recruitment, and the pursuit of the MoU took notable time and attention away from the fulfilment of program objectives, but probably worked towards their realization in the longer term. The 2017 GOPP process has brought about clearer goals and objectives than its predecessor program, and by its arrival the turnover of personnel had been completed. Criteria and indicators were adjusted to achievable outcomes. The office had time to test various partners and built productive longer-term relations with a few. Not all goals were equally achieved, but there are also reasons for the non-fulfilment of goals.

Although this is no longer a niche in Myanmar, HBF has carved out a particular line of work for itself, which is highly relevant in the context and consists of the nexus between digital rights, social media, and the freedom of expression. This has a decidedly regional and international dimension that encourages the travel of advocacy from Myanmar to the world, and capacity building to flow back into the country. HBF has supported Myanmar ICT for Democracy’s (MIDO’s) research and studies, and the presentation of its findings to the UN Secretary General in Geneva. In the past, MIDO has strongly criticized Facebook for its (in)action in Myanmar – and was copied by other actors in the region. Most recently, MIDO has also presented its cause to Facebook in California. This is an area where the regional offices could work more closely together. With the existing partnerships, given the track record of what HBF has already achieved, and combined with the fact that Myanmar is on the cutting edge of international developments related to civil society action and social media, this puts HBF in the forefront of contemporary developments – in a field which might not have yet been fully realized at Headquarters.

The evaluation found indications for high degrees of effectiveness in some of the projects undertaken, despite the small-scale funding available. On the one hand, these successes pertain to initial funding for partners, projects or themes at a time when others did not see this opportunity, or not to the same degree. HBF has been the first donor for Freedom of

Expression Myanmar (FEM) whose founder Yin Yadanar Thein, has briefed German MPs Renate Künast and Katrin Göring-Eckardt on its dealings with Facebook on several occasions, with a direct impact on the social media policy debates of the German Greens. HBF has been supporting MIDO since 2017, as one donor among others. In 2019, HBF enabled them to test and pilot a social media help line in preparation of the 2020 electoral process. According to MIDO, no other donor would have funded the pilot project for this tool, for HBF an investment of around 20.000 USD. Based on the pilot, MIDO – in a consortium with other organisations – attracted funding in the amount of 2 million USD.

Media dissemination strategies play an important role for effectiveness. To illustrate the reach HBF funding can have in a short period of time, the investigative documentary “The Dark Side of Coal in Myanmar” produced by the Myanmar Journalism Institute for Mizzima TV and HBF had over 1.7 million viewers on Facebook who watched for at least 5 minutes. Released in March 2019, the video’s naming-and-shaming tactics also had imminent effects; for example, a coal power plant was stopped in Yangon Region.

Collaboration with Partners and Sustainability

The regional office has a variety of civil society partners in Thailand and in the region. Partnerships include scholars, academic institutions and think tanks, but extend little to governments or ASEAN. The office appears to be a veritable networking machinery, juggling various relations in Bangkok and across Southeast Asia. HBF is loyal to long-time partners and affiliates, and the quality of the relationship probably grows over time. Some partners may have performed poorly, and they might be included in the overall partnership structure for historical reasons. Not all partners know each other. One organization who joined the portfolio recently said they feel like “working in silo” and ask for more exchange with peers.

The level of programmatic input and oversight provided by HBF varies from partner to partner and depends also on geographical proximity. The office appears to make good use of a core strength: identifying partners with potential at a time when this is not yet seen by others, and when they can profit from capacity building, networking and exposure. It has also learned that the partners’ performance improves where the office’s finance coordinator has visited and trained their staff. Partners see HBF primarily as a donor, although they appreciate the close interest and co-design approach, which differentiates HBF from other funders.

It is one of the key findings of this evaluation that there is insufficient collaboration between the offices in the region. Synergies between the programs are hardly pursued. On the contrary, it appears that the offices seek to avoid a potential overlap, while some thematic links and opportunities for collaboration are apparent. The evaluation also learned about only few partner organisations who are in touch with more than one HBF office. There seem to be contradictory views between Headquarters and the field whether there are sufficient funds and structures for regional cooperation in place. The Thailand office had administrative and coordination responsibilities over the other programs/offices in Southeast Asia in the past – this practice changed and all offices are now of equal status. There is an uneasy feeling about hierarchic relations between the offices in the region, which nobody wants to impose.

The current arrangement results in a situation that discourages the development of joint projects. However, several HBF interlocutors have expressed the view that joint or cross-country programming does not need to be implemented by the regional office (although intuitively this would appear to be the most logical approach), but that regional projects could be pursued by any office in the region. The evaluation has identified several themes that appear to invite enhancing regional cooperation. This should be discussed timely ahead of the upcoming GOPP process so that the results of this discussion can be taken into account for further planning. There also needs to be clear guidance from Headquarters on this issue.

To look at regional coordination in Southeast Asia comprehensively, the embeddedness of Southeast Asia at Headquarters in Berlin, and communications between Headquarters and the regional office, also have to be taken into account. The Southeast Asia strength and focus in the field does not seem to be matched with corresponding expertise and capacities at Headquarters. This appears to create a bottleneck situation by which the volume of information generated in the region is not matched with sufficient attention and capacity to respond in Berlin. At the same time, the Head of the Asia Division regards the transfer of policy guidance from Bangkok to Berlin as insufficient.

In addition to the Asia Division, a number of other sections at Headquarters such as thematic sections, the gender section, StEva, the finance department, and the executive board are at times in contact with the regional office, whereby the Asia Division is not always kept in the loop. Most of the requests coming from Berlin reach the regional office in German language, which primarily makes the regional director accountable for responses.¹ English translations of key outputs and operational guidelines should exist, but it remains unclear if these are sufficiently known and used in Bangkok, for example to guide the gender identification and mainstreaming. Relations between Headquarters and the field offices remain in parts a grey area; both ends are encouraged to take up the threads to continue improving the conversation.

A specific and new case for regional collaboration is the idea of establishing a regional relocation centre for human rights defenders in Bangkok. The background for this project, which is in the process of being developed, lies in the deteriorating situation for human rights and environmental activists across Southeast Asia, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances and arrests. The idea for this centre has grown over the last years, is now backed by Headquarters, and is said to be in line with larger EU policies and measures to protect human rights defenders. From the perspective of the evaluation, this is a high-risk project, which requires close collaboration between the HBF offices in the region. Not all communications on this issue to date have displayed the sensitivity the topic requires. Considering the conditions under which HBF operates in the region, this project requires carefully tuned communications and planning as well as strategic handling of brand (in)visibility.²

The HBF office in Myanmar entertains a variety of partnerships at different levels of scale and capacity, ranging from local activist groups and CSOs to formalised national NGOs and INGOS, media organisations, and the government in the form of the ECD. Pursuing a trial-and-error approach, the team has built a range of relations to choose from, some of which have become longer-term allies and implementers and some of which are new, allowing for both continuity and change in the program. Compared with other international organisations, HBF has relatively little financial resources to offer and is often among the smaller donors where this role is shared with a given partner. Several partners have stated that they would like to hear from HBF/ the respective program coordinators more regularly – including feedback to narrative reporting – and want to learn more about their overall work in Myanmar and elsewhere.

Partner relations usually function on the basis of project implementation. Most partners with ongoing projects who were interviewed for the evaluation see the HBF office as a donor who administers projects on a half-yearly basis. HBF does not offer core costs, capacity building, or other types of support with the exception of inputs to project design, connections to resource persons, and the facilitation of travel costs where this suits the programme goals. Activities tend to clog towards the end of a calendar year; the finance and administration team would prefer this to be more balanced.

¹ The “Zweitentsendung” makes a difference to the office’s ability to respond, but only since 2018.

² This was work in progress at the time of the evaluation in October 2019.

The type of project support which HBF usually provides is not suitable for everyone, in particular not for small or start-up organisations who function rather on a consultancy basis and have a light administration. Such organisations can be highly effective and impactful, but are slowed down by HBF requirements for administrative and financial reporting. A contract like the one offered by HBF tends to force recipients into traditional staffing structures. Also the duration of projects appears to be unsuitable for some partners. Contracts on a half-yearly basis make it difficult to build internal capacity, bind labour to processes of re-application, and make planning difficult.

The biggest hurdle in partner relations, however – with risks for the sustainability of relationships – lies in the requirements for administrative and financial reporting from partners to HBF. Most partners interviewed for the evaluation have outlined that the HBF requirements would be by far the most demanding of any of their international donors (maybe with the exception of USAID). The difficulties described pertain to the rule to provide original receipts for all expenses; the requirement for quotations for comparatively small expenses (starting with 50 USD); the necessity to translate receipts and vouchers from Burmese to English; and the requirement to provide details of individuals and copies of ID documents of persons involved in HBF-supported activities. The requirements pertaining to personal identification appear most unreasonable and difficult to implement in the context of Myanmar. This situation has detrimental effects on partnerships. HBF has already earned a reputation of being difficult to deal with in administrative terms. Against this background, some might consider not to continue existing partnerships, not to re-apply in the future, or not to apply in the first place, if they can afford it or have other offers, as they find the operational costs too high to deal with.

Realisation of Cross-Cutting Task Gender Democracy

There are no projects specific to women, men, or LGBTIQ communities in the regional program. Despite all mainstreaming efforts at Headquarters, the requirement to use the HBF gender identification, and the persistence of the gender theme in program applications and annual reports, gender democracy remains the weakest element of the regional program. This seems to be a long-standing problem. Overall, the program seems to have very little impact on gender equity. This seems to be in stark contrast of the overall importance that HBF vests in the topic.

Efforts seem to be under way to catch up and bring the issue up-to-date with HBF approaches and requirements. The office gender focal point appears to receive increased support and guidance from Headquarters and works with two consultants to enhance the gender focus. The program coordinators have started to explore with partners whether and where gender indicators can be made more explicit. A gender feasibility study is under way, expected to be presented ahead of the start of the next GOPP process. It would be advisable to revisit the issue in earnest at that time.

In Myanmar, HBF specialises in supporting LGBTIQ rights groups, not least because the women-oriented gender sector is saturated with financial support. Partner Colors Rainbow organises the &Proud festival which, in 2019, took place with Ministerial permission and brought together 15.000 people in public. This is a remarkable achievement given the situation that homosexuality is still illegal in Myanmar. The people behind &Proud believe that the visibility gained from this event can support the legal advocacy undertaken by Colors Rainbow, who believe that legal change – that is, the decriminalisation of homosexuality – is possible during the next legislative term. From the perspective of HBF, this is a significant partnership which makes a distinctive difference in the Myanmar country office' portfolio. From the perspective of Colors Rainbow, HBF provides a minor contribution to a large pool of donors, with the latest project constituting only about one per cent of the overall budget available to the organisation in 2019.

Despite significant achievements with promoting LGBTIQ rights, it has remained a challenge to make gender democracy a cross-cutting theme in other areas of programming, in particular in those under resource politics and development. Over time, the number of projects marked as G-1.2 under the gender categorization has increased, but this remains a challenge. The gender categorization could be more actively used to work with partners in order to raise gender awareness and identify relevant indicators. Headquarters could also provide further guidance to country offices on how to work on gender under the themes of environmental governance, resource politics, or renewable energies.

If HBF wants to stay relevant in this field, it might be advised to identify further niche areas where women and/or LGBTIQ groups require support which is not yet provided by others, or identify such groups who explicitly work on environmental issues. This is in particular pertinent when noting the risk that organisations like Colors Rainbow and &Proud might refrain from applying for HBF support due to comparatively high administrative costs in the future – a risk that might impact the realisation of programme goals in the next cycle.

Conclusions

The HBF regional office has become a recognised actor in certain policy circles across the region. It has built relationships with perseverance and vision, contributing to regional networks and debates. The overall portfolio combines a variety of projects and approaches to support civil society, including country-specific projects (notably in Thailand), trans-national projects (again notably from Thailand), and through regional networks.

“Green politics” with a focus on renewable energies and the environment is HBF’s brand and could be further enhanced as such. In fields such as monitoring international investments as well as migration and refugees, the office has to clearly define and communicate its added value. Supporting legal expertise seems to be a cross-cutting tool across themes. More could be done on the freedom of expression and gender at a regional level. The cross-cutting theme of digitalisation is not anchored in the regional program, and a strategy paper on this issue has yet to be provided by Headquarters, with potential benefits for Southeast Asia. This could possibly be a niche for HBF; despite it being a trend, there are only few organisations that support digital rights and security at the regional level.

The Bangkok office has achieved a lot under challenging conditions. It usually invests small amounts with high administrative costs in one-year project cycles. Some partners would benefit from longer-term funding commitments, but strategies would need to be in place on both sides to realise this idea. At times, personnel capacities appear stretched, raising the question whether tasks could be further balanced within the team. Significant change will come to the office with a new director in 2020. This needs to be well prepared.

The achievements of the office to date and the current program should not be taken for granted. The regional program is still in its infancy and needs to be further consolidated. Program components and projects should better speak to each other and be better connected, within the components, where feasible across the components, and between the offices in the region. There needs to be sufficient budget and time set aside for convening and administering regional coordination and regional projects, together with guidance from Headquarters. Plans should be made to operationalize these ideas at the occasion of the upcoming GOPP process, which does not yet foresee any synchronization between the offices in the region.

HBF already came a long way in Myanmar and had been working on and for the country from the Thailand-based offices before 2015. By the time Headquarters decided to “go in”, other international organisations had already established presences inside the country and had intensified their relations with national stakeholders. The in-country program needed time to

catch up with developments, politically, operationally and in terms of partnerships. However, it seems HBF has done well, and increasingly so during its latest phase.

HBF has built more substance and detail around its two program components, environmental governance and resource politics as well as political culture and human rights. It has gone through a trial-and-error period with new partners, has developed some strong partnerships in both program areas, and continues to invest in new relations. With all the importance and successes of the work under program area B, it is component A where HBF can really make a difference and where there are fewer international support mechanisms at play. The office should consider to both deepen and broaden the overall environmental portfolio. While the synergies between the program components could be further enhanced, some of HBF partnerships and projects have been surprisingly effective. It appears that program officers and office directors, based on good intuition and analysis, chose strategically relevant partners, invested in projects at the right time, and could harvest successes and see impact on real politics where messages were transmitted through the right channels.

At the same time, it is safe to say that the contextual environment has to be carefully watched, and in parts re-assessed, to recalibrate programming and amplify those fields of action where HBF wants to have a lasting impact. This requires gaining a better understanding of the dynamic donor environment in order to evaluate where and how HBF can best make a difference, but also using or creating synergies with others where feasible. The contextual awareness should include donors and projects around the peace process, where some action might be taking place with a view to resource extraction, revenue sharing or energy planning that are not discussed in the public domain; the same applies to Rakhine State. This is not to say that the office should work on peacebuilding or reconciling communal tensions explicitly, but it should be aware of projects in these fields that touch upon its own priorities.

With a view to the upcoming elections, it is important to understand which dynamics are likely to be at play from early 2020 to mid-2021, and to plan with this accordingly. From the beginning of 2020, the political debate will be increasingly coined by the electoral process. The atmosphere might become more heated, as elections are always processes of contestation. The second half of the year will likely be dominated by the campaign until the elections take place, presumably in November. From election day until the inauguration of the next government in March/April, the parliament and executive will face a long lame duck period during which not much work can be pursued with official stakeholders. How to use this period? There are no green parties, and rarely do political parties have environmental policies in Myanmar. At first, the HBF could consider inserting “green themes” in the capacity building programs of political parties through intermediary organisations. Second, it could create opportunities for public debates of parties and candidates in a non-partisan manner, during which these themes are amplified and enter the public discourse. Third, the lame duck period can be used for research and the preparation of programmatic strategies and action for the next legislative term.

The evaluator likes to thank all HBF staff and partners for all operational support, for engaging with this exercise in an open and transparent manner, and for the trust received.

Key Recommendations

For Headquarters

- Plan the recruitment and handover for the next office directors carefully and timely to avoid gaps as they occurred in the past.
- Match the relevance of the offices in Southeast Asia with sufficient expertise and capacity to respond in Berlin.
- Enhance and synchronise communications between thematic sections, the Asia Division and other headquarter desks vis-à-vis the regional offices.
- If an expansion of regional work is considered it should be matched with sufficient resources.
- Create Incentives for long-term staff to stay with HBF, for example educational offers or sabbaticals.

For Regional Coordination

- Enhance communication and collaboration between the HBF offices at regional level, and for Headquarters to provide guidance in that regard.
- Continue to seek and probe entry points to ASEAN institutions.
- Enhance the reporting on the networking and facilitation functions of the regional office, including for ASEAN countries which are touched by regional programming, but don't have direct projects (e.g. Malaysia, Brunei, Laos).

For the Regional GOPP process

- The new problem statement should describe the state of the art of freedom of expression, democracy, ASEAN, and environmentalist approaches in Southeast Asia and should provide a brief up-to-date description of the regional actor landscape including civil society, media, ASEAN, and peers.
- Think out of the box of the existing components and use the next GOPP process as an opportunity to re-calibrate the program.
- Think beyond continuity, take decisions regarding partners who might not be sufficiently effective, close gaps strategically and explore new themes.
- Continue to enhance the gender orientation of the program.
- In case of further expansion, consider a country mapping for Malaysia.
- Include Timor-Leste in the media digest and in the overall coverage.

For the Myanmar GOPP process

- Enhance contextual awareness to understand how HBF comes in as a donor, learn more about other donors around HBF partners, identify potential niches, enhance synergies and avoid potential pitfalls.
- Enhance awareness of international actor networks around the peace process and around social media (e.g. by speaking to few key stakeholders and pooled funds such as JPF, PSF, Care International and EU) and identify potential synergies.
- The new problem statement should describe the status quo & latest updates regarding key environmental themes, resource and energy politics, freedom of expression, social media landscape, and gender/LGBTIQ situation.
- Re-calibrate programming
 - Review long-term goals and think strategically, even beyond the next GOPP timeframe.
 - Amplify the environmentalist profile of HBF and insert more green themes in the public discourse - set clear, visionary goals and develop a “branded” theme.
 - Define the sub-goals under component A more clearly and make them more distinguishable.
 - Define the goal of component B in a manner that is more appropriate for the current context.
 - Enhance synergies between program components A & B.
 - Consider the electoral transition in the timeline for the new program.
- Create opportunities for HBF partners to meet with each other; consider organizing a joint event at the outset of the GOPP cycle – either within or across program components A & B, or both.
- Re-assess the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process before continuing the investment.
- Consider a project to build the capacity of environmental lawyers. This could be done through targeted scholarships, seconding interns to ENLaw in Thailand, a HBF academy with VLS, or other options.
- Take a decision regarding continuation or non-continuation of the scholarship program before the next GOPP planning process.
- The alumni network could be more actively used and strengthened.
 - If continued, managing the scholarship program & alumni network should be included in the responsible program coordinator’s ToR.
 - An alumni network meeting in 2020 could involve a debate between those alumni who stand as candidates for the elections.
- Enhance regional cooperation with the HBF offices in Bangkok and Cambodia.

Operational recommendations

- Find a longer-term arrangement for partners who are likely to stay with the office for at least one GOPP cycle to avoid or ease the necessity for (half-)annual re-applications.
- Revise the requirements for administrative and financial reporting to safeguard reputation and relationships.
- Strengthen the collaboration between the program and administrative & finance teams.
- Enhance the direct contact between administrative & finance team and partners, including outside the office.
- In the short term, recruit temporary assistance for the transition to the new data management system (for scanning documents).

For Myanmar in 2020

- Be aware of the electoral cycle dynamics and how they will shape the period until mid-2021
- During the first months of 2020, insert “green themes” into the policy development of political parties through intermediate service organisations or specialized technical assistance providers who are in engaged in capacity building for political parties in a non-partisan manner.
- During the second half of 2020, create opportunities for public debates of political parties and candidates on environmental issues, for example by sponsoring DVB events; this could also include LGBTIQ and other topics of importance for the office.
- Consider investing in election observation to get direct access to information on the electoral process as it rolls out; this could be done with a focus on social media monitoring, for example with MIDO or The Carter Center, or with support to citizen election observers.
- Use the “lame duck period” between the peak of the electoral process and the inauguration of the new government to conduct research on the status quo of all (pending) relevant laws / legislative processes of issues relevant to the programs of the office, and prepare advocacy or support strategies for the new term.