

# Intra-Buddhist Dialogue in Southern Thailand

Project Brief, December 2016

## Background

Buddhism has a central role in Thailand. More than 94% of the population adhere to Theravada Buddhism. While its principles are closely intertwined with the culture and governance structure of the Thai state, multiculturalism is an idea embraced by the majority of Thai society. However, in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, where the majority of the population are Malay Muslims, a long-standing separatist conflict between Malay Muslim insurgents and the Thai government has claimed more than 6,000 lives since 2004.

Perceptions that efforts to address this conflict have largely focused on the concerns and grievances of the Malay Muslim population, have left the minority Buddhist community in the South feeling neglected and marginalized, creating an obstacle to peace in the region. At the same time, the close relationship between Buddhism, the Thai state and notions of “Thainess” plays into the dynamics of the conflict in the South.

It is in this context that, in 2015, the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP) at Mahidol University, the Human Security Division (HSD) of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich launched an intra-Buddhist dialogue project.



October 2015 field trip to Sungai Padi Mosque, Narathiwat

## Objectives & Approach

The goal of the project is to facilitate dialogue between a range of key Buddhist actors in order to encourage the constructive engagement of the Buddhist community in efforts to promote peaceful coexistence in southern Thailand.

The initiative brings together individuals from a diversity of strands within the Buddhist community, including monks, local officials, business people, political activists, academics, students, government officials and members of the military, each with their own wider networks in the Buddhist community. They are organized in two so-called ‘reflection groups’, which offer a safe and constructive space for dialogue.

One group was created in the South and one in Bangkok. Their regular exchange and parallel interaction with local and national authorities builds a connection and understanding between both Buddhists in the center of the country and the South, and between the wider Buddhist community and key policymakers in Thailand.

The project aims to establish a group which is representative of, and influential in, the wider Buddhist community. Through dialogue, it aims to develop a common understanding of the conflict and actions the group can take to promote peace in the South and to promote greater involvement of the Buddhist community in conflict transformation activities.

In particular, it aims to support the group to give voice to the needs, fears and concerns of Buddhists, to minimize the effect of actions by Buddhist groups that could be obstacles to the peace process, and to prepare and encourage the Buddhist community to engage with Malay Muslims on building a peaceful future together.



«Tree of Expectation» and field trip to Sungai Padi Mosque

## Activities

### Dialogue and Community Outreach


The first reflection group meetings were held in July 2015 and they have since continued on a regular basis. Through a variety of activities encouraging deep listening and active interactions, participants exchange personal experiences, jointly analyse potential obstacles to majority-minority coexistence, and brainstorm solutions to the conflict. In addition, some of the dialogues include representatives of the Malay Muslim community, in order to contribute to an understanding of different perspectives on the conflict and to prepare the ground for further cross-community dialogue. Field trips to affected communities allow participants to interact with local Buddhists, authorities and Muslim leaders, and learn first-hand about the strategies of coexistence practiced by some peaceful Buddhist-Muslim communities in the region.

### Putting ideas into practice

The project supports the implementation of a variety of seed projects. These are practical ideas put forth by individual members, or a group of participants, which seek to contribute to the goals of the project. These have included actions to widen the social network amongst Buddhists, to gather information on the concerns and grievances of Buddhist communities, the production of a short film on coexistence in the southern provinces, and the establishment of a system of “envoys” for engaging with the authorities and other groups.

## Outcomes

The project has already seen some success in its efforts to create a diverse group of Buddhist stakeholders, who have taken on ownership of the project and are actively engaging in outreach both within the Buddhist community, and towards other stakeholders.

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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA  
Directorate of Political Affairs DP  
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Institute of Human Rights  
and Peace Studies

 **CSS**  
ETH Zurich

A group entitled ‘Weaving Peace Together’, with an online presence, has been established, which enables participants to the dialogues to remain in contact, as well as to reach a wider audience. The group has been active in exchanging information regarding the conflict in the South, and reacting to incidents of violence, including issuing statements in response to attacks on civilians calling for dialogue between the authorities and the insurgents.

Religion is a sensitive issue requiring a sincere and mindful approach, and within every community – so too among Buddhists – there exist a diversity of views that must be respected and equally considered. Intra-group dialogue of this nature is thus a slow and delicate process requiring sustained engagement. The project continues in its efforts to facilitate peace, with a particular focus on increasing the engagement with key policymakers and on fostering constructive engagement between the Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities.

## Further Information

<http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/foreign-policy/human-rights/peace/religion-and-conflicts.html>

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