



The bridge over the Salween River where the river flows to the sea, Mawlamyine, Mon State

BRIEFING PAPER 1: CONTEXT AND KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

This is the first in a set of Briefing Papers providing insights into key aspects of the Gulf of Mottama Project, which operated over the period 2016–2024. A project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, it was implemented in Myanmar by a consortium of three partners: Helvetas (with overall responsibility), the Myanmar NGO, Network Activities Group (NAG), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). A text box showing the key features and achievements of the project can be found at the end of this Paper, along with a list of the other Briefing Papers.

AN AREA OF RICH BIODIVERSITY

The Gulf of Mottama in Southeast Myanmar lies at the mouth of three major rivers: the Salween, the Sittaung and the Yangon. It is a globally unique estuary characterized by a strong tidal bore, extensive mudflats, and high biological productivity. The dynamic flow of sediment and nutrients sustains a range of high-value fish species, marine mammals and overwintering shorebirds including various endangered species. For this reason, the conservation of the coastal area of the Gulf is of international importance. It is also of intrinsic importance to the people who gain their livelihoods from the Gulf through fishing, farming, and aquaculture. Living in scattered coastal villages, these people are fa-

miliar with coastal erosion and with the loss of lands to the sea. Indeed, there is a recognized circular pattern of erosion and deposit whereby land is eroded by the sea on one side of the Gulf and emerges on the other side roughly every 15–20 years.

This forces periodic village relocation, generally two to three times in a lifetime. The increased frequency of extreme events induced by climate change – notably floods and tidal surges – mean that livelihoods are increasingly precarious and village relocations are increasingly common. All the interventions under the Gulf of Mottama project that are described in this series of Briefing Notes are based on the premise that biodiversity conservation and improvements to local people's livelihoods must, and can be, mutually reinforcing.

WORKING IN DIFFERENT TERRITORIES

The Western side of the Gulf of Mottama lies within Bago Region, while the Eastern side is in Mon State. Even before the political developments of 2021 (see below), this meant that administrative procedures had to be adapted as appropriate; a State has greater powers of devolved decision-making than a region. The two sides of the Gulf also have other distinct features.

The Bago side of the Gulf comprises a large expanse of very low lying, flat land that is prone to flooding. It is characterized by extensive, low input paddy and green gram cultivation, often curtailed by saltwater intrusion. Aquaculture, typically combined with duck raising, is also common. Road access to the coastal villages is quite poor, and during the rainy season boats often become the more convenient means of transport. Over the past 15 years or so there has been a steady loss of land from Bago that is now reversing, with new mudflats being deposited. Meanwhile, erosion on the Mon side of the Gulf is becoming stronger. Here the land mass rises inland quite rapidly, leaving only a narrow band of flat coastal land. It is, however, relatively well served by a network of all season roads, and paddy cultivation is more intensive on the generally more fertile, less saline land. The fisher people earn their income from the catch in the Gulf, plying small boats that can easily negotiate the relatively shallow waters.

Ethnically, the coastal people are predominately Bamar, most of whom are Buddhist; there are also scattered populations of (mostly Hindu) Tamils who moved to the area several generations ago. In Mon State (overall, predominately Mon as the name suggests), a few of the coastal communities are ethnic Mon – but throughout the area, peoples of other ethnic groups are also present.

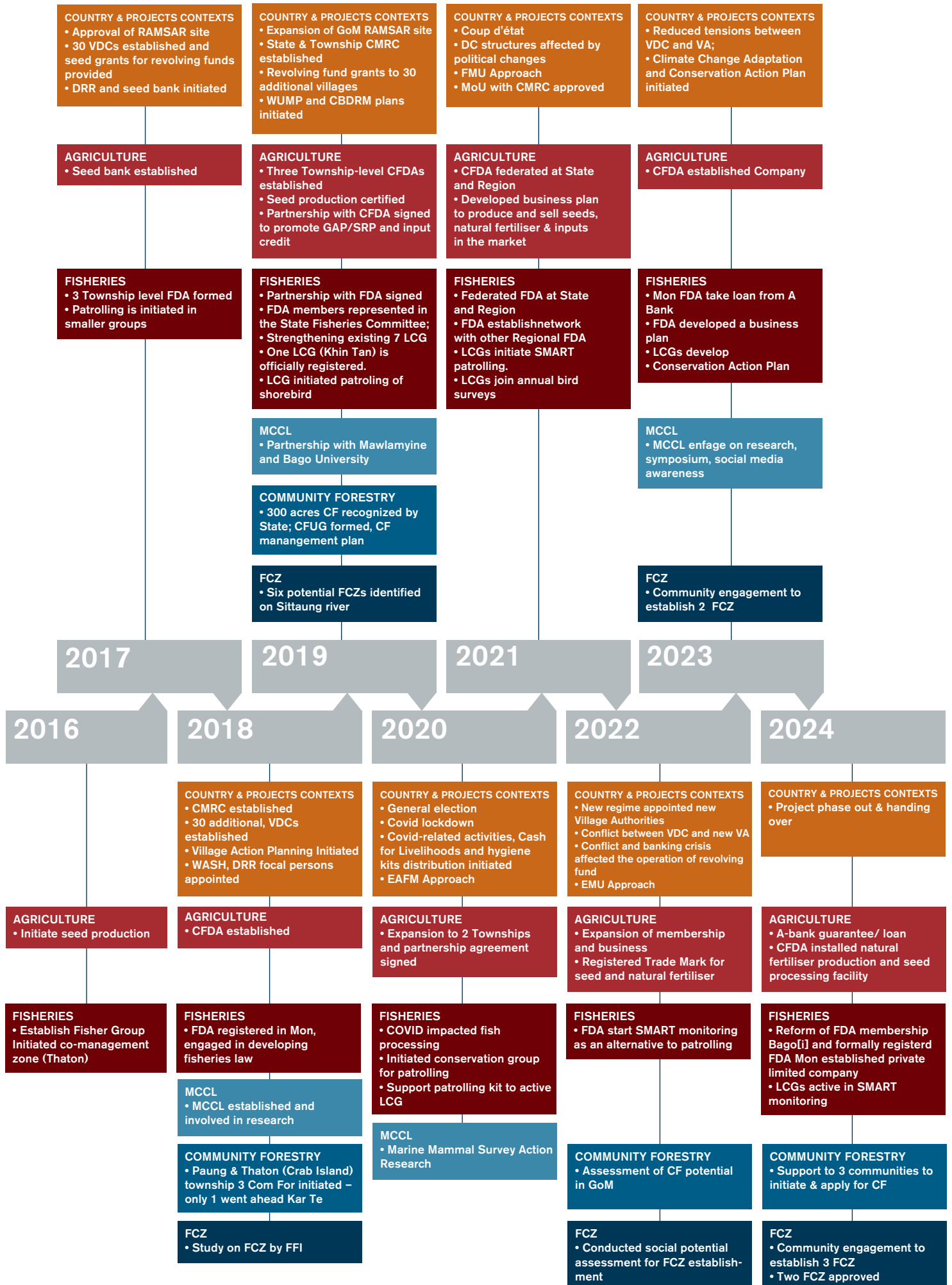
A CHANGING POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Gulf of Mottama Project was foreseen to operate over at least three phases, each of three years. Designed in 2015, it commenced activities when there was considerable optimism about the democratic development of Myanmar. Accordingly, the project sought to work closely with government structures – both the line agencies and the administrations. Considerable initial progress was made in planning conservation mechanisms, as outlined below. The project was nearing the end of its second phase when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. This caused a huge economic downturn - ending many sources of income generation, especially within the fishing sector for which the huge market in China abruptly ceased. The medical effects of the virus, however, were stronger in 2021, when more deadly variants started circulating, and medical supplies were scarce. The military coup of February 2021 that overthrew the democratically elected government of the National League of Democracy (NLD) changed the course of the project completely. Since then, direct collaboration with the, now military, government has ceased, and the country has entered into a period of civil conflict with various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and People's Defence Force (PDF) waging war against the military.

Target villages of the Gulf of Mottama Project



Although major acts of violence within the project area have been relatively uncommon, the impact on people's livelihoods has been severe. Traditionally, many young people from the area migrate to Thailand to seek work. In the early days of the COVID pandemic, many returned without having made the money they had planned, incurring further costs in the process. With no opportunities at home and a worsening economic situation, there was soon a net migration back to Thailand. This outflow of people (both legal and illegal) only increased when the military government announced in February 2024 the enforcement of conscription. Many villages are currently mainly populated by older people (those who did not succumb to COVID-19), young mothers, and children left with grandparents. Available data indicates that most households are heavily indebted, especially as inflation is running at a very high rate. The banking sector has been struggling since the coup, the cost of living is soaring, and the value of any savings in Myanmar Kyat is being rapidly eroded. It is in this unstable situation that the project has sought to consolidate achievements and ensure as much sustainability as possible.



ADAPTING THE MANAGEMENT MODELS

As first conceived, the project was titled the Community-Led Coastal Management of the Gulf of Mottama Project. It began working with 30 village communities within six townships¹, facilitating the formation of a Village Development Committee (VDC), headed by elected representatives. This served as the entry point for project interventions. Each VDC had different sub-groups organized according to livelihood interest; together they developed a Village Action Plan, and seed money was provided for a revolving fund. The interest groups under the VDC comprised farmers, fishers and people interested in alternative income-generation opportunities; over time, the farmer groups and fisher groups federated into township level and then Regional (Bago) and State (Mon) level entities. Linked to the VDCs, Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) were established in areas of high biodiversity interest, their membership generally comprising former bird hunters persuaded into alternative livelihoods, or younger people with enthusiasm for conservation.

Up until the 2021 military takeover, the project worked closely with the government line agencies, especially the departments of fisheries and of agriculture of Bago and Mon, the respective regional and State administrations, and the national Union government. At international level, an early success was the designation of part of the Gulf (the coastal area of Kyaikto and Bilin townships) as a Ramsar wetland site covering 42,500 ha. Three co-management zones were foreseen within the coastal waters, working with the inland fisheries departments; further seawards, the Union fisheries claimed responsibility. A Coastal Natural Resources Management Plan was developed by 2018, and a Coastal Natural Resources Management Committee established in Bago and in Mon that would be responsible for its implementation. Relevant fishery areas in Bago and Mon were also revised in a participatory manner.

Whilst the declaration of the original Ramsar site was an achievement, it was of inadequate size for effective conservation both from an administrative and ecosystem perspective. The project therefore expanded activities to two further townships, Paung and Changzon (both in Mon State) at the same time as increasing the total number of villages to 60. The project also facilitated the extension of the Ramsar wetland to cover a total 161,041 ha – as ratified in 2020. To better manage fisheries, at least eight Fisheries Management Units (FMUs) were planned – subsequently renamed Ecosystem Management Units (EMUs) to reflect the importance of conserving the entire ecosystem, not only fish stocks.



Aerial view of mangrove forest in crab island, Aung Kan Thar village, Thaton, Mon State



Fishing boats along the Bilin River, Bilin, Mon State

With the cessation of any cooperation with the government from February 2021 onwards, the project re-focused on community-led conservation rather than supporting the establishment of township or higher-level conservation bodies. Humanitarian assistance, started during the COVID-19 pandemic, was also increased in 2023 to support the recovery of livelihoods affected by flooding. A key focus of the last phase was to build the capacities of the locally led institutions that the project has supported to ensure that they will continue to operate beyond the project lifetime. For associations, this was complicated by a Law of Association introduced by the military government in November 2022 that required all existing associations to re-register. However, appropriate solutions were found.

The key achievements of the Gulf of Mottama are summarized in the text box below.

¹ Kawa, Thanatpin and Waw in Bago Region and Kyaikto, Bilin and Thaton in Mon State.

THE TRIPLE NEXUS APPROACH

The project is adapted and implemented using a triple nexus approach, which utilizes the combined expertise and interlinkages between sustainable development, peace and conflict mitigation, and humanitarian actions, as shown in the figure below.



The Triple Nexus Approach in GoMP

KEY FEATURES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GULF OF MOTTAMA PROJECT

GOAL

The unique biodiversity of the Gulf of Mottama is conserved and sustainably developed, benefiting the human communities that depend on it and increasing resilience to climate change.

KEY PROJECT COMPONENTS

- Improved livelihoods of coastal people
- Conserved biodiversity (especially fisheries but also shorebirds, marine mammals and mangroves)
- Good, structured governance of the natural resource
- Humanitarian assistance (added in 2020)

GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

60 coastal villages of the Gulf of Mottama, with an additional 17 villages for selected activities

TIME PERIOD

January 2016 – December 2024 in three phases (short 3-month inception in 2015)

BUDGET

CHF 17.54 million (Phase I: 4,050,000; Phase II: 8,000,000; Phase III: 5,483,999)

FUNDING

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

IMPLEMENTATION

A consortium led by Helvetas with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Myanmar NGO, Network Activities Group (NAG). In the first phase, the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) was also a consortium partner.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Village development and livelihood opportunities

- Established and built the capacity of 60 Village Development Committees (VDC) to conduct sectoral participatory planning (such as the Livelihoods Development Plan, Water Use Master Plan, community-based Disaster Risk Management, Climate Change Adaptation, Conservation Action Plans), to prioritize community needs and implement a Village Action Plan.
- Improved the income of more than 20,000 people (65% from poorer households) through the

credit services provided to VDC members from the Village Revolving Fund; Vision Fund Myanmar (for larger loans), and the FDA and CFDA. These covered investments in agriculture, fisheries, and other income-generating activities.

- Supported diversification of the livelihoods of more than 1,500 people through vocational skill training, creating job opportunities for 88% of those trained either through wage employment or self-employment.
- Strengthened community resilience to disasters and climate change by improving small-scale rural infrastructure, such as road renovation, irrigation canal rehabilitation, weir construction, flood barriers, and water systems.
- Provided life skills and awareness on safer migration to over 3,000 people, including the potential migrants and family members of migrants.

Conservation

- Contributed to the official recognition of the Gulf of Mottama (42,565 ha) as the fourth RAMSAR site in Myanmar in 2017 and its expansion to 161,530 ha in 2019 (ratified in 2020), making it the largest RAMSAR site in Myanmar.
- Developed the Coastal Natural Resource Management Plan (CNRMP) and established a multistakeholder mechanism (Community Natural Resource Management Committees) at Union, Regional and Township levels to coordinate the wise use of coastal resources.
- Facilitated the revision of the fisheries law in Mon State and Bago Region to incorporate the principles of 'co-management' by the public sector and local communities.
- Established community-managed conservation areas, such as community forests (mangrove forests) and fish conservation zones, which are led by the community through Local Conservation Groups (LCGs)
- Contributed to the generation of scientific and foundational information on fisheries (fish species, fish catch, spawning area, etc.) and biodiversity conservation (such as annual bird survey, marine mammal counts, mudflats and ecosystem valuation), with more than 70 research reports published; these have been widely shared in the public domain and used in policy discussions.
- Raised community awareness of the importance and wise use of coastal natural resources in the Ramsar area through widely disseminated communication materials.

Agriculture and fisheries

- Facilitated the establishment of associations for small-scallop fishers (FDA) and coastal farmers (CFDA) that provide demand-driven services such as credit, sustainable fishing and agricultural practices, market linkages, and advocacy for the interests and rights of their more than 6,500 members.
- Increased access to locally adapted rice seed varieties through community rice seed banks, thereby increasing the rice yields and income of coastal farmers.
- Campaigned against illegal fishing, successfully reducing this by 85% through support for patrolling by authorities and communities. Although since 2021, monitoring and patrolling has not been possible and illegal fishing has returned, the earlier success convinced fishers of the effectiveness of controls.

Humanitarian support

- Provided access to clean drinking water for over 80,000 people (of whom 50% are women), and disseminated information on safe sanitation and hygiene practices, including Covid avoidance measures to some 50,000 (45% women).
- Provided Cash for Livelihoods (during the Covid-19 pandemic) and Cash for Work (during the economic hardship following the political changes) to over 10,000 people (50% women and 70% from poorer households).
- Supported the establishment of 32 community quarantine centres with water systems during the Covid-19 pandemic; ensured that 19,539 people (40% women) received dry food and COVID prevention materials.
- Over 9,000 households affected by flooding and conflict received emergency response and livelihood recovery support to restore their livelihoods.

GoMP IS A PROJECT OF SDC

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LIST OF BRIEFING PAPERS

- 1: Context and Key Achievements**
- 2: Institutions for Coastal Management**
- 3: Responding to Climate Change**
- 4: Community Based Disaster Risk Management Plans**
- 5: Adapting Livelihoods to “Slow Onset” Changes in Climate**
- 6: The Humanitarian – Climate Change Nexus**
- 7: Conserving Biodiversity and Improving Local Livelihoods**
- 8: Access to finance**

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