

A new debate on aid in Myanmar

By Tamas Wells
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I was looking through my pile of old books recently and found a copy of Aung San Suu Kyi's 'Freedom from Fear'. It was hard to spot because the title and cover had been wrapped with plain brown paper.

I remembered that after I bought it from a little shop in Yangon in 2006 someone had warned me that foreigners shouldn't go around carrying the books of famous political prisoners. A book like that was bound to bring suspicion from the authorities - and more importantly, potentially place Myanmar friends or colleagues at risk. So I had tried to make the book as inconspicuous as I could.

Of course Aung San Suu Kyi is no longer a political prisoner, and now remarkably sits in Myanmar's parliament. And since 2011 there have been some astonishing changes in the country - especially with the degree of freedom of expression. There are obviously still some restrictions on the press - and a host of other ongoing issues - but people no longer attract attention for reading an Aung San Suu Kyi book.

The good thing is that these new freedoms - and greater use of the Internet and social media - have meant that public debate about issues in Myanmar is now far easier.

One issue receiving increasing attention is international aid.

Growing aid budgets, new NGOs and donors and the entry of institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have thrust aid into the spotlight, both for the new opportunities and the new issues that it brings to Myanmar.

In an effort to connect these changes, we have been trialing an online discussion forum.

It is called the [Paung Ku Forum](#) - 'Paung Ku' meaning bridging or connection in Burmese - and it aims to publish opinion and discussion about key issues of aid and development in Myanmar.

Over the last year we have discussed a range of new developments in aid and politics in Myanmar - issues of religious violence and aid, the role of civil society organizations, approaches to capacity building, the controversial Myanmar census and a number of other things. And having a niche focus on practitioner perspectives on aid in Myanmar, we hope that it can be complementary to ANU's excellent [New Mandala](#) blog on politics in South East Asia.

As we consider expanding this network we are hoping to get input and feedback from interested people both in Australia and Myanmar. Most of the current participants are Myanmar people working in the aid industry but if you are a student, working for an international NGO or for the Australian government, or just interested in Myanmar, you are most welcome to be involved.

We are keen to know how this Forum might be extended, what topics it should focus on, or if you are potentially interested in contributing (in English or Burmese).

Most discussion on the Paung Ku Forum currently takes place on [Facebook](#) - and also on [Twitter](#). We also have an email group.

If you have ideas or would like to be involved you can contact me at pkdiscussionforum@gmail.com or via Facebook.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Tamas Wells is the editor of the Paung Ku Forum and is currently completing his PhD at the University of Melbourne.

About the author/s

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Tamas Wells is a research fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Before entering academia he worked as an aid and development adviser and consultant with various NGOs, including Save the Children and Oxfam.

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