

# The Myanmar Futures Exchange: Development at the Cross-Roads

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## Abstract

*This report describes the methods and findings used at the 2014 Myanmar Futures Exchange (MFE), a futures workshop that engaged with government, NGOs, religious groups, and academics in Yangon, Myanmar. The MFE presented a unique opportunity to brainstorm strategies for the future of economic development in Myanmar with a cross-section of the Yangon community. A team from the East-West Center and University of Hawaii developed a unique methodology involving futures thinking, leadership, and personal action to engage with the group. This report describes the methodology used, the outcomes of the workshop, and implications for further futures work.*

**Keywords:** scenarios, participatory development, futures studies, dialogue, casual layered analysis, Myanmar, Burma, community, stakeholder engagement

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## Introduction to the MFE<sup>1</sup>

The Myanmar Futures Exchange (MFE) was founded in 2013 to serve as a means to engage with people working in Myanmar at a critical junction in the country's<sup>2</sup> development. The workshop facilitates conversations about the future and provides tools and supportive relationships to empower citizens to create their preferred futures. It is the first multi-stakeholder futures event of its kind in Myanmar.

The MFE is a project of the East-West Center (EWC) an educational and cultural organization established by the US Congress.<sup>3</sup> The EWC wanted to engage with its network of scholars within the country, and provide an open forum for collaboration. Given the lack of structured opportunities for people in-country to discuss recent changes, the MFE team saw futures as a way of bringing people to the table and addressing some of the critical issues Myanmar faces.

Now in its second year, the MFE has engaged with hundreds of participants. The first MFE (2013) was a 2-day, 200 person workshop on sustainable economic development in Myanmar

in 2020. The second MFE (2014) was a series of workshops that included 560 participants and focused on developing Myanmar's "civic creatives".

Scenario building workshops were undertaken at 15 sites in Yangon and around the country including Shan State, Mandalay Division, Kiyin State, and Mon State. Participants from diverse sectors including government, business, civil society, education, religious groups, media, and the arts attended the workshops. MFE 2014 concluded with a 60 person full-day workshop in Yangon that used consolidated data from the smaller workshops to build on existing scenarios.

## Myanmar Context

Myanmar is a country undergoing unprecedented change. In 2011, Myanmar began to open up politically and economically, much to the surprise of the rest of the world. The changes were government-led and included a release of political prisoners, ending censorship, reaching out to opposition parties, and several economic reforms. The US lifted sanctions in 2012 and the EU followed shortly thereafter.

While dramatic political and economic reforms have taken place, there is still much to be done in ensuring that Myanmar continues to prosper and grow. A number of local and international organizations are currently working within the country to reduce poverty, increase employment, and build capacity of local institutions. The rapid political, economic, and social changes taking place present an incredible opportunity for futures work, yet there are few organizations doing this work in Myanmar.

Thinking about and strategically planning for the future can help the new government when tackling difficult issues. Many in Myanmar see the opening up of markets and the resulting capitalist consumerism as a given future. In contrast, the MFE found that many others, often those in rural areas, are concerned that this future will not include them. Futures thinking helps people work together on multiple and preferred options for the years to come and helps them see the possibilities of a more inclusive and equitable future.

At the time of writing, Myanmar is still one of the poorest countries in Asia and the country ranks very low on several human development indicators determined by UNDP. According to the Human Development Index of 2013, Myanmar ranked 149 out of 187 countries. The World Bank describes the state of infrastructure in Myanmar as "very poor", 32% of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition, and 72% of the country lacks electricity. Furthermore, tension between Buddhists and Muslims as well as between the government and ethnic minority groups has come under much scrutiny from the outside world.

Futures thinking helps decision makers think big and utilize a multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder approach to solving complex problems. By engaging with futures work in Myanmar, the MFE hoped to shed light on the future consequences of current policy decisions and plan for wild cards and other uncertainties.

## Futures, Systems Change, Leadership

The initial MFE (2013) explored the uncertainties and risks confronting Myanmar in the early stages of its unprecedented change. The workshop consisted of mapping a set of pre-determined drivers on a risk/uncertainty matrix. Network analysis was undertaken to determine what the group saw as the most important

and well-connected nodes. Finally, 2x2 matrices were created from the most central nodes. Participants engaged in storytelling about where Myanmar currently is on the matrix and how it will get to a desired position by 2020. The workshop concluded with individual reflection and goal setting on actions needed to push Myanmar towards the desired goal.

This year the team took a slightly different approach. We wanted to add to what had been accomplished in 2013 and take into account the many changes of the past year.<sup>4</sup> Growing flows of goods, people, money and information both from the outside and within Myanmar brought new forms of uncertainty, instability and inequality. These shifts have provided challenges for existing organizational and leadership models.

After experiencing hope, surprise, and uncertainty, Myanmar is now entering a stage in the transformation process that requires new leadership and organizational approaches. We see this building process as requiring *civic creativity*.<sup>5</sup> We see participants in the MFE process as *civic creatives*; citizens working with others to take concrete actions that will shape tomorrow. Civic creatives are not defined by a specific job, title, sector, or government title, but rather by their joint desires to engage in the community for positive change.

MFE 2013 focused on risks, opportunities, and drivers of change. MFE 2014 focused on systems change and activating leadership.

MFE 2014 assisted *Civic Creatives* in three main ways:

1. Awareness: ability to recognize the role that creativity and community play in shaping change
2. Action: learning how to use tools to envision, plan, and work toward preferred futures
3. Alignment: cultivate a network of support for creative and strategic action

## **MFE 2014 Goals and Targets**

MFE 2014 included two main components. First, a series of scenario building workshops were conducted at sites in and around Yangon. The workshops had several outcomes. They:

- taught strategic foresight tools
- worked with participants to gauge the diversity of overall perceptions of the future
- helped participants identify key drivers likely to shape Myanmar to the year 2025
- created scenarios of preferred futures
- identified actions needed to create those futures

The collective thinking of all scenario building groups was then synthesized and formed the core content for the second component, a symposium involving 60 invited guests held on May 3 in Yangon.



Figure 1. Identifying Drivers of Change, Hpa-An

The symposium's mandate included three elements:

1. synthesizing and deepening findings to date
2. developing leadership approaches to facilitate civic creativity
3. creating a road map for the future of the MFE itself as a community-driven activity

*Synthesizing:* Participants at the symposium engaged with the main outcomes of the scenario building workshops and identified key drivers of Myanmar's future (listed below). They worked with futures techniques such as a modified causal layered analysis to discern the issues underlying some of the drivers of change.

*Leading Creativity:* Participants learned approaches including scenario planning, causal layered analysis, and goal setting over three different time horizons. These helped turn foresight into action and developed leadership through the help of creativity and connections. Participants learned about the process of creating lasting change within a system and how to activate key "levers" in their own sectors to affect positive change.

*MFE 2015 and Beyond:* It is significant that the MFE project itself can be an example of civic creativity. Participants developed pathways for the MFE to develop deeper and wider national roots and sustainability. The MFE team worked with local participants to begin to transition to a locally created and run project.

## MFE Action Framework

The MFE process is about assisting civic creatives in developing new skills, connections and leadership approaches to take action. Three tenants define the MFE approach to action:

1. identify and build on the *positive*, including finding opportunity in challenges;
2. identify what can be *created* and grow; and

3. start *small*.

The overall belief is that the collection of challenges is too large for any one person or group to fully grasp or deal with so it is best to plant seeds of positive social change that can grow into larger shifts.

### MFE Findings

MFE 2014 participants identified key drivers of change that they believed will shape Myanmar through to the year 2025. The results of the 14 scenario workshops were synthesized into 10 main areas for further development at the concluding symposium.

The ten overall *Drivers of Change* that will shape Myanmar to the year 2025 as identified in MFE 2014 are:

1. Responsive Governance
2. Critical Thinking
3. Trust Building
4. Access to Communications Technology
5. Road and Energy Infrastructure
6. Access to Quality Education
7. Financial Systems Reform
8. Employment Patterns
9. Intergenerational Relations
10. Resource Stewardship

Symposium participants shared thoughts on the nature and detailing of each of the 10 Drivers and refined core issues within each by identifying key specific lever points of change (for example, personal tax policy within financial sector reform).

Having refined the nature of each of the Drivers of Change, symposium participants then examined the interconnections between Drivers and identified the ones they felt they could personally address. The connections between drivers and participants' spheres of influence were then mapped using 'crowd-sourcing' tools and network mapping software.

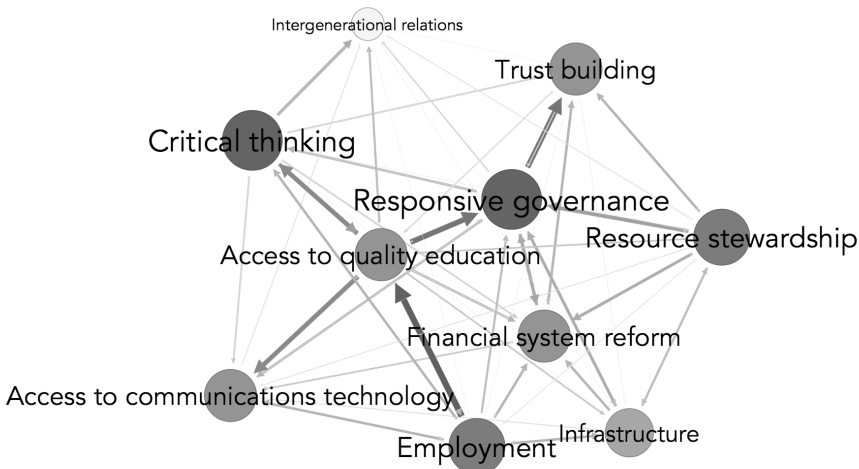


Figure 2. Perceived Interconnections of 10 Key Drivers<sup>6</sup>

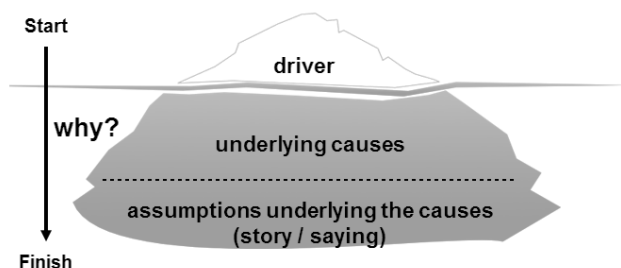
Three focus areas were identified as being both important and most actionable by the group as a whole: 1) access to quality education, 2) responsive governance, and 3) financial system reform.

Differences of location and generation lead to distinctly different perceptions of the process of change. Participants in regional areas were less likely, in general, to perceive current political and economic developments as highly impactful changes. Participants in major urban areas such as Yangon and Mandalay felt the opposite.

Furthermore, younger participants tended to see both more continuity and more opportunities in the years ahead than older participants who tended to see radical changes and challenges. The sharp divergence in views led the MFE team to come to see Intergenerational Relations as a key Driver of Change despite the fact that it was not highly ranked by those at the symposium.

Once the drivers had been determined, participants learned about Casual Layered Analysis (CLA). The MFE team modified CLA into three steps rather than the usual four.<sup>7</sup> The modified CLA “iceberg” was simplified due to time constraints and the differing English language abilities of the people in the room.<sup>8</sup> Each group

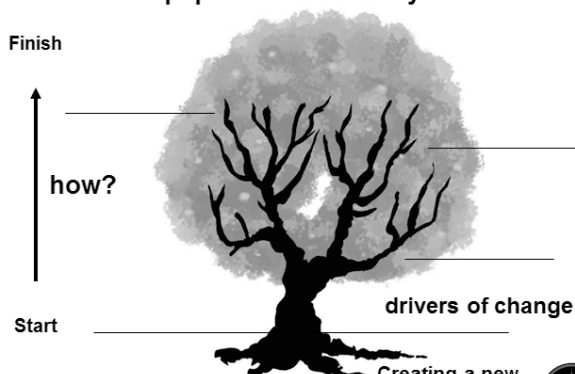
### Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)



chose one of the four core drivers to engage with.

After going through the CLA iceberg working from the top down to the underlying causes, participants worked from the bottom up using the image of a tree to create a newspaper headline from 2025. The tree took the findings from the CLA and extrapolated them outward to create a story about change in Myanmar.<sup>9</sup>

### Newspaper headline for Myanmar 2025



## **Systems Change**

The emphasis of MFE activities is to affect actions. The macro level drivers raised from the MFE draw attention to the need for systems change. Systems change entails impacting an entire system – be it education or governance – and requires the engagement of several actors and organizations within the system.

After digging down to assumptions and beliefs through Causal Layered Analysis, participants were then introduced to the “Six Steps to Significant Change” a model of change developed by the organization Forum for the Future, and asked to consider the tipping point necessary for a sustained transition. Participants outlined their immediate, near term and longer -term steps and used the change model to engage in goal setting within their system or sector.

## **Next Steps**

In a closing discussion about the future of the MFE Symposium participants expressed a desire for the MFE to continue and evolve. Participants discussed ways in which the MFE could become more locally-driven. To facilitate this, participants want a space to connect with other civic creatives about critical issues. This space should be both virtual and in-person, taking the form of events throughout the year.

A communication platform and a recurring event series could continue conversations begun at the MFE. This would enable conversations to continue, and for people to connect, network, and share ideas. MFE participants would be able to post progress on actions and communicate with others motivated to take concrete positive actions to build the future of Myanmar.

Participants also called for similar futures-leadership training to move both out into the rural areas, and “up” to elected officials and high-profile leaders. Many feel that for the numerous already active civic creatives, what is missing is a way to connect and build a network. This process will require a higher frequency of activity and especially the work of MFE partners.

Finally, given the nature and purpose of MFE 2014 (civic mobilization and individual empowerment) there was a desire to see primarily top-down mind-set changes and leadership. There was a notable yearning for leadership in government, industry and other sectors to validate and provide space for the activities of engaged citizens.

## **Greater Implications**

The MFE provides an interesting case study on how futures techniques can be used as a catalyst for change. People both inside and outside of the country wonder what the future holds for Myanmar and in what ways it will develop and modernize. The MFE provided a forum for people from different sectors to come together and discuss critical issues. Futures visioning and scenario planning provided an opportunity to discuss possible futures and the roles of individuals and organizations in bringing those futures about. Merging futures thinking with leadership and systems thinking pushed the attendees to see futures as a way to structure their thinking about creating change in their organizations and communities.

These past two years of the MFE is just the beginning of an ongoing process of creating sustainable futures for Myanmar. The workshops will continue to develop

and grow based on the needs of local partners. It is hoped that the workshop scope, methodology, and outcomes, will help other organizations work in the developing country context.

## Notes

- 1 Aaron Rosa from the University of Hawaii, Manoa, designed the MFE logo and many of the materials used in the workshop.
- 2 The country changed its name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. The name of the then capitol city Rangoon, was changed to Yangon. In 2005 the capital moved from Yangon to Naypidaw.
- 3 The mission of the EWC is to “strengthen relations and understanding between the peoples and nations of the US, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative research, study, and dialogue. <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/>
- 4 One example of this was the drastic increase in the number of cellphones spotted by the MFE team on the streets of Yangon between 2013 and 2014
- 5 The inspiration for engaging with civic creatives was taken from Richard Florida’s work on the Creative Class.
- 6 Network map created by Richard Sandford from Northover Research
- 7 Causal Layered Analysis usually consists of four levels: the litany, social causes, structure/worldview, and the myths or metaphors that underlie them all. The MFE modified the structure down to three levels.
- 8 Facilitated through simultaneous translation headsets from English to Burmese
- 9 Tree and Iceberg graphics and were created by John Sweeney and Mark Alexander from the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

## Acknowledgements and Partners

From small beginnings the MFE process now works with over 20 partners in design and delivery

1. Union of Myanmar, Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development	12. Myanmar Business Executives Association
2. British Council	13. Myanmar Egress
3. British Embassy	14. Myanmar Foresight Group
4. Pyoe Pin Programs	15. Northover Research
5. Inya Lake Hotel	16. Phaung Daw Oo Monestary
6. United States Embassy	17. Point B Design
7. Mango Media	18. Pyin-U-Lwin English House
8. Forum for the Future	19. Sitagu Monastic Order
9. Hawai’i Research Center for Futures Studies	20. Shan Literature and Culture Association
10. Institute for the Future	21. Socio-Lite Microfinance Foundation
11. Myanmar Business Coalition on AIDS	22. UNESCO
	23. Yangon Cooperative University
	24. Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies (CPPFS)



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