Impressions of Myanmar
Int’l Policy Studies Study Trip - Spring Break, 2015

“Nothing prepared me for the magnitude and extent to which the complexities which we had studied permeate life and politics in Myanmar. We were able to engage with most of the principal stakeholders involved in the formation and implementation of policy in Myanmar. It was the meetings that were off the (Western) beaten path that were most memorable and beneficial.” Mustafa Abdul-Hamid

“Nay Pyi Daw was such a bizarre capital city – essentially a ghost town, except with a large ornate golden complex that housed the government agencies. That visit further reinforced for me how strangely unique the country is.

“Our meetings with various types of stakeholders in the country enabled me to see how inextricably linked these different problems are, and helped me realize the importance of having an education that cuts across traditional divisions, e.g. as a business actor operating in Myanmar, I would need to have an intimate understanding of government policies...” Nadia Anggraini

“...we met with [the] Union Election Commission that gave us an ‘official’ picture of the current situation in Myanmar, and then we heard a very different voice from young Burmese exiled authors in the *Irrawaddy Times*. With this arrangement, we saw the whole picture, especially considering the fact that people in higher official positions might be reluctant to speak out.” Rui Du

“Although my main interests still center on international economy/finance, after the study trip, I’m more aware of the fact that successful policy-making needs multifarious perspectives. I have started to explore courses beyond my concentration. For instance, I decided to take ‘Writing and Rhetoric for Policy Audiences’ because I became interested in policy communication as well as the role of the media in shaping public perceptions. In order to think practically about improving institutions, I’m also taking a d.school class, ‘Change That Has a Chance’, which focuses on applying design thinking to a real-world problem.” Misa Fujisaki

“On the study trip, IPS students had the opportunity to meet influential people in the fields of politics, economics and academics in Myanmar. During the meeting with USAID, the World Bank, and Proximity Design, we learned of other perceptions about Myanmar from the viewpoint of foreign organizations. The organizations we talked to objectively analyzed and determined the current
situation of the Myanmar economy and suggested respective solutions for future economic development.” Yasuhito Uto

“Perhaps the most important lesson I got from the trip is that decision makers are always facing a dilemma between choosing to be idealistic and faithful to their principles and adopting a more practical view, compromising in some things to improve their chances to implement their projects. All of the people we talked to, including the government, had a vision for Burma, of a better future for it. However, all stakeholders had to face the difficult decision of choosing to what extent they were willing to give up in their beliefs or compromise in some of their ideas to get things done.” Maria Garcia Lecuona

“The trip certainly enhanced my overall experience at Stanford, and I believe it will remain a highlight of the program. I learned a lot about putting the theory of state building, the democratic process, conflict management, and political reconciliation into practice, specifically the enormity of how complex everything is. The week of travel before the official trip acted as a bedrock for me to construct a useful understanding of what followed, and apply what I learn in my remaining four quarters.” Ethan Hamilton

“Between the meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, the President and his cabinet, the Peace Center, the Election Committee, and the Irrawaddy Times’ Aung Zaw, I simply can’t imagine how we could possibly have had better access to such a wide array of key policymakers and stakeholders.” David Jonason

“Through our interactions with political parties, the World Bank and USAID, I realize that Myanmar is faced with the mammoth task of bringing all states onboard the inclusive development paradigm, most of whom are plagued by conflict. The Kachin, Kayah, and Kayin states have been on the forefront of conflict, demanding regional autonomy, whereas they are endowed with abundance of natural resources critical to the development of Myanmar as a whole. With 73 political parties and 134 ethnic nationalities, a federalist structure is perhaps the only effective governance tool to foster inclusive and equitable development.” Radhika Kapoor

“The absolute highlight of the trip was the meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD). I learned a great deal from the meeting with them, and found it incredibly interesting to hear about their goals as a party as well as tactical challenges and how they approach democratic development. I also found it interesting that when we asked about specific policy goals or work areas, their responses tended to be values-based and strategic rather than drawing hard lines on various issues. The stark contrasts between the various parties we met with, whether the NLD, the ruling government and the President, or the Shan State representatives, painted a picture of a quickly evolving, complex, and at once sophisticated and crude political arena.” Emma Kelsey
“Overall, the trip was a positive part of my first year at IPS and I felt that I learned a lot by being exposed to a very new culture to me and through our top-level meetings. I enjoyed spending the time with my classmates and was really glad that everyone in our year participated.” Kona Shen

“Those ten days helped me to think about the nature and importance of political leadership. On the one hand, the figure of Aung Sang Suu Kyi truly impressed me; she is completely different from what I expected. Instead of being exclusively an advocate of democracy and human rights as normative beliefs, she is truly a stateswoman. What I found most striking was not only her speech and the authority she commands, but also a clear mindset and a very definite view of how the world is and how it should be.” Cesar Martinez Alvarez

“I was blown away on this trip by the access we had to leaders of all sorts in Myanmar. While of course the vast majority of people in Myanmar are relatively poor, and the military continues to hamper democratic progress, I was astounded by the development that I did see, and the liveliness of the people I met.” Leah Nosal

“The final day of the trip was spent at the Yangon School of Political Science, where we had an opportunity to meet some very bright enthusiastic students with deep interest in Political Science. I was especially moved when a student asked me if he could study in US as a refugee - [it] just made me realize how lucky I was to have opportunities for education and learning. We discussed various case studies and the possible solutions to the problems that exist in Myanmar. The students from YSPS were keen to understand the cases and presented their valuable view on the current situations.” Bhavana Yarasuri

“In a short span of time, the trip offered us deeper insights about the transformation that the country is undergoing, in public and private sector development as well as the cultural aspect of the country. The real and first-hand experience that we got through this trip cannot be matched by any amount of reading or conferences or workshops.” Shiv Vadivelalagan

“Every meeting was a learning process. Some of the meetings which did not run so smoothly (Shan State) or were clearly being conducted from a script (the majority of the Government meetings) were in themselves fascinating for the insights that they presented us with.” Chris Walker

“Myanmar’s strategic location attracts the attention not only of the western countries but also from Myanmar’s growing neighbors, China and India. The direction the country will take is thus largely in the hands of the civil society. Navigating the flux of western and eastern influences and developing its own ideas for reforms are the challenges Myanmar society faces. To implement such reforms the civil society will have to forge relationships and build networks with the leadership and international community.” Lucie Zikova
“It was the variety of stakeholders we met during the trip that impressed me most, ranging from civil society and the private sector to government and the international community. Particularly, it was surprising how study trip leaders arranged highly balanced meeting schedules where a specific stakeholder group was not given excessive attention. So, we could learn all different views on the issues and develop relatively unbiased perspectives. For example, we threw similar questions such as ‘What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the upcoming elections?’ or ‘What are your views on foreign direct investment and transnational corporate involvement in the extractive industries?’ and examine how their answers varied. The result was interesting, offering insights on the landscape of stakeholder conflicts and coalitions in the country.” Yea-Seul Lim

“Myanmar is at a pivotal moment, and there may be no more exciting place in the world right now. Having the chance to see the rapid level of change, but also to see it before it has changed completely, was awesome. Likewise, the variety of the meetings and interlocutors was awesome. We got to reference previous meetings in later ones, using information we learned from one actor to guide our questions to another. Hearing conflicting opinions was interesting and important, but perhaps even more importantly were the key issues that we heard repeated from the start (e.g. the need to resolve the conflict/the importance of peace, the serious matter of land rights issues, education reform, etc.). Seeing and hearing all of these deep issues float to the top of nearly every conversation we had was supremely useful in distilling a solid “what is going on in Myanmar right now” sort of narrative.” Swain Uber

“Stepping into Proximity Designs’ offices was as if we had never left Silicon Valley. They use design thinking to build development tools for rural populations. Proximity got a foot in the door in Myanmar through relief operations following Cyclone Nargis. ...Their core belief is that anything they design has to be ‘ground truthed,’ so they use empathy interviews and prototyping with rural farmers at every stage of the process. Once the project or design is market ready, they sell it on microfinance credit to farmers and have a unique repayment system based on seasonal agricultural profits.” Amanda Ussak