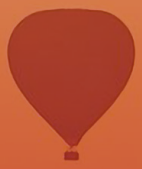
NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION COLLABORATORY

Built to Last

Leadership & Negotiation Training for Myanmar's Pro-Democracy Movement





Monica Giannone
Edith Bowles
Anselm Dannecker
Sam Talamini
Brian Mandell

HARVARD Kennedy School
Center for Public
LEADERSHIP
NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT
RESOLUTION COLLABORATORY

OCTOBER 2026

HKS Center for Public Leadership
Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory
Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

ncrc.hks.harvard.edu

Primary Authors
Monica Giannone, Edith Bowles, Anselm Dannecker, Sam Talamini, and Brian Mandell
Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory, Harvard Kennedy School

With a Special Thanks to
Robert Wilkinson, Brigadier General Dana H. Born, Ons Ben Abdelkarim, former President of Ecuador Jamil Mahuad, Hannah Riley Bowles, Lyndal Barry, Sophie Barry, Mie Mie Winn Byrd, Johanna Kao, Zaw Lin Maung, Hsu Mon Aung, Ashley Bandura

About the Program
The Executive Program for Civic Leaders (EPCL) was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and developed in collaboration with the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Harvard Kennedy School's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory (NCRC).

Statements and views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, or the Center for Public Leadership.

Copyright 2026, President and Fellows of Harvard College

Built to Last

Leadership & Negotiation Training for Myanmar's Pro-Democracy Movement

Monica Giannone
Edith Bowles
Anselm Dannecker
Sam Talamini
Brian Mandell

HARVARD Kennedy School
Center for Public LEADERSHIP
NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION COLLABORATORY

OCTOBER 2026

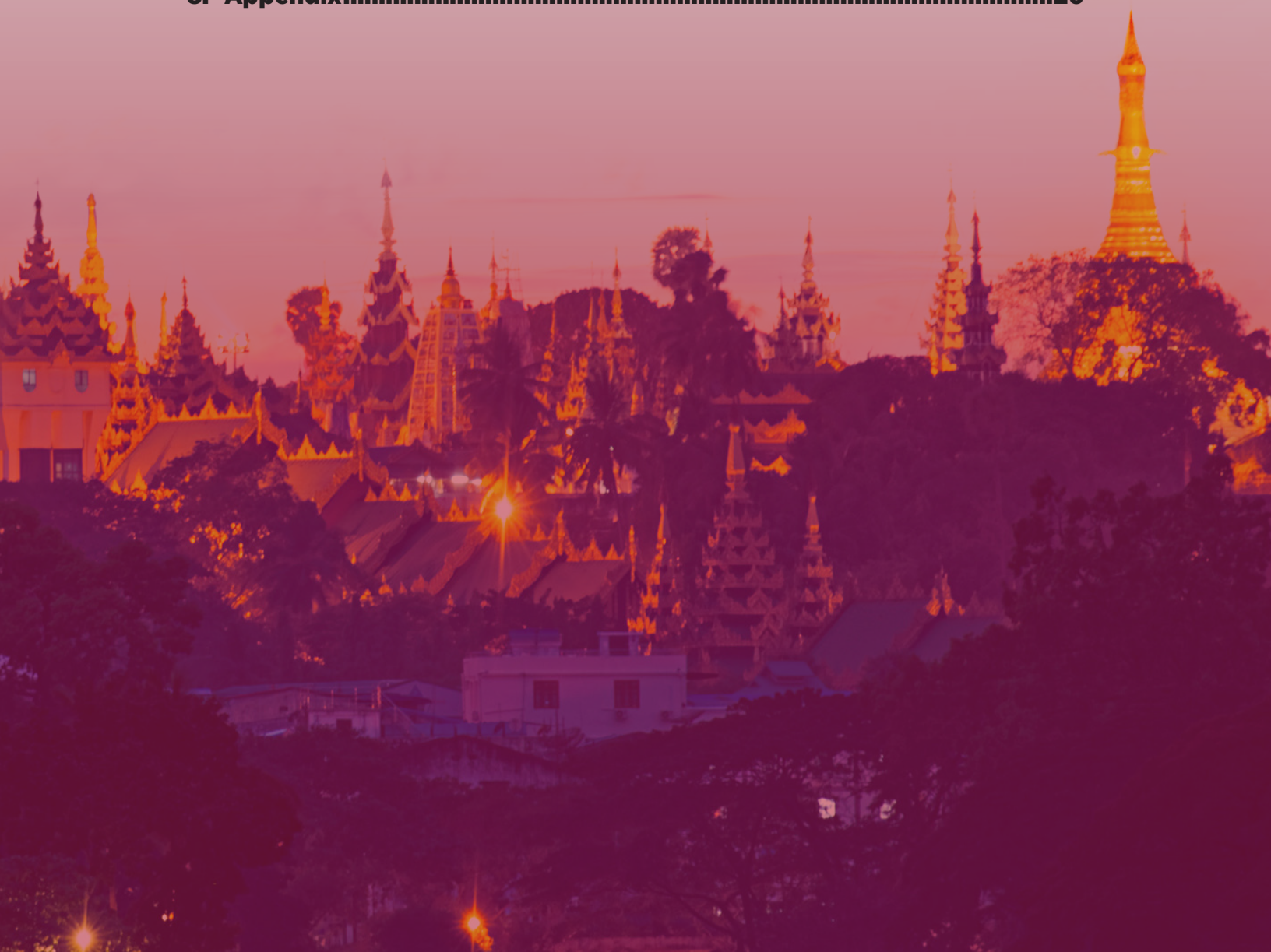


Adobe Stock Image

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iv

1. Executive Summary 1
2. Context and Origins 2
3. Participant Selection and Cohort Composition 6
4. Program Design and Content 8
5. Outcomes, Effects, and Impacts 14
6. Beyond the Cohort 20
7. Conclusion 24
8. Appendix 26



Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the dedication, expertise, and courage of many people over four years.

The Executive Program for Civic Leaders (EPCL) was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and developed in collaboration with the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Harvard Kennedy School's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory (NCRC). We are grateful to all three institutions for their commitment to this work.

The program grew out of conversations among **Edith Bowles, Lyndal Barry, Sophie Barry, Mie Mie Winn Byrd, Johanna Kao** of IRI, and **Hannah Riley Bowles** of the Harvard Kennedy School about how to create a negotiation and leadership program for those emerging at the forefront of Myanmar's democracy movement following the military coup of 2021. Practitioners with decades of experience in Myanmar, Edith Bowles, Lyndal Barry, and Sophie Barry formed the core IRI trainer team and delivered the preparation and application sessions that merged the theory taught by HKS instructors with the lived realities of participants on the ground. Mie Mie Winn Byrd, Senior Adjunct Fellow at the East-West Center, was instrumental in laying a strong foundation for the program.

The program was brought to life by its core faculty: **Monica Giannone**, Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy and Director of the NCRC at Harvard Kennedy School; **Anselm Dannecker**, former Senior Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School and Lecturer on Law at Washington University in St. Louis School of Law; **Brian Mandell**, Mohamed Kamal Senior Lecturer in Negotiation and Public Policy and Faculty Chair of the NCRC at Harvard Kennedy School; and **Robert Wilkinson**, Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Their teaching, judgment, and sustained commitment over four years were the backbone of the program.

We also thank the **IRI program team, Zaw Lin Maung, Hsu Mon Aung**, and **Ashley Bandura**, whose work behind the scenes made every session possible — managing logistics, operations, communications, and participant coordination under difficult conditions. This program could not have been a success without the skill and dedication of the **translation team**. Their commitment to the work meant they became, over the years, experts in the substance, ensuring the concepts came alive to participants. You know who you are and we are forever indebted to your "behind the scenes" dedication to this program.

We are grateful to the additional faculty whose contributions shaped the program in lasting ways: **Dana H. Born**, retired Brigadier General and former Lecturer at Harvard Kennedy School, whose sessions on authentic leadership challenged participants in profound and lasting ways; **Ons Ben Abdelkarim**, former NCRC Fellow, whose failure case methodology opened new ways of learning from difficulty; and **Jamil Mahuad**, former President of Ecuador, and Adjunct Lecturer at Harvard Kennedy School, whose account of negotiating an end to a long-running border dispute brought the principles of negotiation to life.

This report was written by **Monica Giannone, Edie Bowles**, and A**nselm Dannecker**, with significant data and research support from **Sam Talamini**, and with **Brian Mandell**, whose intellectual leadership and guidance shaped the work throughout.

Most of all, we thank the 139 participants of EPCL — for their courage, their commitment, and for showing up.

1. Executive Summary

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup, imprisoned parliamentary leaders who had been elected the previous November, and abruptly ended a decade of quasi-democracy and relative prosperity. Economic collapse, institutional breakdown, and brutal repression followed. The overwhelming majority of the people of Myanmar unequivocally rejected the coup and paid for it with their safety, their livelihoods, and in many cases their lives.

What emerged was a vast, diverse, and fractious pro-democracy movement. Its leaders were motivated and courageous. Many were also operating under conditions of extreme personal risk, coordinating with people they barely knew, and across ethnic and organizational divides, without formal authority.

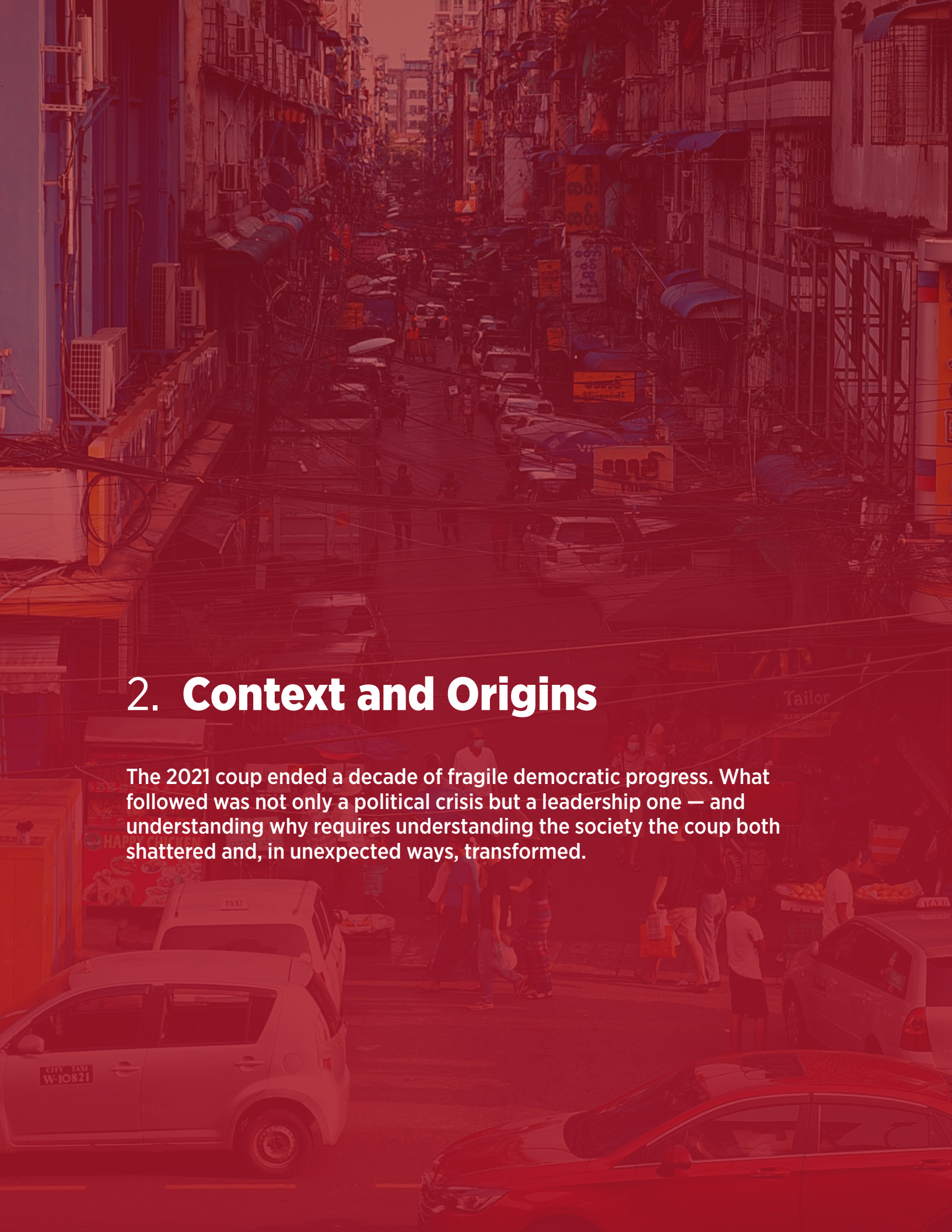
The Executive Program for Civic Leaders (EPCL) was created to meet that gap. The program originated with a small group of expert trainers with deep experience in Myanmar who recognized the need and designed the core concept. They quickly brought on board the International Republican Institute (IRI) — with thirty years of in-country relationships, institutional knowledge, and existing networks within the very community EPCL would serve — and reached out to Harvard Kennedy School's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory (NCRC), which contributed a rigorous framework for leadership and negotiation education and the innovative, experiential teaching to bring it to life. Together, they delivered rigorous, practice-oriented leadership and negotiation training to pro-democracy leaders in Myanmar: virtual, secure, and sustained over a full semester. Its theory of change was straightforward: equip leaders with skills and, in doing so, create an informal platform for learning and collaboration among those determined to build a more democratic and just country.

EPCL was distinctive in what it was not. It was not an advocacy program, a technical assistance project, or a short-term political intervention. It rested on a fundamentally democratic premise: that leadership and negotiation are learnable skills, available to everyone, not the province of particular individuals, organizations, or factions. In a movement and moment defined by deep divisions, this was not a neutral choice. It was a design principle.

Between September 2021 and July 2025, EPCL trained four cohorts of approximately 35 participants each, for six months per cohort — 139 people in total, 43% women, drawn from virtually all pro-democracy organizations, ethnic groups, religions, and age groups across the movement. Sessions were delivered virtually with simultaneous Burmese translation, with operational security embedded as a structural feature of every session.

The program worked. In end-of-cohort surveys and interviews, participants reported meaningful shifts — away from hierarchical, zero-sum models of leadership toward more adaptive, relational, and strategic approaches. They described applying tools directly to alliance-building, internal governance, humanitarian coordination, and communications strategy. One participant captured a shift many described: "Previously we thought about leadership as a position. Now we see leadership as doing the work that needs to be done."[1] In one concrete instance, two EPCL alumni drew on their shared training and networks to negotiate the safe evacuation of humanitarian organizations from a city under active fire.

This report documents the origins, design, pedagogy, and impacts of EPCL. It also reflects on what it means to deliver leadership and negotiation training in an active war — and why sustained investment in this kind of human and relational infrastructure remains essential for democratic futures, in Myanmar and wherever repression, fragmentation, and prolonged uncertainty define the terrain.



2. Context and Origins

The 2021 coup ended a decade of fragile democratic progress. What followed was not only a political crisis but a leadership one — and understanding why requires understanding the society the coup both shattered and, in unexpected ways, transformed.

Political Context

For most of its modern history, Myanmar has been under military dictatorship and home to the world's longest running civil wars, waged by ethno-nationalists seeking greater self-determination. Since 1948 the country has not experienced a single year free of armed conflict. 2011 to 2021 brought change, in the form of quasi-democracy, economic growth, a decline in armed conflict, and vastly expanded opportunities for young people. Free and fair elections took place in 2015 and 2020. On February 1, 2021, the military staged a coup, overturned the results of the 2020 elections, banned independent media, imposed internet blocks, and jailed most of the country's top democratic leaders.

Unlike during previous coups, there was a mass public rejection, which cut across Myanmar's region, ethnic and religious group, socio-economic status, and age. Young people refused to give up the civil rights with which they had been raised, while older people refused to return to the repression and economic isolation of the previous dictatorship, from 1962 to 2011. Weeks of mass demonstrations took place across the country. Civil servants joined a massive public sector strike, known as the Civil Disobedience Movement. Striking industrial workers paralyzed the private sector. In villages and neighborhoods across the country, deposed local parliamentarians and ordinary people stepped into leadership, organizing mutual aid and keeping services running. Parliamentarians who had evaded arrest, civil society actors, and ethnic organizations that had opposed military rule for decades quickly moved to form alternative governance structures.

Faced with opposition it had not foreseen, within weeks the military imposed mass digital surveillance, jailed thousands, and disappeared opponents. As the military shot hundreds of unarmed, mostly young protesters, thousands of young people turned to armed struggle, seeking collaboration with the ethnic organizations who fought the military and maintained their own "liberated areas" for decades. Popular demands moved beyond the return to the previous status quo to encompass the removal of the military from politics, justice, an end to different forms of discrimination, and the creation of a federal democracy to accommodate Myanmar's ethnic complexity, frequently described together as far-reaching "system change."

Leadership Context

How leadership is understood and practiced stood at the center of both the acute challenges and the generational opportunity posed by the coup and popular response.

A hierarchical conception of leadership is deeply engrained in Myanmar's institutional landscape. This conventional model, shaped by decades of military rule, centers on a singular leader whose decisions are implemented rather than debated. Questions are discouraged, hierarchies by age, gender, and status are rigid, and norms around who may speak are strictly observed. The response to the coup encompassed explicit recognition that this model had not served Myanmar well. What emerged in its place — among activists, scholars, and movement leaders alike — was a new political sensibility: one grounded in cross-ethnic solidarity, mutual understanding, and the rejection of the exclusion and domination that had defined the old order.

Concurrently, the coup created gaps in both leadership and authority. It disqualified the military as a source of legitimate authority. In some areas rapid armed response or cooption by pro-democracy actors prevented military authorities from establishing themselves. Conversely, the imprisonment of most of the senior members of the previously governing National League for Democracy (NLD) removed the country's best known civilian political leaders. New actors, many of them young, ethnic leaders, women, or local leaders, emerged to assume national roles and meet the demands of the moment. Day-to-day leadership responsibilities were redistributed across a constellation of pre-existing and new institutions; civil society organizations, interim consultative councils, ethnic political organizations with their own administrations, and the National Unity Government, formed by parliamentarians who had evaded arrest.

While hope and motivation was high, the challenges were immense. Decision-making authority was diffuse, trust across groups was uneven, popular expectations were daunting, and few had experience working together at scale. Most were working in improvised conditions, from hiding or liberated areas, with patchy communications, amid uncertainty about family and colleagues, and under threat of surveillance, arrest, or violence. Longstanding ethnic, political, and organizational divisions—previously managed through formal processes or left unaddressed—now had to be navigated in real time, all while responding to an immediate and violent threat to their lives and livelihoods.

Why Leadership and Negotiation Capacity

While deeply committed to a new, democratic Myanmar, few leaders had previously had access to formal leadership or negotiation training. Myanmar's education system, with its conventional emphasis on rote learning, hierarchy, and suppression of debate, provided little preparation. As one participant joked: "The EPCL trainers are the only teachers I ever had who told us to ask questions."[2] Negotiation, in particular, was often understood narrowly—as concession, weakness, or engagement with an illegitimate adversary—rather than as a set of skills for coordinating action, managing disagreement, and building coalitions within a democratic movement.

One early session made the need visceral. The group was given a simple consensus exercise — a math problem with a clear answer, but one that looked different depending on how you read the information. The task was to reach a collective decision within a time limit. What happened instead was a model of everything the movement needed to learn. Participants were deeply respectful. They listened carefully. No one interrupted. One by one, they shared their views — thoughtfully, generously, fully. And then they ran out of time. Voices had been heard. No decision had been made.

It was not a failure of commitment or intelligence. It was a failure of process and behind it, something more fundamental. The only decision-making model most participants had ever lived inside was authoritarian: one leader at the top, everyone else implementing. They knew, with

conviction, that this was not the model they wanted to build. So they did the opposite and made space for every voice they could within the time allotted. They listened and they refused to let any one person dominate. What they didn't yet have were the tools to do the next thing: to take all of those voices and actually move toward a decision. **How do you practice deliberative democracy when you have consciously rejected the only model you were ever shown, and no one has yet shown you another?** That question became the core of the work.

Rather than generic training focused on advocacy, technical assistance, or short-term political strategy, EPCL was designed to invest in the human and relational infrastructure of democratic leadership. Its central assumption was that leadership capacity, especially the ability to work productively with others, would remain critical regardless of how Myanmar's political trajectory unfolded.

Leadership was framed not as a position or authority, but as the practice of mobilizing people to tackle difficult, often adaptive challenges. Negotiation was framed as an everyday leadership activity: deciding priorities with colleagues, managing internal conflict, building alliances across difference, and coordinating action among actors with overlapping but not identical interests. The program was explicit that negotiation was a key skill to deploy, not only—or even primarily—for the context of engagement with the military regime, but rather for the many internal negotiations that shape and help democratic actors collaborate over time.

To ensure the depth and relational fabric this work required, the program was designed as a virtual, cohort-based training model over the course of a full academic semester. Virtual delivery was the only viable format for engaging leaders dispersed across regions, borders, and degrees of risk — many operating from hiding, in liberated areas, or across international borders. The cohort-based model, however, was a principled pedagogical choice independent of those constraints: a closed group over six months enabled the development of shared language, deepening relationships, and the kind of mutual accountability that one-off workshops cannot build. Together, these design choices made possible what the work required.

The design was enabled by the close collaboration between the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Harvard Kennedy School's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory (NCRC) teams. The collaboration combined deep contextual knowledge of Myanmar with a rigorous, practice-oriented approach to leadership and negotiation education that is informed by engagement in other global conflict regions. Over time, the program evolved in response to participant feedback, changing political conditions, and lessons learned about what it means to teach leadership in an environment characterized by fear, loss, and uncertainty.



3. Participant Selection and Cohort Composition

A program is only as good as the people in the room. Getting the right people into that room — across ethnic lines, organizational rivalries, age hierarchies, and active security threats — was itself an act of institutional skill and relational trust.

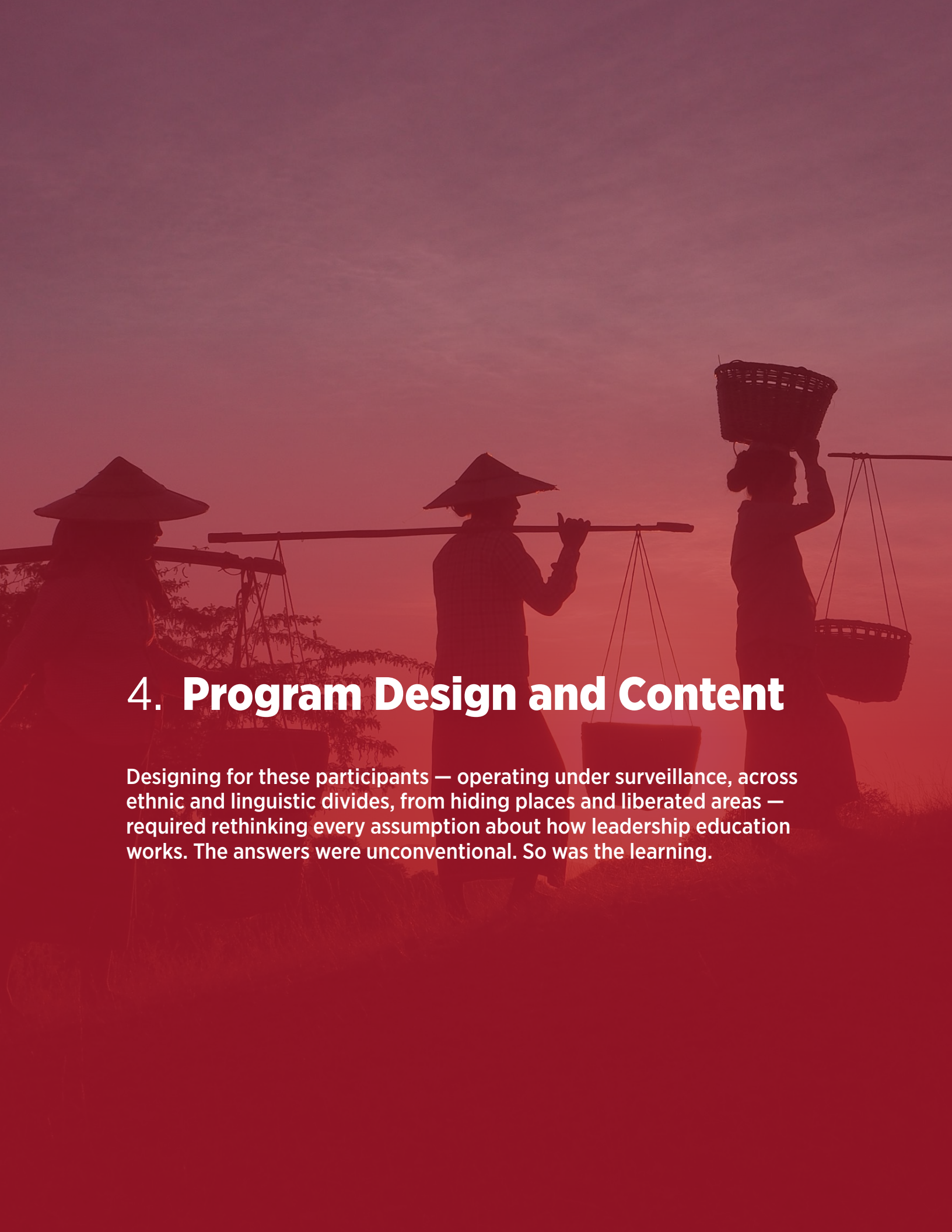
Drawing on thirty years of relationships in Myanmar and deep knowledge of its political landscape, IRI worked through its existing networks and partner referrals to ensure representation across different sectors, regions and institutional backgrounds, aiming to reach people already exercising leadership in their professional roles and to build cohorts representative of the movement's full complexity. EPCL's 139 participants were powerful reminders of the breadth and strength of the movement. Imagine a room with activists now putting together a local interim administration despite daily airstrikes; senior civil servants who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement then took on the challenge of running service delivery from a laptop while in hiding; parliamentarians from urban areas moving between temporary camps in liberated areas; ethnic officials working to rapidly expand pre-existing administrations to accommodate thousands fleeing from central areas; and young activists whose adult lives had taken place in the narrow window between the end of one dictatorship and the beginning of another.

Across four cohorts, a total of 139 people — 60 women and 79 men, ages 28 to 67, from virtually every major ethnic group, religion, and opposition organization in the country, including Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, Ta'ang, Karenni, Chin, Karen, Mon, Pa-O, Rohingya, and Bamar — came together in a virtual room that many of them could access only from their phones to do the hard work of learning to lead differently.

A wide age range was intentional and important. In Myanmar, age hierarchy strongly shapes who speaks, who leads, and whose ideas are heard. Bringing together participants ranging from their 20s to their 60s was a deliberate design choice to break down those barriers. Educational attainment and English language skills were also not criteria for joining, which further removed potential hierarchies.

How participants found EPCL itself reflects something important about the program's role in the movement. In end-of-program surveys, 67% of respondents reported joining because a colleague or friend recommended the program. In a high-risk environment, recommendation is not merely a recruitment mechanism, it is a trust signal. Someone vouching for the program to a colleague is also implicitly vouching for the safety of the space. EPCL entered networks of people who had already started to learn to trust each other. For 74% of respondents, it was also entirely new territory: they had never participated in a program like this before. The trust was not built on prior experience of similar training — it was built on the word of someone they already trusted.

The heterogeneity of each cohort reflected a core pedagogical assumption that leadership and negotiation skills could not be meaningfully developed in homogenous groups, particularly in a context where democratic futures depend on the ability to work across long-standing divides. A stable group over six months allowed participants to develop shared norms, a common language, and mutual accountability. And, for many, the cohort itself became an informal network for consultation, support, and coordination that extended well beyond the formal sessions.



4. Program Design and Content

Designing for these participants — operating under surveillance, across ethnic and linguistic divides, from hiding places and liberated areas — required rethinking every assumption about how leadership education works. The answers were unconventional. So was the learning.

Pedagogical Approach

The most consistent thing participants said about EPCL, across four cohorts and four years, was simple: it worked in the real world. Noting in surveys, "I applied these [EPCL] skills to practical life – unlike other trainings we have had", and "I always like the training, because I can use it immediately."[3] EPCL used an experiential learning model that recognized participants as practicing leaders. Participants found it immediately applicable, even under the extraordinary conditions in which they were leading. The aim was not to prescribe "correct" leadership behavior, but to expand participants' repertoire of tools, frameworks, and choices. The pedagogy emphasized exercises, simulations, and facilitated reflection: practice first, theory in service of it. For many, especially the older participants, the pedagogy constituted a lesson in and of itself.

Operational Security ("OpSec")

Operational security was not treated as an add-on, but as a structural pillar of the program itself. Participants were physically dispersed, but all were to varying degrees subject to the threat of physical or digital surveillance, arrest, violence, or killing.

Sessions incorporated security protocols for participation, anonymization practices, and regular 'OpSec' check-ins. These measures shaped both content and facilitation style, reinforcing norms of caution, consent, and mutual responsibility. Surveys conducted at the end of each cohort found that participants viewed OpSec an important area of learning in and of itself. The numbers bear this out: 100% of survey respondents rated the environment as "Safe" or above on a five-point scale, with 71% rating it "Very safe" or "Completely safe" to share their opinions — a remarkable result for a program whose participants included people operating under active threat of surveillance, arrest, and violence.

> "သင်တန်းမှာ ပါဝင်သူအားလုံး ပန်းတိုင်တစ်ခုတည်း ရှိကြတဲ့အတွက် ဆွေးနွေးရတာ လုံခုံခြုံငြိမ်လို့ ခံစားရပါတယ်။ "သင်တန်းမှာ ကျင့်သုံးတဲ့ လုံခုံရေးအစီအမံစနစ်ကလည်း အရမ်းကောင်းပါတယ်။"
>
> *"I feel safe discussing because all the people involved in the class have the same goal. The security system for the course is also very good."*[4]

Equally important was attention to the emotional dimension of leadership under repression. Many participants were coping with loss of homes and jobs, the death or imprisonment of family and colleagues, displacement, and trauma, as well as multiple responsibilities. The program created space for reflection on how fear, anger, grief, and urgency affect decision-making and relationships. This dimension of the pedagogy was repeatedly cited by participants as essential to their ability to continue leading others under sustained strain. One participant said that joining the course "made me know I have many friends out there, and I don't feel so alone in my difficulties. This made me feel safe."[5]

Sequencing and Content

Preparation

Each cohort started with two months of "preparation sessions," conducted by the IRI trainer team. These sessions covered stakeholder mapping, communications, strategy, and alliance building, drawing on both Myanmar examples and international ones. The team aimed to create a cohesive cohort with a foundational knowledge of core leadership activities. Some participants knew how to stakeholder map and develop strategy but almost none had been exposed to communication as a leadership activity. Sessions on alliance building incorporated comparative experiences from democratic transitions in other countries, such as Timor-Leste. The fact that their struggle was from the Asia region, historically relatively recent, and involved many young people created an openness among participants, even as the Timorese challenged assumptions about alliances. These 'prep sessions' further set the tone for shared learning by establishing confidence in EPCL as a safe environment, a shared understanding of context, and learning routines in chronically disrupted conditions.

Leadership

Following the preparation sessions, the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution team started on leadership modules. Sessions taught leadership principles, systems thinking, group dynamics, and case analysis. Core to the work was the idea that leadership is an activity and distinct from authority. Participants learned to diagnose the system, differentiate between adaptive and technical challenges, and mentally 'go to the balcony,' which proved a particularly popular tool. Participants embraced these concepts as a move away from the singular, hierarchy based, zero-sum models of leadership, which, in their view, impeded cooperation and problem solving. These concepts had particular resonance with people in new roles attempting to solve complex problems. As one person said: "In EPCL, we learned to question and revise own assumptions. In the past, we were always thinking that there is only one way. We never thought about common ground. We insisted, 'it has to be like this,' which created big problems. It was hard to learn and hard to talk. From EPCL we learned to think and comfortably discuss multiple paths to achieve the same goal."[6]

A "failure case analysis" delivered by an NCRC trainer deeply engaged the participants. They called her "Sister Ons" and saw in her struggle as a civil society leader in her home country during a time of political upheaval something that rhymed with their own. Her failure case, and the methodology she taught, helped destigmatize the idea of failure itself. Her presentation prompted others, especially women, to share their own failure stories and discuss what they might have done differently. Participants have used the methodology in their own subsequent practice sessions. These sessions broke the taboo around failure and reframed it as data.

Equally challenging, and equally formative, were sessions with a retired U.S. Air Force Brigadier General and Harvard Kennedy School faculty member whose career spanned military

command, crisis response, and decades of leadership education. She brought to EPCL something participants had rarely encountered: a senior military leader who spoke openly about her own doubts, mistakes, and moments of uncertainty. Her sessions on authentic leadership asked participants to interrogate not just how they led, but who they were as leaders — and whether those two things were aligned. For many, especially those who had come up in hierarchical institutions where showing vulnerability or asking questions was seen as weakness, it was genuinely disorienting. Several described it as the most difficult and most valuable part of the program.

Bridging Leadership and Negotiation

The next module dealt with the difficult interpersonal skills that bridge leadership and negotiation, including managing emotion, difficult conversations and dialogue, and dealing with differences. This sequencing reflected a core design choice: participants needed a shared understanding of leadership challenges and system dynamics before tackling negotiation concepts and principles. Specific sessions dealt with emotional concerns, decision-making models, behavioral traps, and focusing on skills related to inquiry and curiosity. These topics resonated with the instincts of younger leaders who rejected the traditional strict 'control' of emotion in favor of tools for managing and understanding emotion and were generally more comfortable discussing emotion. Throughout, facilitators encouraged participants to surface tensions between urgency and sustainability, authority and legitimacy, and principle and pragmatism.

Negotiation

Almost none of the EPCL participants had experienced formal negotiation training. Many participants entered EPCL with a narrow understanding, shaped by zero-sum political experiences, of negotiation as solely a formal, apex level undertaking associated with concession, betrayal and surrender. The program explicitly challenged this framing. Negotiation was introduced as an everyday leadership activity rather than a discrete political event. Participants worked with frameworks that emphasized interests, relationships, and process, particularly in multiparty settings. Over time, many reported increased comfort engaging in negotiation with allies, partners, and stakeholders whose priorities differed from their own.

Negotiation modules built from two-party fundamentals to multi-stakeholder negotiations and coalition-building, reinforcing throughout that negotiation is a leadership process rather than a transactional skill. Instruction integrated simulations, role preparation, and facilitated debriefs. Each cohort did at least five simulations of varying degrees of complexity. Importantly, the program consistently distinguished between internal negotiation for coalition building and engagement with an illegitimate military regime. Participants were clear that the skills they were developing applied to coordination, alliance-building, and decision-making within the pro-democracy movement and related institutions. Several described using negotiation tools to manage internal tensions, build coalitions across ethnic and organizational lines, and identify shared interests where positions initially appeared incompatible.

Participants responded very well to a session from Jamil Mahuad, the former President of Ecuador who had personally negotiated an end to a decades-long border dispute — one of the region's most intractable territorial conflicts — and who had himself studied negotiation at Harvard. He brought the concepts to life not as theory but as lived experience, integrating attention to core emotional concerns and emphasizing results over winning. Participants found this eye-opening: here was someone who had sat across a table from a hostile government, under enormous pressure, and had found a way through.

Application

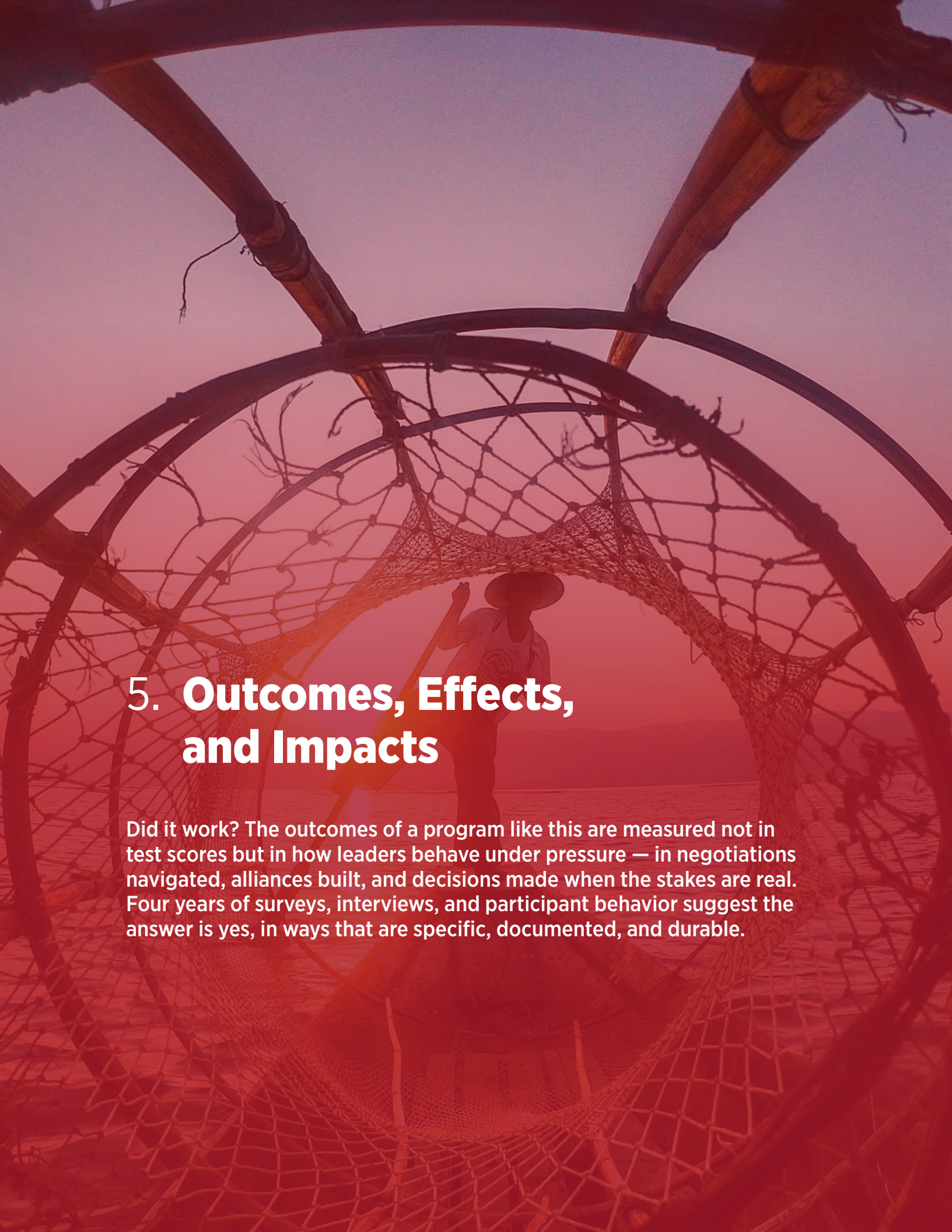
The Kennedy School and IRI teams collaborated continually to ensure that content was both rigorous and accessible for Myanmar audiences. This day-to-day collaboration involved on the spot adaptations; from the simple, changing a classic example involving baking with the zest of an orange, not a conventional Myanmar activity, to drying the peel to make a snack, to more complex. Instruction required careful attention to translation. For example, the standard Myanmar translation of the term 'interests,' အကျိုးစီးပွားများ' – a fundamental and essential concept in negotiation theory – implies 'benefits' or 'advantages' in Burmese. After iteration, the EPCL team chose a hybrid term အကျိုးစီးပွားလိုလားချက်များ combining implications of both 'benefit' and 'necessity.'

Participants also consistently requested greater use of Myanmar-specific scenarios and examples. To respond to this and connect concepts to lived experience, conceptual sessions taught by Harvard were interspersed with application sessions facilitated by IRI. These 'application sessions' required participants to do exercises or otherwise apply concepts they had learned to the communication, strategy, and coalition building challenges they faced in their real-world roles. For example, participants applied systems thinking and diagnosis to complex stakeholder coordination challenges among Myanmar's diverse opposition groups. Participants were asked to apply skills of inquiry and understanding emotional core concerns to the many relationships they were trying to build and manage. These sessions did not require participants to disclose sensitive details, but encouraged them to experiment with tools and approaches in ways appropriate to their context. Over successive cohorts, the balance between theory and application was adjusted in response to participant feedback, with increased emphasis on Myanmar-relevant scenarios and alliance-building challenges.

For the negotiation application, the Harvard team helped the IRI team draw up Myanmar-based simulations. For example, one simulation was built around resource issues that participants were not only familiar with, but also illustrated general negotiation themes around competition and inter-dependence. Participants noted that the 'close to home' simulations were hard because they aroused more emotion. However, they were also better able to identify and learn from the sometimes hidden complexity, which plays a role but may not always be explicit in negotiations. Finally, the realism of the Myanmar simulations brought home the importance of listening skills,

the role of emotion, and the importance of preparation. As one person summarized: "I think it's about listening and exploring and learning about the opposition, their interests, their positions and their issues. The learning from these experiences is really applicable in real life, whether we reach an agreement or not, it is useful as we are all trying to understand the issues better and how these impact on the participating organizations."[7]

Operational constraints shaped learning in ways that were difficult to fully mitigate. Translation, access to materials, and uneven connectivity affected participation. In each cohort some participants had to go to specific locations to get an internet connection, while most relied on mobile phones to connect and read materials. Emotional strain was an ever-present factor, requiring facilitators to balance rigor with care. These challenges do not detract from the program's value. Rather, they offer insight into what it takes to deliver meaningful leadership education under conditions of repression and war.



5. Outcomes, Effects, and Impacts

Did it work? The outcomes of a program like this are measured not in test scores but in how leaders behave under pressure — in negotiations navigated, alliances built, and decisions made when the stakes are real. Four years of surveys, interviews, and participant behavior suggest the answer is yes, in ways that are specific, documented, and durable.

Individual Leadership Practice

"Everything I have done over the last four years has been influenced by what I learned in EPCL, because our work is all about relationships with other people and groups. I couldn't have had the discussions I've had without the EPCL training," said one participant in a governance role from the first EPCL cohort.[8] Across all cohorts, participants reported meaningful shifts in how they understood and practiced leadership. In the end of program survey, they said that EPCL had improved their problem-solving, conflict resolution, and overall leadership skills.[9] Critically, participants took on board the idea that leadership is an activity with learnable tools: diagnosis, listening, pacing, and the management of loss and change. "This training is something entirely new for us since the coup. We never heard these kinds of ideas before," said one of the senior leaders.[10] They also gained the essentials of strategy, communication, and alliance building. As one participant said: "The most useful lesson to me is inquiry and how to move away from just advocacy. This training addresses the problem of people being stuck in own thinking. The application sessions were really important and useful. They help us to think about how to reach agreement so that can win and also avoid fighting in the future."[11] Many described applying leadership and negotiation tools to alliance-building efforts, humanitarian coordination, communications strategy, and internal governance processes.

They reported greater awareness of how emotions, fear, and urgency shaped their own behavior and that of others. As one woman, a prominent organizer in her area, said: "I really liked the lesson on looking at the dance floor from the balcony because it helped me understand myself better. I had an emotional moment where I felt sad and tried to avoid situations when young people ignored me. But when I connected this feeling to the lesson, I was able to see the conflict in my own workplace and the various movements as a whole from above. This helped me understand the younger generation better. I was able to have an engaging discussion with the facilitator during a group work session, and this practical learning helped me to better understand myself, which in turn improved my relationships with both young and old people."[12]

Leading Organizations in a Complex Movement

Participants described becoming more deliberate about how they exercised authority, both within their organizations and across the broader movement, including moving from directive to facilitative approaches, embracing listening and inquiry, and managing disagreement. Two leadership journeys are illustrative.

Prior to the coup, one participant[13], a top leader in one of the largest political parties in the country didn't think he had to listen to ideas from fellow party members. His view was that party members were followers who should obey leadership decisions. He saw his personal integrity, investment of time, and commitment to the party's goals as sufficient for leadership. Prior to joining EPCL, he had begun to notice that something was not working in his leadership style but he could not put his finger on it. The presentation of "Sister Ons'" Failure Case and then doing his

> "ကျွန်တော်တို့ရဲ့ တော်လှန်ရေးဟာ ဘာကြောင့် အရင်က မအောင်မြင်ခဲ့တာလဲဆိုတာကို အဓိက အကြောင်းရင်းကို သိရှိနားလည်လိုက်ပါပီ။ ဒါကြောင့် ကျွန်တော့်ရဲ့ အရင်တွေးခေါ်ပုံတွေကို စွန့်လွှတ်ပီး ခုတော်နဲ့အညီ တော်လှန်ရေးဖစ်လာအောင် တခြားအင်အားစုတွနဲ့ အခွင့်အရေးရတိုင်း စကားပြော၊ ဆွေးနွေးမှုတွေ ပြုလုပ်နေပါပီ။"[1]
>
> *"After hearing instructor Ons' words, 'Every change has a loss.' and 'Don't look for blame; just look for a solution,' I realized the main reason why our revolution has not succeeded before. That's why I gave up my old ways of thinking and now talk and discuss with other forces whenever I get the chance to make our revolution more in line with the times."*[14]

own Failure Case Analysis exercise helped him find a solution: "I realized I was stuck on the dance floor. Now I learned to zoom out and view the big picture, to 'go to the balcony.' This exercise was very valuable for me. I learned to listen to and understand members of the party. I learned to get a better understanding of the others' situation in order to find better solutions. You may think you are right but others may not think you are right. In these cases, you need to manage your emotions. Sometimes people say 'no' just to be ornery or because they don't understand, especially when we face challenges." His new approach to leadership extended to his engagement with the larger movement. "I have regular meetings every week with our allies. I shared 'going to the balcony or zooming out exercise' with them to help our group to more efficiently reach solutions. EPCL's training design is unique, practical, and interactive. I have used what I learned, and I believe it has already helped me to be a smarter leader and will continue to do so in future."

Another participant[15], a two-time parliamentarian from central Myanmar, quickly assumed local and national leadership responsibilities following the coup. As an experienced politician, he hadn't previously thought about the utility of training. But EPCL provided him with essential tools for coordination and negotiation among groups in the chaotic and dangerous conditions following the coup: "As someone who manages pro-democracy groups, security is essential, and negotiating among these groups who are mostly my comrades is a vital skill that I have to employ. The training has had a powerful positive impact on my ways of managing these groups. The most important part that changed my behavior was about using listening skills. Before the training my assumption was everything will be on our terms because 'we are government.' In fact, a lot of what we were doing was just telling people what to do. By our nature and culture, we in Myanmar love to give orders and boss people around if we are position holders. This is what we have been seeing or doing our whole lives. Now I understand we need to listen to other perspectives if we want to be effective. I've used this a lot and I've taught other people how to listen instead of just asserting authority, which gets better results."

These shifts were not framed as personal growth in isolation, but as practical adaptations to the realities of movement leadership. Participants frequently connected leadership concepts to concrete challenges, such as coordinating volunteers, managing internal disagreements, or maintaining legitimacy while making difficult tradeoffs.

Negotiation Reframed

Negotiation learning was among the most frequently cited outcomes of the program, and among the most significant. EPCL treated negotiation not as a technical or transactional skill, but as a core leadership competency: the everyday work of coordinating action, managing disagreement, and building coalitions among people with overlapping but not identical interests. Through simulations and facilitated debriefs, participants gained comfort engaging in negotiation with allies and partners whose priorities differed from their own — a significant shift for leaders who had entered the program associating negotiation primarily with concession or surrender.

As one participant put it: "I learned by doing negotiation simulations in EPCL and taking on different roles. In the EPCL negotiation sessions, I could grasp concepts and these made me think in new ways. I learned we need to lay out options. Even though something may be for 'greater good,' some people still may not see it as in their interests and this has to be considered. I've used the negotiation skills with the other groups here on the group. We can see results. By negotiating, we can avoid some common problems. Instead of approaching by saying 'this is what we want,' I let others bring up issues and respond. This approach has created good relationships."[16]

Importantly, participants were clear that the skills they were developing applied to coordination, alliance-building, and decision-making within the pro-democracy movement and related institutions. Several described using negotiation tools to manage internal tensions and build coalitions across ethnic and organizational lines. Negotiation skills have enabled participants to address crises in real time. In one instance two EPCL alums worked together to negotiate the safe evacuation of humanitarian organizations out of a city during heavy fighting. They knew each other only from EPCL but were each able to use their negotiation skills and mobilize complementary networks to address the situation.

In other instances, EPCL alumni have encountered each other in person in different contexts. "Sometimes we meet each other in other settings and realize we know each other through EPCL. This makes discussion easier, because we already have a common ground based on the instruction."[17]

Application and Spillover

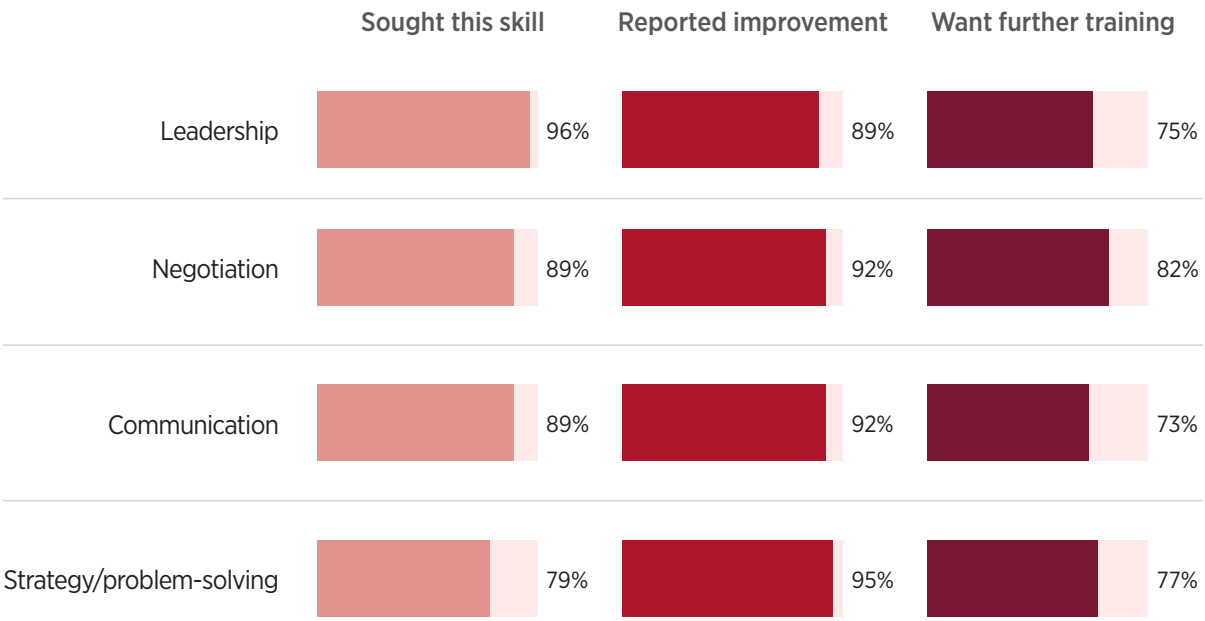
One participant from Chin State took what he learned, went home, and ran 11 trainings. He even wrote a manual. And he wasn't alone among his peers. Across cohorts, participants actively shared tools and frameworks with colleagues and subordinates — driven partly by conviction, and partly by the reality that the post-coup contraction in educational and training opportunities had created a vacuum that EPCL, for many of them, had been the first to fill. The survey data reflects this: 91% of respondents reported lasting impact, and 59% said they use the concepts frequently — not as a formal practice, but woven into how they lead.

None of this spillover was accidental. EPCL was built for real-world application from the start: conceptual sessions always paired with application sessions, frameworks always tested against live Myanmar scenarios, learning always oriented toward the room each participant would walk back into. The expectation was never that insight would stay inside the cohort. It was that the cohort would become a node in a larger network.

> "ဒီသင်တန်းဟာ ကျွန်တော့်ရဲ့ ကျွမ်းကျင်မှုတွေကို တိုးတက်စရေုံသာမကဘဲ နောက်ပိုင်းမှာ ကျွန်တော့်ရဲ့ အလုပ်နရောနဲ့ အဖွဲ့အစည်းမှာပါ လက်တွေ့အသုံးချနိုင်ခဲ့ပါး၊ တခြားသူတွေကိုတောင် ပန်္ဒလည်လေ့ကျင့် သင်ကြားပေးနိုင်ခဲ့ပါတယ်။"
>
> *"This course not only improved my skills but also allowed me to apply them in my workplace and organization afterward, and I could even provide training for others."*[18]

Appetite for Learning

The appetite for learning continued beyond the course. Among respondents who had sought specific skills, large majorities reported improvement in related areas. Alumni pointed to interest in further sessions on leadership, negotiation, communication, and problem-solving, with negotiation drawing the strongest interest at 82%. The responses inform and suggest avenues for continued work.





6. **Beyond the Cohort**

Programs end. Relationships don't — or at least, the right ones don't. What happened after EPCL's formal sessions closed is in some ways the most important part of the story.

The alumni network was not in the original blueprint. It grew because people wanted to keep talking. After the first cohort completed in 2022, the team created a monthly gathering — and it has met every month since, across in-person workshops and dozens of virtual sessions, spanning all four cohorts. The sessions are filled with guest speakers, workshopping current challenges, and generative problem-solving.

The EPCL container has stayed relevant because it filled a gap that formal institutions can't. It provides a forum for leaders to informally exchange ideas, debate, and discuss common challenges free of the constraints of formal settings. As one group of alumni put it "we can discuss any issue." Five years of war, shifting territorial control, and constant physical threat have made leadership and negotiation skills more salient than ever — not less. Alumni are explicit about this: "We want more on negotiations. We see more need for negotiation among organizations." Negotiation, in their words, is "helping to move away from blaming, which does not help, to sharing, analysis, and talking to each other."19

In 2024, the network took a significant step forward with a week-long in-person workshop coordinated by IRI in Thailand that included the HKS team. It was the first time members of the first three cohorts had ever been physically in the same room for an extended period. Participants traveled from a range of locations. For several days, they worked side by side on real challenges facing the pro-democracy movement, applying the frameworks they had developed virtually over the preceding years to live problems, with simultaneous translation in the room. Advanced training sessions pushed the work further than virtual delivery had allowed. But the most significant thing that happened in Thailand may have been simpler: people from different ethnic groups, different political parties, different regions, and different organizations, who had built trust across a screen, finally met face to face. The relationships that had been built virtually became something more durable. The network also created space for targeted work beyond the cohort format, including workshops for specific organizations in response to alumni requests.

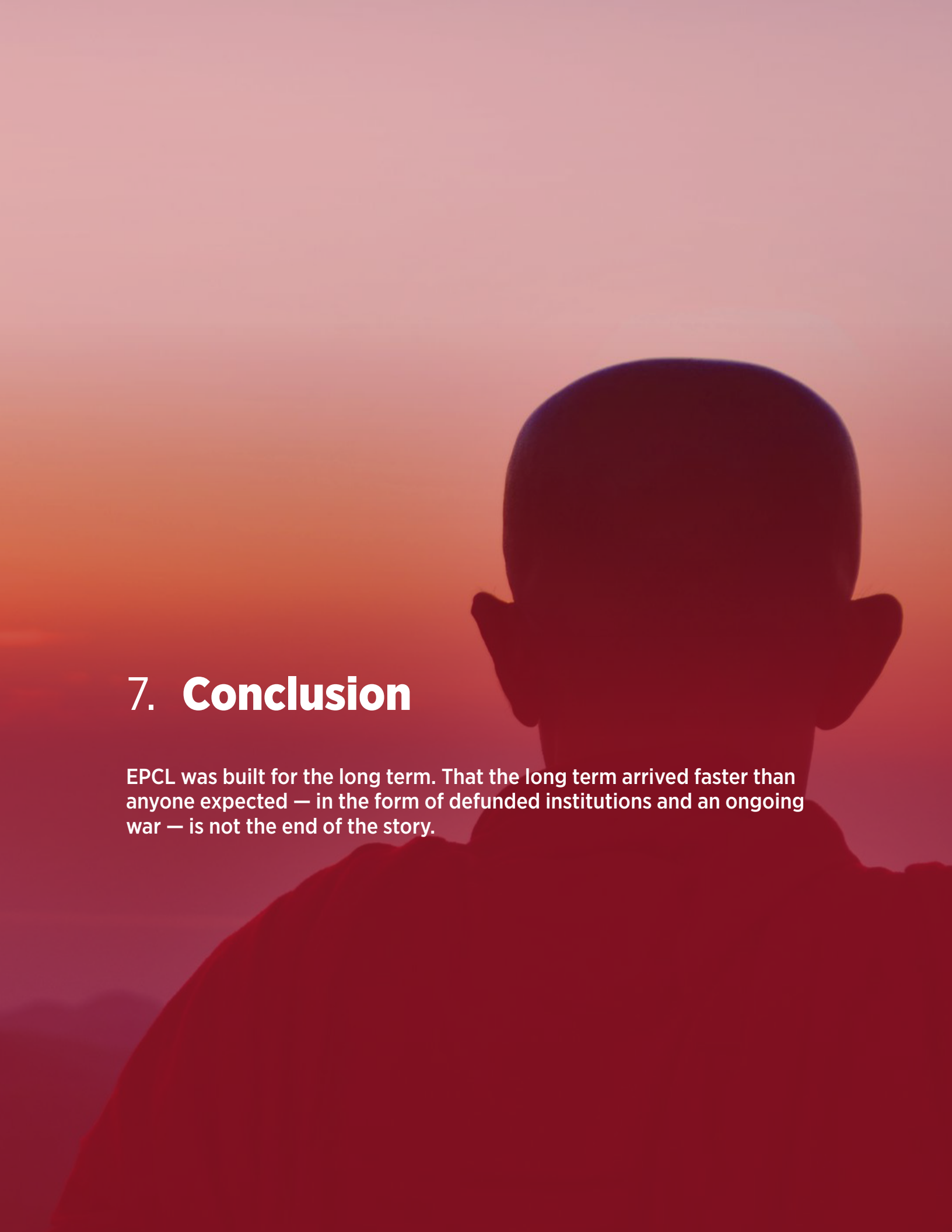
The durability of the network is perhaps the most telling evidence of EPCL's impact. The fourth cohort of EPCL was underway in early 2025. With the loss of institutional funding following the termination of USAID funding, the course had to be discontinued. The network was not designed to survive without that support. It did anyway. The trainer teams finished out EPCL 4 as volunteers, and the alumni network has continued to meet monthly, facilitated by many of the same trainers without institutional backing or financial support. In early 2026, a four-day in-person workshop brought members of all four cohorts together. The group did refresher trainings, talked deeply about the future of their movement, and laid plans for the future of the alumni group as informal network without institutional backing. When asked, the alumni were clear that they wanted to continue.

The data tells the same story: 70% of survey respondents reported interacting with other EPCL alumni since their cohort ended, and 72% expressed willingness for continued engagement.[20] When funding disappears and people keep showing up, the investment was real.

When USAID funding ended, something else unexpected happened. At the 2026 in-person meeting, alumni asked to be trained as trainers themselves. They had experienced what the program could do. They wanted to bring it to their communities, their organizations, and their colleagues. The train-the-trainer model now being developed by the HKS and former IRI teams is a direct response to that request. If ten alumni become trainers, and each reaches their own network, the impact of four years of work becomes exponential. What began as a gap in funding has opened into something the program's original designers had hoped for but could not have guaranteed: a model that no longer entirely depends on external support to survive.

> "သင်ကြားမှု၊ သင်ယူမှုဆိုင်ရာ စာရွက်စာတမ်းများ၊ စကားပန်း-ဘာသာပန်ပေးတာတွေနဲ့ လက်တွေ့ လေ့ကျင့်ခန်းများသည် ကျနော်/မတို့ မဗြေပင်မှာ ရင်ဆိုင်ရတဲ့ အခြေအနေတွေနဲ့ အရမ်း နီးစပ်ပါတယ်။ နည်းပြတွေရဲ့ ရှင်းလင်းတဲ့ သင်ကြားနည်းစနစ်တွေက အရမ်း ကောင်းပါတယ်။ ဒါ့အပြင် နယ်ပယ်အသီးသီးမှ မိတ်ဆွေအသစ်တွေ ရရှိခဲ့ပြီး သတင်းအချက်အလက်များကို ဖလှယ်နိုင်ခဲ့တာကြောင့် ကျနော်/မရဲ့ ကွန်ရက်ကို ပိုမိုကျယ်ပန်လာစေပါတယ်။"
>
> *"The teaching, learning materials, translation, and practical exercises closely resembled the real-life situations we face on the ground. The instructors' clear teaching methods were excellent. Also, I made new friends from various fields and could exchange information, which broadened my network."*[21]





7. Conclusion

EPCL was built for the long term. That the long term arrived faster than anyone expected — in the form of defunded institutions and an ongoing war — is not the end of the story.

EPCL was conceived as a long-term investment in democratic leadership capacity, not as a short-term intervention tied to a particular political moment. Four cohorts, 139 participants, and four years of sustained engagement later, the program demonstrated that this kind of investment works — even, and especially, under the conditions where it is hardest: war, repression, and profound uncertainty.

While EPCL lost institutional funding, the relationships it built proved more durable, and the work it started is finding new ways to continue.

One recurring tension throughout the program was between participants' desire for immediate results and the slower work of building sustainable leadership capacity. That tension is not a flaw in the design but is instead the central challenge of building a democratic movement, particularly under conditions of war and repression. The case for this kind of work rests precisely on the recognition that urgency and sustainability are not opposites; they are both necessary, and the latter makes the former possible over time.

The need for this kind of work has not diminished. If anything, the conditions that made EPCL necessary have spread. Wherever actors must negotiate across difference, build coalitions, and make collective decisions without the shortcuts of hierarchy or coercion, there is a role for this model.

In the end, this report is about 139 people: parliamentarians, ethnic political leaders, civil society activists, and organizers, who found themselves called to lead a democratic movement under conditions none of them chose and few of them were prepared for. They showed up to a virtual room, under a password, from hiding places, phones in hand, and did the hard work of learning to lead differently. When the funding disappeared, they kept showing up anyway.

Their story is particular to Myanmar. But the challenge it represents is not. Global freedom has declined for the twentieth consecutive year.[22] For the first time in more than twenty years, the number of autocracies now exceeds the number of democracies worldwide.[23] In nearly every context where democratic aspirations are alive, the challenge is the same: groups with different histories, interests, and levels of trust must find ways to work together across difference, build coalitions, and make collective decisions. That is a leadership and negotiation problem. It is also a solvable one. EPCL shows us how.

8. Appendix

Appendix A: Survey Results

Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Value
Total responses	78
Women / Men	37 / 28
Cohort 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / Not identified	15 / 14 / 13 / 26 / 10
Mean age (n=70)	44.8 years
Age range	28–67
20–29 / 30–39 / 40–49 / 50–59 / 60–69	1 / 22 / 26 / 15 / 6

Reasons for Joining (n=67, multiple select)

Reason	Count	Respondents (%)
Recommendation	45	67%
Build Myanmar-relevant skills	38	57%
Sought specific skills	29	43%
Build professional skills	23	34%
Networking	6	9%

Among those who sought specific skills (n= 29)

Skill	Count	Respondents (%)
Leadership	28	96.6%
Negotiation	26	89.7%
Communication	26	89.7%
Strategy	23	79.3%

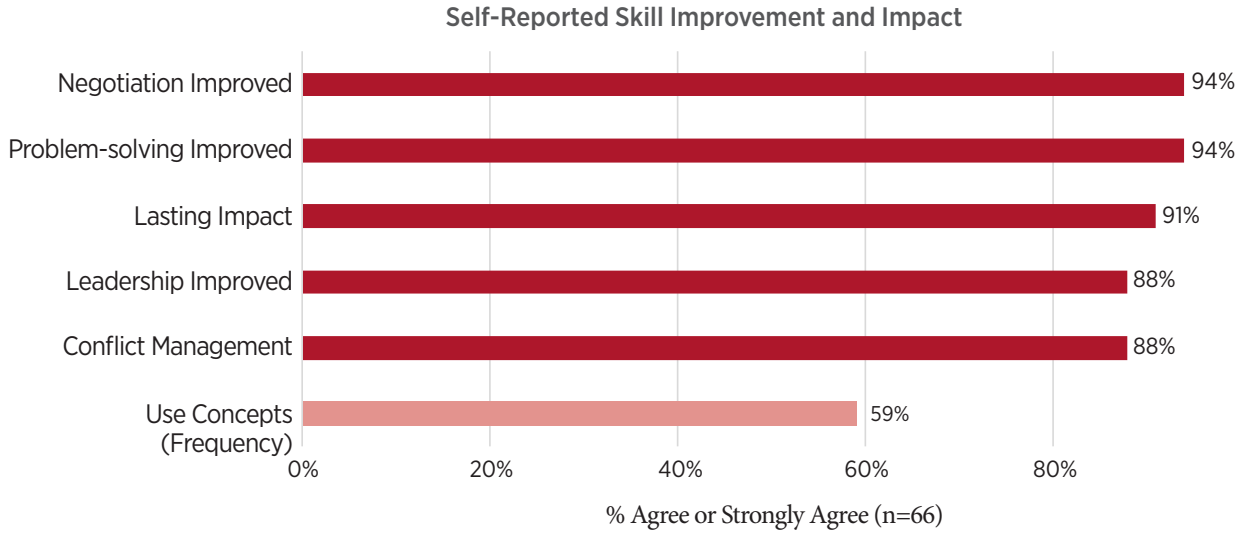
Quantitative Ratings

All items rated on 5-point scales. Percentages represent proportion of respondents who answered each question.

Question	n	Mean	% 4–5	% 1–2	Scale
Overall experience	66	3.77	68%	8%	1=Poor, 5=Excellent
Small-group usefulness	64	4.13	81%	2%	1=Not useful, 5=Very useful
Simulations usefulness	65	4.25	86%	2%	1=Not useful, 5=Very useful
Lecture usefulness	65	4.20	88%	0%	1=Not useful, 5=Very useful
Safe space	65	3.95	71%	0%	1=Not at all, 5=Completely
Lesson relevance	65	3.94	72%	3%	1=Not relevant, 5=Highly relevant
Negotiation improved	66	4.06	94%	2%	1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree
Leadership improved	66	3.98	88%	0%	1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree
Problem-solving improved	66	4.05	94%	0%	1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree
Conflict management	66	3.98	88%	0%	1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree
Lasting impact	66	4.02	91%	2%	1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree
Use concepts (frequency)	66	3.67	59%	2%	1=Never, 5=Very often

Skill Improvement and Impact (Chart)

The chart below visualizes the six agreement-scale items. The pattern shows very high agreement across skill improvement measures, with a notable drop for frequency of concept use is worth noting as it shows participants report the training changed how they think and lead, even if they don't consciously apply EPCL frameworks every day.



Yes/No Items

Question	Yes	No	Total (n)	% Yes	% No
Had prior similar training	14	39	53	26.4%	73.6%
Interacted with other EPCL alumni since cohort ended	46	20	66	69.7%	30.3%
Willing to participate in follow-up discussion	38	15	53	71.7%	28.3%

Appendix B: Cohort Composition

A table breaking down each cohort by number of participants, gender, organizational type, and age range. This data comes from IRI participant records, not the survey.

Cohort	Year	Total Participants	Women	Men	% Women	Survey Respondents	Response Rate
1	2021–2022	31	12	19	38%	15	48%
2	2022–2023	33	11	22	33%	14	42%
3	2023–2024	40	17	23	42%	14	35%
4	2025	35	20	15	57%	27	77%
All		**139**	**60**	**79**	**43%**	**70**	**50%**

Appendix C: Curriculum Sequence

Phase	Content	Led By
Preparation	Stakeholder mapping, communications, strategy, alliance building, Timor-Leste examples	IRI team
Leadership	Systems thinking, adaptive challenges, “going to the balcony,” failure case analysis	NCRC / HKS
Bridge: Leadership to Negotiation	Managing emotion, difficult conversations, inquiry, decision-making	NCRC / HKS
Negotiation	Fundamentals, interests/relationships/process, multi-party, 5+ simulations, Myanmar-based scenarios	NCRC / HKS
Application	Myanmar-specific exercises: political agreement, coalition building, real challenges	IRI team

Appendix D: Citations

#	Endnote Text	Appears In
1	Participant A, End-of-program survey presentation	Executive Summary
2	Participant B, Interview	Section 2
3	Participant C, Cohort 1 survey response	Section 4
4	Participant D, End-of-program survey	Section 4
5	Participant E, Cohort 1 program report	Section 4
6	Participant F, Interview	Section 4
7	Participant G, Cohort 4 debrief	Section 4
8	Participant F, Interview	Section 5
9	Participant H, End-of-program survey	Section 5
10	Participant I, Interview	Section 5
11	Participant J, Interview	Section 5
12	Participant K, End-of-program survey	Section 5
13	Participant L, Interview	Section 5
14	Participant M, End-of-program survey	Section 5
15	Participant N, Interview	Section 5
16	Participant O, Interview	Section 5
17	Participant O, Interview	Section 5
18	Participant P, End-of-program survey	Section 5
19	Participant Q, In-person workshop	Section 6
20	End-of-program survey data (Appendix A: Yes/No Items)	Section 6
21	Participant R, End-of-program survey	Section 6
22	Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2026. https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-freedom-declined-20th-consecutive-year-2025	Section 7
23	V-Dem, Democracy Report 2025. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf	Section 7

HKS Center for Public Leadership
Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory
Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

ncrc.hks.harvard.edu

HARVARD Kennedy School
Center for Public
LEADERSHIP

NEGOTIATION AND CONFLICT
RESOLUTION COLLABORATORY

Copyright 2026, President and Fellows of Harvard College. Printed in the United States of America