LESSONS FROM PARTICIPATORY BOTTOM-UP PLANNING PROCESSES IN CHIN AND KAYAH STATES, MYANMAR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About Hualngo Land Development Organisation

Hualngo Land Development Organisation (HLDO) was established in April 2010 to support development of the Hualngo Area of Chin State, with the aim of eventually working in other areas of the State. HLDO was established by tribal leaders committed to serving their people to improve their quality of life. It seeks to pursue sustainable development through community empowerment and increasing people's abilities to analyse their community needs and identify effective solutions.

About the Local Development Network

In 2012, the Local Development Network (LDN) in Kayah State started with the support given by Metta, ActionAid Myanmar and Shalom Nyein Foundation's Fellowship program. Since then, LDN has become one of the most important civil society organisations in Kayah State. LDN is led by six Fellow alumni that make its Senior Management Team. LDN works in education, community empowerment, livelihood and environment, peace and governance and social protection. The bottom-up planning project is part of its peace and governance portfolio.

About ActionAid Myanmar

ActionAid is a feminist organisation that uses a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable, particularly women and youth, are heard. ActionAid is working with civil society organisations and networks across the world to protect civic and political rights.

Lessons from participatory bottom-up planning processes in Chin and Kayah States, Myanmar

1. Introduction

Myanmar's postcolonial governmental experience has been dominated by a high degree of centralisation. While there were early attempts at decentralisation, Myanmar's decades under military rule were defined by increasing centralisation of power. Since 2011, Myanmar has been on a course of transition from military rule to what has been referred to as a hybrid system of government that blends civilian and military control. In November 2020 the country will undergo its second democratic election. ActionAid continues to support Myanmar's democratic journey by supporting governance development at the subnational level. This work is done in collaboration with communities and civil society organisations, with a focus on the effective delivery of gender-responsive public services, as well as inclusive planning and budgeting processes.

Since 2006, ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) has centred its governance development work around the central tenet of inclusive participation, wherein all community interests, particularly women, youth, and other marginalised groups, are trained in community mobilisation and leadership and work together to develop action plans that focus on grassroot needs. This work has enabled AAM and our civil society partners to make significant contributions to Myanmar's public sector reform.

In 2018 a critical review of AAM's governance work noted that, although "*discussions with state, regional and local government in Myanmar ...had resulted in significant positive changes in approaches to bottom up planning and more accountable institutions*" (ActionAid, 2018a), focus should be directed to several recommendations. Among these were the following:

- Refine the village book programme to position it as an important tool to support a decentralisation and local governance transition process in the country.

- Conduct a study on the Fellows' experience in mobilising communities for planning and action.

- Explore how advances in the capacity of youth, women, and civil society can be built upon and explore concrete ways in which leadership skills can be put into practice and multiplier effects can be realised.

This Research Brief presents lessons on how AAM has sought to address these issues. The Brief presents evidence concerning governance work that has taken place in two Myanmar states: Chin and Kayah. It examines two distinct bottom-up planning models introduced by the Local Development Network (LDN) in Kayah State and the Hualngo Land Development Organization (HLDO) in Chin State.

The aim of this brief is two-fold. First, it presents key findings and recommendations for advancing inclusive planning and budgeting processes that support community identified development objectives. Second, it reflects on the experience of communities in Chin and Kayin States as they identify their needs, develop action plans that address those needs, and participate in government planning and budgeting processes to seek funding for their community development priorities.

1.1 Background of the research

This research is built upon AAM's experience with its Fellows programme throughout Myanmar and the organisation's previous work with Fellows in Kayah State. The Fellows programme was piloted in Myanmar in 2006 and since 2008 it has been implemented in multiple states around the country. Up to May 2018, the work of AAM has focused on linking youth leadership to village-based participatory planning and community development processes. In this programme, women and youth leaders – called Fellows and/or Changemakers – are trained by AAM to facilitate inclusive participatory planning that supports rural communities in critically analysing their needs and resources; defining priorities and preparing realistic action plans that promote village level development objectives. The Fellows live in the communities for two to three years. In this model young Fellows lead the process of changing traditional village attitudes and relationships to make community structures and processes more inclusive.

1.2 Chin State

Chin State is situated in western Myanmar. It is one of the most isolated states in the country with remote villages that are particularly difficult to reach during monsoon season. Most of the state's population live in rural areas below the poverty line and face daily challenges such as unemployment, food insecurity, lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate education, and poor access to services, including healthcare. Households in Chin State also suffer from inadequate access to sanitation and safe drinking water. Furthermore, due to limited economic opportunities in the area, people tend to migrate to other parts of the country, as well as internationally, in search of jobs (UNICEF 2014).

In 2006, AAM and HLDO introduced the Fellows programme in Chin State. This programme trained women and youth leaders to help communities to claim their rights. In 2016, AAM and HLDO

again started a Fellows programme in Chin State to support youth leadership at village level, this time including a focus on bottom-up participatory development planning processes. Implementation of the project, called *Changemakers: inspiring community-led development in the poorest and most isolated communities in Myanmar through youth leadership,* was led by HLDO in 60 villages with 60 Fellows. In 2019, a research team led by AAM and with support from five HLDO Fellows collected data on the operation and impact of the project.

1.3 Kayah State

Kayah State, historically known as Karenni State, is situated in eastern Myanmar. Although it is the nation's smallest state, it is populated by 10 ethno-linguistic groups (Kramer et al. 2018). The state has experienced civil unrest for the past 60 years. Due to its mountainous terrain, poor roads, and the impact of monsoon season, its villages tend to be difficult to reach (TNI 2018). Extreme poverty is a pervasive problem that is exacerbated by a scarcity of arable land, poor infrastructure, and inaccessible markets. Environmental degradation, inadequate healthcare and education and widespread health problems add to the daily challenges face by the people of Kayah State.

Three problematic community conditions attracted the attention of AAM to Kayah State. First, communities in the state have traditionally offered few opportunities for their residents to participate in village decision-making. Traditionally marginalised women and youth have experienced the fewest opportunities to be active in community affairs. A second problem involved attracting government financial support for projects that might enhance village level community development. These two problematic conditions have been reinforced by a lack of inter-village cooperation to address problems that they share. AAM assessed that community-based organisations (CBOs) that can work across village boundaries and ethnic divides might be able to create a level of cooperation need to find shared solutions to common problems and to speak with one voice in negotiations with township authorities for government support for community projects. The Strengthening a community-led development (SCLD) project was introduced by AAM and Local Development Network (LDN) in Kayah State to address these three problems and develop a model of participatory planning and community development that can address village and inter-village needs and seek support from the government (AAM 2017).

The research discusses the operation and impacts of SCLD, examining evidence from 153 villages and 22 village tracts in Demoso and Hpruso Townships of Kayah State. In this model representatives of villages that comprise village tracts participate in a Village Tract Community Based Organisation (VTCBO). The focus on the village tract is supported by the fact that it is the base level of government administration, and among all levels of Myanmar government, it most directly represents citizen interests.

VTCBOs were intended to support governance building objectives by facilitating engagement of villagers in processes of decision-making and linking village leaders on an inter-village basis with village tract authorities; to make the planning process more inclusive both within and across participating communities.

VTCBOs are established at the village tract level in both townships to support continuous dialogue and engagement of communities with government officials to fund needed community projects, improve the provision of public services, and to enhance the peace building process.

The VTCBOs are expected to become responsible for supporting the creation of village action plans and preparing village tract action plans and advocating for these plans through meetings with local government. In the second stage, through their relationships with VTCBOs, it is intended that individual villages gain increased access to public services and higher satisfaction with government. Within villages decision-making will be made more inclusive by encouraging women and youth to participate in community meetings and other activities. By the end of the project in 2021, it is expected that VTCBOs will have produced 40 village tract action plans and successfully presented them to local authorities in the two townships.

2. Research objectives and approach

By bringing together lessons from the standard Fellow-led and village-based planning process in Chin State and the new VTCBO-led planning process in Kayah State, the study sought to analyse the impact of individual-oriented versus collective agency in strengthening community-led development and shifting power dynamics. In addition, the research considers to what extent the two community-led models have stimulated change in existing gendered and age-related power dynamics within the subject communities. Drawing from the research results this research brief also provides recommendations for the future of AAM's programme work in community-led development in Myanmar.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

In its work ActionAid uses a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to support people living in poverty and experiencing exclusion to become the leading agents in their development process. The HRBA approach brings together concepts such as agency, power shifts, and feminist principles (ActionAid, 2010). Consistent with this philosophy, the current research used a participatory approach to collect and assess evidence within a set of theoretical frames including:

- The capacity of rural villagers to participate in and contribute to participatory planning and community development;

- The limitations and opportunities related to traditional structures and processes of power and leadership on the village level;

- The impact of the intersectionality of traditional norms and values and religious influences on the self-identity and empowerment of women, youth, and other marginalised groups, and;

- The dynamics involved in identifying and acting upon individual and collective agency to realise participatory planning and community development objectives.

The **capacity of rural villagers** to participate in and contribute to participatory planning and community development – often referred to as '**community philanthropy**' – provides an additional frame for assessment of the processes initiated by AAM to strengthen community-led development. The concept has been defined as a process that aims to build local resources to drive development, create ownership and leadership within villages, strengthen community capacity and voice, and shift power to the village level. The intent is for villagers to gain greater control over their lives and strengthen their ability to define their future (Doan 2017; Hodgson & Pond 2018).

Consideration of **power dynamics** on the village level is also an important framing for this study. Chambers (2006) sees village power dynamics as involving 'uppers' (those who are recognised as dominant or superior to others in a particular social context) and 'lowers' (those who are recognised as subordinate or inferior to uppers in that social context). Four types of power can be seen within this conceptualisation. First, power *over*, meaning the power of an upper over a lower, usually with negative connotations such as restrictive control, penalisation, and denial of access to opportunity. Second, power *to*, meaning effective choice, the capability to decide on actions and carry them out. 'Power to' also can be labelled as 'agency'. Third, power *with*, meaning collective power wherein groups together exercise power through organisation, feelings of solidarity, and acting together. Fourth, power *within*, meaning strengthened individual self-identity and self-confidence. The AAM Fellowship programme is based on this understanding of power, wherein youth and women become catalysts for changing power dynamics within communities, seeking to diminish the meaning of labels such as 'uppers' and 'lowers' and thus allowing all groups to share power to realise community objectives. This conceptualisation is utilised to determine if power shifts occur and understand the resultant implications for participatory planning and community development.

The concept of **intersectionality** is linked to power analysis, as it describes how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect to impact the social position and self-identity of individuals (Crenshaw 1989). Using the lens of intersectionality this study aims to obtain evidence regarding how in particular gender and age impact efforts to change the roles and relationships among women and youth in the subject villages.

Often people living in poverty and experiencing exclusion are unaware of their rights. They may also lack information, skills and knowledge needed to claim those rights. Awareness-raising and information sharing processes can help to change these situations. But often people also internalise their oppression, seeing their condition as natural and unchangeable. Consciousness-raising processes can shift fatalistic beliefs and help people see themselves as agents capable of bringing about change (ActionAid, 2020, p.31). This research uses the concept of **agency** as the result of a conscientisation process. Two forms of agency are identified: individual-oriented agency and collective agency. In the standard Fellowship model introduced by AAM in many areas of Myanmar, Fellows use their **agency as individuals** to facilitate the community development process within a village. **Collective agency** assumes a central role as the development process is implemented by people working together in and among communities to claim their rights through the introduction of VTCBOs.

2.2 Research questions

With these framing considerations in mind, the Research Brief asks:

What drives and supports change in a community-led development process?

To answer this research question, evidence is sought to answer two sub-questions:

- How does a bottom-up development process, whether it is at the village or the village tract level, influence power dynamics?

- Which form of change agency, Fellows or VTCBOs and their members, create a stronger and more sustainable impact in terms of community leadership?

The logic that supports evidence gathering and analysis to answer the research questions is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comparing two community-based leadership models
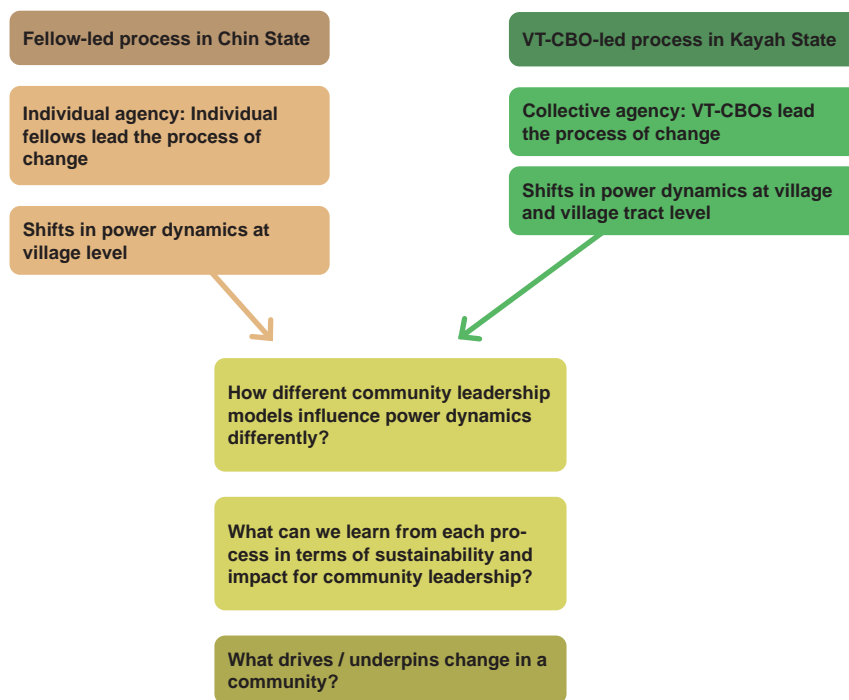
2.3 Research methodology

The research was a joint effort among HLDO, LDN and AAM. The study generally followed an ethnographic methodology as it sought evidence to produce a holistic picture of the complex, multi-layered social phenomena under study.[1] This approach also allowed for combining different data collection techniques at different times (Fingerroos & Jouhki 2014: 83).

In Kayah and Chin States, the main data collection tools used were semi-structured thematic interviews and focus group discussions conducted by field staff, and key informant interviews with HLDO, LDN staff, and community members performed by AAM researchers.[2] The data was collected in Burmese (Kayah) or Mizo (Chin) language. Data was recoded through hand-written notes and afterwards translated into English.

The data collected was analysed through a participatory approach, wherein findings were discussed and agreed upon using ethnographic analysis. Analysis was performed after the first data collection period and continued throughout implementation of the project. The data collection and analysis took place between April 2019 and June 2020. A final round of coding was performed by AAM researchers.[3] Final research validations were performed in Chin State in May 2020 and in Kayah state in September 2020.[4]

1   Ethnography allows the researcher to observe everyday life as it happens as well as produce understanding of the functioning of societies and individuals in varied situations (Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto 2014).
2   The thematic interviews were carried out alongside the project implementation. The interviews were arranged with local community members and other key people who are involved in the project implementation. AAM provided training on data collection techniques to staff from the two partner organizations that were to be part of the research team.
3   To code the data, a qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used.
4   In addition, a project document review and context analysis of each township was

2.4 Ethical considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines provided by the American Anthropological Association (2012). Guidance regarding research ethics was also be provided to local partners and the Fellows by AAM. Informed consent was sought before interviews and before note taking. All data was collected anonymously and without revealing any personal or sensitive information about the respondents.[5] At the end of the research process all data collected was stored under password protection by AAM. Individuals involved in the study ensured that any content gathered was used responsibly without exposing risks to children and that children would remain in their known environment throughout the entire research process.[6]

conducted by ActionAid Myanmar.
5   The interviewees and the participants of the focus group discussions were informed beforehand about the motives of the study and about the ways the data collected was to be used. In the beginning of each interview and focus group discussion, a written consent was asked from each interviewee and focus group participant.
6   The research was conducted in accordance with ActionAid's Child Protection Policy.

3. Findings

3.1 Chin State: Findings related to Fellows impact community power dynamics within communities

Evidence demonstrates that the Fellow-led community development process can facilitate changes in traditional power relationships.

Individual agency

- In communities where village affairs were formerly seen as arenas that only belong to village leaders, elders and household heads, local youth in the villages have become engaged actors of community development.

- Women have gained more confidence to voice their opinions and ideas, as well as to question those of men.[7]

- Women and other historically marginalised villagers have been invited to participate in village level meetings and other activities and encouraged to express their opinions and ideas.

Collective agency

- Traditional views regarding community development have started to change. As a result of the introduction of Fellow-led community development, it is now seen as a participatory process that improves community members' capabilities and emphasises contributions from the entire community.

- Communities that formerly exhibited weak structures and collaboration processes have become more organised and united, self-sufficient, and developed an ability to identify and prioritise village needs and develop solutions to address them.

- Self-help groups (SHGs) and CBOs have contributed to the organisational capability and capacity in the subject villages, offering opportunities for women and villages as a whole to function in more inclusive and united ways to identify and act upon their common interests.

- Villages have experienced participatory community planning through the Village Book preparation process, organising CBOs, and negotiation of funding for village projects with local government authorities.

Shifts in power dynamics

- Youth have assumed village leadership roles through their work as Fellows and women have gained new village leadership roles through their work with SHGs.

- Through the establishment of SHGs and other elements of Fellow-led community development, women have become organised at the village level and started to take part in village decision-making processes and contribute to projects that are valued community-wide.

- Changes can be seen in household dynamics wherein traditional gendered labour roles have started to shift. Women have gained more voice and new forms of authority within the household sphere.

Enablers of change process

- The supportive role of HLDO has been essential.

- Training local youth to lead in community development has created new village organisational capabilities and capacity to act.

- Encouraging inclusion, unity, trust, and respect has promoted participation, collaboration, and teamwork among all community groups and villagers.

- Analysing traditional gendered norms, values, and practices and exploring what factors within the community result in inequality between men and women was important to women finding more important home and village roles.

- Offering knowledge and skills training to women and organising them through SHGs enabled them to be more involved in community decision-making and widened their work inside the communities.

- Engaging villagers through the Village Book preparation process and offering them tools that allow them to define their needs and actions required to address those needs supported their ability to negotiate improvements with external actors.

Barriers to village change processes

- Fellows need time to build trust within villages. Initially Fellows were perceived as development workers getting paid for their activities and expected by villagers to implement projects. As a result, at times Fellows felt under pressure and insecure.

- Spare time that residents of Chin villages have available to participate in village affairs is clearly limited and proves be a significant barrier to participatory planning.

- Long-term structural transformation of deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and values will take time. Religious norms and limited access to education are cited as deeply rooted causes of entrenched power imbalances between men and women.

- The negotiation process with local government officials is an area where many villages are limited in their ability to effectively act upon their interests. They are often unfamiliar with governmental processes, unable to negotiate in Burmese, and the government may be unwilling to recognise local village planning as a form of legitimate decision-making.

- Village participatory planning and community development sustainability is also challenged by internal village factors. These include a lack of technical skills needed to undertake projects that might range from planting a coffee plantation to developing a new water source. This is further complicated by villagers not being able to sacrifice the valuable time required to develop these skills that are necessary to plan and implement village projects.

7　These efforts include the village cleanliness projects, alcohol and drug use prevention, and the establishment of a new coffee farm.

3.2 Chin State: Learning how agents of change can produce sustainable impacts in terms of community leadership

Fellows and the Village Book process in Falam Township were able to initiate change within their communities. They expanded the capacity of HDLO to reach and support villagers' livelihoods, while also changing attitudes towards community engagement through bottom-up participatory processes.

The Village Book participatory planning process has helped community members work together as a group and led to the establishment of community-based organisations (CBOs and SHGs). The Village Book process has the potential of making significant contributions to the wellbeing of communities across Chin State. The current research shows that thus far Fellows and the Village Book process have supported important changes in the subject villages. To sustain these accomplishments, the following actions are recommended:

- Community-level discussions regarding gender inequality and how it intersects with other forms of discrimination need to continue. These discussions must have a clear focus on how to break gender barriers and how to allow for women leadership at the village and township levels.

- HLDO engagement with the bottom-up participatory process has been crucial. For the future, it is recommended that HLDO support the establishment of networks of trust across villages with similar planning priorities. It may look to the VTCBO model in Kayah State as offering practical ideas regarding how these collaborative inter-village networks can be established and operated. This collaborative approach could help villages learn to work together through participatory planning and community development and to advocate for their common needs with the government.

- Members of SHGs and village CBO should continue to engage with township government decision-making processes on how to allocate the government's scarce resources through planning and budgeting. The CBOs and SHGs should pursue establish linkages with formal governance processes at the township, regional, and Chin State and levels.

3.3 Kayah State: Findings related to Fellows impact on community power dynamics within communities

Individual-oriented agency

- The VTCBO approach to engaging with communities and village tract administrators appears to be growing in its attractiveness to communities. This reflects growing trust in the idea and capabilities of VTCBOs.

- Perceptions of communities regarding VTCBOs membership are important to consider. VTCBOs have been doing their work in the interest of the communities, rather than the village tract administrators.

Collective agency

- VTCBOs have made gradual progress in proving their value to the communities that they serve. This is demonstrated in a growth in interest and involvement in VTCBO community development work by villages and individual villagers.

Community Philanthropy

- The VTCBO approach has contributed to better connecting communities with village and village tract administration. The village tract action plans were cited as tangible evidence of this networking.

Shifts in power dynamics

- VTCBOs are potentially valuable tools that can serve efficiency and effectiveness interests of villages, village tract administration, and township governance. VTCBOs and the village tract action plans that they produce more clearly represent grassroot level priorities to the government while at the same time helping government officials better understand grassroot level needs and priorities. Thus, VTCBO can be assessed as contributing to the empowerment of village in the landscape of township decision-making.

- Although communities might lack technical understanding of bridge construction, for example, through the collective competency represented in the VTCBO they can monitor whether bridges are efficiently constructed as planned. In other words, the VTCBO offers villages a new level of support to promote and protect their interests.

Enablers of change processes

- The formation and operation of VTCBOs reflect the important role played by LDN. LDN has been essential in terms of training VTCBO members and facilitating networking with the government. Without its support after the project ends some respondents question whether VTCBOs will survive.

- Proponents of 'good', 'sound', 'sustainable' and other forms of transformative governance emphasise the essential ingredients of responsiveness, accountability, and transparency. Evidence from the current study indicates that VTCBO-led community development offers great potential for contributing to each of these desirable traits of governance.

- VTCBOs serve as both 'microscopes' and 'telescopes' that help communities better 'see' the structures and processes that impact community development. This enhanced ability to see inside these structures and processes results in improved opportunities for communities to have their interests represented in government decision-making and to determine whether government administrators act in responsive and accountable ways.

- VTCBOs contribute to outward transparency experienced by government officials. VTCBOs offer the government opportunities to better see what communities, need, want, and have prioritised. They also provide feedback that government needs to improve its performance in terms of responsiveness, accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency.

- VTCBOs provide a two-way accountability bridge between communities that comprise village tracts and government. An important role associated with this bridging quality involves the capacity for communities to assure that projects are implemented as intended and budgets are expended as approved. The existence of VTCBOs appears to bring about a condition that provides for checks and balances that contribute to assuring development work headed by administrators at village and village tract levels is performed according to the best interests of the villages affected.

Barriers to village change processes

- VTCBOs need to address gender imbalances and financial issues. Without inclusive membership and adequate financial resources to cover basic operating requirements, the VTCBO approach is not sustainable. VTCBOs must also address the problem of frequent member turnover and establish cadres of members who demonstrate commitment to the VTCBO-led community development idea and possess competencies that help them to contribute to its success

- While communities are generally aware that VTCBOs exist to support community development, VTCBOs are not often mentioned in conversations regarding community affairs. This lack of interest in VTCBOs in part maybe a product of VTCBOs not adequately explaining to communities what they are doing and how they are doing it. VTCBO members need to be cognisant of the fact that community engagement must be an ongoing VTCBO activity, particularly in villages and village tracts where there has been no implementation of action plans. Village tract administrators argue that positive perceptions of VTCBO will grow as they continue to produce meaningful action plans, gain government approval for projects, and build engagement with communities.

- VTCBOs have also generated negative perceptions. A typical complaint is that VTCBOs have yet to produce tangible benefits. Some respondents only see that VTCBO members are attending trainings and not producing financial or functional benefits to their communities.

- VTCBOs are essential to women overcoming the intersectional barriers to their participation in and leadership of community affairs. The idea that older men should hold community leadership positions still holds sway in most VTCBOs.

- VTCBOs need to gain recognition from both government and community members. If the VTCBO-led community development process is helpful to local government administration, then the interpersonal relationships between VTCBO leaders and village tract administrators will improve.

- To be successful in gaining funding for community projects, VTCBOs must create action plans that provide clear and convincing evidence to government decision-makers.

3.4 Kayah State: Lessons learned on how agents of change can create sustainable impacts in terms of community leadership

Strengthen and maintain close relationships with community members

Community members and village and village tract administrators suggest that VTCBOs should strengthen their engagement with and visibility in the communities that they serve. They also suggest that VTCBOs should involve community members more in both planning and implementation of the village tract development processes. These actions should significantly contribute to trust building with their community and individual level constituents. They should also contribute to communities better understanding and supporting the VTCBO-led community development approach.

Maintain role clarity

Respondents expressed concern regarding role conflicts between VTCBOs and the formal administrative structure. VTCBOs should clarify that their intent is not to compete with the existing administrative structure. Rather, they should make it clear that, as was described above, they can offer useful support to administrators in realising their effectiveness and efficiency objectives.

Networking with government

Study participants suggest that VTCBOs should step up their efforts to network with and lobby MPs and appointed government officials. They also emphasised that VTCBO planning activities, including the annual township meeting, fit within the government's budget development schedule. Beyond the promotion of village and village tract action plans, the strategy of engagement with elected and appointed government officials should include promotion of the value of VTCBOs to the government as well as to the communities that they serve.

Need for continuing support from LDN

Study respondents emphasised the importance of continuing support from LDN to the survival of the VTCBO approach. LDN staff members have expressed optimism concerning the future of VTCBOs. They assert that VTCBOs can function independently after the SCLD project comes to an end. However, this will be contingent on their effective use of what they have learned in the capacity building trainings concerning how VTCBOs connect with local government and the methods for VTCBO activity organisation.

VTCBOs will continue to need support from LDN to improve their engagement with the government. One of the challenges that VTCBOs face is determining which department is responsible for which need area/project proposal and how to approach the right departments. LDN could assist by producing stakeholder mapping of government departments and suggested means of engagement.

Revise training design

Although LDN provided capacity building trainings to VTCBO members to enhance their leadership, management, and networking skills, the training participants have thus far failed to use them effectively in their community development work. To address this problem LDN should revise the training design to make it better reflect the circumstances of VTCBO members. The trainees' education level and experience in community development should be considered in designing the training such that it is more useful to VTCBO members with low levels of education and experience.

Monitor the performance of VTCBOs

While some project proposals received acknowledgement from the government in 2019, more did not. The primary reason given for this was that VTCBOs did not submit their proposals in time to be considered during the 2019 government budget cycle. Since preparing and submitting project proposals from village and village tract action plans to be considered by the government is a primary indicator of VTCBO performance, steps should be taken to more closely support VTCBO activity in this area. These steps could include a list of government departments to meet, and a follow-up calendar so that meetings lead to clearly defined progress indicators. This action can support the Village Tract plans, as well as the project proposals submitted to the government. Guidance, support and training could be provided on Union and State/Region budget planning cycles; and policy/advocacy approaches, including the importance of documenting engagements and following-up with officials after meetings.

Share lessons learned across VTCBOs

Another area that LDN can improve upon is in mentoring. This could be achieved by supplementing its existing approach by accumulating evidence of the progress of VTCBO members on tasks for which they received mentoring assistance. Lessons learned from successes and disappointing experiences should also be documented. These documented lessons learned should be shared with other VTCBOs to support their learning needs. An example of a learning approach that could be developed is a document that includes suggested 'dos and don'ts' for engaging with government departments. Additionally, a checklist could be prepared that includes best practice approaches to meeting VTCBO responsibilities.

4. Conclusions

Chin

As AAM (2020) has previously reported on local governance building, the progress evidenced in the current research and the suggestions offered to build upon this progress will only have sustainable meaning if it is part of a new approach embraced by governance actors – governmental and nongovernmental – to integrate village level participatory planning and community development into formal governance structures and processes. Participatory planning and community development through the Fellows programme and the Village Book process, and informally advocating with local government officials for funding of village projects, can be considered a form of what AAM has referred to as 'proto-governance'. This term describes nascent forms of governance between the village and local government level in Myanmar. Supporting this involves capability and capacity-building efforts prior to the creation of institutionalised linkages to the structures and processes of government. With time, AAM sees the forms of proto-governance it has promoted becoming a pathway to future settled patterns of governance at the local level that emerge to involve government, community organisations, NGOs, and other stakeholders in the realisation of common governance objectives.

Kayah

The project has realised very limited progress in changing the power dynamics associated with traditional village leadership. There is little evidence of participation of youth and women in community participatory processes and of their ability to assume leadership positions. Barriers created by the intersectionality of age and gender in traditional Kayah State culture remain very powerful and likely will take many years to change.

A major limitation to consideration of all evidence produced by the current study involves the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which affected every component of the project during its second year of operation. In a positive vein, the Covid-19 pandemic experience might be viewed as a test of community resilience. Assessed in this light, VTCBOs proved to be valuable new community resiliency assets that made useful contributions to township level responses to the pandemic. The scale of inter-village operation of VTCBOs appeared to enhance the efforts of township health departments.

In terms of broader Myanmar and Kayah State local governance building objectives, the VTCBO approach appears to be an interesting component of what AAM refers to as 'proto-governance' as described above. It appears to offer potential for contributing to the good/sound/sustainable governance dimensions of responsiveness, accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and efficiency from the perspective of multiple stakeholders in local governance. VTCBOs that have proven to be most successful in engaging with communities and the government might be designated as 'pockets of effectiveness'[8] and used as learning examples for other communities in Kayah State and elsewhere in Myanmar.

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