

# Governance in Action

## ActionAid Myanmar

IS01

Quarter 3 Edition



### Note from the Editor

We would like to welcome you to **Governance in Action**, ActionAid Myanmar's first governance newsletter!

Change is appearing in a graduate fashion since the 2010 elections in Myanmar. A new political opening is perceived, which is allowing space for democratization and decentralization of the development paradigm in Myanmar. Different donors, multilateral and bilateral development agencies are shaping up their strategies for Myanmar from a restricted mandate to a normal development approach.

Huge market interest has been observed due to the opportunities resulting from the present reforms. However, this recent development trend seems to be serving powerful interest groups, bringing different development models into Myanmar which do not fairly take into account the current social, economic and political architecture of Myanmar.

It's unclear how Myanmar should learn from the mistakes that other developing countries have made in the

name of development. The overall effort of the parties involved will create a new governance structure, shaping it to ensure just and democratic governance within the country, particularly along the lines of inclusive growth and ecological care.

Action Aid Myanmar has initiated this effort to publish a quarterly newsletter to capture the changes happening around the country with a particular focus on governance. Stakeholders will be informed through news updates, best practices of community led development projects, and in-depth analyses.

In this particular issue, we have several case studies, which both describe and analyze the challenges and positive developments in governmental cooperation as they take up their roles as duty bearers and are reminded of their obligation to respect, protect and fulfill citizen's rights.



Governance has emerged as one of the key priorities for ActionAid Myanmar (AAM), aligned with Action Aid International (AAI) strategies and key promises.

ActionAid Myanmar's governance program is designed to support the reform process to ensure just and democratic governance and human rights in Myanmar by strengthening democratic institutions and promoting active citizenship. Different institutions of state and non state actors at local levels including village, village tract, township, district, and regional levels are being formed and strengthened with the support of development partners. ActionAid also provides support for national level state and non state actors which set democratic norms and practices as well as showcasing models for people centred development programs in respect to ensuring quality public services and holding the duty bearers accountable. Most of the programs are linked with the national development priorities of the government and contributes to the National Comprehensive Development Planning process of Myanmar.

Developing and strengthening community based organizations, civil society organizations, media watch groups, members of parliament, area level platforms and different forums through bottom-up participatory planning processes has been key in AAM programming. This aims to empower poor and marginalised communities, build up their alliances, and help them to claim their rights to duty bearers and holding duty bearers accountable.

The above mentioned actions fit within AAM's larger programme framework on governance and human rights and is aligned with AAM's long-term goal to change "how" power is exercised, rather than "who" holds power. A core method of these projects is the use of youth leaders (Fellows) for community empowerment and local level democratization. The Fellowship programme, involving young men and women from different ethnic minority groups, was developed and successfully utilised by AAM to include sustainable approaches to development and delivery of effective education and health services. Fellows were also effective in livelihood promotion and disaster risk reduction in both conflict affected and remote, poverty stricken areas in different states and regions.



**Training Workshop at ActionAid Myanmar Office**

Numerous projects funded by European Commission (EC), DANIDA, SIDA, and ActionAid International Governance Team have been contributing to this reform process. The SIDA funded project entitled; Change Makers: Transforming Myanmar from Within, supports the efforts to build on the long-term fellowship approach as a core strategy of development and reaching to other potential actors to sensitize and make responsive legislative body, media and civil society forums at national level. DANIDA supported Citizens Accountability in Public Service Financing (CAPSF) project is aimed at building the capacity of target groups to participate in and to analyze the purpose of the public service financing at different levels. It also seeks to strengthen national media to create space for and promote citizen's participation in public financing processes and to influence parliamentarians and government officials to be responsive to people's priorities in public financing.

The combination of EC-NSA and EC-Governance complements and creates synergy with existing projects in the Ayeyerwaddy region and Kayin State. Through previous AAM interventions, communities have already been empowered to develop community master plans and are familiar with participatory empowerment processes. However, our current projects go much further by focusing specifically on the active citizenship of underrepresented groups, like women, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. This is done simultaneously by raising awareness amongst local and state level government workers about just and democratic governance.

In 2011, the EC-NSA project helped the Fellows to perform various activities, ranging from baseline data collection to the development of village level institutions such as village community-based organizations (VCBOs), and the implementation of village development plans. The current EC Governance project, in return, strengthens these community based institutions developed and supported by the EC-NSA project. In addition, it will focus on scaling up women's self help groups and strengthening the capacity of local government representatives, so they can be held accountable and are responsive to the citizens.

All these projects are being implemented by several local partners including KDN, Shalom Foundation, Action for Social Aid, and PMA.





Kaingthaung village is one of the most remote and inaccessible villages in the Delta Region of Myanmar. It has difficulty communicating with the nearest town, and is rarely visited by government officials. ActionAid has been working in this village through the Disaster Preparedness ECHO (DIPECHO) and Governance project since 2010. Working in this village was not without its challenges, however, and success was only achieved in understanding the importance of capacity development for local leaders through our trainings.



**Kaingthaung Village builds a road to the cemetery**

For years, Kaingthaung's village headman misused his power in every single aspect of leadership. When I began as a community mobilizer in the village, it was very difficult for me to initiate development work at the community level without his approval. On a day I remember quite vividly, he called for a meeting with some youth from the village and myself. He had just come back from ActionAid's 'Governance Accountability Training', which emphasizes *accountability, transparency, and community participation* as keys to positive changes at the local level.

During the meeting, I could immediately sense a change in his usual unsupportive manner. At one point, he promised that if I made positive changes for the village that he would "promise to extend [his] support whenever it was required". From that point onwards he started sharing the knowledge and experience he gained from the training on local governance. He also requested that everyone in the village extend this same kind of cooperation and unity. I was confused at how quickly his attitude had altered to being so accommodating.

Despite this confusion, I started mobilizing the village to work towards our community-led action plan to construct a road to the village cemetery as soon as possible. With the help of the headman, the villagers were able to complete the road for about 17,000 USD\$. The project was originally predicted to cost around 45,000 USD\$.

It was during this project that I realized the positive changes in the headman's attitude had been caused by the governance training and were there to stay. I therefore wanted to utilize this opportunity even further by helping the village to create a project that would bring solidarity to the entire village. After a village-led meeting, they decided to attempt to build a sea embankment to prevent the village from sea erosion. This had been a massive challenge for the village for a very long time. Sea erosion had forced the village to relocate from the other side of the river to its current location.

When I had explained this problem to the whole village in consultation with the village authority, they all agreed to make a concrete embankment. From the point of a citizen, this is definitely the main responsibility and obligation of the government as a duty bearer to fulfill. So together we had developed an action plan to implement this activity and put the government as one of the main duty bearers and state actors for this project.

The following day, we were informed that the parliament representative and his party from the district level were going to visit our village. We took that opportunity and presented our village action plan which explained the embankment project. We also urged them to remember their responsibility to fulfill the need of the community. Simultaneously, we presented our village development master plan. The government representatives and Member of Parliament took the issue seriously and promised that they would place this issue in the parliament and would try to allocate budget for it.

Local leaders understanding the importance of transparency and engaging meaningfully with the community can lead to real strides towards local development. Community mobilizers have an obligation to educate members of the community of their responsibilities and obligations. Even though government officials are difficult to communicate with, they are representative of the people, and can therefore be asked to be key duty bearers when projects are necessary. In understanding these roles, projects can be implemented that can help to develop a better future for their village and community.

***Aung Thu***

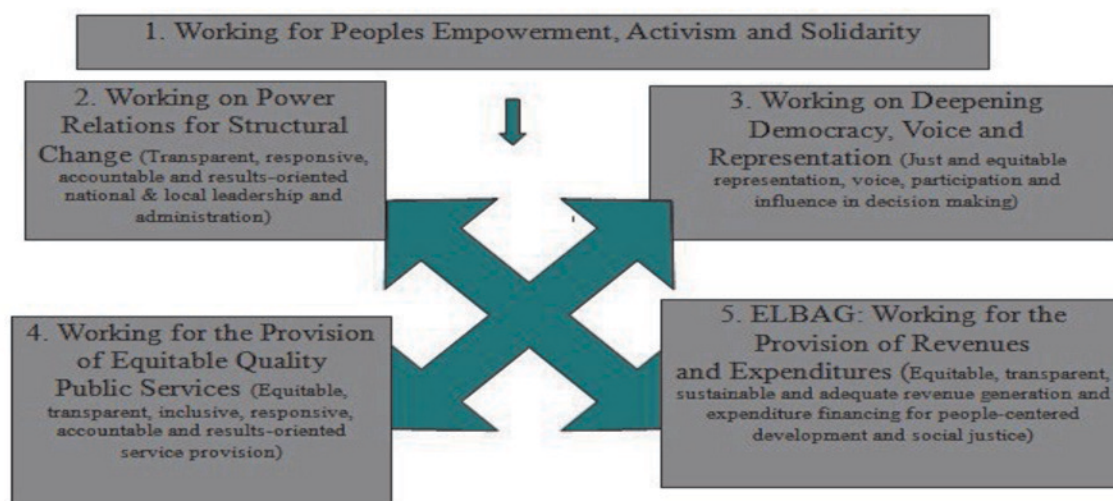
***Community Mobilizer***

# Changes and Challenges



In order to clarify ActionAid's approach to working on Governance, the five focus areas outlined below are proposed as key work areas. These objectives will be reached by mirroring the diagram below. ActionAid believes that following these objectives (starting at objective 1) will allow us to reach the overall objective: Advancing the political influence of people living in poverty to hold governments and corporate actors accountable.

With the inception of Myanmar's very first parliament on 31st January 2011, the elected government has begun the critical phase of planning in the critical issues of economic development, societal integrity, and infrastructure. This would require substantial capacity building of the elected representatives and empowerment of the government and civil society stakeholders. ActionAid has been involved with different state and non-state actors to ensure the transition leads to the strengthening of people's economic literacy, downward accountability and the securing of rights to information in Myanmar. But whilst focusing on downward accountability, ActionAid perceived many challenges in the overall governance architecture in Myanmar.



## Elite Power

Power structures within a state have a big influence on the ability to do governance work. Elites control key areas in the state, the market and society arenas. We should not forget the range of actors that span the social sector, such as NGOs, civic associations and charities. Additionally, international organizations such as INGOs, bi- and multi-lateral donors, international corporations and the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, WB, WTO, IFIs, etc) influence the power dynamics within and across states. Common for all these groups is their ability to mobilize resources and exert influence through the power of their position and status. They will use *elite political settlements* to reach their objectives (Chandhoke 2010). In *elite political settlements*, formal institutions do not operate according to their own stated rules, but rather by exercise of personalized power. This category covers a wide range of governance forms ranging from military rule to elitist party competition in 'democracies'. What they share is the fact that personal individual power plays an important role in how resources are allocated. In other words, these settlements are always crucial and underpin state and societal relations. Elites may change, but elites will always play a significant role in political outcomes and exclusionary politics will threaten political stability.

To be able to positively affect these settlements, governance work should pay attention to past history, informal institutions, personalized relationships and globalization (DFID/IDS 2010). We should therefore not only focus on injustices and unfulfilled rights, but also on influencing elites towards the development of a just and democratic state for both the wealthy and those living in poverty.

## The Capacity of the State

The rights-based approach often foregoes acknowledgement that the duty bearers themselves may have limited capacity by only focusing on the demand side. If a state has limited resources and manpower to fulfill its citizens' rights, this becomes problematic. Additionally, duty bearers at the local level may, in many respects, be 'hostages' in a dysfunctional system that denies the resources and training necessary for them to fulfill their duties. In this sense they can also be considered as 'rights holders' as they are denied the means of fulfilling their obligations.

## Resource Capacity

The fulfillment of rights is synonymous with a redistribution of wealth and the provision of equitable services. In terms of governance work, we should not only focus on policy or practice changes in relation to distribution, but also on how the resources for implementing these changes can be equitably generated through economic development and taxation. We can do this, for example, by promoting taxation reform (including tax capacity), a focus on the exploitation of natural and extractive resources, and heeding the fact that aid and loan dependence can negatively distort the reciprocal relationship at all levels within a state. We have to understand how our work can generate genuine political demands for types of investment that promote economic development and social justice.

## Change and Conflict

Working for good governance practices and addressing power relations at all levels is a political process, and not without risk of incurring conflict. We must recognize that conflict is often a necessary and constructive element of change processes. However, we must make sure that these conflicts do not cross the threshold towards violence. Therefore, we should carry out a thorough risk analysis and a power mapping before starting activities so that we are aware of how our work may be affected or contribute towards conflict.

“**Filled with hope and courage of conviction, ActionAid inspires to innovate, take risks and transform these challenges facing Myanmar into opportunities for change.**”

## A Fruitful Combination: LIFT Empowerment and a Motivated Fellow



*“I will come along with you to Myaing”* U Hla Myint, the manager of Pakokku District Myanmar Agricultural Service (MAS) department said to me.

We were together at the ceremony for a compound fertilizer distribution to farmers in Pakokku township. The event was attended by the Head of the District General Administration Department (GAD), local farmers and other Line Department officials at district and township level.

The Head of the District (GAD) was very pleased with our work and thanked ActionAid and ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) for contributing fertilizer to small holding farmers who had been lacking agricultural inputs for that season. Together with the LIFT project they had been supporting the State's guidelines on Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation.

U Hla Myint, the Head of GAD, and I decided to visit one of the project areas to monitor a village action plan. We decided to go to the Kan Nat village, as the villagers had requested a renovation project for their pond during a shared discussion.



**ActionAid TC at fertilizer donation ceremony**

This pond would allow them to harvest rain water for paddy cultivation. In order to implement this project, however, we needed the head of GADs to help obtain government-owned heavy machinery.



*Continued from Page 5*

U Hla Myint, the MAS District Manager, had been unable to allocate the necessary budget to fund the project. The mitigation LIFT fund consisted of about 1.4 million Kyats (approx. 1400 Euros) for each village and was coordinated by ActionAid and ADRA. The Kan Nat Villagers had already used one million Kyats of this support to construct a stone wall as part of the drainage to the drinking water pond. The villagers, along with ADRA's water sanitation specialist suggested to make this project the first priority as it would help in terms of disaster mitigation work in case of drought. This left the village with 400,000 Kyats to spend on excavating the pond to harvest rain water for agriculture.

After attempting to obtain an excavator from the road construction site, they were told the fee would be 100,000 Kyats per hour, meaning they would have to finish the excavation in four hours. It turned out that the GAD Head was quite willing to help, but unfortunately the intended excavator was stationed far away. Transportation would cost 800,000 kyats, more than twice the available budget.

A village leader told the GAD Head, "Uncle, *I have seen an excavator standing in the road construction site near to this village and I hope you will convince the Engineer to help us*".



**Pond excavated by heavy machinery**

He then replied "*If there is a machine near, let me try to talk to the engineer. Please ask some village elderly to come along with me. But remember, I am not sure if you will be allowed to use it, as it is their department's property. However, I hope it will be alright as the government supports development work in rural areas.*"



**Myaing Township GAD head, MAS Managers, ActionAid T/C and Kan Nat Villagers**

The GAD Head, MAS Manager, the village elderly and I went together to the construction site. There the GAD Head conveyed our need of a machine for a pond excavation to the Engineer. Because of the GAD Head's position and explanation about the difficulties being faced by the villagers, the Engineer immediately allowed us to use it. He explained that the machine required four gallons of fuel per hour. So at the end, the villagers could use the machine for 18 hours spending only 300,000 Kyat.

The villagers, now understanding the strategy of Participatory Planning and Monitoring, were successful in planning and implementing a project that would lead to a better future for themselves. Coordinating with the government at different levels enabled the deliverance of downward accountability to its citizens and ensured that citizens' rights were protected.



**Pond harvested rain water after digging**



# Visiting Economist: Think of Yourselves First



**Myanmar is the regions' new darling - a wave of investors are about to come court this sleeping beauty. "I wouldn't give them a free lunch at all", said internationally renowned economist and feminist Dr. Marilyn Waring, when visiting ActionAid Myanmar this year.**

The positive transition towards democracy that is taking place in Myanmar right now also represents a number of challenges to the country: How to manage public finances in a transparent way? How to measure growth and value? How to deal with vast numbers of foreign investors, donors and NGOs flocking to the country?

Through seminars and workshops, Dr. Marilyn Waring shared her valuable insights, advice and best practices with Members of Parliament, journalists, businessmen and activists.

Her primary message was that the GDP should not be used alone when measuring a country's growth, since it omits components such as the unproductive work of women, and environmental costs – two areas which Dr. Marilyn Waring's research has earned international acclaim.

"The challenge is to find economic reform that balances environmental protection with economic and social development," said Dr. Waring.

Another important point of hers was that the State of Myanmar needs a participatory budget. People should have access to it, find interest in it, and criticize it when they find public finances are being used inappropriately.

She further highlighted that Myanmar should not be scared of making demands or regulations regarding foreign investments. Investors are used to that, and they will come no matter what – so you should think of yourselves first, was her advice.



**Dr. Waring gives talk on “Understanding the Growth Paradigm: Care for Ecology and Future in Myanmar”**

**“The challenge is to find economic reform that balances environmental protection with economic and social development.”**

Dr. Waring visited Myanmar as a guest of ActionAid Myanmar. During her stay she was the keynote speaker of a seminar about growth and ecology, attended by more than 200 representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, NGOs and media. She also participated in an ActionAid Myanmar workshop for NGOs and activists.

In 1975 she was the youngest Member of Parliament in New Zealand – a position she held until 1984. While in Myanmar, she made it a point to meet about 30 Hluttaw (the Parliament of Myanmar) members for a sharing of best practices for parliamentarians in other developing as well as developed countries.

Having first-hand experiences from other countries that recently went through major transitions such as Vietnam and Cambodia, she warned Myanmar to learn from the mistakes of others.



Thank you for reading!



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**End poverty. Together.**

**NEXT ISSUE:**

*“Civil Society Engagement in  
Governance—Sharing  
Experiences of South Asia”  
ActionAid hosts experts for conference*