

(1) Why public communication matters for Tanintharyi Region Government

Effective communication can improve the relationship between government and the public and can strengthen the responsiveness and accountability of the government.

Communication plays an important role in promoting good governance and public service provision. Effective communication can improve the relationship between government and the public and can strengthen the responsiveness and accountability of the government. A good flow of information will enable the public to be aware of a government's existing and future programs, to understand their rights and obligations, to be enthusiastic about expressing their needs and views, and to know how to access services. A use of strategic communication mechanisms can promote the accountability of government bureaucrats, thus, helping with corruption reduction and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs.

On the other hand, if communication is not effectively used, governance reform is believed to have more adverse effects and challenges. It generally causes less political will (the willingness of the public to be involved in politics and government process), resistance or opposition by different interest groups or stakeholders and hostile public opinions (such as through protests and riots).

(2) Why public participation matters for Tanintharyi Region government

The outcome of effective public participation is believed to produce more efficient, equitable, and sustainable planning, policies and decisions.

Public participation enables the public to connect themselves with decision makers and influence the policies adopted by the government to meet their needs and concerns. Thus, the outcome of effective public participation is believed to produce more efficient, equitable, and sustainable planning, policies and decisions.

Public participation does not only make government decisions more responsive to public needs, it also helps to resolve conflict, build trust and improve public knowledge about issues. It can improve the quality of the decision as it allows the public to incorporate local knowledge in the process. It also strengthens democracy by preventing conflict between the public and government and increases confidence in public institutions.

Lack of public participation and consultation in government initiatives often leads to public opposition, suspicion, and protests against development projects due to the fear of socio-economic impacts that might negatively affect them. It can also emerge lack of public trust in government due to lack of transparency, weak responsiveness of the government to public feedback.

Methodology

We conducted initial desk research in Yangon, followed by the delivery of workshops in Tanintharyi Region with MPs, government and CSOs, to learn about their issues and capacity needs.

The workshops involved identifying issues and needs individually, and then bringing these into group discussions. Workshops were run across three days with different stakeholders – the first day with MPs, the second day with CSOs, and the third day with government and civil servants. All together in Tanintharyi Region workshops, there were 136 participants – nine MPs, 32 CSO staff from 26 organizations, and 95 civil servants from different departments.

Based on the analysis and findings of the workshops, we conducted additional research to further understand their needs and issues, and find examples of possible solutions. We then conducted read-out sessions of our draft research with a mix of MPs, government staff, and CSOs from Tanintharyi, to receive their feedback and ensure the research was accurate and relevant.

(3) What we know about access to information in Tanintharyi Region

Access to information is reported to remain a challenge in Tanintharyi Region. Levels of information sharing vary:

- ▶ **Government infrastructure projects** share information through Village Tract Administrators (VTAs) and 10 Household leaders, and this is reported to be somewhat satisfactory in some parts of Tanintharyi.
- ▶ **The process of planning and budgeting and the procedures of local development funds spending** are reported to be inadequate and have low circulation amongst communities. However, recent information suggests that access to information may have improved in Tanintharyi Region recently as a result of efforts to strengthen public participation in budget planning.
- ▶ **Government procedures and laws:** MPs highlighted the lack of explanation of government procedures and laws to the public. Government staff raised the issue of a lack of public understanding about law and government department procedures. CSOs also stated that laws written with technical language were a barrier for local communities in understanding them. Lack of public awareness and understanding on laws including land acquisition laws, farm law, and fishery law, CSOs stressed the lack of community participation in law making.
- ▶ **Lack of public awareness on Land issues:** Land issue and natural resources were some of the most discussed across the workshops, highlighting lack of public awareness on respective laws. Under the issue of land, lack of public understanding about laws and restrictions, a lack of access to information at the village level, and the weaknesses of the laws were stressed. In terms of natural resources a lack of information on investment projects, including Special Economic Zone project, was reported as a serious concern in Tanintharyi.

(4) What we know about public participation in Tanintharyi Region

“Consultations and meetings for local projects and budget prioritization are reported as only happening between TDAC and Ward Administrators (WAs), lacking wider public participation.”

In Tanintharyi, VTAs seem to act as a bridge between the public and the General Administration Department (GAD) for their interaction and participation in local projects, despite local people feeling that their involvement in decision making about local projects is limited. In some townships, public participation in local projects funded by Local Development Funds seems to be relatively good.

In urban areas, public participation can be observed in Township Development Affairs Committee (TDAC). However, consultations and meetings for local projects and budget prioritization are reported as only happening between TDAC and Ward Administrators (WAs), lacking wider public participation. There is also no mechanism for regular public meetings to engage urban residents.

Government staff also stated the need for improvement in cooperation amongst departments, and engagement with the public to access community information. The lack of cooperation and engagement amongst MPs, government, CSOs and communities were frequently raised in almost every issue discussed in the workshops.

(5) What we can learn from other countries which addressed these issues

The below four case studies are of some of the projects that have been effective in addressing public communication and public participation. They are also relevant for issues that were discussed in the workshops.

Projects Addressing Public Communication

Providing Access to Justice and Legal Awareness, Timor-Leste

To Contribute towards the emergence of a protective legal system in Timor-Leste Especially for vulnerable groups with the population



Figure 1: As village workshops and meetings are happening in Tanintharyi communities on a regular basis, integrating components of legal awareness and related topics in village meetings and workshops could be a culturally appropriate and effective means of communication.

Projects Addressing Public Participation

Land Tenure and Peace-building in Madagascar, Africa

To build the capacity of land service agents, increase the use of government land services, and improving the equality of services through participatory community evaluations.



Figure 3: The workshop findings highlighted the complexity of land registration processes and lack of public awareness of processes and laws in Tanintharyi. The project of land tenure in Madagascar addressed this

I-Governance in Naga City, Philippines

To produce a more accountable and responsive government and encouraging city officials to develop more innovative approaches in city management



Figure 2: Applying tools such as modification of the website, creating a citizen charter and initiating SMS system would be beneficial to Tanintharyi for the existing website platform as well as for its most suited communication platforms.

Porto Alegre Participatory Budget, Brazil

To Reflect and meet the needs and preferences of the local communities in budget planning.



Figure 4: Porto Alegre provided the public with a greater decision-making role to influence budget planning through multiple steps. The government of Tanintharyi may benefit by modifying and

(6) Recommendations

These recommendations learn from international good practice and build on the insights and ideas of government officials and MPs, who participated in workshops. Successful implementation of some of our proposed reforms will be challenging, given resource constraints. However, there is commitment and enthusiasm within forward looking regions like Tanintharyi, to innovate and deliver better for their local communities.

What can be done to improve public communication in Tanintharyi Region

■ Develop a public communications strategy:

Using multiple communication channels as a means to increase public awareness including radio, print media (magazines, handbook and flyers), websites, creative performance, and SMS. This could include:

- ▶ Establishing local radio stations (such as FM radio) to transmit information in a timely manner and with overcoming language and literacy issues that arise with print media.
- ▶ Collaborating with a telecom company or other potential partner to initiate an SMS based communication system where short messages of laws, government programs, disaster warnings and other messages could be sent
- ▶ Amending the current Tanintharyi government websites with more information on simplified laws and rules, a directory of officials with their contact details and availability, statistics on finances and details of the annual budget, and available services and how to use them
- ▶ Creating a guidebook to inform the public about government's available services, how to use them, and who to contact.
- ▶ Incorporating multiple languages relevant to local contexts in each communication channels
- ▶ Applying tools such as community meetings, print media and radio as the most applicable to reach a dispersed rural public

■ Promote government responsiveness and accountability:

- ▶ Promoting government's responsiveness and accountability by allowing public feedback and complaints via communication channels
- ▶ Using SMS to collect public opinions through surveys, to request local information, and to receive public feedback and complaints

What can be done to improve public participation in Tanintharyi Region

■ Participatory Budget

Build on the success of recent budget participation initiatives by:

- ▶ Allowing the public to review budgets, prioritize and vote on thematic areas, and coordinate with the municipality/ government
- ▶ Initiating own participatory budget process in each government department by covering more specific thematic issues related to their department
- ▶ Promoting public participation in budget process by coordinating and facilitating meetings and forums, simplifying budget information in simple formats, and capacity building for community representatives
- ▶ Exploring the use of multiple simplified formats - posters, public displays, magazines or other creative formats - to ensure the information of Citizen Budget and other budget information reach both urban and rural audiences

■ Land Issue

- ▶ Capacity building of stakeholders for land registration, participatory assessment and evaluations, and public awareness-raising
- ▶ Using the Community Score Card (CSC) or community gatherings to assess and evaluate public opinions and needs on land registration and service provision
- ▶ Creation of a center for legal advice through coordination by the land department, communities, and CSOs in terms of human and financial resources – the functions and components of the center could be based on a needs assessment of the community and might include legal advice, registration procedures, and/or information on other issues
- ▶ Incorporating monks or religious leaders in land issues to disseminate information, to mobilize community members, and to raise public awareness
- ▶ Establishing community-based land services agency in collaboration with the land departments to mobilize local people's participation in addressing land registry issues

■ Women's Participation

- ▶ Using traditional tools such as multi-stakeholder (women, religious leaders, officials) meetings and debates on women's participation, social dialogues, awareness-raising campaigns for women, and stakeholder commitment to support women's rights and participation

■ Investment and development projects

- ▶ Empowering community participation through community dialogues, village workshops, and training-of-trainers for community representatives to enable them to influence the decision-making in the local development projects
- ▶ Increasing public access to information about investment and mining projects by incorporating the most suitable communication channels - including different formats of print media, social media, website, and traditional meetings and consultations - to convey understandable and simplified information. This could be done through collaboration between Union Ministry, regional government and MPs, CSOs, and private companies to obtain updated information and deliver to the public in a timely manner.

This policy brief paper is developed from the handbook
"Informing and Engaging the Public – Improving local governance and
empowering communities in Kayin State and Tanintharyi Region".

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POLICY
BRIEF

Informing and Engaging the Public
Improving local governance and empowering
communities in Tanintharyi Region



Context

Decentralisation in Myanmar, to the States and Regions, is an important part of the democratic transition that our country is going through. State and Region governments are seeking to develop effective government at the local level, which responds to the needs and demands of local communities. This Policy Brief should be seen in this context. It focuses on Tanintharyi region and asks what reforms may be needed to ensure more responsive and effective government.

In this Policy Brief, you will read why public communication and public participation matter for Tanintharyi Region Government, local context of Tanintharyi Region in relations to access to information and participation, case studies that successfully addressed these two themes, and recommendations that provide practical solutions based on local context to address issues discussed in the workshops.