

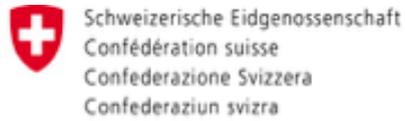
“Like Wax of a Candle”

**Youth-led community development
in Kayin State, Myanmar**

Key Highlights

“Like Wax of a Candle”

Youth-led community development in Kayin State, Myanmar



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Yangon, January 2020

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Acronyms

AAM	ActionAid Myanmar
FGD	Focus group discussion
GOM	Government of Myanmar
KISG	Kyar Inn Seik Gyi
KNU	Karen National Union
KWKR	Kawkareik
TDG	Than Daung Gyi

Introduction

The lives of communities in Kayin State have been marked by what has been characterized as the longest civil war in the world (Federer, et al, 2015). For more than 60 years, these communities have learned to survive the violence perpetrated by the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), the Karen National Union (KNU), as well as several KNU splinter groups (Kyed, 2019) operating in Kayin State. A ceasefire in 2012 between the KNU and Myanmar government and a subsequent Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015 brought more stability to Kayin State (Federer et al, 2015). However, communities in Kayin still continue to face militarization, intermittent fighting, and exposure to landmines (HRW, 2016; KHRG, 2019).

Since 2010, Myanmar has gone through rapid political and economic changes (Federer et al, 2015; HRW, 2016). Yet, the people of Kayin continue to face high levels of poverty, lack of infrastructure, as well as limited access to basic services, such as electricity and water. Availability and quality of other essential public services, including health and education are also scarce. Since access to employment opportunities outside agriculture is scarce, large numbers of people, especially youth, have tended to migrate toward more prosperous neighbouring countries in search of better sources of income and quality of life (Federer, et al, 2015).

To support change to this situation, through its fellowship programme ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) has trained young women and men called fellows to facilitate a process of community-led development throughout the country. With the help of young fellows, rural communities can adapt to the circumstances of the present and imagine and plan for a more desirable and sustainable future (Ferretti, 2010, 2015; Löfving, 2011). The fellowship programme engages communities in Myanmar in a self-defining process that involves identifying their needs, specifying desirable actions to address these needs, and setting priorities among the chosen actions. This process of self-definition produces a strengthened sense of community and self-empowerment. The essential product of this effort is a book called the village book,¹ which memorialises the evidence resulting

¹ More information about the village book can be found here: <https://actionaid.org/publications/2014/village-book-training-manual-community-led-and-planning-process>





Landscape view of Myapadaingnaing Village,
Kawkareik Township, Kayin State.



Students crossing the stream.

from these efforts. The book also functions as a concrete advocacy tool that supports the efforts of villagers as they seek improvements for their communities with governing authorities (ActionAid, 2012, 2014).

Through the fellowship programme, AAM applies a bottom-up, participatory approach to rural community development, within which three elements come together: 1) Fellows as process facilitators; 2) community members as the main actors of the process; and 3) the village book – a book that draws together the components of the bottom-up development plan of the village. The fellowship programme reflects AAM's central assumptions and evidence-based programmatic ideas regarding community level problem solving. Through this approach, community members come together to analyse their situation, define their needs, find

solutions, and develop action plans designed specifically to address the context of their village according to their terms (ActionAid, 2014).

In Kayin State, two fellowship projects were piloted in 2011. The projects were designed to provide a context-specific and sustainable response to the severe lack of public services in the area due to protracted conflict. By raising villagers' awareness of their rights and strengthening the capacity of them as rights holders and governing authorities, the projects made important contributions in terms of strengthening the relationship between local communities and the Kayin State government. As a result, villagers gained better access to health, education, and new income sources and the Kayin government made commitments to liaise with communities on service provision.



Landscape view of Kwinkalay village,
Kyar Inn Seik Gyi Township, Kayin State.

Since these two pilot projects, three additional fellowship projects have operated in the region. The Southeastern Infrastructure and Rehabilitation Initiative (SIRP I) that operated between 2013 and 2016, covered 90 rural villages in Mon and Kayin States. The project aimed to empower communities by improving village member access to basic education, water, sanitation facilities, and health care as well as creating improved income sources for them. (EMC, 2015)

Initiated in 2016, the Empowering communities in Mon and Kayin states (SIRP II) project built on the work of the first SIRP initiative. The project has aimed to contribute to the economic and social development of vulnerable families and communities and provide improved conditions for the voluntary return and dignified settlement of displaced

people in Mon and Kayin States. Making use of knowledge gained from the first SIRP project, this project has focused on the development of young leaders and the strengthening of community engagement in decision-making. The focus of the project has been to strengthen the engagement, training, and mentoring of changemakers and other community members to enhance active citizenship skills, increasing support and awareness among governing authorities and regional government, and to increase their engagement in community led development. The project, which will come to an end in January 2020, also seeks to increase responsive service delivery.

Like the SIRP II initiative, the Changemakers: Empowering communities in Kayin and Chin states projected was

initiated in 2016. The project sought to contribute to the economic and social development of vulnerable families and communities in these two states through development of young community leaders as AAM fellows. In the project, fellows and community volunteers were identified by a local partner and trained by AAM. Community volunteers assisted fellows with their changemaker responsibilities. They mobilized community members through the establishment of village community-based organizations (VCBOs) in targeted villages that had not been included in the pilot projects. The fellows and the volunteers supported the communities in analysing the causes of their poverty and vulnerability to social, economic, and environmental problems. Fellows ultimately helped their communities to create action plans to overcome these challenges. In response to the lack of young women's participation in decision-making processes, the project also had a strong focus on gender equality and young female leaders' empowerment in the targeted communities. By offering leadership training to young women and by encouraging them to become changemakers and community volunteers, the goal of the project was to increase and strengthen women's voices in village affairs and open spaces for women's active participation in community life. The project closed in December 2019.

This research sought to understand the journey that young women and men in Kayin State experience when they become fellows and begin to facilitate the change process in their home communities. It focused on three townships: Than Daung Gyi, Kawkareik and Kyar Inn Seik Gyi to determine how youth become fellows, how they experience the fellowship process, what kind of challenges they face during the process, and how they perceive their future and that of their communities as the two most recent fellowship projects come to an end.

The study utilized a participatory research approach and embraced key concepts from Feminist Participatory Research (FPR). 12 young fellows participated in the research: 10 men and two women. The research was conducted between May 2019 and October 2019, using thematic interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) as data collection tools. The research participants received research training from AAM and participated in the research design, implementation, and analysis of the research results. The fellows conducted 48 interviews and eight FDGs with community members in the three townships. AAM staff conducted two individual interviews and six group interviews with fellows; two group interviews with AAM Hpa-an field staff; three FDGs with local community members²; and five individual interviews with AAM employees working with fellowship projects. In addition, several group discussions were held between AAM staff members and the research participants throughout the course of the research. During these discussions, the fellows and AAM staff members

² Community members who took part in the interviews and FDGs included women and men, youth leaders, adolescent leaders, fellows, community volunteers, village administrators, village elders, SHG and VCBO members, head masters and school committee members.

jointly analysed the collected data and explored it from diverse angles. At the end of the research process, a research validation meeting was arranged in Yangon.

Key findings

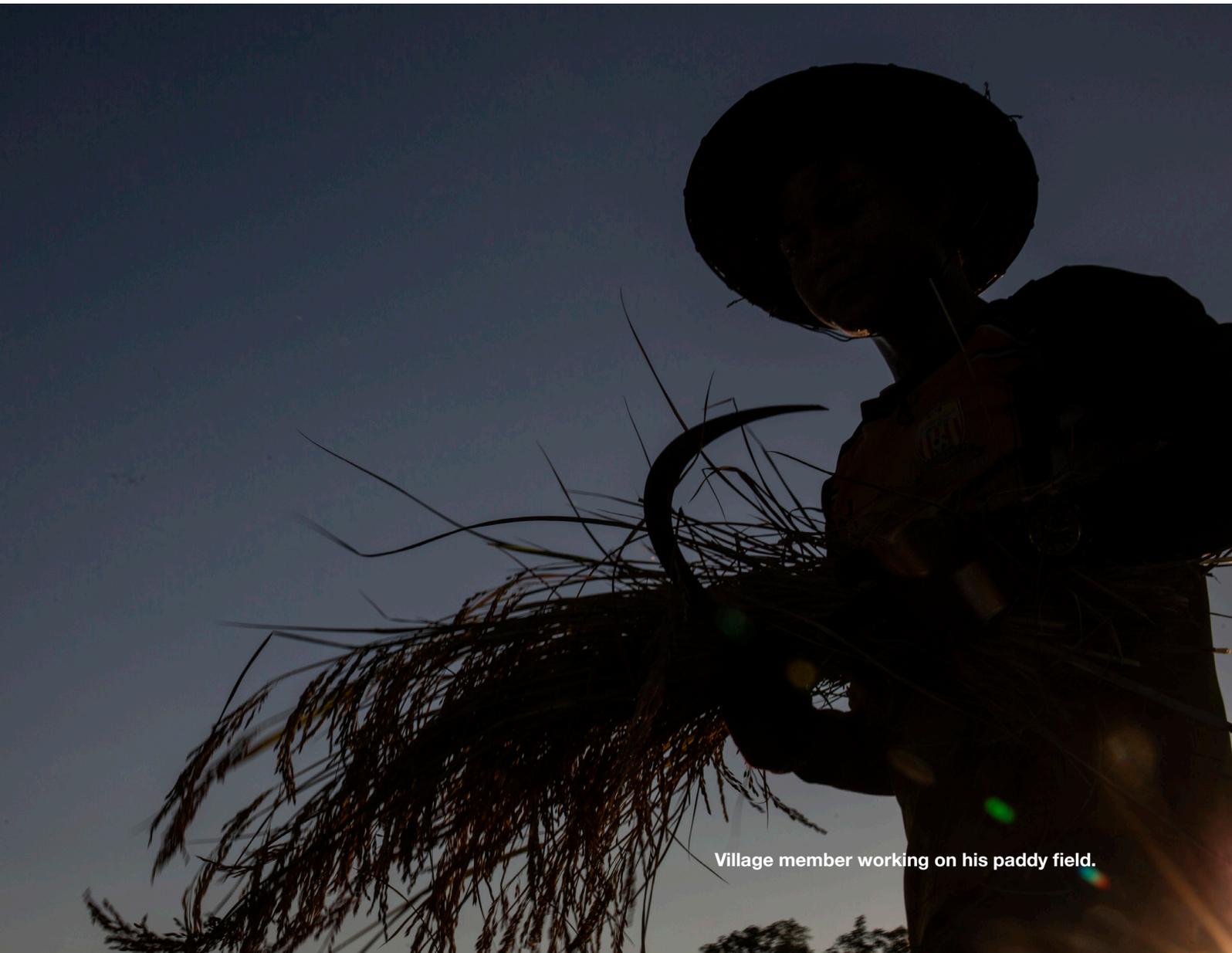
1. The Fellows Programme: Personal and Community Adaptation and Transformation

The study results demonstrate that young fellows play a key role in the community development approach. Like the communities they serve, fellows experience a challenging process of self-definition and self-transformation. This transformational process exhibits internal and external manifestations. As the evidence presented through this research demonstrates, as young products of the villages that they serve, fellows enter the fellowship programme presenting the intersectional influences that have formed them as young men and women. Their age, gender, ethnicity, language, prior experiences in their villages, and other factors intersect into a maze of layered influences that impact their view of themselves and their worlds. To understand the internal journey of fellows requires accounting for their intersectional formation. To adapt, survive, and succeed as fellows requires that they take on the mission of self-transformation. From 'just another youth in the village,' they assume responsibility to transform themselves into essential change agents for their villages. As three fellow participants stated,

When I started working in the village as a fellow, the work was challenging at first. I felt unencouraged and that I had a lot of pressure to make the process work in the village. I was worried I would fail. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)

I changed mentally. I used to be very childish and did not understand the meaning of community development. Now I lead community development work. (Fellow, KISG, group interview, Hpa-an 26.6.2019)

... I had to behave like a Fellow. I had to prepare my mind to act like a fellow. It was difficult at first. (Fellow, TDG, group interview, Hpa-an, 25.6.2019)



Village member working on his paddy field.

In addition to the internal transformation that young men and women undergo during their journey as fellows, the study's evidence shows that they also experience a transformational process in terms of how they interact with the world. From the young person's state of experiencing little responsibility on the public stage of the village before they enter the programme, fellows are transformed into essential ingredients in the life of their villages as they assist them in the community development process.

From a state as young villagers carrying intersectional baggage that prevents them from feeling that they have a place in interacting with their elders (much less leading them), as fellows they are largely self-transformed into village assets called upon to interact with village, government, and EAO leaders in the interest of promoting and supporting community development objectives. From a condition of no voice in village affairs, the young fellow eventually takes on a leading voice in the life of their village.

The evidence produced in the current study documents the remarkably rapid transformation that fellows experience during their participation in the fellowship programme. From a state of unsure self-assessment and little experience in village affairs, in a couple of years they become engaged as change agents in their villages. However, this does not happen without them paying a psychological and emotional price. To reach their intended state as an effective leader in community development, the fellow must overcome a variety of hurdles to build their self-confidence and their competency in community leadership.

Perhaps the most difficult psychological barrier to overcome in the fellow's journey involves the intersectional factors that have impacted their view of themselves and their place in the world. The concept of intersectionality posits that our social and political place in society is a product of an interweaving of multiple converging social systems (Carastathis, 2014).



Mulaei Mountain, Kayin State.

As fellows start their journeys in the fellowship programme, they carry internalised understandings of themselves that have been influenced by how their age, gender, ethnicity, language, and other characteristics – most of which they possess as the result of the accident of birth – have been assessed by those in power in their social settings. As young people their social environment has conditioned them to believe that only their elders could serve as village leaders. That they might be village role models is a foreign concept to them:

... It was difficult at first [to] work with elders and village leaders. I was only 17. I was very young, and I had never worked with adults. When I was talking to them

it made me... I was not confident when I was talking to them. (Fellow, TDG, group interview, Hpa-an, 25.6.2019)

Female fellows have grown up being led to believe that village leadership is a man's role in the community:

Before the village development planning, the relationship between men and women was that women could not make time to attend meetings because of the large amount of household work. Back then, the responsibility of women was to stay at home and look after children



Mulaei Mountain, Kayin State.

... Men were responsible for attending meetings, perform leadership in the community, earn income ... The ones who made decisions were elder men of the villages, household leaders and monks. (FGD, community members, KWKR, 16.6.2019)

how you speak because of your accent. You fear that you are judged because of your ethnicity and where you come from. Especially in a greater event where you need to speak to other people [people not from the fellow's own village or state]. (Fellow, final meeting, Hpa-an)

As members of ethnic and linguistic minorities, these young men and women have seen and heard from dominant group members and leaders that their 'out group' is socially inferior or less sophisticated than the dominant group or groups:

These intersectional influences produce an effect of multi-layered self-doubt that leads fellows to question their ability to succeed in their work. As they become fellows these young villagers are challenged to overcome this psychological baggage to become problem-solvers and leaders in their villages.

In the beginning, you are worried about



Women from the WSHG working at their home.

When new fellows enter AAM's fellowship training they are intimidated by the new material that they must take on to develop the competencies that they will need as they participate in village-level community development. They also are intimidated by the new mindset – the new personality – that they must absorb to effectively perform as village leaders. During their AAM training and afterward in their village work, this personality transformation involves the transition from the youthful mindset of the young villager to an adult tasked with doing and facilitating community development work in their villages. During their AAM training they gain tools and encouragement that promote development of the self-belief that they need to take on their new village work.

... Through the training, we give them volunteering spirit. Their mindset and attitude changes through the training. To work with fellows, some are different than others. Their mindset is not the same. This affects their work. You can see that, yes. In their attitude. They are different. We can train them to change [within], but they begin with different mindsets and attitudes. (Employee of AAM, interview, Yangon, 24.9.2019)

Yet, new fellows typically enter the field and the doing of their work with lingering self-doubt. They ultimately overcome these self-doubts through a blend of strategies. They are provided continuous support from AAM staff. They develop



Crossing the stream with Cargo Kubota truck.

support networks with other fellows in their township and beyond that provide emotional and practical support in their times of need. They develop new forms of relationships among village leaders and other villagers that provide reinforcement for their personal and professional development. Their stature in the village dramatically changes from 'just another village youth' to that of community development process facilitator. Most importantly they find their identity as young village leaders through the doing of their work. Applying trial and error methods and a remarkable level of determination, they are able to adapt, survive, and flourish as leaders in the community development process.

This assessment of self-transformation is subject to qualifications seen in the study's evidence. Some fellows are advantaged by characteristics of their background and particulars of their village context. For instance, fellows who

have been active in village affairs prior to their participation in the fellowship programme find the adjustment to the village leadership role easier than those who do not have this prior experience. Female fellows who were active in the village prior to their tenure in the fellowship programme are better able to engage with women in the village, thus improving the fellow's acceptance as community leader and assisting in getting villagers to participate in the community development process. Other fellows were advantaged by working with village leaders that immediately offered them support and assisted them in developing networking among villagers needed to support the community development process.

Another advantage involves the fellows' length of tenure with the programme. Those fellows holding their positions from the beginning of their project tend to adjust more fully



Fellow meeting with community members.

to their new roles, and more completely take on the new 'personality' seen as being required by the study's fellow respondents. Fellows that assume their positions later on during the project period are disadvantaged by less AAM training and by less exposure to the 'acclimation by doing' process involved in interacting with villagers and village leadership. Since there is notable turnover among fellows in a township over the course of a project, this should not be assessed as a trivial problem.

... Some former fellows join another organization and quit being fellows. So, we have had to search for new fellows. Kayin fellows did not receive the same training as what the fellows received before. So, they are less capable and weaker than the former fellows. The

new fellows do not receive full training, only the refresher training – they have less experience than the former fellows.'
(Group interview with AAM Hpa-an office staff, Hpa-an, 28.6.2019)

In summary, fellows experience internal transformation through what might be referred to a reflexive change process (Ferreira, et al, 2020). The word 'reflexive' is appropriate because it connects internal processes with external influences. As fellows act in and upon their social environment, their social environment acts upon them, which contributes to building their confidence and competence to become effective community leaders. Challenges and positive experiences in their work environment also contribute to the determination that fellows must exhibit to adapt, survive, and flourish in their community development work.



Fellow meeting with community members.

2. Building Proto-Governance on the Village Level

The fellowship programme is intended to contribute to building what may be referred to as ‘proto-governance.’ This means that it assists villages in developing capacity and capability needed to self-govern. The programme aids villagers in building relationships and products of collaborative action that can support the processes and products of governing. The community development process remains in the status of ‘proto’ because, though it should be seen as essential to building good governance on the local and state level, it has not become part of formal governing structures and processes.

As fellows experience a process of internal transformation from ‘just another youth in the village’ to a state of village leaders materially contributing to community development, they also become important components of a process of village transformation. As they make contributions to community development, fellows also participate in transforming power and role relationships, particularly those involving men and women. They support a planning process wherein women are essential contributors.

Fellows provide leadership in a community development process that results in new structures and products of proto-governance. In terms of village structural transformations, they support the creation of Village Community-Based Organizations (VCBOs) and Women’s Self-Help Groups (WSHG). These new structures of village life are intended to be more than input elements of the community development



Villager working on her paddy field. (The person appearing in the photograph was not part of the research.)

process. It is hoped that they will be permanent structural features of a village-level approach of self-governance. The most important product of the community development process that fellows assist in guiding are the village books. Village books are intended to be much more than charming artefacts of a stimulating village experience. They are intended to be durable records of what villagers have determined, through collaborative self-governance, to be prioritised village needs, actions to address those needs, and desirable outcomes of actions to address village needs. Village books represent the sort of evidence essential to effective local governance.

Another structural transformation supported by the work of fellows on the village level involves the roles and power dynamics experienced by men and women. During the long period of conflict in Kayin State, as men fought, contrary

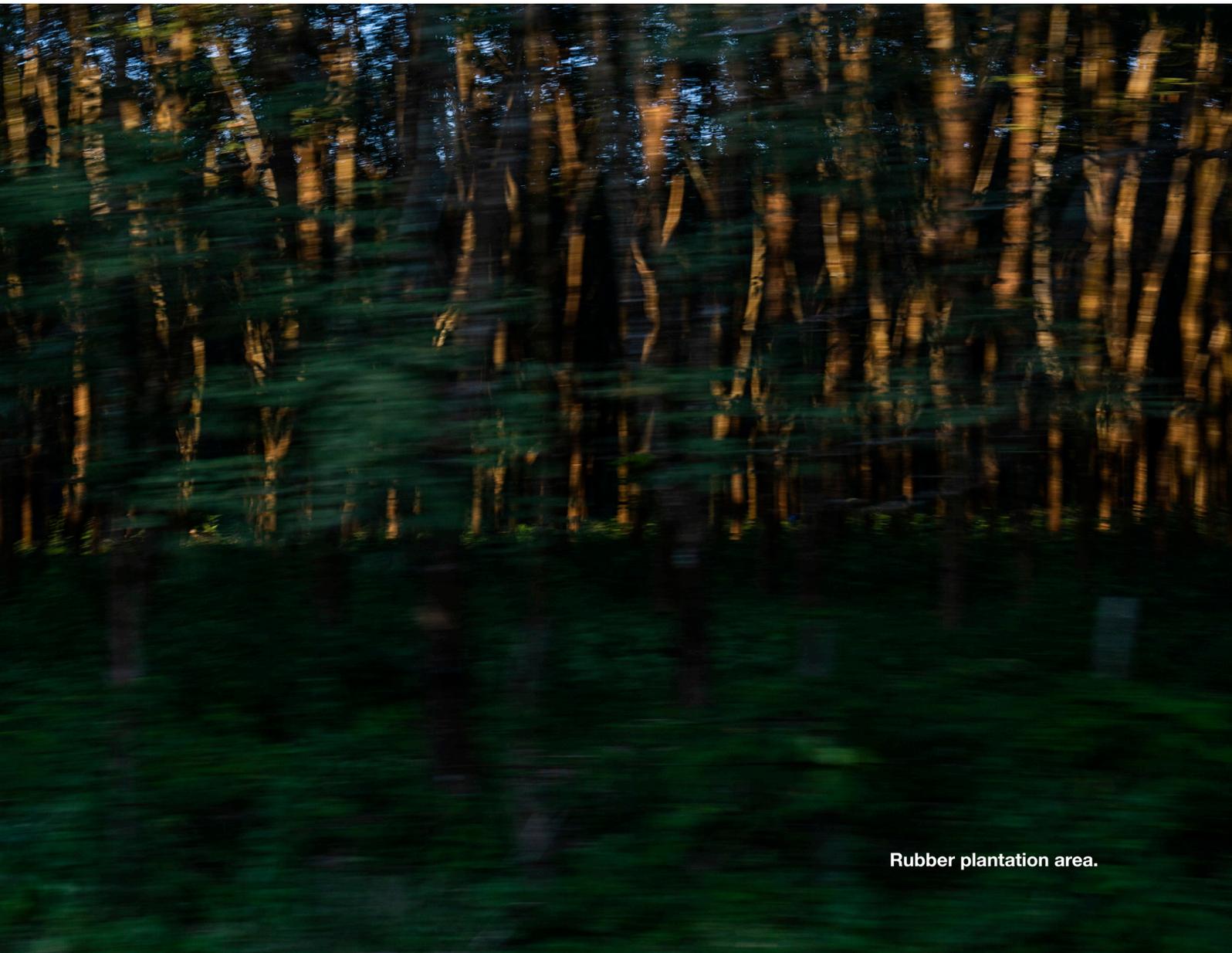
to social norms regarding their 'acceptable' village roles, women assumed positions of leadership in village life. Some even become village chiefs. Additionally, the existence of the Karen Women Organization (KWO) for 35 years in Kayin State has played a role in empowering women in the state (KWO, 2010). Yet, the traditional minimal public roles of women in the village as compared to men remains a component of the intersectional definition of women in Kayin villages. The community development process supported by the fellowship programme and fellows assigned to individual villages has introduced a structural shift in the traditional role definition of women. Women play essential roles throughout the process that leads to the development of village books. The formation of WSHGs provides an institutionalised location to strengthen the self-identity and self-empowerment of groups of village women. That the fellowship programme prioritises the appointment of female fellows offers the potential for the creation of additional links between the interests of women and village decision-making.



Family walking on a paddy field.

Before the WSHG, there was no cohesion among women in the community. There was no self-help group. There was lack of knowledge about the rights of women [...] WSHG was founded in 2018. It was hard. Because of the small amount of experience and understanding [...] There are changes in the situation of women after forming the WSHG. They managed to perform the cooperative credit society, improve group working skills, create data, do accounting and take notes. These changes are formed by the leadership within the group and the experiences. There are changes within men and women, such as women got the chance to make decisions and

participate in village meetings. These changes happened because women brought out the self-help system. Men noticed the rights of women and gave space to women. It is important, because it gives women a chance to experience how a cooperative credit society works and women can use the borrowed money to support their own families. (Interview, community member, KISG, 8.7.2019)



Rubber plantation area.

Perhaps the most important role that fellows play in the structural transformation of villages involves their representational responsibilities in dealing with village chiefs and administrators and the government and EAOs. As part of their efforts to engage with the village from the beginning of their community development work, fellows seek support from and collaboration with village leaders. The level of responsiveness on the part of village leaders can impede or facilitate the extent that fellows are able to engage villagers in the community development process. Beyond their initial collaboration (or lack thereof) the fellow and village leaders generally maintain a relationship related to village problem-solving that eventually takes the form of the village book.

A greater challenge involves ‘fellows in the middle’ as they act with and between government representatives and representatives of EAOs regarding on-going matters of

village governance and then concerning the disposition of the village books. This role of course has consequences for the internal development of fellows as they face the uncertainties and stresses associated with dealing with these powerful and contentious interests that critically impact the life of the village. However, that fellows find a place in negotiating with government and EAO representatives, jointly or separately, indicates a structural shift in management of village affairs. The voice and aspirations of villagers represented in the efforts of fellows as they deal with these entities means that villager-centric participatory planning holds the potential for influencing the institutional holders of power over the future of villages.



A girl herding her cows.

Recommendations

The recommendations that result from this study fall into two categories. First, recommendations are offered regarding a pathway forward to transform the current ‘proto-governance’ state of village-level participatory planning and community development into an institutionalised part of local governance. Second, action is suggested to AAM for revision of the fellowship program in response to the following recommendations suggested by the fellows that participated in the study:

- Provide support for fellows to help them address the internal struggles and fears they face at the beginning of their fellowship journey.
- Address female fellows’ childcare and household responsibilities to encourage their participation in activities, especially those that require travel and staying away from home for several days.
- Support them in the establishment of fellow-CBOs



WSHG meeting.

From Proto-Governance to Governance: Institutionalising Village-Level Participatory Planning

ActionAid's experience in Myanmar provides ample evidence of the success of participatory planning at the village level. With facilitation assistance from fellows, community members have been able to demonstrate in many settings that they have the desire and competence to create sustainable change for their communities. A problem that ActionAid has identified is that this dynamic and effective approach to community development is having questionable impact upon the formal structures and processes on the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar. VCBOs, and WSHGs established by the fellowship programme for instance, have not been incorporated into formal decision/policy-making processes. Nor have permanent bridges been constructed to meaningfully connect village participatory

planning to formal government or EAO decision-making. The assessment here is that while the current AAM model has been effective in bringing 'proto-governance' to the villages of Kayin State and elsewhere in Myanmar, this approach to village-level participatory planning/community development has not been institutionalised to become part of the formal structures and processes of local and state/regional decision-making.

The central recommendation of this study is that AAM and governance actors work through the village participatory planning process in a way that it becomes an integral part of formal governance at the local and state/regional levels in Myanmar. This effort should be pursued within the context of reforms being pursued by the General Administration Department (GAD). As part of this solution, the experiences, opinions, and concerns expressed by fellows also should be addressed and taken into consideration in the search for sustainable solutions.

To address concerns raised by the fellows in this study, a funding mechanism should be found such that the work begun by AAM fellows can continue without interruptions in the future. The present study demonstrates that fellows are invaluable resources for effective community development. As a result, a way forward must be identified to continue – to integrate – this work as part of a permanent local level governance solution at village tract level. If funding cannot be found to support a ‘community development specialist’ in every village, a smaller number of these specialists could form village tract and/or township cadres of permanent employees armed with the fellows’ skill set. This township and village tract level cadres of specialists could support continuing volunteer community development processes in the villages. Additionally, either through the use of the township level team of ‘community development specialists’ or another organisational approach, independent funding for civil society organisations can continue support of the nascent village VCBOs as well as to create a feedback channel for village track administrators.

However, these suggestions will only have enduring meaning if they are part of a new approach embraced by governing authorities to institutionalise and integrate village level participatory planning and community development into formal governance structures and processes. The study suggests that AAM, other interested national or international stakeholders, governing authorities agree to support GAD reform undertake a project intended to design an effective approach to build an institutionalised bridge between village participatory planning/community development and formal governance structures and processes.

Suggestions for future research

Beyond our suggestion for a project to identify and test an approach to institutionalise village-level participatory planning as a permanent part of local and state formal governance in Kayin State and Myanmar as a whole, we suggest that additional study should be undertaken regarding the experience of participants in the ActionAid fellowship programme. More specifically, limitations of the current study involving sampling problems should be addressed in future research. To make the research more generalisable, a research plan that includes a larger overall sample size should be developed. To support a focus on the experience of female fellows that will make application of a feminist perspective more robust, female fellows should be over-sampled. In addition, the research plan should accommodate the logistical constraints that female fellows face related to time and distance away from their maternal and other family responsibilities. The research plan should further account for the agriculture production calendar and the impact of Myanmar’s rainy season.

Beyond Myanmar, variables explored in the current study also should be examined in other national settings. This includes our suggested applied research concerning the search for an evidence-based approach to bridge village-level participatory planning with the formal structures and processes of governance.

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