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Briefing Paper on Best Practices in Promoting Good Governance in Myanmar

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This research was conducted by the Bridge Research and Consultancy on behalf of a consortium of three organizations comprised of Phan Tee Eain, Capacity Building Initiative and Action Aid Myanmar to complement an ongoing project aimed at strengthening civil society to engage better with government over policy formulation and implementation. The 4-year project entitled “Strengthening a responsive, diverse and democratic civil society in Myanmar” is co-financed by the European Union (EU). The contents in this paper are solely the findings of the research and do not necessarily reflect the views of the consortium members or the EU.

Introduction

Amid fast-paced yet complex institutional developments and increasing democratic expectations in Myanmar, there have been increases in opportunities as well as challenges for CSOs to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in their advocacy efforts with the government. In such a dynamic context, this research intends to find and examine different approaches of CSOs in their attempts to engage and influence the government in promoting transparent and accountable governance and identify best practices to advise CSO practitioners. To this end, the research was operationalized through the following three guiding questions

1. *What different approaches are being used by civil society organizations to inform and influence the government in Myanmar on truly transparent and accountable governance?*
2. *How effective are those approaches in promoting transparent and accountable governance in township, state/regional and union levels of government?*
3. *What are the principles underlying the best practices that CSOs can use in promoting good governance?*

Qualitative methods were employed for the research, and both primary and secondary data were used. Secondary data sources include previous CSOs study reports, academic journal articles and news reports. Primary data were collected through 24 key informant interviews (KIs) and 1 focus group discussion (FGD). The key informants were identified through a snowballing method and they consist of senior staff of various CSOs, members of parliament (MPs), and CSOs consortia leads. Triangulation of observation from secondary data with those from primary data reveal the following key findings on approaches of CSOs in Myanmar.

The list of practices and approaches reviewed shall not be seen as exhaustive and further studies may be needed to recommend strategies to be used by international organizations, local NGOs and CBOs beyond 2020. The principles identified through this study should help CSOs operating in Myanmar to apply more strategic practices and approaches when they engage the government and local authorities and ultimately contribute to more transparent and accountable governance in Myanmar.

Advocacy Approaches of CSOs

Evidence-based approach: Policy makers and implementers seem receptive to information such as evidence-based report, research documents, and papers conducted and presented by CSOs in a systematic and professional manner. Having the evidence on the issues makes the positions of CSOs stronger and more concrete in advocacy. The information – evidence-based research in particular – is in great demand for the government authorities and elected officials. The government and local authorities appreciate the work of CSOs in this regard.

Provision of capacity building and technical support: CSOs are taking a role in providing capacity building to the communities and technical support to the government (by both local and international experts) simultaneously and this is found to be an effective approach because it is important that communities' and the government share an understanding of issues and existence of issues. Not having the same understanding of issues or existence of issues tend to create the government's resistance to coordinate with CSOs. The government also may not want to appear that they do not know issues affecting the communities.

Joint advocacy platforms: Many CSOs join advocacy platforms/networks or carry out joint advocacy initiatives to complement their own advocacy efforts. Raised collectively, platforms/networks can amplify CSOs' voices in the ears of the government. Also, local CSOs can benefit from joining a consortium led by an INGO that has signed a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with relevant ministries because such status of INGOs opens doors for CSOs to engage government officials.

Use of personal relationship: In situations where it is difficult to get appointments, CSOs often use informal means such as through existing relationships, using personal friendships to build working relations, or working through a Personal Assistant and/or personal reference by someone who has previously worked with them. Developing and maintaining personal relationships depend largely on individuals' experiences and attitudes towards CSOs and the level of acceptance of the government and local authorities on the democratic transformation.

Media: The use of media in the form of press releases, email alerts, press conferences, pictures, social or audiovisual media is being used to influence the government and local authorities, to mobilize communities and to raise awareness on a particular issue. Given the increasing use by the government departments, social media such as Facebook also appears to be a well-used practice in informing and influencing the government.

Using international instruments: Sending complaints to international bodies such as CEDAW and ICCPR is also a tactic to influence the government. While this approach has worked, it is important to remember that embarrassing the government may also negatively influence the government's view of CSOs.

Organizing events and public forums: Organizing public events and forums and inviting government officials and

members of parliament to networking meetings and events are commonly used by CSOs. Such events are mutually beneficial because facilitating between the government and community seems to work in a way that channels the voice of communities to policy makers and implementers who need information on communities' grievances and concerns over a particular issue.

Visits to government departments: CSO representatives' visits to government departments in person are particularly relevant for engaging authorities at township level departments. The approach allows CSOs to practice transparency and earn the trust of government officials.

Public campaigns: Public campaigns, coupled with other approaches are used by CSOs to pressure the government and make the voice of the public more audible.

Factors that influence effective CSO advocacy approaches

Trust: Trust facilitates CSOs to engage the government and local authorities more easily and in a less threatening way. Trust also results from successful implementation of CSOs' planned activities especially for those working in conflict areas. Meeting informally and formally at events, visiting government offices to inform them of the CSO's activities and progress are being used by CSOs to build trust with the government and local authorities.

Humility: Humility or humbleness is a personal quality useful in engaging and influencing the government and local authorities in Myanmar. Equipping oneself with humility and humbleness makes things easier for CSOs in dealing with the government.

Common ground: Finding a common area of interest contributes to less challenging engagement with the government and local authorities. Issues and projects that resonate with different stakeholders' needs are easier to raise and implement with the coordination and approval of the government and local authorities. Thematic areas such as livelihood, health, education and women's rights are less contentious thematic areas to work with the government and local authorities.

Individual personality: The personality of individuals is one aspect to note in engaging with the government and local authorities. The easy-to-work-with people within government and local authorities are a matter of luck for CSOs and not always predictable. The more exposure government and local authorities have to life outside of their government institutions, the more receptive they are to concepts, ideas, and information about CSO activities.
Challenges of CSOs in their advocacy efforts

Political climate: The current political dynamics influence advocating and engaging with the government and local authorities. The reluctance to engage is particularly found between the people in political positions, for example,

parliamentarians and the state/regional General Administration Department (GAD). The authorities at GAD are more accustomed to abiding by bylaws, proceedings, and regulations than those in political positions. These are tools utilized by authorities at GAD to cooperate or to refuse to cooperate with CSOs. Confidentiality laws are another tool that GAD uses to refuse cooperation, particularly with CSOs who request data from the department. They also use the reason that the government staff are prevented from attending events organized by CSOs.

Registration: Lack of registration is a significant challenge for CSOs in advocating and engaging the government and local authorities. Implications of a lack of registration for CSOs include difficulty in gaining permission to hold events and activities, inability to get permissions to implement activities, non-attendance of the government and local authorities at their events, issues not being taken into seriously and a lack of responsibility from the authorities if anything happens to an unregistered CSO.

Red tape: Engaging MPs becomes challenging and the channels to engage them become bureaucratic. Therefore, engaging MPs through the speakers of the respective parliaments becomes a practice. Some parties prevent their MPs from attending events, particularly politically sensitive issues/events/workshops organized by CSOs, on the grounds that these MPs may talk too much out of their party line.

Unclear advocacy platforms and decision-making bodies: Lack of clarity in how to reach out to the government and local authorities is also a challenge for CSOs, particularly at township level. To hold events, they are unclear how to get permission, who to get it from and what procedure they should follow.

Government's perceptions and understanding of CSOs: Some government departments see CSOs as problem makers who take up their time trying to explain their activities. On the other hand, CSOs have the perception that the government is giving preferential treatment to international individuals, seen as "foreign experts". Moreover, CSOs are often seen as opposition to the government and local authorities and this discourages officials from engaging with them. Some government and local authorities have a fear of CSOs as they are perceived to be always against or blaming the government.

Power dynamics amongst CSOs: The space for CSOs to engage with the government and local authorities is shrinking, and so is the role/space of local organizations among the more powerful INGOs and national NGOs in the arena of advocacy. Inputs from CBOs and some local NGOs are not taken seriously at meetings, in multilateral and bilateral documents, and in strategy papers released by INGOs and bigger NGOs. Space is made available for things such as consultation, forums and meetings, but the voice of CBOs appears to be non-existent with regards to advocacy at national level.

Principles underlying best practices

Build capacity for research – information is power: CSOs that have carried out successful advocacy activities use information as a tool to engage the government officials and parliamentarians. Government officials and parliamentarians appreciate evidence-based research because they do not have the time and/or have the capacity to research.

Offer a solution, not a problem: Offering a solution rather than approaching the government and local authorities with loads of problems and issues is an effective practice by CSOs. The government and local authorities may not know the technicality of the issues CSOs are presenting. Therefore, it is important that CSOs offer solutions to issues, not just the problems or issues.

Be informed of changes: Keeping an eye on the social, political, and economic changes including local/national disasters is key to an effective practice. Changes, both positive and negative, are the windows to opportunities to engage and advocate the government more effectively. Positive changes bring easier and better engagement and cooperation with the government. Harmful events may expand the role of CSOs at a time when the country is in dire need of assistance.

Build trust: Building trust fosters effective engagement with government and local authorities and is a core element of this. Types of trust-building initiatives can differ among CSOs and with different politicians and government officials.

Be consistent, patient and committed: Successful advocacy takes patience and commitment. CSOs need to be consistent, patient and committed to the issue they are advocating for. When an organization does not have any specific focus, or moves between issues to follow popular trends, their advocacy efforts are usually unsuccessful. Therefore, having a focus area or issue and being consistently and fully committed to that particular area or issue are important.

Be aware of institutional and cultural sensitivities: CSOs should keep institutional and cultural sensitivities in mind when they visit the government officials. Preparing themselves before the meeting, including checking on history, profiles and personality of the persons they are going to meet, increases the chances of successfully engaging the government officials. CSOs should be humble and speak in a friendly and polite manner.

Find the entry points and communicate clearly: CSOs should find out who exactly to engage within a particular department and/or parliamentary committee. CSOs may find entry points through someone who is familiar with these officials and prepare a clear message to deliver. When inviting them to event they should clearly communicate what the event is about, attach the agenda, and follow up afterwards.

Prepare for advocacy meetings: CSOs need to prepare well in advance before they meet with government authorities. This may include researching the laws and policies of the

issue to communicate clearly the communities' needs and concerns. When informing about research findings, CSOs should link these to the issues raised by communities. CSOs should also have serious discussions within their team prior to the meeting to know exactly who, what and how to present to the officials.

Conclusion

The practices and approaches of CSOs in Myanmar may change in response to changes in the political landscape and overall policies of the government but the underlying principles identified in this study could conceptually remain valid. Further studies may be needed to recommend strategies to be used by international organizations, local NGOs and CBOs beyond 2020. However, as the study promotes, the success of advocacy is based on a combination of different approaches and practices. Despite the fact that the findings may not constitute an exhaustive list, they should help CSOs operating in Myanmar to apply more strategic practices and approaches when they engage the government and local authorities.