



COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT IN KAYAH:

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS FROM COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

RESEARCH PAPER – OCTOBER 2020



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Discussion about child rights in community (education project) in Law Plyar Leh village, Hpruso township in 2018.

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 up its Senior Management Team. LDN works in education, community empowerment, livelihoods and environment, peace and governance and social protection. This bottom-up planning project is part of the LDN 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 communities across the world to develop solutions that help people adapt to climate change impacts and build resilience. ActionAid is working with civil society organisations and networks across the world to protect civic and political rights.

In 2018, AAM and LDN began to work together to establish village tract plans, aggregating needs identified in community-based development plans.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Kayah State, communities are slowly recovering from decades of armed conflict and face challenges of re-building livelihoods, improving health, and increasing access to education. For the past seven years, ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) has been engaged in supporting the development of Myanmar's sub-national institutions of governance, from the village level up. Following the establishment of the country's first civilian-led government in 2016, Local Development Network (LDN) and AAM came together to design a model whereby several villages would lead development together, coordinating at village tract level.

In 2018, AAM and LDN started working on a 'proto-governance'¹ project that would bring a number of villages together to establish village tract plans, aggregating needs identified in community-based development plans. As part of this process, villages were clustered together through the formation of village tract development committees or community-based organisations, known hereafter as VTCBOs. The VTCBOs were expected to then develop action plans addressing common developmental issues for the villages under the clusters. VTCBOs use the plans from this participatory and collective community development process to lobby local government departments during township annual meetings.

The LDN-AAM collaboration was through a project called Strengthening Community Led Development (SCLD) being implemented in two Kayah townships: Demoso and Hpruso. Together these townships cover 40 village tracts, each with 2 - 13 villages: 153 villages in total. Kayah is a small state but is highly diverse in terms of the ethnicities and religions represented amongst the population. Whilst the economy has begun to open up across Myanmar, many in Kayah remain extremely poor. Those who do not migrate to Thailand or elsewhere for work predominantly find themselves working in agriculture. Economic 'development' is often characterised by exploitation of people and resources – a rigged economy based on secretive deals struck between local armed groups and their crony businesses. Given this complex political economy, it is of little surprise that securing the trust of local leaders and communities have been previously found to be essential ingredients for successful community development programmes in Kayah State.

1 'Proto-governance' is a term that refers to 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 one pathway to future settled patterns of governance at the local level that must emerge, and involve government, community organisations, NGOs, and other stakeholders.

Local governance is led by Village Tract Administrators and Village/Ward Administrators. Public engagement in governance is limited, but growing, supported by an increasing number of civil society and community-based organisations (CSOs & CBOs) formed in response to community and political issues in the state. Women are often excluded from public life in Myanmar, and Kayah is no exception. The exclusion of women from community activities is exacerbated by the impact of long running conflict and is especially severe where gender intersects with other marginalised characteristics – especially age and ethnicity. Respect for elders and a highly stratified system of social status reinforce women's powerlessness.

This research examined the effectiveness of 22 of the VTCBOs part the SCLD project using four preliminary theoretical concepts: community philanthropy, intersectionality, power and agency. Community philanthropy allows us to theorise the process of strengthening community-led development. Intersectionality is applied as a crosscutting theoretical approach throughout the analysis, with a focus on gender, age and ethnicity, which are intersecting factors that appear in the data. And because the research aims to analyse the impact of collective agency in strengthening community-led development and shifting power dynamics, agency and power were also used as guiding theoretical concepts. The study involved the use of key informant interviews (KIs) and focus groups discussions (FGDs) with a range of stockholders involved in the project: Village Tract Administrators, Village Administrators, patrons of VTCBOs, members of VTCBOs, clerks, and community members (see Annex 1).

This study has highlighted some important lessons for VTCBOs of what works when advocating for your village tract's priorities – to cut through thick bureaucracy and the disinterest of government representatives. For example, having a well-compiled evidence base and knowing the right moment during the annual budget cycles to pitch your plans to officials, were both cited as keys to success.

The study's findings suggest that the work of VTCBOs have been positively perceived at both village and village tract levels. Positive contributions of VTCBOs have also been acknowledged by township administrators. VTCBOs have generally left a favourable impression on communities through the work they have performed thus far, especially where administrators are perceived to be not working hard enough in the community interest or have not been adequately accountable.

The study's findings indicate that, while the project has not been fully implemented, it has realised noteworthy progress, mobilising communities to form community-based organisations at the village tract level. These VTCBOs have begun to engage with the government to fund much-needed projects and will need ongoing support to get better at that process. The project made limited progress in changing the power dynamics associated with traditional village leadership, and there is little evidence of participation of youth and women in community participatory processes, and of their ability to assume leadership positions – these are clear areas for improvement.

Most study respondents believed that VTCBOs will continue into the future and become independent entities. To realise this vision, this paper makes a number of recommendations to VTCBOs:

- Strengthen and maintain close relationships with community members. Community members and village and village tract administrators suggest that VTCBOs strengthen their engagement with, and visibility within, the communities they serve.
- Make VTCBOs more inclusive and gender balanced. Although VTCBOs are aware of concepts of inclusion and gender equality, the study found that this learning may not be filtering through to other members of the community. More efforts need to be made to include women and youth in VTCBOs leadership positions.
- Maintain clarity of roles. 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
- Networking with government. Study participants suggest VTCBOs step up their efforts to network with and lobby MPs and appointed government officials.
- Need for continuing support from LDN. VTCBOs will continue to need support from LDN to improve their engagement with the government. For example, 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.
- Revise training design. 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.
- Monitor performance of VTCBOs. Effectiveness of VTCBOs engagement with government budget cycles should be monitored, and where needed guidance, support and training should 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. 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.

ACRONYMS

AAM	ActionAid Myanmar
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDD	Community Driven Development
CLD	Community Led Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GCA	Government Controlled Area
KII	Key Informant Interview
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
LDN	Local Development Network
NGCA	Non-Government Controlled Area
SCLD	Strengthening Community Led Development
VTa	Village Tract Administrator
VTcbo	Village Tract Community Based Organisation
WA	Ward Administrator

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study examines the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of 22 VTCBOs that are part of the project entitled Strengthening community-led development (SCLD) in Kayah State, Myanmar. The project is being implemented by ActionAid's local partner organisation – Local Development Network (LDN) – in two townships (Demoso and Hpruso) in Kayah State between May 2018 to April 2021.¹ The aim of the project is to support the development of community-based organisations (CBOs) within the village tract (or VTCBOs), enabling them to present village needs at township level and positively influence their development and peacebuilding agendas.²

By the end of the project, it is expected that VTCBOs will have supported 40 village tract action plans, working closely with village tract CBOs and local authorities in

both townships. The VTCBO model builds on, and is complementary to, AAM's Fellow-led development model. The difference is that the Fellow-led process focuses on individual villages, who support the creation of a 'Village Book' which can be used in advocacy with government officials and parliamentarians. The VTCBO approach, on the other hand, looks at the needs of whole village tracts containing a cluster of several villages, rather than priorities of an individual village.³

The study, which took place in the first and second year of operation of the project, aims to assess whether the project activities implemented by 22 VTCBOs have been able to bring about changes in the existing gendered and age-related power dynamics within the communities, and, if so, why and how those changes have occurred.

1 The total number of villages covered by the project area was 279 at the start of the project in 2018, revised to 268 in 2020. These villages are located in 40 village tracts, covering government-controlled areas (GCA) and non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) to represent the collective needs of their communities, formulate development plans, and advocate with local authorities.

2 The choice of geographic scale – village tract – for this project is due to its importance in local governance in Myanmar. It constitutes the most local level of formal state administration, and its role is purportedly to represent citizens' interests.

3 The number of villages in village tracts ranges from 2 villages to 13 villages.



Women participation in construction of nursery school in Hylar Du village, Hpruso township 2018.

1.2. Kayah State

Located in the eastern part of the country, Kayah (Karenni) State has a population of 286,627 people and is the smallest state by area in Myanmar (Myanmar Census 2014, 2015b). Kayah State is ethnically diverse, with at least twelve different ethnic groups, namely Kayan, Kayin, Kayah, Shan, Kayaw, Bamar, Yintale, Yinbaw, Lahta, Gheko, Ghebar, Monu. These ethnic groups speak six different languages. The state is also religiously diverse, including Buddhism, Christianity, and various forms of local spirit worship (The Border Consortium, 2019, p.7). Formerly a predominantly Christian area, due to the introduction of Christianity by missionaries in the early colonial period, religious diversity has increased with the in-migration of predominantly Buddhist ethnic Bamar people over the past seventy years (Kramer, et al., 2018, p.18).

Kayah or Karenni (hereinafter Kayah) has experienced armed conflict and associated upheavals over at least the past 50 years (Ibid, p.11). Conflict has resulted in forced displacement from Myanmar across the Thailand border, as well as internal displacement within the state and to elsewhere in Myanmar (The Border Consortium, 2019, p.7). In 1988, at the peak of the conflict in Kayah, villagers were ordered not to work in their fields (Ibid, p.351). Communities were often required to collectively negotiate with the military for permission to harvest their crops, as well as over issues such as security, food provision and taxation (Ibid, p.351).

After a ceasefire agreement in 2012, communities in Kayah experienced little socioeconomic development. The peace process paved the way for several economic development projects derived from business agreements between armed actors, such as the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and outside companies. These projects were exploitative of local communities and their natural resources, for the benefit of non-Kayah communities (Kramer, et al., 2018, p.111). As a result, these communities remain sceptical of economic development and external development projects (Ibid, p.110).

1.3. Demoso and Hpruso Townships

The study covered a total of 153 villages across 22 village tracts: 17 village tracts in Demoso (33 villages) and 5 village tracts in Hpruso.

Demoso Township

Demoso township is located west of Loikaw and is the second most densely populated township in Kayah state. Demoso has a population of 79,201 across 26 village tracts (Myanmar Census 2014, 2015a). Up to 2000, Demoso has suffered from armed conflict and internal displacements. After the peace process was signed, Demoso became well placed as a centre of trade in the country, with its connectivity to Thailand, while also being close to Shan and Kayin States (The Border Consortium, 2019). Demoso is also developing as a tourist destination due to its rich natural environment and unique ethnic traditions.

Religious leaders generally oversee important community activities. Village-level governance roles are voluntary but exclude women and the poor. People in Demoso seem to be disconnected with important stakeholders, such as government and ethnic armed organisations (EAO).

Hpruso Township

Hpruso Township is adjacent to Demoso and has a population of 29,374 (Myanmar Census 2014, 2015c). The Township has 14 village tracts. Fertile land towards the north-eastern border with Demoso is ideal for agriculture and eco-tourism (The Border Consortium, 2019). Similar to Demoso Township, the KNPP exercises a level of control over the township, alongside Union government authorities (Ibid).

People in Hpruso rarely have experience working with local township authorities. Because the township is under dual control, residents are often not satisfied with either authority or may feel their interests are inadequately represented by either party. Furthermore, tensions around unequal development arise because people are not informed about development projects; they do not know where, when, and by whom development is led. However, people in Hpruso appear more open to corporate investment than other townships in Kayah state. (DME for Peace, n.d.)

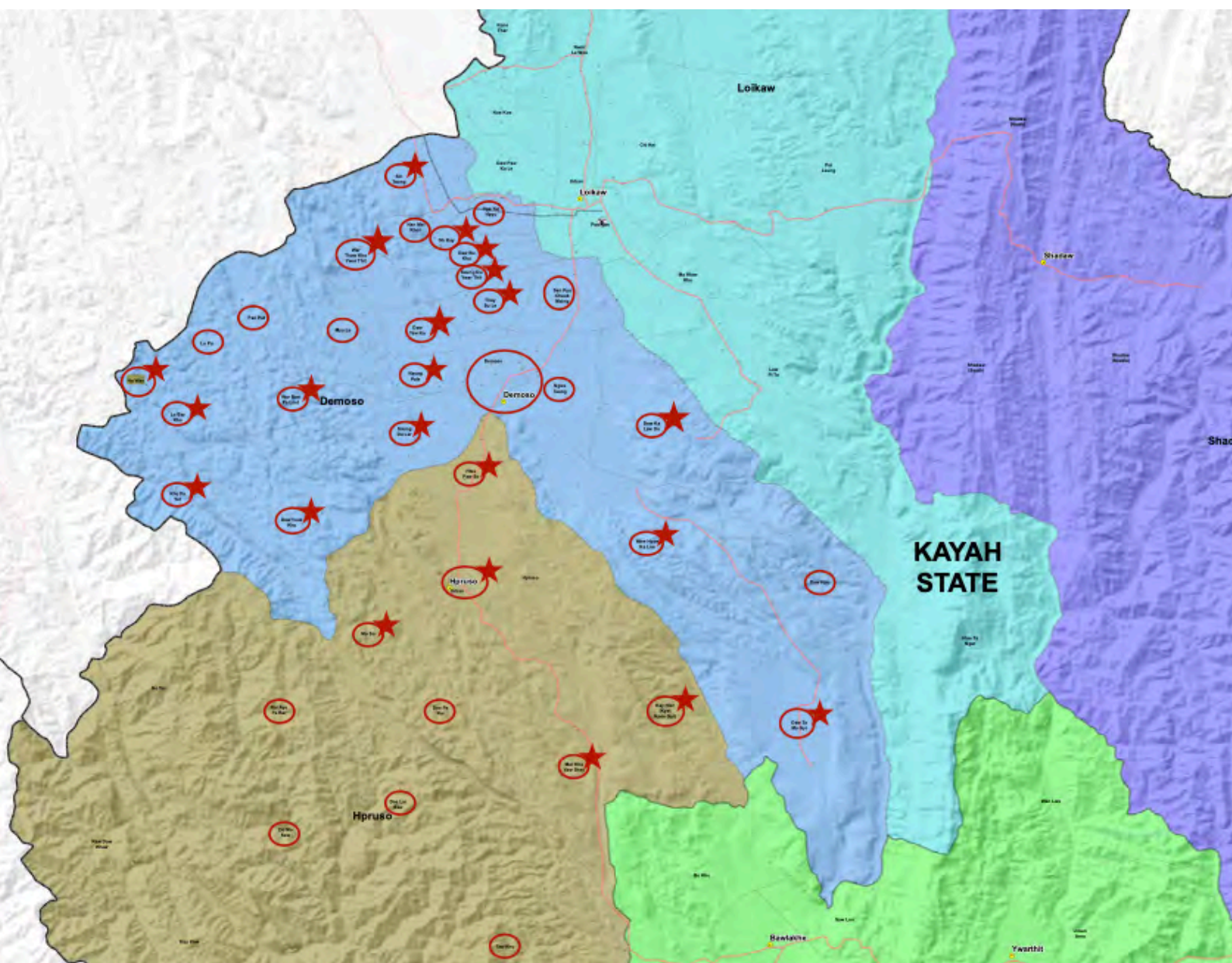


Figure 1: Map of Kayah State (Source: MIMU, 2020) Note: The 40 circled areas symbolise the Village Tracts where the SCLD project operates. Those Village Tracts that have a star are the project areas covered by this research.

1.4. Community-Led Development (CLD) in Kayah

Available literature shows that community-led development projects have been implemented and/or are being implemented in Kayah State, using various models. One report emphasises that the following components are important for organisations implementing community-led development in the state (Pact Myanmar, 2019. pp.7-8):

- Continuous trust building with local leaders and community members is fundamental because people tend to lack trust of outsiders and are suspicious of the motivations behind new ideas and ways of working.
- Recognising people's efforts and services publicly in community-led development work is important. Recognition may take the form of public awards ceremonies, local media coverage, certificates of achievement, badges or pins denoting a leadership role in a CLD group, etc.



Village development committee working in their village development plan on Daw So Hpya village, Daw Ta Ma Gyi village tract, Demoso township, 2018.

1.5. Local governance

Village tract administrators (VTAs) and ward administrators (WAs) are important governance stakeholders. According to a study conducted on local governance mapping of Kayah, village tract and ward administrators are facilitators, acting as go-betweens for village tracts and townships (UNDP, 2014, p.11). Local public services are thought to have improved since 2011. Villagers' representation at the township level is improving to some extent, suggesting there are now more opportunities to participate in decision-making processes relating to development (Ibid).

Given the role village tract and ward administrators play in communities, awareness raising and promotion of participating in local elections under the Village Tract and Ward Administration Law is relevant for all communities in Myanmar. Whilst far from a formal system of subregional local government, the law at least links local communities with the state, furthers the local community understanding of key roles, and promotes better governance of local development (Progressive Voice Myanmar, 2018, p.1).

1.6. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)/ Community Based Organisations (CBOs)

CSOs in Kayah are established around identities associated with ethnicity, language, and the local context. The emergence of CSOs has increased compared to the period before political changes in 2011 (Paung Sie Facility, 2018, p.54). CSOs are an inherent part of Kayah State politics and society (Kramer, et al., 2018, p.100). point out that CSOs and CBOs are more informed of and receptive to community and political issues (Ibid, p.100). CSOs have brought issues routinely faced by local communities to the attention of government. These include land confiscation, exploitative natural resource extraction, and hydropower dam construction (Ibid, p.100). CSOs in Kayah tend to see EAOs as more approachable and open-minded of advocacy initiatives than the government (Paung Sie Facility, 2018, p.54).

1.7. Intersectionality of gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status

Women in Myanmar are generally expected to stay at home, do household chores, and rear children (Belak, 2002). Conflict has made the lives of women in Kayah State more restricted. Trapped in armed conflict for decades, the restricted mobility of isolated people in Kayah State impacts their access to livelihoods and education, and women experience this more acutely (Agatha Ma & Kusakabe, 2015, p.342). Women are more isolated due to restrictions, and isolation weakens their confidence and capacity to exercise decision-making power. Consequently, women may utilise a strategy of silence and submission to avoid negative consequences of armed conflict, further reinforcing society's recognition of women as subordinates (Ibid). Unfortunately, women's powerlessness is reinforced by the current power structures and hierarchies typical in Kayah communities (ibid).

Respect for elders is expected from younger people in Myanmar. Parents, teachers, monks, pastors, and Imams are authority figures in society – along with village and ward administrators (Khaing Tun, 2017). Many people are hesitant to ask questions of authority figures and usually do not go against them, with this tendency magnified in small rural communities.

Many people in Myanmar, particularly from non-Bamar ethnic states, feel close to people who belong to the same ethnicity and speak the same language, and this is often the basis of collective action. Speaking their language improves the potential of individuals or groups to associate with Union or non-government authorities. A case study on women's mobility reveals that a middle-aged woman, because she spoke the language of their representative,

could successfully negotiate with the KNPP and do her business selling and buying essential goods even in restricted areas (Agatha Ma & Kusakabe, 2015, p.353).

Socio-economic status plays important roles in power dynamics at the community level. For example, if a lower status individual – a poorer member of the community or someone from a minority ethnic group – is appointed as a village/tract administrator, he/she may face undue influence from community members who have higher socio-economic status (Pact Myanmar, 2019, p.11).

1.8. Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has offered VTCBOs opportunities to collaborate with township authorities and villages. However, on balance the pandemic has been detrimental to efforts to establish the VTCBO approach as a valuable addition to community development in Kayah State. Restrictions on gatherings and travel between villages have caused disruptions in VTCBO planned activities. Developing village tract action plans and presenting them to the government was intended to be a regular annual process. The 2019 action plans were presented to the government. However, as of the date of this report 2020 plans had not been presented to responsible local government departments due to the postponement of the township annual meeting.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In designing the research, four preliminary theoretical concepts were selected for this analysis: community philanthropy, intersectionality, power and agency. Given that participatory methods were embedded in the research design, concepts could be adapted as the research progressed in response to themes selected by research participants in the field. This section aims to introduce these concepts.

Community development means different things to different people. The traditional concept of ‘community’ such as village, groups of villages, or small town is anchored to a geographical area, and associated with three characteristics: geographical location, identity, and common interests (Mfaniseni Fana Sihlongonyane, 2009). More recent development concepts have been influenced by participatory approaches explored by Chambers (1984), and Amartya Sen’s (1985) capability approach, that focus on the promotion of human capital. These frameworks call for the active involvement of community members in the development process, and empowerment as a means to allow them to participate in the decision-making (Mansuri & Rao, 2004).

Because the current research aims to analyse a community-led development model, the framing of **community philanthropy** provides conceptual support for the process of strengthening community-led development. This concept has been defined as a process that aims to build locally driven development and resources, create leadership and ownership among communities, strengthen community capacity, promote increased voice and a shift in power. In other words, the process is about providing local people greater control over their lives and strengthening their ability to define their future (Hodgson & Pond, 2018).

While philanthropy alone is highly attached to the altruism of donors, the donors hold the power to decide what to donate and to whom they donate, forming one-sided power relationships. In contrast, community philanthropy is based on distributed leadership within and across groups and mutual support between philanthropist and communities (Harrow & Jung, 2016). This can be observed in the World Bank’s community-driven development (CDD) approach. Distinct from more conventional community development models, the CDD approach is centred on the idea of empowerment and the development of strong local-level organisations who then take the lead in improving people’s access to services and developing autonomous community decision-making practices (IFAD, 2009).

Community philanthropy advocates for advancing agency locally. While community philanthropy might be equated by some with community foundations, community

philanthropy is more universal, with long-held practices dating back to the early twentieth century and taking a variety of organisational forms (Doan, 2019). What characterises community philanthropy are norms such as reciprocity, solidarity, transparency, obligation and trust (Ibid). Community philanthropy is a process rather than an end product, and is concerned with giving agency to local people, who then organise their actions through community foundations staffed with local people such as volunteers, community associates, and board members (Knight & Milner, 2013). In a nutshell, philanthropy represents sharing of private resources – time, treasure, talent – for public benefit and social change (Phillips & Jung, 2016).

The study aims to obtain information about possible changes connected to gendered and age-related power relations within the subject communities. The analysis approaches the research questions through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality, a term coined in the late 1980s by black feminist scholars, emerged as a response to racism and the white patriarchy. Intersectionality suggests that the combined effects of discrimination on the basis of race, sex and other individual characteristics are greater than the sum of their parts, and therefore a single axis framework is not sufficient (Crenshaw, 1989). Having been deployed in many disciplines including feminist and ethnic studies, the concept facilitates consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power (Cho, et al., 2013). Intersectionality is applied as a crosscutting theoretical approach throughout the analysis, with a focus on **gender and age**, the intersecting factors that appear in the data.

Taking an intersectional approach to examining the project’s impacts on the imbalance of power relations involves exploring how the power imbalance exists, and the factors that influence it. The literature suggests that power imbalances exist among different classes, across genders and age groups, and in traditional kinship structures. It has been argued that not all community members have equal power and some communities may have several power elites (Cislighi, 2019). Evidence pertaining to CDD projects in Latin America, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa has shown that development efforts and decision-making at community level are controlled by community elites (Platteau & Abraham, 2002). Formal and informal structures play major roles in conserving culturally embedded power dynamics, wherein power is assigned to selected groups such as elders, chiefs, or spiritual leaders. For example, it has been reported that in some Indonesian communities decisions regarding who should take on leadership of projects is highly influenced by traditional kinship structures and dominant religious institutions (McCarthy, et al., 2015).

Gendered norms and discriminatory cultural practices are among the factors that contribute to imbalances in power relations. Studies have shown women remain sidelined from public decision-making processes because of prevailing gender norms (Chigbu, 2014; Cislighi, 2019). A study of a CDD programme in Indonesia revealed that the



Participants of Hpruso Township education advocacy meeting, including Township Educational officers, GAD officers, headmasters, village administrators and village representatives, 2018.

chronic poor were not benefitting from the programme. The passivity of participation among disadvantaged groups, such as female-headed households, was prevalent because of gendered governance arrangements in the programme and resistant social norms of the subject communities (McCarthy, et al., 2015).

However, there are success stories which demonstrate community-led development models which increase the effectiveness of projects seeking to transform harmful gender norms and reduce domestic violence. According to the results of a study of community-led development projects, decision-making in the family was found to become more equitable and increase appreciation of male participants for their partners' work inside the household. It was found that women participants can be more likely to participate in decision-making of the community after five years of implementation (Cislaghi, 2019).

Because the current research aims to analyse the impact of collective agency in strengthening community-led development and shifting power dynamics, **agency and power** will also be used as guiding theoretical concepts in the analysis. It is argued that a goal of community development is the promotion of solidarity and agency (Bhattacharyya, 2014). Agency can be measured by whether or not an individual participates in a group or a development process. It is concerned with factors related to autonomy or freedom from unnecessary restraints and specifically looks at the extent of power a community has to define itself as opposed to being defined by others (Ibid.).

Sometimes agency can be individual-oriented, as in the case of a Fellow-led development process or collective as in the case of a VTCBO-led development process. In AAM's standard Fellowship model, individual Fellows facilitate the community development process in individual villages. Yet, often community-led development must take the



Children are fetching water in Daw Tama Gyi village, 2018.

form of a collective approach that requires collaboration among individuals and groups of people. Collective action, a system of working together through coalition-building, networks and alliances is also useful for tackling issues that are concerned with more than one community. For instance, environmental action requires collective action of more than one community because environmental goods are public goods that cannot be contained within political boundaries (Warburton, 2018). In an attempt to theorise agency in the subject form of community-led development, the study will look at how VTCBOs create collective agency for the development of a whole village tract.

It should be noted that the collective model of agency is prone to challenges. One weakness in the design of collective action that has been identified is that it is difficult to sustain. Early collective action theorists such as Olson (1971) argued that 'rational, self-interested individuals will

not act to achieve their common or group interests unless membership of group is small or unless they are coerced. Another potential limitation of collective agency is that the leaders of groups who make decisions on community matters may not accurately reflect their communities, which are often made up of diverse constituent communities, each with their own agenda and priorities (Walzer, 2016). However, collective action as shown in empirical evidence drawn from cases of self-organised resource regimes is possible if social norms such as reciprocity and trustworthiness locally evolve, as opposed to being externally induced (Ostrom, 2000).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research draws on feminist enquiry and participatory approaches. The study was designed to be participatory, with AAM's implementing partner (LDN) in Kayah State actively involved in developing themes, which were then used to create interview guides for thematic interviews, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). This approach ensures that interpretations and meanings that are induced from the research data stem primarily from the research participants themselves rather than the external AAM researcher.

Data collection was performed in four rounds, with modifications made between each. In the first round, all 6 types of participant (Village Tract Administrators, Village Administrators, patrons of VTCBO, Members of VTCBOs, clerks, and community members) were interviewed. In the second and third rounds, interviews primarily involved VTCBO members and village administrators and with questions focusing on the relationship between VTCBOs and government. Some of the questions in the first three rounds became less relevant. For example, as some project activities were in early stages of implementation, participants were unable to comment on what changes and/or impact the activities had achieved. The questionnaires in the final rounds of interviews included more questions focused on power dynamics and intersectionality. Also, after a couple of consultation meetings between The Bridge, LDN, and AAM, more women and youth members were added to sampling for the last round to maintain the feminist research approach. In addition to FGDs with women, the research team also ensured that at least 50 percent of the participants were women in FGDs with community members. The data in the first three rounds of data collection took the form of interviewers' notes. The fieldwork in the last round was recorded and transcribed by LDN's field assistants and then translated from Burmese into English by The Bridge researchers.

Additional details regarding the research process can be found in Annex 1.

3.1. Limitations

- Although following a broadly inductive approach which allowed themes and areas of inquiry to evolve as the study progressed, some modifications of approach made between data collection phases may have led to inconsistency in the quality of data. For example, in the first three rounds of data collection the interviews were not recorded. Rather, the interviewers took notes during interviews. In the final round, interviews were recorded.
- Restrictions to inter-state travel introduced to control the Covid-19 pandemic prevented researchers from visiting Kayah State to conduct interviews in person. This may have impacted participant responses, as face to face meetings are considered more conducive to building trust and giving respondents the confidence to be open with researchers. Practical challenges such as reliability of, and capacity to use, technology may have also introduced some error or bias
- The timing of the project also may have impacted on the quality of data. For example, the first three phases of data collection did not capture respondents' views on the impact of project activities, as interviews in August 2020 were carried out before implementation was substantially underway. Conversely, the project was undertaken over a long timeframe, which can introduce challenges for both the respondent and the project team in accurately recalling and recording data. To address the issue, researchers interviewed the project manager to verify data from respondents
- Interviews carried out as part of any social research methodology should give consideration to the setting in which interviews are undertaken and the likely impact on responses given. It is worth noting that the LDN office was the chosen venue for interviews in part due to the need for a stable internet connection in response to pandemic restrictions.

4. FINDINGS

The VTCBO-led development process was first piloted in 2014 in 12 village tracts in Kayah State. In 2018, the SCLD project expanded to 40 village tracts in two Kayah State townships: 30 in Demoso township and 10 in Hpruso township (a list of the townships included appears in Annex 4). This study covers 22 VTCBOs: 17 VTCBOs in Demoso and 5 VTCBOs in Hpruso townships.

In this section the findings of the study are organised according to themes identified by the field assistants and a content analysis of the data, wherein additional themes were found. First the community-led model in Kayah State is introduced. This is followed by a description of the Local Development Network (LDN) approach to strengthening the role of village tracts and the agency they gained in development activities through the 'Strengthening Community-led Development' project. Next, consideration is given to the process of forming village tract community-based organisations (VTCBOs), also referred to as development committees in some communities (for purposes of this report, 'VTCBO' will be used). The roles and activities of VTCBOs are also discussed. This is followed by an intersectional analysis of barriers to participation faced by women. Finally, the impacts of VTCBOs are assessed, particularly in terms of the experiences of women, and suggestions are offered regarding the sustainability of the VTCBO approach.

4.1. Role of LDN in establishing VTCBOs

The VTCBO model is a bottom-up planning process that seeks to transform a pre-existing development process led by one person (usually a village tract administrator) into a participatory model at village tract level.⁴ As the implementer of the project, LDN assumed a leading role, including: provision of capacity building trainings; monitoring VTCBO activities; mentoring for VTCBO members; and, facilitation of VTCBO networking with the government.

LDN provided capacity building trainings to VTCBOs on the topics of organisation building, leadership and facilitation, and refresher training to VTCBOs formed before the SCLD project. SCLD project staff were trained on matters such as gathering information needed from their respective village tracts. Trainings provided by LDN were aimed at enhancing community members' understanding of development processes, and how to lead their own processes. Training topics also included overarching concepts of development and good governance, the importance of respect for the public, systemic record organisation, techniques for effective networking and communication, and community mobilising. LDN provided additional trainings regarding:

the responsibilities of clerks; concepts of community-based organisation; organisational development; environmental protection; livelihood management; health awareness; leadership concepts; awareness-raising on child rights; parent-teacher meetings to promote education of children; and, accounting and financial management.

LDN also trained community members on how to assign the duties of the VTCBO secretary, president, and members. To help villagers better manage their time such that they can participate in village affairs, including VTCBO activities, it also provided training on designing a household schedule. The rationale for this training approach involved assuring responsiveness and accountability for the president and all VTCBO members. LDN has worked with VTCBOs to provide technical support as needed and to help them develop action plans on their own. LDN's field assistants were essential to these activities, intended to support the development and operation of the VTCBOs. The process of developing basic organisational capacity and capability among the VTCBOs was intense and time consuming.

Study respondents reported that training provided by LDN on the concept and operating characteristics of VTCBOs have prepared VTCBO members to engage with government. LDN and VTCBO respondents also reported that VTCBO members have gradually become more self-confident and assertive in interacting with local government officials in the township annual meeting where VTCBOs present their needs and proposed action plans. LDN has also helped prepare VTCBO members to make presentations to local government departments by asking them to do mock presentations. LDN training raised VTCBO members' awareness of their right to speak up and the importance of individual leadership. The trainings have been helpful in promoting mutual respect and understanding in the community. Study respondents emphasised how training provided by LDN contributed to VTCBO members becoming more effective in mobilising fellow community members. They also noted that the training provided by LDN is of particular importance due to VTCBO members' low level of education.

LDN has monitored the work of VTCBOs through field surveys to assure they are on the right path, identifying support they might need. In addition to the field assistants' regular analysis of VTCBOs, the LDN director and manager have also monitored VTCBOs once every three months. Field assistants provided mentoring to VTCBOs on a variety of matters as needed. LDN senior officers also provided mentoring on how to engage government departments and share information.

LDN's role as facilitator has strengthened the bridge between the government and the subject village tracts. LDN makes sure that local government departments are aware of the existence of VTCBOs, by introducing VTCBO members to township administration departments and

⁴ VTCBOs are expected to contribute to the planning process by identifying community needs and challenges, finding solutions to these problems, and presenting proposals to the government at the township level.



VTCBO annual planning meeting in Daw Hpu village, Demoso township, 2019.

raising the subject of VTCBOs in other meetings with government. LDN has helped to build relationships between the VTCBOs and village tract administrators, village tract clerks, and organised meetings between the authorities and VTCBOs. LDN has led the process of setting up appointments for these meetings, sending village and village tract action plans to officials before the meeting date. Field assistants support these meetings by clarifying and minimising conflicts of interest between VTCBOs and government representatives. During the meetings with government officials, VTCBOs present village and village tract action plans. LDN helps to prepare VTCBOs for these meetings with the government by making sure they have completed all official forms and provided necessary evidence to support their development action plans.

4.2. VTCBOs and community development

"When LDN introduced this [project in our village tract], people from all 6 villages participated. The most suitable candidates are selected out of the meeting attendees. There were 8 to 10 attendees from each village. The concept for selecting village representatives is that those selected should be able to work for the development, and women were also the selected group." **Member of VTCBO in Dekyae village tract in Demoso**



Township level education meeting in Hpruso Township Hall including Township Education officers, GAD officers, headmasters, village administrators and village representatives, 2019.

Formation of VTCBOs

Before the formation of VTCBOs, LDN took a variety of preparatory steps as part of implementation of the SCLD project.

First, the LDN project team organised meetings and explained the planned project process and specific activities to village heads and village tract administrators. LDN also introduced the project to all township government authorities. In these preparatory meetings, guidelines for selecting members of VTCBOs were explained, including that VTCBO members representing their own villages could not be civil servants, and must be able to demonstrate their commitment to the development of their communities.

LDN organised meetings with villages to explain the VTCBO concept and project activities to village tract community members, village representatives, and village tract administrators and village heads. LDN required 2 to 3 village representatives to participate as members of the VTCBO. VTCBO members were selected in two ways. In some villages, administrators selected the participants, while in others villagers themselves volunteered. Who would serve in each VTCBO position was decided either through a formal vote, or by informal verbal agreement among community members. Common VTCBO positions include president, secretary, accountant, auditor, and finance manager. The person that receives the most votes becomes president, and those receiving fewer votes are assigned to the other positions. By the end of 2018, a total of 328 representatives were selected to be part of the 22 VTCBOs that are part of

this study (see Annex 4).⁵ The duties and rules of VTCBOs were also established during the formation period.

For the most part, VTCBO elections went smoothly. However, some villagers were reluctant to volunteer for VTCBO membership. This reluctance was primarily cited as being due to their work and home commitments leaving little time for community activities. In these villages, the village head pressured community members to take the position.

Some respondents mentioned a lack of integrity in the process, reporting that the village head had interfered in 3 village tracts in Demoso and 1 village tract in Hpruso. In one case, due to lack of participation among other attendees, the village tract administrator led most of the discussion and influenced the decision-making process. As one LDN staff member recalls: “It was neither something tough nor easy. What had happened was some people were pressured to take the president position by the administration”.

The administrator asserted that those who have time to volunteer and have experience in working for development of the village tract should be given priority consideration for leadership positions. An additional challenge involved lack of participation of all villages in some village tracts at the beginning. This reluctance to participate involved reservations regarding the VTCBO process. However, eventually all villages participated.

Another challenge to the formation of VTCBOs was lack of clarity in the minds of community members regarding the election process and feelings that it was disorganised. For instance, some respondents reported that there were no quotas for women to assure gender balance in the membership of the VTCBOs. Even now, fewer than a third of members are women. Despite this, broad representation was achieved, including from youth, elders, administrators, women and men.

The Beginning of the VTCBOS

During the start-up phase a substantial challenge involved villager participation. Many community members avoided participation in the VTCBOs due to their assumption that it would require time that they felt they did not have to offer. The project designers’ interpretation of the community philanthropy model in Myanmar – requiring the contribution of time and effort to community development through a structured organisation such as a VTCBO – is outside its traditional conceptualisation. This alternative interpretation of the theoretical underpinnings of the project may have contributed to the challenge of villager

participation and may therefore warrant closer attention in future projects.

After formation of the VTCBOs their members (re)introduced themselves to each of the constituent communities. The VTCBOs came to be seen as a representative group of the community. Committees developed profiles of the village tracts and performed field research, including discussions with community members, to identify the needs and priorities of each village. Action plans were created based on the findings. All 40 VTCBOs have developed village tract action plans. Village level action plans were developed in February 2019, and village tract action plans were developed from May to July 2019. The action plans were understood as essential for developing credibility with government officials.

To sustain VTCBO operations, some village tracts were able to raise funds from among their members. Each member contributed 5,000 Kyats to support meeting organisation, prepare for engagement with the government, and other organisation purposes. Some respondents expressed concern that they may be pressured by their family members if they have to pay for these expenses in the future. The study found that VTCBO members are strictly volunteers with no remuneration for their time and effort. VTCBO volunteers view their contributions as pure community philanthropy.

From Village to Village Tract Action Plans

At village level, the work of VTCBO members includes identification of community needs, developing prioritised community projects that address those needs, and representing this information in village tract action plans. In interviews, VTCBO members were often also characterised as volunteer representatives of the communities to government departments. To perform these roles, in 2019 VTCBO members mapped the needs of each community through a village plan, broadly following a bottom-up participatory process akin to the Village Book.

At the Village Tract level, VTCBO members worked together to develop action plans. They also organised fund-raising activities at community events and festivals. Once decisions were made at VTCBO level, members went back to consult their own villages. During VTCBO consultation with villages, issues that cut across villages were included in village tract action plans. Problems that are limited to individual villages remained in village action plans. Road improvement and provision of electricity have been amongst top priorities in the village tract action plans. Other projects of common interest have included football field construction, water supply development, school construction, improvement of health facilities, and resolving land ownership conflicts. VTCBOs have also begun to monitor the government’s implementation of their proposed projects.

⁵ The number of VTCBO members primarily depends on the size of village tracts by population. The largest VTCBO has 22 members, while the smallest has 9 members. In the interest of representativeness, the number of members also varies according to the level of ethnic diversity in the village tract. For example, Myo Ma Quarter in Demoso has 13 villages, each belonging to different ethnic groups such as Kayah, Kayan, Shan, Bamar and Gurkhas. Thus, the VTCBO for this village tract includes representatives of all 13 ethnic groups.

This process required VTCBO members to lead a process of negotiation among communities on setting priorities for the entire village tract.⁶ Where villages had individual priorities, the prioritisation process included an element of inter-village competition, through which VTCBOs were able to develop a close relationship with community members united in support of their plans.

“Before, there was no effort put by the community members, no technology, no participation. Only a few people work for the community. Soon after the project started, community members gained more knowledge [of community development].” **A village elder from Demoso Township**

In 2019, once Village Tract Action Plans were finalised, VTCBO members presented the needs and projects first to township-level government departments during the annual township meeting, and again during ad hoc meetings with Members of Parliament (MPs) and other government officials at village level. Study participants said they received positive responses from government officials at township meetings indicating that their proposals would be considered in Kayah State Hluttaw (parliament) budget planning or allocated from existing Union-level or subnational funding allocations. However, as of October 2020 evidence of this is yet to emerge.

These meetings might be seen as important new spaces that have been opened up to improve structural and procedural relationships between VTCBOs and the state, giving nascent village tract level entities opportunities to receive formal recognition of their roles in representing village and village tract interests. The approach can therefore be assessed as a benefit to villages, village tracts, and the government, because village priorities that have not been implemented in the past have come to light, and have been raised with government officials who have committed to review spending decisions as a result.

⁶ VTCBOs also look beyond the village tract to extend their networks to include NGOs that might assist them in meeting community needs. For example, to address village tract education needs, some have established contacts with NGOs that focus on education services.

4.3. Internal Factors that influence performance of VTCBOs

“One of the reasons for the absence of women in the meetings is because they don’t know how to ride motorbikes; some can’t afford gas for the motorbikes; some members are disapproved to participate by their family members.”
Hpruso Township VTCBO member

The study has identified internal factors, especially in terms of power imbalances and the intersectionality of age and gender, that have been a challenge to broad and inclusive community participation through this project.

Women participation

This study recorded an imbalance in participation in VTCBOs between men and women, with women representing less than a third of the total of 322 VTCBO members of the 22 VT under the study (see graphs in Annex 1).

“As women, there are challenges and difficulties. With my age and experience, it seems like I still need a lot for the development work. To say it as a woman personally, I think it is also the attitude of people here. They prefer men”. **A woman member of a VTCBO from Demoso Township**

The study explored the extent to which VTCBO-led community development stimulated changes in women’s participation in community affairs. Barriers to women’s participation in community development activities were found to be ascribed to the nature of economic life and divisions of labour within the community, underpinned by traditional patriarchal values and behaviours.

VTCBO meetings are commonly scheduled for evenings, at 7 or 8pm, after members and other villagers are finished with their daily livelihood activities. This meeting time presents problems for many women, impeding their participation. Women often feel unsafe in their villages after dark and are reluctant to venture out alone. Traveling to meetings is also a factor. Many women may not feel able to ride a motorbike, the dominant form of transport, and those that do own and ride motorbikes may not be able or willing to spend money on gasoline to get to meetings. For other women participation is discouraged by members of their families.

Since women are usually greatly outnumbered by men at meetings, women may feel intimidated and reluctant to participate in discussions or pursue leadership roles. Where



Leadership training and facilitation training in So Baw Teh village, Demoso township, 2019.

women are involved in meetings and VTCBO activities, the study findings indicate that women are not involved in primary leadership roles. Rather, they are usually engaged in tasks such as managing or documenting financial matters and taking meeting minutes. Of 22 village tracts examined in the study, only two have women leaders. This reinforces the gender discrepancy in VTCBO membership. There are cases of more extreme gender misalignment. For example, in one VTCBO that consists of four villages, there are only three women participating in the VTCBO. While a few VTCBOs can claim they have more or less the same number of men and women participating, this does not signify that women are treated equally or given equivalent roles as men.

Women respondents in the study confirmed that they feel traditional patriarchal power relationships have limited their opportunities to participate in or lead the work of

the VTCBOs. They also acknowledged their familiarity with playing predominantly supporting roles in the community and the home, they might have inadvertently contributed to the gender imbalance in VTCBOs by acquiescing to roles that reinforce traditional gender relationships.

In contrast the views of women respondents that women lack awareness on gender and the opportunities for participation in community affairs, the study produced evidence that male leaders of VTCBOs appear to possess some gender awareness, and accept the importance of inclusiveness in VTCBOs. This points to the value of training on concepts of inclusion and gender equality, but suggests this learning may not be filtering through to other members of the community, including to women themselves.

Intersectionality

The study's findings suggest that the intersectionality of age and gender is important to the experience of women in VTCBOs. Respondents indicate that traditional perceptions of older people as more experienced, and as a result should hold leadership positions, is reflected in the organisation and work of VTCBOs. Although some VTCBOs have included youth, women, and younger men, leadership positions are filled based on criteria such as experience in the development sector, leadership capacity, and ability to contribute their time to development work. These criteria tend to favour older men. As a result, older men predominately hold VTCBO leadership positions. Conversely, young women are perceived as inexperienced and not capable of leading VTCBOs. Respondents asserted that being young and a woman may not be what the communities want to see in their leaders.

Despite the residual power of these intersectional gendered and ageist assessments, the study uncovered examples of village heads asking younger women to join the VTCBOs and to participate in village decision-making. Evidence of the position contribution of women to the work of VTCBOs appears to have contributed to a greater acceptance of their role in some cases. Yet, even with evidence of their capacity to work and lead, and acceptance by some village heads, women still feel excluded and discriminated against. The broadly held assessment that women are not required to lead communities remains pervasive.

The involvement of young people in VTCBOs is also challenged by the fact that many potential young leaders have migrated away from their village for work. The ability to attract and retain young VTCBO members is hampered by a scarcity of local employment opportunities.

Challenges within VTCBOs

VTCBOs are not well known in the communities they are intended to serve. Study respondents identify several reasons for this, including a lack of interest in VTCBOs among villagers; people are too occupied with their livelihoods and household duties to follow community affairs, including the work of VTCBOs; communities lack understanding of the work of VTCBOs; villagers may not be aware of the potential benefits of development to their lives; and, communities have yet to see tangible results from community development work. While during the formation of VTCBOs constituent villages appeared to be enthusiastic, apparently their interest has gradually faded. There appears to be little united inter-village support for VTCBOs, and a low level of interest in attending VTCBO meetings.

Largely due to these financial pressures and household obligations, there is a high level of turnover among VTCBO members. As a result, VTCBOs lose essential experience. New members may not be adequately trained before assuming their duties. Induction of new VTCBO members appears to depend on the availability of LDN to provide training. Successful membership transitions may also be affected by the level of willingness existing members show to involve new members in their work. High member turnover threatens the stability and sustainability of VTCBOs. All of these issues affect the survival of VTCBOs.

There remains some untapped potential for coordination of activities at village tract level via VTCBOs. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, in 22 village tracts, rather than utilizing village tract-wide approaches, VTCBO members collaborated with individual village heads, reflecting a village-centred approach, in places necessitated by travel and assembly restrictions. Members have assisted with spraying chorine in villages, distributed face masks, and, in coordination with township health departments, Covid-19 awareness-raising activities. They have also worked with village heads by installing checkpoints to screen the village entry in 8 village tracts in Hpruso, and 20 village tracts in Demoso. VTCBO members, including presidents, have even taken turns sleeping at these checkpoints. Whilst demonstrating the commitment of VTCBO members and their ability to mobilise quickly in the face of a crisis, a question remains about whether the VTCBO could have played a more strategic role to coordinate activities at village tract level.

Inadequate funding for VTCBO operations

Inadequate funding for basic VTCBO operations is a problem commonly reported by study respondents. VTCBOs need funding for essential activities such as meetings and the production of materials associated with their action plans. According to respondents, lacking a dedicated place for VTCBO meetings also appears to be a common problem across VTCBOs. Aside from the inconvenience experienced by VTCBOs and community participants, to some observers the lack of regular meeting locations may symbolise an absence of credibility and stability.

Without sustainable funding, VTCBOs are unable to implement more innovative projects. For example, some VTCBOs would like to generate additional funds to support activities such as micro loan programmes focused on stimulating economic activity in their village and create jobs for young people. Since the study area is rural and characterised by poor villages, generating revenue is a daunting challenge. Through member contributions and community fund raising activities, VTCBOs have generated a modicum of local income. Some more successful VTCBOs have even produced sufficient income to initiate micro loan programmes. Villager ability to repay loans is subject to question with unsustainable debt traps being a common and



Villagers discussing village development committee's roles and responsibilities, Ya Sa Mo So Village, Saung Du Lar village tract, Demoso township, 2018.

intractable problem in rural communities across Myanmar. VTCBOs should take care to set realistic expectations if they wish to enter the challenging arena of microfinancing for rural development.

This inadequate capacity of VTCBOs to generate income to support their operations means they will continue to be dependent on external funding sources for the foreseeable future. Beyond an expectation of continuing assistance from LDN, VTCBOs will likely need ongoing support from NGOs and the government.

4.4. External Factors that influence VTCBO performance

Challenges to community philanthropy

The experience of communities in Kayah State of the work of NGOs over many years has led to a distinct understanding and set of expectations regarding NGO behaviours. One fundamental expectation is that NGOs bring external support for village projects and activities, with limited or no requirements for in-kind or other commitments from villages that receive assistance. A perception reported by study respondents is that villages hold the same expectations regarding VTCBOs. They essentially view them as another NGO, and so have similar expectations regarding their behaviours. As a result, they expect to realise benefits

from these new forms of community development with no reciprocal investment by villagers. Since VTCBOs are predicated on the idea of community participation and self-investment, these perceptions that equate VTCBOs with NGOs may pose a barrier to VTCBO effectiveness.

This perception affects the engagement that communities have with VTCBOs, especially regarding the spirit of volunteerism that is essential to sustain them. Despite an increase in the level of interest in the work of VTCBOs over the study period, it will likely take more time for community members to be convinced of the value of their involvement in community development, and of VTCBOs as an instrument of community mobilisation.

The lack of availability of members to volunteer their time and effort is one of the primary barriers to the sustainability of VTCBOs. Community activism must compete with the family and work responsibilities of the poor villagers upon which it must depend. The problem becomes particularly acute during harvests and monsoon seasons. VTCBOs can struggle with finding days and times that are convenient for the majority of members. While the number of the villagers attending meetings tend to increase after the harvest and rainy seasons, the rate of attendance remains in the 50-60% range, with middle-aged and older men most frequently attending. In general, since most VTCBO members are not available during daytime hours, most meetings are in the evening. As noted above, this means that women members are generally unable to attend.

Another factor that influences the level of participation in VTCBOs involves the extent of a common identity and unity among the villages within village tracts. Common identity and cooperation are more prevalent in village tracts where villages have the same ethnic identity. In village tracts characterised by multiple ethnic identities, cooperation among villages is more difficult. For some villages, the 'village tract' is an artificial or irrelevant construct that groups them with other communities they feel they may not share any common interests. Respondents also noted that residents of urban quarters were also less likely to participate in community affairs, including VTCBOs. Perhaps this points to a difference in the interests and priorities of urban and rural populations.

Governance

Arguably the factor that most negatively impacts performance of VTCBOs is the limited budget capacity of the Myanmar government and small allocations for local community development. This is compounded by slow-moving and unresponsive government bureaucracy. VTCBOs are left feeling that they cannot know how the government will respond to community development proposals included in their village tract and village action plans. The study provides new evidence regarding what AAM refers to as 'proto-governance', a condition wherein

new forms of governance are emerging, but have yet to link with formal structures and processes of government. While VTCBOs have emerged as potentially influential governance resources at local level, due to the institutional weakness of the Myanmar government and other contextual factors their prospects for becoming institutionalised components of governance are unclear. The situation is further complicated by unresolved political issues that largely reflect Kayah State and Myanmar's post-conflict local governance transitions. While Kayah State is rich in natural resources, political realities have prevented translation of this wealth into resources for local development.

Relationship between VTCBOs and the government departments

Building and retaining effective relationships with government departments is key to the performance of VTCBOs. LDN has supported VTCBOs in building connections with local government departments. However, the study's findings show that the relationships between VTCBOs and the government at the township level have not been firmly established. VTCBO leaders confirmed it remains unclear how they are to communicate and network with township level government. A reason for this appears to be that the government has not ascribed credibility to VTCBOs. To the government VTCBOs are new, unproven, and have questionable representational credentials. Until these perceptions can be disproved, VTCBOs may have to continue making multiple repeated requests for meetings with government representatives. Some respondents reported dissatisfaction with the government's attitudes towards VTCBOs in meetings, with reports of inadequate time for VTCBOs to fully represent their proposals, and perceptions of inattentiveness to the needs of the communities that VTCBOs represent.

VTCBOs are therefore perceived as having more work to do to earn credibility with government. VTCBO member respondents concurred in an analysis that, to gain this credibility, VTCBOs must provide more convincing evidence and make more persuasive arguments to the government regarding their activities and their project proposals.

Respondents felt that the government's doubts about the role and work of VTCBOs is also reflected in a lack of serious consideration of village tract and village action plan proposals. The government often offers no response to VTCBO proposals. For those to which the government responds, fewer than 50 percent of projects receive approval, with many postponed to subsequent budget cycles. According to one respondent, the government approved 14 projects from 13 village tract action plans during the period of April 2018 to June 2020. This respondent further reported that this represented a response rate of 32 percent. During this period, 76 projects from individual village action plans of 18 village tracts were approved. FGD participants from VTCBOs alleged that the



Daw Weh Ku village, Dawruku village tract, Demoso township, Kayah State

government was not transparent regarding which projects will be funded and the criteria used in their determination which will receive governmental support.

LDN project team members identified factors that contribute to successful VTCBO engagement with government departments. The village tract development plans that attracted the most favourable reactions from government were supported by strong evidence of community need and included articulate, thorough and realistic descriptions of projects intended to address these needs. They also tended to better align with government budget priorities. Members from more successful VTCBOs appear to be more assertive in seeking opportunities to bring community needs to the attention of appointed public officials and MPs during their community field visits.

The study's findings also indicate that there are additional reasons for the government to assess that VTCBOs are weak and not credible representatives of community interests. For instance, some VTCBOs have not been able to accomplish planned activities because they do not have the capacity to cover basic production inputs such as transportation costs. Furthermore, in the eyes of many government officials VTCBOs do not possess legitimate authority to represent community interests. Rather than locally driven and organic manifestations of community development, they may be interpreted as artificial, and temporary manifestations of external interests.

The evidence indicates that the attitude of many government officials regarding VTCBOs is at best ambiguous. Since the power to approve and fund village tract and village proposals remains in the hands of governmental departments, these attitudinal and perceptual barriers must be overcome for VTCBOs to realise success on a sustainable basis.

Integrating Village Tracts Action Plans in Township Planning Processes

Beyond the challenges considered above regarding relationships between VTCBOs and government, additional barriers exist that negatively impact VTCBO effectiveness. Included among these is government delays in accepting VTCBO-proposed development projects. VTCBOs worry about the impact of such delays and resultant uncertainty on their constituent communities' trust in them. Such delays in approvals and resultant uncertainty and diminished VTCBO credibility are likely related to another problem: Inadequate government understanding of the context of need for proposed projects. Rather than understanding the detailed localised context of a given proposal, the government tends to over-generalise and not appreciate the specific need under consideration. For instance, a study respondent offered the example of a VTCBO proposal for a road improvement. The government responded that the village tract has adequate serviceable roads and denied the request without fully considering the detailed localised characteristics of the need. This sort of inadequate government consideration heightens the need for VTCBOs to present good quality documentary evidence in their action plan proposals.

4.5. Impact of VTCBOs

"In the past, when a project was started, say MMK 10 million was approved for the road construction and the builder may spend only 7 million. There were no committees to inquire about the missing 3 million. And the administrators could not question it, either. Now as the VTCBO was formed, it gets better. If any issues arise, like low quality, these issues can be reported to the respective [government] departments." Community member in Hpruso Township.

The study's findings suggest that the work of VTCBOs have been positively perceived at both village and village tract levels. Positive contributions of VTCBOs have also been acknowledged by township administrators.

Community to government impacts

Despite the external and internal challenges discussed above, VTCBOs have made gradual progress in proving their value to the communities they serve. This is demonstrated in a growth in interest and involvement in VTCBO community development work by villages and individual villagers. The subject communities have come to better understand how they can be a part of the new approach to

community development through village tract/inter-village collaboration. According to a village tract administrator, villagers and villages as a whole are beginning to more openly participate in community development and management. A village tract administrator noted that while communities might lack technical understanding of bridge construction, 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 way to promote and protect their interests.

The evidence also indicates that the VTCBO approach has contributed to better connecting communities with village and village tract administration. For instance, one village tract administrator stated that the VTCBO model has strengthened networking between villages and village tract administration. The village tract action plans were cited as tangible evidence of this networking. Viewed by respondents from each level of analysis included in the study, VTCBOs are seen as potentially valuable means to achieving local objectives. VTCBOs and the village tract action plans more clearly articulate grassroots level priorities to the government, while at the same time helping government officials better understand grassroots level needs and priorities.

Governance impacts

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.

In terms of responsiveness, the VTCBO-led community development process is helpful to local government administration in identifying and responding to community needs and priorities. The interpersonal relationships built between VTCBO leaders and village tract administrators, and evidence-base presented in action plans helps administrators communicate community conditions to their seniors within the township administration. The action plans provide evidence for government decision-making, making it more realistic and responsive to community needs.

VTCBOs provide a two-way accountability bridge between communities and government. They develop the capacity within communities to monitor project implementation and assure that projects are as intended, and budgets expended as approved. The existence of VTCBOs appears to strengthen such checks and balances, assuring development work headed by administrators is performed according to the best interests of the villages affected.

VTCBOs support for transparency objectives was identified

as a significant impact by FGD and KII informants. VTCBOs help communities to see more clearly the structures and processes that impact community development. This enhanced ability 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.

Community perceptions

Acceptance by their constituent communities is fundamental to the sustainability of VTCBOs. As a result, perceptions of communities regarding VTCBOs are important to consider. While respondents observed that communities are not yet closely involved in development processes, it is also worth noting that VTCBOs have generally left a favourable impression on communities through the work they have performed thus far. A village head endorsed this assessment by saying that he sees that VTCBOs do their work in the interest of the communities. The favourable reading of VTCBOs by respondents is influenced by their role in making communities more connected with government. The contributions that VTCBOs are making to networking and engagement with government seems to be responsive to community desires.

VTCBOs are increasingly viewed as desirable by villages where the administrators are perceived to be not working hard enough in the community interest or have not been adequately accountable. VTCBOs are viewed as contributing to accountability and effectiveness in these situations. VTCBOs are emerging as the entities to whom villagers turn when they feel that their needs are not being addressed. The VTCBO approach to engaging with communities independent of village tract administrators appears to be growing in its attractiveness to communities. These factors amount to growing trust in the capabilities of VTCBOs.

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.

Perceptions of VTCBOs are associated with communities' familiarity with them. 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 may in part be a product of VTCBOs not adequately explaining to communities what they are doing and how they are doing it. VTCBO members are cognisant of this 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 related to VTCBOs will grow as they continue to produce meaningful action plans, gain government approval for projects, and build engagement with communities.

Changes in women's participation and power dynamics

A common assessment of the study's respondents is that VTCBOs are extremely important to overcoming intersectional barriers to women's participation in, and leadership of, community affairs. They provide platforms for women to become more involved in the life and direction of their communities, and to become agents of change. One VTCBO leader noted that these new entities in community development have already offered opportunities to women to gain confidence through involvement in the community development process. Gender equality appears to be gaining traction among VTCBO members. While the idea that older men should hold community leadership positions still holds sway in most VTCBOs, there is evidence in some VTCBOs that this idea may be weakening.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has documented the characteristics and early performance of an approach to community development in villages in Kayah State in Myanmar. The project has been built upon understandings gained from AAM's Fellow-led development approach. The study's findings indicate that, while the project has not been fully implemented, it has realised noteworthy progress. The progress thus far has taken the form of mobilisation of communities to form community-based organisations at the village tract level and the development of capabilities that will help them work toward village tract development objectives, by engaging with local government departments to obtain necessary budgetary support.

The study's findings suggest that this collective community-led development model realised limited effectiveness in advancing the intended collective inter-village agency. However, the evidence also demonstrates that additional efforts need to be made in a number of areas. VTCBOs have demonstrated potential for leading village tracts in the identification of their community development needs and specifying projects that will address those needs in the form of village and village tract action plans. VTCBOs have made progress in 'learning the ropes' involved in engaging with the government to fund needed projects. While there is evidence of progress in working with officials and elected representatives, much must be done to improve the capability of VTCBOs to realise success in dealing with the government.

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. The intersection of age and gender-based discrimination in traditional Kayah State culture remains a powerful exclusionary force, and likely will take many years to change.

A major limitation of the current study was 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 assets for community resilience 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 improved governance measured through 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' as described above and used as learning examples for other communities in Kayah State and elsewhere in Myanmar.

In light of the potential value of this pilot project as a learning tool for community development, an end-of-project evaluation should be planned. In light of the disruptive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the project, evidence should be reported on the third year of operation of the project under what hopefully will be more 'normal' circumstances. The design of the final evaluation should use mixed methods to measure the impact of VTCBO-led community development on the governance dimensions of responsiveness, accountability, transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness.

5.1. The future of VTCBOs

The intent of the SCLD project is for VTCBOs to be established as a central mechanism for grassroots community development in Kayah State. To accomplish this, they will serve as a collaborative platform for the creation of village and village tract action plans, and then as a bridge between communities and government to seek funding for, and implement, community projects. For this vision to become a reality, VTCBOs must gain recognition from both government and community members. These bidirectional relationships are essential to building organisational capacity and capability; and acquiring financial support for the long run. The current study represents an examination of the extent to which this pilot application of the idea has been successful.

Most study respondents believe that VTCBOs will continue into the future and become independent entities. They see the VTCBO as a necessary communication and policy-building medium between village tracts and government. They hope to see VTCBOs established as CSOs that represent their communities. To become institutionalised parts of local governance, VTCBOs need to be recognised by the government as viable and sustainable. Therefore, respondents expect to see VTCBOs continue to work with government as well as with villages and village tracts to pursue joint development objectives.

To be established as a permanent part of the local governance landscape in Kayah State, study respondents suggest that VTCBOs must address challenges identified in the preceding discussion and build upon strengths. Addressing the financial issues identified above appears to be a high priority.

Without adequate financial resources to cover basic

operating requirements, the VTCBO approach is not sustainable. VTCBOs must also address and solve 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 contribute to success.

Another central question to be resolved in relation to the sustainability of VTCBOs involves the important role played by LDN. Since LDN has been essential in terms of training and facilitating networking with the government, without its support after the project ends, some respondents question whether the VTCBOs will survive. Recognition of VTCBOs as a legitimate representative of village tract interests by township level government was also identified by respondents as critical to the survival of the VTCBO approach.

5.2. Lessons learned and recommendations

Interviewees unanimously agreed that VTCBOs should continue to operate. The following discussion reflects what respondents described as lessons learned thus far and their suggestions for the future role of VTCBOs.

Include women and youth in VTCBOs leadership

The research found that limited progress has been achieved in changing the power dynamics associated with traditional village leadership. To move away from patriarchal power relationships, women members and youth must be included in the VTCBO leadership. Meeting time needs to be revised to allow for women and youth to participate effectively. Also, women-centered planning needs to take place at the VTCBO level.

Strengthen and maintain close relationships with community members

Community members and village and village tract administrators suggest that VTCBOs strengthen their engagement with, and visibility within, the communities 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 strive to be accountable to the communities they represent, and improve people's understanding of the community development approach.

Maintain clarity of roles

Respondents expressed concern regarding role conflicts between VTCBOs and the formal administration structures. 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 VTCBOs 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

Reflecting the discussion earlier in this report, 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 apply 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 lower levels of education and experience.



Children performance to celebrate open ceremony of new school building in Hlyar Du village, Hpruso township, 2018.

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.

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ANNEX

1. Research Process

Research training

Two rounds of research trainings were provided to LDN's field assistants in March and July, 2019. In the first round of trainings, the field assistants were introduced to the research plan and the data collection techniques of the study. The field assistants conducted a series of participatory group exercises through which they visualised the change process in the villages and mapped stakeholders with whom they would conduct interviews and focus group discussions with. Afterwards, the participants also defined why they wish to collect research data from those specific stakeholders and what kind of information they could receive from each one of them.

The second round of training focused on research ethics and it gave more in-depth guidance on thematic interviews. The participants also received instructions on notetaking and created interview themes and questions for each stakeholder group they identified during the first round of training. The selected themes include SCLD project, VTCBO-led development process, Fellow-led development process vs. VTCBO-led development process, capacity building given for LDN, establishment of the VTCBOs, training given to the VTCBOs, structure of the VTCBOs, creation of the village tract action plans, presenting the village tract action plans to the local government, collaboration between the administrators and the VTCBOs, relationship between the VTCBOs and the local government, role of the VTCBOs, work of the VTCBOs, impact of the VTCBO's work, and the development process and future of the VTCBOs. Based on the selected themes, interview questionnaires were developed together with the AAM researchers. Afterwards, they practiced thematic interviews and notetaking and a research timeline was defined together with the researchers.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, data collection could not be done in the field; The Bridge researchers instead consulted the field assistants on the phone and online consultation meetings were organised among AAM, LDN, and The Bridge. In the meetings, the field assistants were provided orientation on the modified question guides with newly added questions related to VTCBO roles in pandemic prevention measures, the importance of obtaining informed consents prior to the interviews, of privacy and safety of respondents, and security of the recorded data. Decision on the sampling was made together with the field assistants.

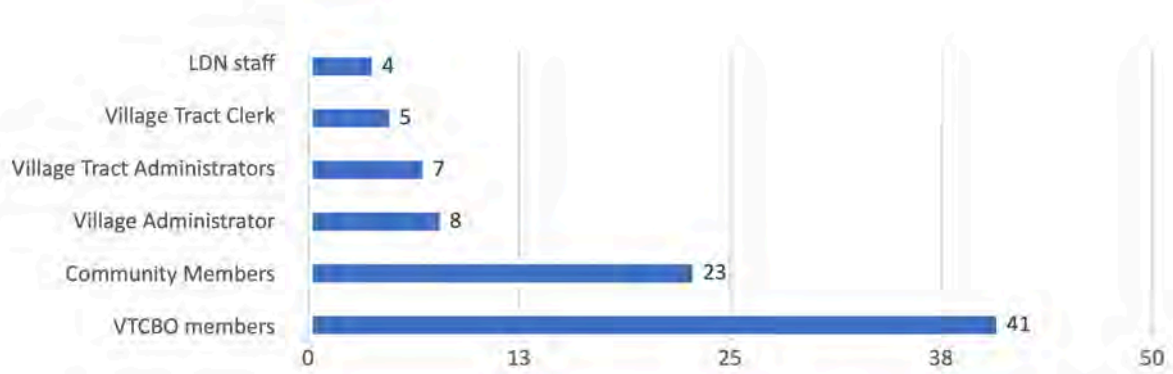
Data Collection

During the data collection, the study used semi-structured thematic interviews and participatory observation. The field assistants conducted the interviews by themselves and carried out participatory observation alongside the project implementation. The interviews were arranged with local community members and other key people who are involved in the project implementation. The study followed ethical guidelines, which means, the anonymity of participants was maintained by not revealing any personal or sensitive information about the respondents. Before the interviews, the motives of the study and how the data collected would be used were informed and a written consent was asked from each interviewee and focus group participant.

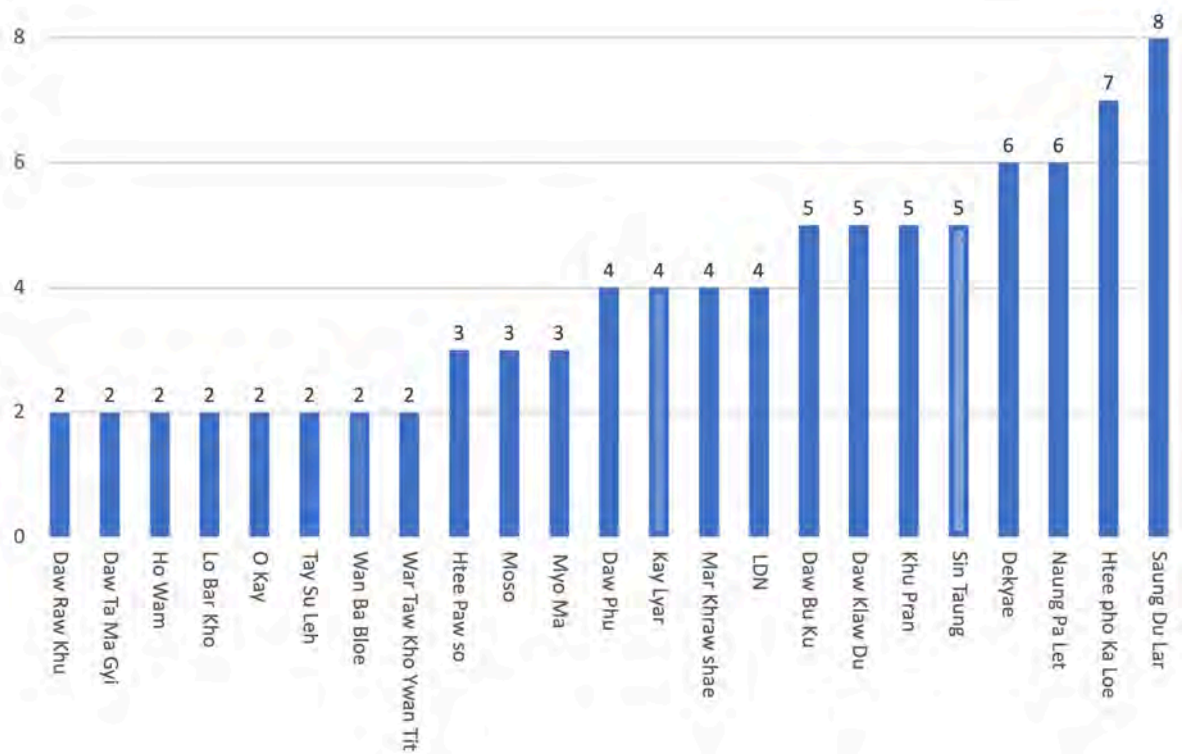
There were four rounds of data collection in Kayah and they took place in October and December 2019 and February and August 2020, respectively. There were 58 KIIs and 9 FGDs and the sampling is detailed in the tables and charts below.

The first bar chart illustrates the respondent group – almost half of the respondents are the VTCBO members, second to that group is the community members. Regarding how representative of the village tracts and the constituent village, the bar chart illustrates that the village tract sample was taken from more than 22 village tracts and, that some LDN staff was also on the list. As shown the third picture in the distribution of the population according to age, the middle-age group, those between 36 and 54 is the highest, followed by the youth group, and there are a few respondents who are 55 and over. The gender pie chart indicates that there is a greater number of male than female respondents and part of the reason is because all village, village tract administrators, village tracts clerks are males, and more than two thirds of VTCBO members are males. According to the ethnicity table, most respondents were Kayah and Kayan, and there are a few Shan and one Kayaw respondent. Most respondents speak Bamar languages together with major dialects, Kayah and Kayan and nearly a third of respondents speak Kayah and Kayan only.

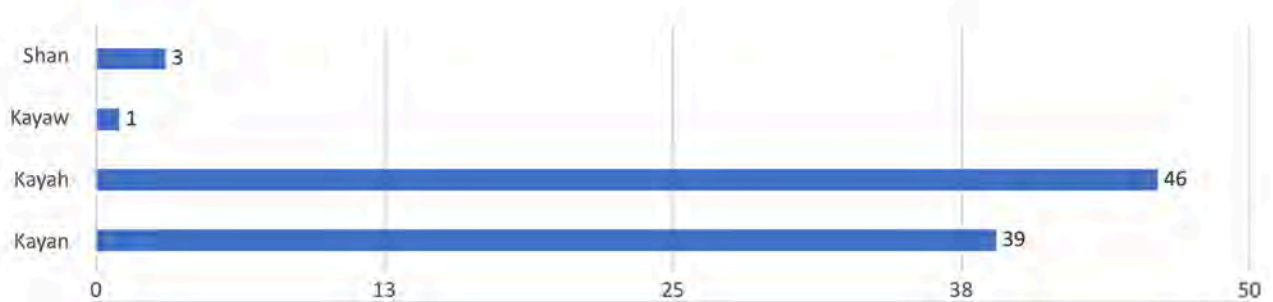
Respondent Group



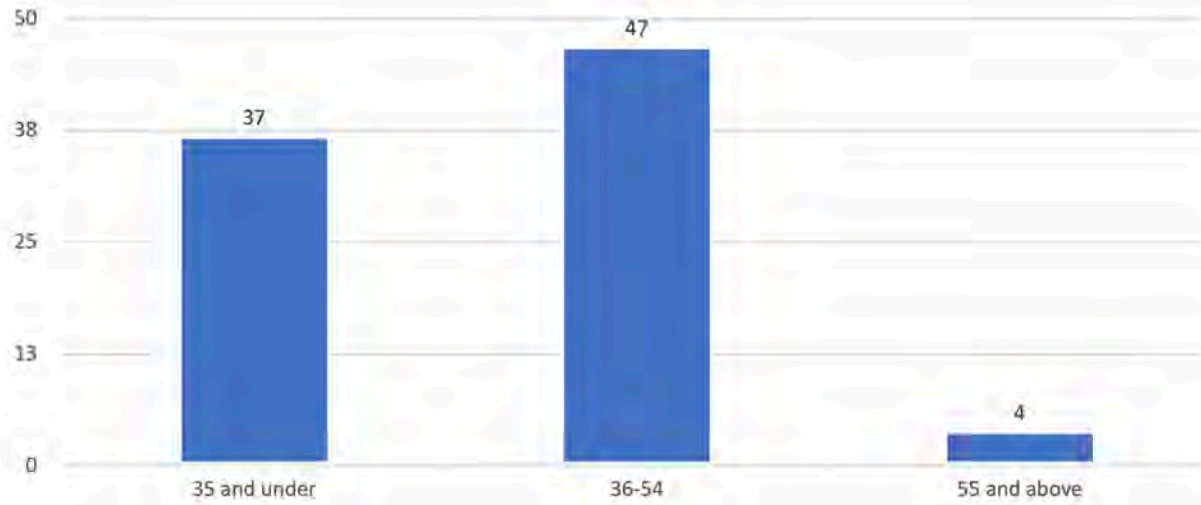
Respondent per Village Tract covered in research



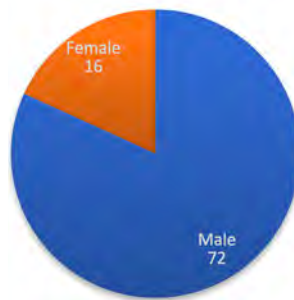
Number of Respondents by Ethnic Identity



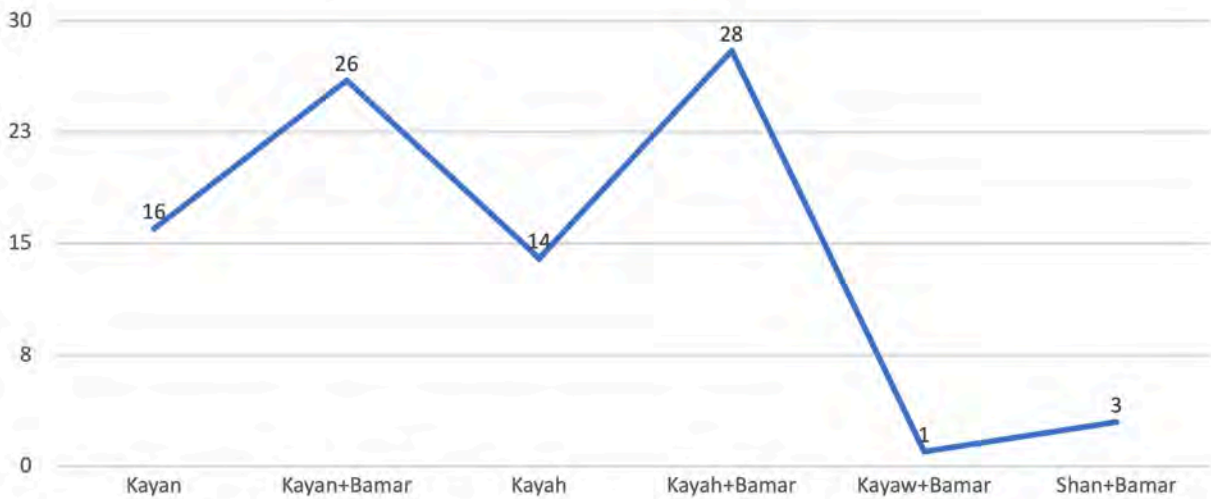
Number of Respondents by Age Group



Number of Respondents by Age Gender



Languages spoken by the respondents



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