



Promotion of Participatory and Accountable Local Governance

# Social Accountability in Action

Stories from Dawei and Myeik in Tanintharyi Region, Myanmar





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# 1 Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to narrate some experiences gained during the implementation of the *Participatory and Accountable Local Governance (PALGO)* project in Tanintharyi Region. The project aimed at narrowing the gap between local government and citizens, creating an enabling environment and contributing to ideas and tools for local authorities and citizens to jointly improve local development.

PALGO was a three-year pilot project implemented between 2015 and 2018 as a joint partnership between Tanintharyi Regional Government, national NGO Loka Ahlinn Social Development Network (LASDN) and VNG International<sup>1</sup>. The project's budget of € 670,609 was joint-funded by the European Union (75%) and VNG International (25%). The contents of this publication have been written by Lucia Nass, Susanne Kempel, Nay Zin Latt and Kyaw Swa Swe, all actively involved in the project.

The first part of the booklet will explain what social accountability is and how the social accountability trainings and pilots have helped participants to understand the importance of communication and collaboration between local authorities and citizens for delivering municipal services. And more important, how it encouraged them to put what they had learned in practice and thus changing and improving these services. The second part explains two social accountability processes in detail; what was achieved, what was challenging and how they were dealt with.

We hope that these stories will inspire and encourage those who are working in local governance and local development to build on the experiences described in this booklet. The social accountability results of the PALGO project will have a follow up in the recently started *Municipal Accountability, Governance and Inclusive Communities (MAGIC)* project, which continues to strengthen local government in Tanintharyi Region and is starting similar project activities with state government in Chin State. This project is also implemented by VNG International in partnership with Loka Ahlinn in Tanintharyi Region and Hornbill Organisation in Chin State. The project is funded by the European Union.

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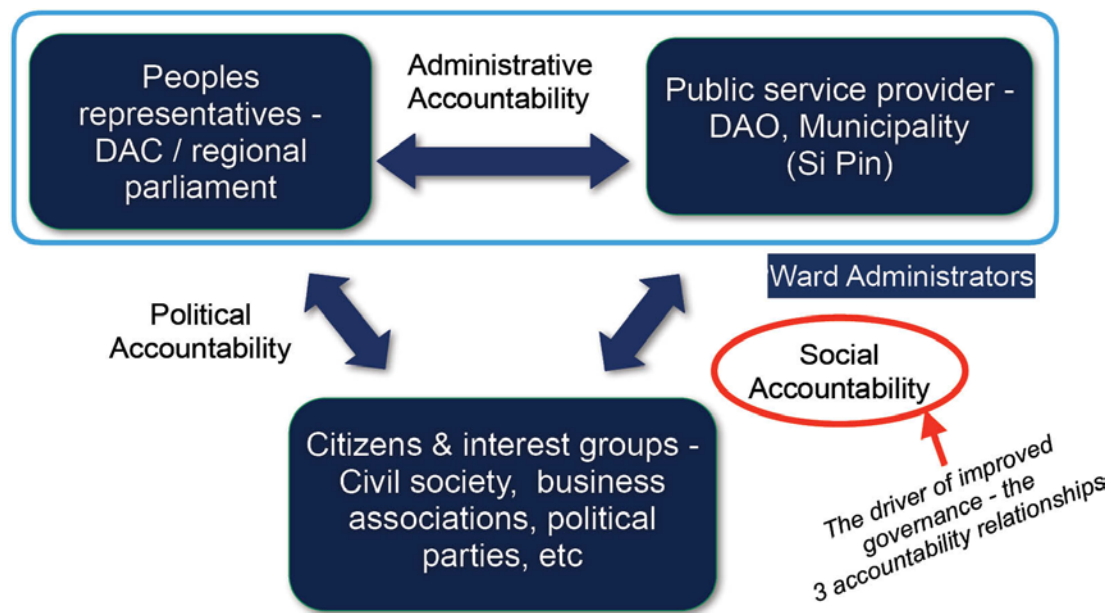
<sup>1</sup> The International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities

## 2 Understanding Accountability

Most of the stories in this booklet are related to the Social Accountability activities of the Participatory and Accountable Local Governance (PALGO) project.

### 2.1 What does Social Accountability imply?

Accountability is the requirement of those in power to explain and take responsibility for their choices and actions. Officials in government are seen as custodians of public resources, whereby accountability is a pro-active process. Government officials do not sit and wait for citizens to request for information and demand accountability but actively and voluntarily disseminate information, convene forums of public participation and give account. The direct interaction between citizens and public service providers is known as Social Accountability.



In the PALGO approach we look at Social Accountability as the driver of improved municipal responsiveness and at the needs of diverse interest groups of town residents regarding specific municipal services, such as waste management or town development.

## 2.2 How has it been applied in the project?

Together with civil society organisations, the Development Affairs Organisation (DAO) and the Development Affairs Committee (DAC) organise a process by which local government invites (or receives) organised feedback from citizens on an issue or a service, and subsequently gives an explanation about its current performance. The process enables a dialogue between citizens and local government to come to an agreement (a social contract) about the desired outcome, and the actions each is prepared to take towards achieving this outcome. The implementation of this agreement is monitored to ensure its successful completion, and continuing compliance.



# 3 Part I: Stories from Dawei and Myeik

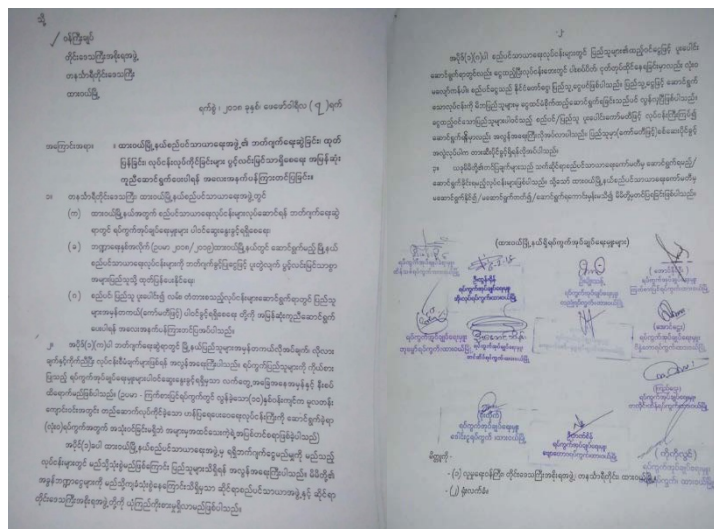
## 3.1 Ward administrators in Dawei raising their voice!

On 7 February 2018, the Ward Administrators of Dawei jointly sent a letter to the Chief Minister of Tanintharyi regional government to complain about the Township Development Affairs Committee (DAC) and the Department of Rural Development of not being responsive and transparent in the budget formulation and approval of some services.

The Ward Administrators of Dawei participated in the Social Accountability training and they became very interested to learn more about transparency in budgeting and decision making, in particular of the General Affairs Department (GAD), the Development Affairs Organisation (DAO) and the DAC. They approached them with the request for more information on budget procedures and to participate in decisions.

However, the agencies neither responded to their queries nor invited them for the meetings and the twelve Ward Administrators decided to send a complaint letter to the Chief Minister of Tanintharyi Regional Government with a copy to the Minister of Social Development Affairs. At the same time, the Ward Administrators also posted the complaint letter on social media causing a wide coverage of their complaint.

The Chief Minister immediately responded by contacting the heads of the concerned agencies and instructed them to follow up on the request of the Ward Administrators. Since then, the agencies have become responsive to the queries of the Ward Administrators and others. It is now becoming a habit to invite the Ward Administrators, representatives of CSO's and other interest groups for regular planning and budgeting meetings. According to the Ward Administrators, it was through the Social Accountability training that they got the knowledge and gained the courage to raise their voices.



Complaint letter sent by 12 Ward Administrators from Dawei township to the Chief Minister of Tanintharyi Regional Government

## 3.2 Ward administrators and citizens in Dawei negotiating their priorities

In 2017 the Township Development Affairs Committee (DAC, also known as the Township Municipal Committee<sup>2</sup>) and the Development Affairs Organisation (DAO) in Dawei had planned in one community to build two roads and one bridge. However, the people in this community were keener to get the drainage system improved. During the rainy season the water didn't flow through easily and the blockages in the drainage made it worse. Due to the stagnant water, mosquitoes were breeding, spreading malaria and other diseases. The ward administrator said that last year two children died from dengue fever which he believed was due to not having proper water outlets. Besides, the bad drainage system caused a bad smell, which remained long after the rains had stopped.

When the community members learned about the road project, they met with the TDAC/DAC members and asked them to reconsider their choice. They suggested to implement both the road and drainage projects but if the funds wouldn't be sufficient, the drainage project was more urgent. The officials of the township DAC and DAO responded that the road project was already approved and that it would be difficult to revert the decision. Funds were not sufficient to implement both projects and, according to the Executive Engineer, the construction of drainage project was expensive.

The Ward Administrator and community were not satisfied with this response and started organising public meetings and met with government officials at different levels to lobby for the drainage project. After lobbying for around three months, the township DAC and DAO agreed to convert the two roads into the drainage project. The project was included in the annual work plan of 2018 and it is expected to be completed before the end of the year.

The Ward Administrators and community members shared that the trainings on participatory planning and budgeting and social accountability had helped them to express their needs and negotiate with the local government.

## 3.3 DAC members in Myeik initiating public review meetings

Located along the coastal part of the Southern Myanmar coast, Myeik is a bustling port town that has retained a provincial yet cosmopolitan atmosphere. These days, Myeik is undergoing change in how local government authorities, civil society and citizens engage with each other. Jointly they are taking the lead in transforming local relationships to improve local development. A breakthrough was the first [public review of the municipal budget](#) in October 2017.

Having learned about social accountability, the Myeik Township Development Affairs Committee (DAC) decided on a bold move. Together with some citizens' groups, they organised a public seminar to review the municipal budget for 2017 - 2018 and to introduce the draft budget for 2018 - 2019. It took the Township DAC members only two weeks to organise this seminar, supported by the Loka Ahlinn project team.

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<sup>2</sup> As per Tanintharyi Region Municipal Law, the TDAC has 7 members. 4 of these are public members – with 2 of them indirectly elected and 2 others appointed. 3 members are from government departments.



### Social accountability insights

In the Social Accountability training the Township DAC members had learned about the process by which local government invites (or receives) organised feedback from citizens on an issue or a service, and subsequently explains its current performance.

They also had understood that the aim of a dialogue between citizens and local government is to come to an agreement (social contract) about improving or delivering a particular service, including the actions each is prepared to take towards getting this service delivered. And finally, it is crucial in the social accountability process that the implementation of such an agreement needs to be monitored to ensure its successful completion and continuing compliance.

In October 2017, more than 160 men and women turned up for the event at the main town hall. They received a booklet with an overview of the municipal budgets and plans. The booklet was prepared by the DAC together with the DAO. It was the very first time that the DAC and DAO shared priorities for planning and budgeting.

Participants, including many women, had the opportunity to ask questions and to voice their opinion about the plans and municipal services such as streets, roads, drains, market, water supply, street lights amongst others. They also addressed the overlap of work between the municipal and rural development departments, quality of services provided and tax collection issues.

More detailed plans and expenditure statements for each Ward were displayed on bulletin boards – whilst many citizens were reviewing the information and submitted written comments and suggestions for changes. Participants noted that “the Myeik DAC/DAO is now on the right track”.

Based on the feedback from the citizens the DAC and DAO made adjustments to the plans and budgets and submitted it to the Tanintharyi Regional DAO and Parliament for approval. They had agreed to organise another public seminar once the budget was officially approved. It inspired at least one other government department in Myeik to initiate a public consultation.

### Participatory budgeting is:

- A tool and process where citizens, along with service providers and officials, decide on and contribute to decisions about the use of available public resources;
- A cycle, which intends to bridge the gap between the local government's budget allocations and citizens' demand for improved services;
- Citizens participate directly or through organised groups in the different stages of the budget cycle together with officials.

### Some insights from the pioneering efforts

Pioneering is not without any risk and can cause tensions with existing norms and regulations, especially if there isn't full buy-in from or inclusion of higher-level authorities. Notwithstanding the good intentions of the DAC members, the Regional DAO authorities in Tanintharyi Region expressed concerns that the Committee moved too far too fast in its enthusiasm to be more transparent. They were concerned that publishing draft budget before members of the regional parliament had had a chance to comment, may cause misunderstandings between government authorities, parliament and citizens.

Citizens may be disappointed and dissatisfied if the budget priorities are amended - or if the budget has to be reduced at later on. At the same time the authorities at regional level welcomed more transparency for regional and municipal budgets once they had been approved. The Myeik DAC sought to mitigate this risk by explaining that the plans and budgets put forward were drafts only and yet to be approved by the regional government - and that likely another public forum would be held once the budget was approved.

Such concerns point to the importance of including several levels of government in the process, ensuring high-level support for public consultations and clearly explaining the different steps in the participatory budgeting process to all stakeholders. The process has also highlighted the working relationship between the members of the DAC, which represents the public, and the staff of the DAO. While the public municipal budget seminar was a good demonstration of how the DAC and DAO can work well together for the public good, the process also raised questions as to the limits of the authority of the semi-elected DAC.

What mandate does the DAC have? Which bodies does it refer to? What decisions can it take on its own and which ones must be referred to higher authorities? Should it be fully elected or does it work better as a hybrid entity? Such questions need to be addressed and resolved over time as part of Myanmar's decentralization and democratization process.

The public review of the municipal budget in Myeik had brought about more trust between citizens and the municipal authorities. It allowed for direct engagement between the DAC and DAO to incorporate citizens' suggestions into the budget plans. Citizens better understood the financial constraints of the DAO and DAC due to a limited budget and all funds being raised locally.



Ordinary citizens became more motivated to contribute more actively, for example for conducting a local waste management assessment and submitting it to the DAC. Going forward citizens have more information of their respective wards, are better able to monitor the quality of municipal services and provide useful feedback to the municipal authorities.

*‘And the story doesn’t end here...’*

### **Public budget seminars to share approved municipal budgets**

The Tanintharyi Regional DAO viewed the initiative in Myeik as a step towards increased transparency and social accountability at the local level and instructed that public budget seminars to share the approved municipal budgets for the coming year would be rolled out in all ten townships in the region. Some Township DAOs now have requested information and advice from the Myeik DAO.

The first public budget seminar on the approved budget was held in Myeik on 17 June 2018, followed by Dawei on 7 July 2018 and Kawthaung on 19 August 2018. The TDAOs in the townships of Palaw and Tayouk Chaung have also held similar seminars while five out of ten townships still remain to do so.

Between 80 to 120 participants attended each seminar. Issues raised by citizens included more information about township development plans, garbage collection, the use of Township DAO land, DAO tax collection and its revenue sources.

Several DAO's and DACs expressed initial concern about hosting public meetings of this kind. A sense of fear held by the local authorities - of confronting or being confronted by the public - has given way to a newfound confidence that municipal authorities can now engage more openly with the public.

The Tanintharyi Regional DAO has now initiated public hearings on other municipal projects such as the redevelopment of the river bank in Dawei (February 2018).

Last but not least, the Myeik public budget seminar has become a source of inspiration for municipal and region authorities in others parts of Myanmar. During late 2017, the Myeik DAC presented the initiative to an inspired group of state/regional lawmakers from across the country at a seminar in Nay Pyi Taw (held under the European Union’s My Governance programme) – and, at a workshop in Yangon, shared their initiative with CSOs and municipal authorities, encouraging them to take bold steps to improve social accountability for local development.

#### **What do the local authorities say:**

“By attending the [social accountability] trainings, I’ve become knowledgeable about responsibility and accountability in public affairs. In the past, there was limited opportunity for the government and the public to be in touch - but we are now having more opportunities to contact, participate and present our opinions to the government directly - or through the CSOs. As an official, I have to be open to and let the voices, opinions and needs of the public be heard.” Ward Administrator, Myeik Township

### Sharing knowledge and experiences

Loka Ahlinn Social Development Network was invited to attend the “[Interparliamentary Conference on Budget Oversight](#)” at Pyidaungsu Htuttaw (Union Parliament) in Nay Pi Thaw, in November 2017. The Project Manager and the Chairman of the DAC in Myeik presented the promotion of public participation and accountability among stakeholders in Myeik. Participants in the conference were Members of Parliament and Director Generals of the Ministry of Planning and Finance, State and Regional directors and CSOs. The presentation effectively stimulated debate on transparency and public involvement in the budgetary process.

As a follow up of this conference, in December 2017, the public consultation and budget transparency in Myeik experience was presented during the CSOs Forum on “[Budget Transparency](#)”. About 100 CSOs from across the country attended that forum.

# 4 Part II. The Social Accountability Training Process

The purpose of the PALGO Social Accountability Training Series is to enable local government authorities to engage with civil society and the business community to address an issue or improve a service as per the needs of the people. Participants select a project where they will try out Social Accountability principles and tools to improve a municipal service.

Module 1 starts with understanding what Social Accountability in local governance means.

*One of the most important questions is  
“What is the Municipality Accountable for?”*

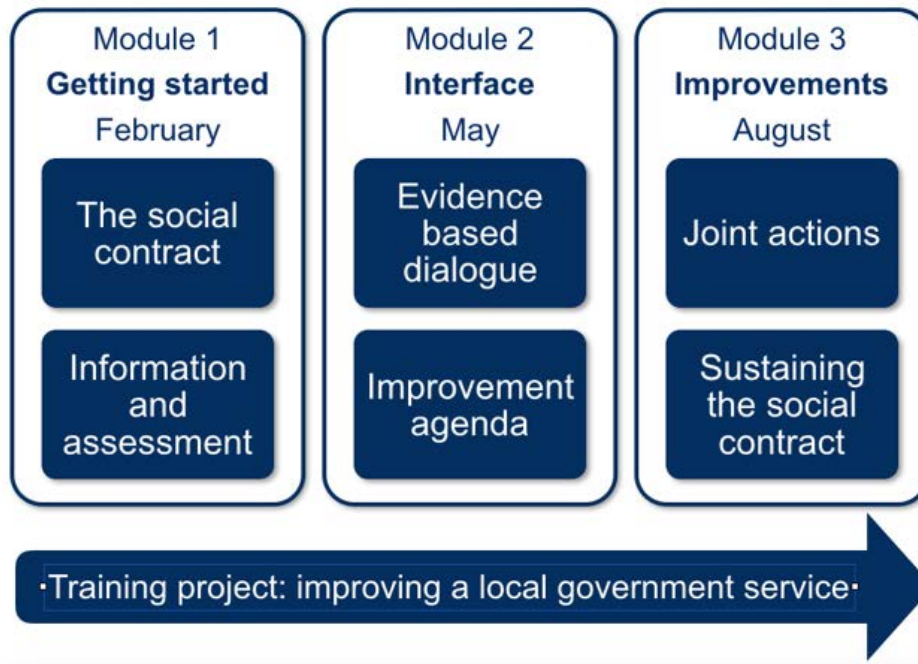
Ideally this has been agreed with residents, CSOs and the business community, but this notion of ‘a social contract’ is new to Myanmar. Municipalities are not used to [share information](#), which is a prerequisite if they want to be held accountable and be responsive to the needs of the people. At the end of module 1, participants from the municipality, CSOs and the business community will select a project or service in the municipality, which they hope to improve together (e.g. lake development, drainage problems, waste management). They will make information available about the service, and start exploring citizen views using [assessment and survey tools](#) they have learned during module 1.

In module 2 we review the progress of the training project. What has worked, what is still difficult? The most important theme is “How do we move towards an [evidence-based dialogue](#) between the municipality and the residents?” In a Social Accountability process, we carefully prepare both sides so that a productive dialogue can happen [at the interface](#) between the two parties: citizens and their local government. At the end of module 2, participants will contact various stakeholders to get them prepared for the interface meeting with responsible persons from the municipality. In the meeting they will [agree on priorities for an improvement agenda](#), including what each party can do to successfully realize the improvements.

In module 3 we again review progress with the training project and draw lessons. The most important theme is “How do we jointly implement the agreement we reached and ensure that the improvements are realized and sustained?” Local government resources are usually limited, and [improvements often come about through joint efforts](#) from the municipality, the business community, CSOs and residents. At the end of module 3, participants will organise and implement a Joint Action Plan, and make citizen monitoring arrangements.

At the end of the training project, we review the process, celebrate results and [plan for the next Social Accountability process](#) of participatory planning and budgeting.

### PALGO - Social Accountability Training Series



## 4.1 Piloting Social Accountability in Dawei

### Reaching consensus – a first step

The Dawei social accountability training group took some time to identify a small project they could work on. The Executive Officer of township DAO had suggested that the group could work on “traffic accidents”. The participants did so during the first module of the training, but it turned out not to be a good project. The responsibilities of the DAO and other government departments regarding traffic accidents were not clear. At some point, one DAO staff approached the trainers to explain that traffic accidents was just an initial idea that the group did not want to continue with.

A participant from the Department of Rural Development (DRD) suggested to choose monitoring of tube wells, which had been installed with support of the Department of Rural Development (DRD) but not all of them were working properly. The training group and social accountability experts decided against this project as it would involve travel to least developed villages, while most target participants were from the town and more interested in municipal affairs.

Some participants were interested to work on an electricity project. Tanintharyi Region is not (yet) connected to the national grid which makes electricity in Dawei very expensive (400 kyat per unit compared to 25 kyat in Yangon). This choice caused some confusion as participants thought electricity was only provided by the private sector. It became clear that the main town generator actually belongs to the local government. However, participants were not inclined to delve into the complexities of such arrangements.

It also proved difficult to understand the dynamics of the relationship between the Township DAO and the semi-elected Township DAC. The DAC Chair showed interest in the social accountability training series and attended the second training module. When participants asked about access to budget information, he explained that even the DAC did not have access to budget planning but simply worked with the budget already approved by the DAO. The budget uploaded on the Dawei DAC Facebook page was available to any interested person but the information wasn't fully up to date.

Participation of civil society also faced challenges. Some civil society organisations in Dawei preferred to work on human rights issues, and large-scale natural resource and development issues (in which they often oppose the sub-national and national government actors) rather than on local governance challenges that require collaboration with local government authorities.

### The evolution of the drain project

It took months to identify a suitable training project and finally, a drain project was chosen because improving the drain would curb dengue outbreaks in the rainy season. A Ward committee of five members was established and they opened a Facebook account. The committee informed the local community, youth and elderly *“what we were doing for our town and the importance and benefits of the drainage system”* and requested for active support and participation of the community. The Ward Administrator said: *“We have previously used mosquito sprayers contributed by the some NGOs but it was not effective. Other actions that need to be done, are regular clearing of small bushes and weeds - and of course develop a well-built drainage system. This year onwards we no longer spray.”*

Before the social accountability training, the Ward Administrator had a plan to collect MMK 30,000 from each household to build a proper drain. *“But then I thought twice. There are two different types of people; the majority wants to receive everything for free, and is not willing to put their money in public services; and only a minority is ready to agree. I did not really want to get involved in public money matters.”* Now, as part of the social accountability training, the local committee decided to develop a proper project with a budget together with engineers from the DAO. The costs for the entire drainage system in the Ward would be MMK 80 million.

Subsequently, the committee shared the plans with the DAO for approval. Unfortunately, their initial response was negative as no specific budget allocation for such projects existed in Dawei city. The group was disappointed; similar projects had been financed in Myeik, why could it not be done in Dawei? Then, the Executive Officer of the DAO attended the third module of the training and agreed that the budget could possibly be allocated from the next year's budget, if the plan would meet the DAOs criteria. Subsequently the project was awarded and construction started in July 2018.

According to the Ward Administrator, many challenges remain. The drain demarcation shows that some fences are placed on public land, and in some places public land is too narrow for the drain to pass. The Ward committee will try to solve this issue with support of the Department of Land Revenue. The Ward committee and the DAO/DAC have also different views on priorities, on the contribution of the citizens and of the DAO and how transparent this should be. As one Ward administrator puts it: *“We have discussed this many times over three months but not yet reached an agreement. Trust between the two parties really needs to be established in order to build a good governance.”*

### What the Ward administrator learned - in his own words

*“After module one [of the social accountability training] the important change to me as Ward administrator was that, I realized how important it is to get the correct information from the public offices. A big change after module two was that one of the two ward projects that needed to be accomplished, was chosen by a voting system, and eventually proposed to the regional DAO. I personally became more confident to pursue decisions in my Ward. [...] After module 3, the number of interactions between the Dawei City Lovers (the name the training participant group had given themselves) and the DAO/DAC increased. As a person with authority, I could raise public awareness and seek participation of residents. Some came to rely more on me, and others are more open to discuss what is going on in our Ward and what our needs are. I learned that for more participation of the public, I myself first need to be active to organise and lead the youth for instance. I am now thinking to organise the youth in town to form an association of blood donors (which does not yet exist in Dawei) for the needy in Dawei hospital. But my big dream is to build an extraordinary and ideal drainage system in our quarter, which does not yet exist anywhere in Myanmar.”*



### Some observations from the Social Accountability Expert

One cannot underestimate the importance of [access to public information](#), one of the first lessons the Ward administrator mentioned. In Dawei, the initial assessment of the situation regarding drains maintenance indicated that government plans and citizens' wishes did not match. The DAO had prioritized deepening of the large drains, but people wanted the smaller drains to be maintained. After clarification it emerged that the larger drains needed to be done first, so that the smaller drains could evacuate water into the larger drains. When there is lack of communication, people can make the wrong assumptions. With proper information, people can participate in an informed manner.



The Township DAC **elected representatives** are an important target group for local governance, and efforts were made to involve them in the training series in different ways. The process in Dawei had planned community meetings to discuss cost-sharing and/or find out key issues related to the drain project, and to select representation for an interface meeting with the DAO/DAC. It turned out impossible to bring the DAO/DAC together; each came separately to different sessions of the training module. When the DAC Chair came, he asked participants to follow the Facebook page of the DAC, and help to handle abusive language. He also explained that tax collection was an issue, as the DAO can only collect from registered households, and many are not registered. While the DAC Chair initially may not have grasped the full potential of social accountability to boost his representation, his requests refer to important areas of engagement of the DAO/DAC in social accountability and participation processes.

Some **Ward administrators** joined module 2, which proved to be useful as they are the link between the people and the local government authorities (the DAO as well as General Administration Department). It was important for the LASDN project staff to manage expectations, as several participants expressed expectations of infrastructure support whereas the project focus is on technical support for good local governance. An important project training activity at Ward level was the focus group discussion to elicit views on drain maintenance and construction. Ideally, participants would have been able to express their views in a meeting with responsible township officials.

As it had not yet been possible in the case of Dawei, the Ward administrator explored budget space on his own. In this process, we learned that no clear guidelines exist on the relationship between Ward administrator and the DAO/DAC.

**Social accountability mediators** – involving senior officials in the training series turned out to be a challenge. It was then decided to involve them at critical points in the training project, for instance, during the interface meeting, when views of citizens were shared, or at the end during a lessons learned session. In this context, we observed that project staff could do more to develop institutional relationships rather than relying on personal relationships.

In a training group there is always some people taking the lead whilst others support and some will just follow what is happening. At the end of module 2, participants were asked to express their commitment to be involved. In this way an 'active team' was formed and the project staff could gradually increase its circle of influence and establish the image of **trusted facilitator** and 'co-operator'. This is very crucial for an organisation that aspires to bring civil society and local government together in accountability dialogues.

Due to the challenges with the social accountability training project, we learned a lot about the dynamics of the local governance (i.e. municipal) system. The DAO/DAC becomes more accountable as they begin to entertain priorities expressed by citizens and their Ward administrators. The reverse is also true, as long as the DAO/DAC does not engage more with citizens and civil society and build social contracts, it will be difficult to get the public support they seem to crave. Through small projects like the drain project in Dawei, the DAO/DAC gain gradual exposure to benefits of citizens' engagement, transparency and accountability.

### Next steps

Though developing of governance relationships in Dawei was slow, several areas of future action emerged from this case:

- The not fully functional DAO/DAC relationships could benefit from support, exchange and review under regional leadership. The public members of the DAC could be supported in their role to bring public and business views to the more technical oriented DAO – and the joint decision making setting of DAC. These critical governance relationships will evolve over time, as the local government system continues to grapple with its mandates. When social accountability projects are considered as policy experiments, they can provide insights into the (dys)functioning of the governance system, and gradually working relationships can evolve, which can be documented in guidelines or even laws.
- In Dawei, it proved one step too far to look into public-private partnerships for essential public services such as electricity in Myanmar. The social accountability experts are of the opinion that social accountability could prove an excellent dialogue starter, resulting in public-private partnerships with more acceptable, perhaps fairer outcomes for the public.
- Although the Ward administrators were elected to facilitate information sharing between the government and the public, the link with the township DAO/DAC is not formalised. In fact there are no regular and institutionalised spaces where the DAO/DAC and the Ward administrators meet.

The role of social accountability mediators, or interface facilitators, is new in Myanmar. Local governance, that is, the productive interaction between municipalities, elected representatives and the people with all their interest groups, can clearly benefit from mediation and facilitation. In this respect, the role of the project partner could be strengthened to strategically engage other CSOs in the local governance interactions, while emphasizing relationships with the regional government. VNG International with the project partners will continue to offer its services to the partners and municipalities that wish to develop participatory and accountable local governance.



## 4.2 Love of the lake: piloting Social Accountability in Myeik

The main lake in Myeik town has a long history and is the local centre of beauty and recreation. Following a social accountability training series, this lake has recently become an engagement hub between civil society and local authorities.

### Selection of the lake lovers project

Participants of the Social Accountability training series in Myeik included staff from the Township DAO several CSOs, and a few representatives of business associations. The Chairwoman of the Township DAC from nearby Kyunsu Township also participated as she wanted to learn for her municipal constituency and one DAO female senior officer was keen to learn more about “how to achieve peoples participation and discipline”.

In Module 1 the participants were asked to identify a specific training project they would like to implement over the course of the training series. They fairly quickly agreed on the lake in the centre of Myeik town; it is a beauty spot and one of the few places in town where locals can rest and exercise, and it also holds much cultural significance for the town. Perhaps they could clean up the area around the lake to make the surroundings more enjoyable? The Township DAO suggested to beautify the area by planting trees.

### The beginning of the lake lovers project

Participants interviewed different groups of people representing various segments of the population living and working near the lake. Others developed a citizen report card: a survey collecting people’s views on specific lake related issues. This was just a quick ‘out door’ training activity, but it brought the point home that diverse views should be explored at the start of any social accountability process. Within a day, many different options and ideas - some conflicting - were collected. For instance there was a noisy generator near the lake which disturbed those exercising, but which was essential for small businesses in the neighbourhood.

The civil society participants formed a lake lovers team, they became the core group of participants of the training project. They included two new people from media and CSO’s, which had not participated in module 1. The training project was already generating more interest in town. The trainers pointed out the role of the local project partner LASDN as a neutral facilitator of interaction between the local government and civil society, unlike the other CSOs in the group, who saw themselves as representatives of certain interests in society. The training participants started calling the core group “the lake lovers” and set up a messenger group for communication among members. This group with 46 members remains active to date.

The Myeik Township DAO mentioned that a lake committee had previously been established by the Chief Minister to renovate the lake and the lake lovers set out to connect with this committee. Together with the DAO participants they wrote to the lake committee, suggesting to include two representatives of their group in the committee. In response, the DAO invited the lake lovers to meet with the lake committee. The trainees explained to the committee the importance of sharing plans with the public and collecting feedback.

They shared the initial findings from the focus groups and the survey, and discussed what more could be done to gather the views on lake development from citizens and business community. During and following the meetings with the committee and the DAO, the lake lovers learned about existing plans and budget details for development of the lake. They found out that the regional government had committed funds and the business community had started donating money, but it was not enough to cover the budget estimate of complete lake development.



#### Evolution of the lake lovers project

In the midst of building this relationship between CSO representatives, the DAO and the DAC, bird flu broke out in the area. The DAC Chair, who had attended the previous trainings and had participated in one of the lake lovers meetings, shared peoples contact details and made a clever move. He instantly developed a Viber group and called upon the training participants to help the local authorities to control the outbreak. They worked successfully together, a first of its kind in Myeik town. Although it halted the training project in some respects, it did have the desired effect of building trust between the local authorities and CSOs.

The lake lovers held several more meetings with the DAO and the DAC but without little action. The training group then discussed the challenges faced by the Township DAO and how they could provide complementary support. They agreed on a number of actions to support the DAO. The DAO participants requested support for:

1. Educating the public (including people living around the lake) to properly use garbage bins.
2. Educating motorcycle riders to use the parking lot in Tat Pyin Zay Market.
3. Conducting a survey to assess citizen satisfaction of the self-help waste management system in fourteen wards.
4. The other participants suggested the Township DAO:
5. To allocate flowerpots along the Strand Road.
6. To properly allocate and manage a car park at the harbour.
7. To manage the “smelly factories” in Myeik and two training participants offered to join the DAO during an inspection visit.

### The shift to waste management

Since a “social contract” between the municipality and the wards appeared to exist, the trainers, who were backstopping the project from a distance, encouraged the lake lovers to carry out a survey of the self-help waste management system as this seemed most promising in terms of social accountability outcomes.

In Myeik Town, the citizens in the 14 wards are expected to self-organise waste management, including collection and disposal. The Township DAO allocates waste disposal sites. According to the law, citizens have to pay a waste tax to the DAO and provide a monthly contribution within their own ward, which in fact is a double tax. The DAO wanted to know citizen satisfaction with this self-help waste management arrangement. The training group conducted focus group discussions with housewives, small-scale businesses and self-help waste management committees in four wards located around the lake during the module 3 training. They organised a meeting between the citizen ward waste management committees and the DAO to discuss the findings.

The lake lovers had made recommendations based on the findings:

- Township DAC to support strengthening ward level citizen waste management committees for their sustainable existence;
- DAO to encourage cooperation of other government departments such as hospital, schools, factories in the wards;
- DAO to make a public announcement that there will be no government waste tax collection to avoid double tax: waste management fees will be increased to sustain the citizen waste management committees;
- DAO to urgently renovate the access road to the waste dumping site;
- DAO to negotiate free health care for staff employed by the citizen waste management committees of the wards similar to government DAO staff.

The ward committees also suggested that it would be more effective to allow the ward to run waste management as a business. The DAO expressed concern about the health of the ward cleaners, suggested that support was required with truck maintenance, and explained that hazardous waste management (e.g. at the hospital) needed the approval of the Township General Administration Department (GAD). The DAO/TDAC explained that it had recently decided to stop collecting the waste management tax from the households due to complaints about double taxation. However, they lacked resources to repair the road to the waste dump.

The parties learned to know each other's challenges. At the end of the meeting, the DAO/DAC revealed their plans for a waste management workshop to review the situation and develop long term plans for improvements. Citizens, wards committees and CSOs would be invited to this meeting to collect ideas and experiences.

Following, the Social Accountability trainers introduced participatory planning and budgeting concepts and tools (module 3). With the support from the trainers and project staff of LASDN, the relationship between the lake lovers and DAC/DAO had improved and allowed the lake lovers to successfully advocate for transparency of the budget. Towards the end of the year, the DAO/DAC took the initiative to organise a public consultation on the draft municipal budget. This meeting was well attended and an important move towards more transparency and accountability in the budgeting process. At the event, the lake lovers expressed a note of thanks and did the closing remarks. Another step had been taken to strengthen the citizen, CSO and municipal government engagement in Myeik Township.

### **Continuation of the lake development project**

After the 3 module training, the lake development project was gathering momentum, donations from business people had met the target, and the regional government had allocated additional funds. Plans were afoot to completely clean up the lake and redevelop the banks. The plans to completely drain the lake prompted the lake lovers to reflect on their own initiative on how to best maintain biodiversity in the lake. As one of the participants expressed it: *“We were offered [by the DAO/DAC] to be volunteers in maintaining the lake and saving the bio-diversity of it. We surveyed the bio-diversity of the lake [together with Myeik University] and found several fish and bird species. We were also able to report the correct information to the DAO. Thus, the collaboration gradually grew.”* Subsequently the main fish and turtles in the lake were moved to another pond during the draining of the lake. By late February 2018, the lake had been completely drained and digging machines were busy deepening and re-shaping its banks. Viewing platforms along the lake had been completed but fortunately faced some damage during the 2018 rainy season. Plans are ahead to establish a dedicated outdoor exercise area by the lake and park areas for recreation. However, additional funds need to be raised from private and public sources.

### **Some observations from the Social Accountability Expert**

The lake lovers are right about their weak point: how well do they represent the diverse social and business interests? They have certainly made a good start with governing relationships but could go further by mobilizing the public; for example, supporting the DAO with organising a public information campaign, collecting public perception on priority activities (especially since resources are limited) and, if necessary, raising their concerns up to the regional level.

Most of the lake lovers used to work enthusiastically with an activist approach to critique and oppose local authorities, and initially were reluctant to engage constructively with the local authorities. But as the social accountability training included staff members from local authorities, they learned to respect each other's views and experiences. In the process they could find their own ways of working together that worked for them whilst the social accountability experts could help manage the dynamics that emerged among the participants.

In this context, initially, staff of the local project partner LASDN in Myeik relied largely on their existing personal relationships, rather than developing institutional relationships. Senior Yangon based staff supported the local teams by introducing them officially to senior officials, asking for their advice on collaboration. An example of how working relationships can be established, and staff can begin to overcome their long-standing mistrust in authorities. Building such relations needs to be maintained and deepened over time and extended to other local government departments as well.



## 5 Part III. Experiences and lessons learned from the social accountability training series in Tanintharyi Region

By Lucia Nass with Nay Zin Latt

“Do you want to do a social accountability training for us?” I said no, because I do not believe that one-off training does anything for the development of accountable local governance. “But how many resources do you have?” I asked. And within the available resources we set out to design a series of training inputs for groups of local governance stakeholders. In between the training inputs, participants would be encouraged to work together to solve an issue or to improve a service in their town. We called this the “training project”. A year later a documentary team recorded some of the changes that had emerged.

*“We have all participated with our best effort and particularly the collaboration from the DAO is significantly immense. With their help we are now getting closer in touch with the town and ward level authority and we are given more opportunity to include our public opinions whole-heartedly.”*

**Lake Lover member.**

*“With the experience and knowledge we’ve learned through the previous [social accountability] modules we could form survey teams - and made field studies to listen to the public voices. After hearing the public voices, an interface meeting was held through the collaboration of the DAO, the Executive Officer of the DAO, and the Garbage Committees to find the solutions to the challenges that the public is facing. One more important thing we’ve made was that we presented the budget of DAO transparently to the public.”*

**Aye Aye Thin, Head of Administration Department, Myeik DAO**

*“There are some challenges too; we are not yet able to persuade the other organisations, such as ethnic groups in Myeik, the public, the departmental authority, the region minister, to work all together to reach the final stage of systematically cleaning up and developing the lake. That’s probably our weak point.”*

**Lake Lover member**

*“In my opinion, I think we learned and understood a lot from the trainings - that we should all be working together with stakeholders like the community and NGOs for a good local governance. We plan to conduct more public seminars and discussions on the new projects planned by the Development (Municipal) Affairs Committee, to get people involved and ask questions about the projects. The benefits are that it promotes transparency toward the people. It even encourages them to be involved in the projects and allows more room for improvements.”*

**U Hla Myo, Regional Director, DAO**



### Building trust

In our experience, the most critical in social accountability is to build trust between the local governance actors. But how does trust develop? Let's look at a comment from Nay Zin Latt in the early days of training design:

*“According to my experiences, using Community Score Card or Citizen Report Card can worsen the relationship between supply and demand side because of naming and shaming a particular institution or department.”*

My co-facilitator had experience with a confrontational approach. So how could we foster capacity for a more collaborative approach? This proved challenging because the citizen-state divide is very deep. Earlier I had noticed that the CSOs believe change comes from 'fighting for your rights', and the local government believes that citizens have to be 'more disciplined'. It is hard to see a collaborative future in this scenario.

And yet, it is my strong belief that when people meet each other as people, and start doing something together, however small, they can begin to shift the views they have about the other. In the training, we developed understanding about the local governance system, in which each actor has a role to play. We allowed participants to first sit in their 'governance group' to reflect with people they were comfortable with, and then to mix up and talk about their respective views. It is through such activities that we hoped the mixed and fragmented group would start to 'gel'.

### Top down or bottom up?

It is widely known and accepted that top political leadership is critical in deep change processes. So we set out to find such leadership for our training series. The regional government wholeheartedly supported the work we were doing, however, they were delegating participation in the training to lower level staff. Perhaps they were too busy, but the following quote suggests something else was at play too.

*“As a regional CDC (DAO) staff I have attended all three modules organised by VNG. After each training module, I reported to the respective higher rank officials in my department what I have learned and gained significant benefits from the trainings that could be reapplied for our department to be able to work more effectively. There was not much noticeable interests from the top officials of our department until the trainings of module two. After module three, they, the higher rank officials, however, became more interested in what it is about, depending upon the report of the projects which are going to be implemented.”*

### Regional DAO staff

The quote shows that it takes time to enable senior officials to engage in something new for which they cannot see the final outcome. During the learning workshop, the same Regional DAO staff explained that Executive Officers from other townships asked to borrow (or copy) her training documents because of the recommendation of the DAO Regional Director to whom she had reported.

There is little experience in the country that shows how 'accountable and participatory local governance' actually works and what it delivers. It was the role of the local project partner to bring these officials on board, i.e. into the training room or the training project. However, this is more challenging than it seems. The local project partner also doesn't know what was coming, so how to convince higher level officials that something going worthwhile is going on?

I take a bottom-up approach; I trust that local actors will find a way to do something together, which will start attracting higher level interest. So with time, we actually attract attention of more senior officials, without having to do too much for it. Perhaps with more effort we could have had senior officials on board earlier, but at the end of the day, it will still be a struggle to build trust between local government officials, CSOs and citizens in each and every ward, town, township and region of this vast nation. Rather than to think that we know what needs to be done, I prefer to acknowledge that we don't know and to trust that locally people will figure it out, if they want to. The best we can do is to create a space to reflect and to motivate stakeholders to try new ways of working that bring life to democratic practice.

### **Trying new collaborations**

In order to develop accountability relations in this bottom-up way, you need to get buy-in from responsible actors. Our training groups comprised of people from various township departments, but the actual decision makers are far away from public service delivery. This makes it very difficult to have a local accountability interface: the responsible actors do not have a local seat, they actually sit in Nay Pyi Taw. So we decided it would be better to focus on the DAO, that is governed a municipal act, and the responsible actors are in the town.

Next to a clear focus on responsible actors, you also need to bring the various other stakeholders together into the training room. You actually want them in the training room, or at least participating in the training project, because it is among these stakeholders that new collaborations can emerge. In addition to the various township departments and the DAO, we invited Civil Society representatives, including the local political parties, the media and some representatives of local businesses.

Although we had also included the ward administrators as participants in the design, they were somehow absent in the first module. The local project partner corrected this soon after, which was critical because the ward administrators are like a linking pin around which local (infrastructure) development projects materialize. Interestingly, although the ward administrators are elected, and have a role to facilitate information exchange between the government and the people, they have no formal relationship with the DAO or the DAC and they report to the General Administrative Department. The DAO does not meet with the ward administrators, not does the DAC.

### **Governance relationships**

It proved most difficult to establish a direct relationship between citizens and the DAO. People just don't expect much from the local government. This will likely only change when they begin to experience that the local government can and will listen to their views. Meanwhile, in the training we focused on the role of civil society to address people's needs and views with proper documented evidences and share these with the DAO/DAC. To this effect, participants worked with focus group discussions (an essential element of the social accountability tool known as Community Score Card) and survey methods (known in the social accountability tool box as Citizen report Card).

### The role of intermediaries

When we seek to build accountable relationships, the importance of mediation cannot be emphasized enough. This function is typically played by an intermediary civil society organisation (CSO), in this case Loka Ahlinn. Initially the main role of the LASDN project teams was to organise the trainings, but in the social accountability training series they were given the role of an intermediary organising the implementation of the social accountability process, mobilizing the various actors during the process and ensuring that all stakeholders perform tasks as agreed. Unlike other CSOs involved in the training series, LASDN did not seek to represent citizens' views.

Next to motivating various stakeholders to engage with the training project, and holding the process (or activity plan), it is important for the LASDN project teams to manage expectations. Several participants expected infrastructure support to come via LASDN, missing the point of the training: that is, building accountable relationships by working together on an issue with local, municipal and other, resources.

For future intervention, it is clear that we cannot underestimate the time it takes to build intermediary capacity. If we want to scale up the social accountability training series, we likely need to think about mentor models to guide and support intermediaries working in different townships. Become an intermediary has to develop from the actual experience of providing leadership to a training series like this.



### Inclusion and gender equality

Although we assume in the above that local government serves the people, we need to point out that there is no such thing as 'the people'. There are many different interests groups in society. In principle the local government takes all views into account, and balances these with the 'public interest' (and the budget of course).

In order to learn to map various interests, we introduced a stakeholder visualisation tool. We need to consider who draws this stakeholder map: do the CSOs involved in the process represent and/or bring out the interests of various groups, including vulnerable groups and gender dimensions? How well do they represent a variety of interests? In our training participating CSOs did not seem to have deep roots in society, but they were representing certain ideals of public interest (e.g. maintaining biodiversity). Participants from the local NLD and USDP political parties represent a membership, so do women's groups and business associations. Media can also play a role to bring out interests which others can't uncover. In stakeholder analyses, we try to hear 'all voices' by engaging a variety of stakeholders and respecting principles of social inclusion and gender equality. In our training series, participants learned to practically study such a variety of voices and to bring these to the municipal table.

Although we had planned to work with participants from **the business community**, we discovered that the well-to-do segment of this community already has strong relationships with the local government. They are frequently asked to donate, for instance in the case of the lake renovation project in Myeik, 3.5 billion kyat was donated upon a request from the regional government. CSOs have little if any relationship with the business community, and typically refer to them as cronies. Yet the private sector runs many (public) services, such as health care and energy. For instance in Dawei participants thought that electricity was provided by the private sector.

### Lessons and suggestions for future work

Based on our experience with the first Social Accountability trainings series, we suggest a few areas for future work:

- The need to deepen DAO/DAC relationships with the wider public through a wider variety of social accountability tools related to access to information, participation and consultation. Which will gradually enable to DAO to be more accountable and responsive to the public.
- The evolving role of the DAC, which could benefit from exchange and review under regional leadership. The DAC is not supported in its role to bring public and business views to the DAO decision making table. The DAC members struggle on their own, and do not have a space where they can be heard and receive further guidance on their functioning.
- The ward administrators who have been elected among others to ensure information sharing between the government and the public, but who have no formal link with the DAO/DAC. A platform where the DAO/DAC and the ward administrators can meet, would complement the role of the elected DAC members in terms of representing the people's views in DAO decision making processes.
- It proved one step too far to look into public-private partnerships through which many essential public service (e.g. electricity) are provided in Myanmar. Social accountability could prove an excellent dialogue starter, which could lead to public-private partnerships with more acceptable, perhaps fairer outcomes for the public.

The role of social accountability mediators, or interface facilitators, is new in Myanmar. Local governance, that is the productive interaction between local government authorities, elected representatives and the people with all their interest groups, can clearly benefit from mediation and facilitation. VNG International will, in cooperation with the project partner Loka Ahlinn Social Development Network and importantly Tanintharyi Regional Government, continue to offer its service to local partners and municipalities that wish to develop participatory and accountable local governance.

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