

Including squatters in solving waste problems

When it comes to resolving the issue of waste, the problem is a lot messier than meets the eye.

Ward 7 and Ward 12 are two pilot projects of the DEALS inclusive governance programme in Patheingyi, Myanmar. When discussing waste with inhabitants of both wards, the conversation goes from illegal dumping and blocked drainages, to squatters and poor families within minutes.

U Daw Nwe – shop owner in Ward 7



The markets and restaurant areas are especially prone to illegal dumping of trash in ditches. And several of the shops on poles, are illegally build over the stream restricting the water flow. The main culprit is not the structures though, but the trash the shops produce. At night, the trash is pushed in the stream when the members of the waste monitoring committees are at home with their families.

One shop owner who was forced to move is Daw Ngwe. "I used to own a shop on the main street, but I knew I might have to move as I built my shop in the stream. I was careful not to throw waste in the stream below, but it was difficult as I had a small Mohinga shop and sometimes waste would fall in the water."

Daw Ngwe now sells the fish-based breakfast dish at the far end of the main road. Since the move, her income halved as it is far away from the main foot traffic. She also paid MMK 100,000 to build the new shop. There was no compensation provided. "Anyone can build a shop on the sandy area next to the public road or across the small stream. Wasn't it for the waste issue, I could have stayed." Several families still live in illegal shops on the main road. Currently, there is no designated authority to collect waste from shops and restaurants. U Kyaw Soe, Deputy Director of Patheingyi municipality, mentions that the municipality only collects kitchen and regular waste. "I do not know who started it, but people think the municipality is responsible for all kinds of waste" U Kyaw Soe shares candidly.

U Kyaw Soe's remarks were voiced during a three-day training from 27 until 29 July organised by VNG International for stakeholders on regional, township and ward levels. The participants learned to survey citizens and organise focus group discussions. None of the surveyed villagers admitted dumping trash, though. Signs in the wards inform citizens of fines for illegal dumping, so they know not to disclose illegal acts.

The new sign placed next to the market in Ward 7 informing villagers of a fine of MMK 10,000 for illegal dumping of trash.



The DEALS programme in Myanmar started in September 2017. A highlight of the programme was a study tour of Myanmar stakeholders to the Netherlands. During more than two years since the start, they have worked on finding solutions to the imminent waste problem in an inclusive manner. But is everyone included, even the vulnerable and poor?

When mentioning the poor in Ward 7, Ward Administrator U Soi Aung, shares that 3,227 out of 3,800 villagers received government support under the latest instalment of the Covid-19 relief fund. Financial assistance is not available for shop owners, anyone who owns a vehicle and people with a steady job. Only day labourers received the subsidy of MMK 20,000.



Women waiting in front of the Ward 7 office to receive the financial Covid-19 support

The Ward Administrator organises meetings four times a year to talk about the waste issue, amongst other things, but the interest of the public is low. "The citizens in the ward are very poor. They are day labourers, for example at the rice mill of trishaw drivers. They work from 6 am until 5 or 6 pm and only make between MMK 4,000 and MMK 5,000 a day. They have to work during the meetings or are tired from work" says U Soi Aung.

Even worse off are the squatters says Daw Nyein Nyein Soe, one of the leaders of the 100 Household Group. "In my area, there are a lot of squatters next to the train track. They have little income and some have debts from private lenders of microfinance companies. They lost their house or were forced to sell and have nowhere to live. They come here because there is space."

She concludes that as leader she talks to everyone including the squatters, but that is as far as the contact goes. Usually the poorer population does not join the meetings to discuss the waste problem organised by the Ward Administrator. Daw Nyein Nyein Soe explains why they might not participate in the meetings. "The squatters have financial issues and a lot of stress as they might be forced to move because they are living there illegally."

U Soi Aung mentions there was a civil society organisation that conducted a survey in the informal settlements. But the Ward Administration or the Ward Support and Cleaning Group did not talk to the squatters or otherwise reached out to them, even though they are seen as a main contributor to the waste problem. On the other hand, the squatters seem to be afraid to talk to authorities as they are living illegally in the ward. Creating mutual trust and involving the illegal settlers into the decision making process, could turn out to be the key to solving the waste issue in Pathein.