

Defining the sticky concept of citizen participation in Myanmar

In a country with a lot of forced labour, citizen participation might have a different connotation than in the Dutch polder model.

During interviews, the discussion often turned from citizen participation to 'volunteering' instead. Ward Administrator U Soi Aung of Ward 7 mentioned, "the community needs income to volunteer. Sometimes they come to meetings or talks by organisations to raise awareness. There are also blood donations in the ward, but public participation on the waste issue is very weak. They population is poor and they need money to be able to take off from their daily labour."

Mr. U Soi Aung, Ward 7 Administrator



Providing input for meetings or discussing solutions were mentioned less often. On the grass-roots level, this meant that some solutions of villagers to the waste problem remained unnoticed by ward authorities.

In Ward 7, Daw Nyein Nyein Soe, a leader of the 100 Household Group, arranged garbage collection in her area. Tired of talking and the lack of budget to fix the once operational garbage collection tuk-tuk, she contacted a trishaw driver in her area to collect the waste once a week. Others soon joined the initiative.

The previous tuk-tuk of the ward cost MMK 200 a month for citizens, but there were a lot of unexpected maintenance expenses as the vehicle was old. The trishaw is a lot more expensive at MMK 400 a week, but there are no unexpected costs. Instead of collecting waste on the street, the trishaw driver only visits the households who pay. Currently, the tuk-tuk sits idle as the body is falling apart. The trishaw solution is not flawless though. "To be honest, I don't know where the trishaw driver dumps the collected waste. And I'm afraid to ask," Daw Nyein Nyein Soe says.

The leader did not discuss her solution with the Ward Administrator or the Waste Support and Cleaning Group. The 20 area leaders including Daw Nyein Nyein Soe do not often join the bi-monthly meetings, as the Ward Administration office is far away and they mostly have to work during the meeting times.

The Market Committee also organises garbage collection on their own. Shop owners at the market pay for the service and large trash bins were placed at the market entrance.

Citizen participation was also one of the main topics discussed during the multi-stakeholder workshop organised by VNG International in Patheingyi. Both the Patheingyi municipality and the Regional Social Welfare Department shared their frustration about lack of public interest during the workshop from 27 until 29 July.

"When a new business wants to settle in the area, we invite the public to join impact assessment meetings, but they are not interested. But if the impact happens to be negative later on, they complain, but it is too late," Regional Director Daw Naw Tha Wah says.

A women selling vegetables on the market in Ward 7



Municipal Chair (mayor) U Zaw Tun Khaing chipped in when discussing awareness campaigns. "I already went to Ward 7, two or three times. Every time, only a few people joined."

A member from the WSCG in Ward 7 explained the issue in more detail. "Those meetings were before the clean-up of one of the streams in the ward, and not everyone is comfortable going to the office of the Ward Administrator. After the clean-up, many people were grateful and happy. This is the time to educate them on proper waste management and good drainage. When it rains, the area still floods, but the water goes down in the drains quickly."

The participants decided to revive the awareness campaigns when the Union government relieves the Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings. The interface meeting will be scheduled outside regular working hours on a Saturday at 2 pm so most people can join. The VNG International trainers shared the importance of organising meetings at convenient times for women, usually between 1 pm and 3 pm.

During the workshop, the participants also learned how to collect information from citizens. At the end of day two, everyone conducted two citizen surveys about waste collection. The results were presented the following day. 66,6% were not happy with the garbage collection by DAC. 52,6% did not receive any trash collection, while 24% had trash collection at least four times per week.

Another tool offered by the VNG trainers, was the focus group discussion. Two focus group discussions were held inviting civil society organisations and Ward 12 citizens.

The data from both the survey and the focus group discussions formed the starting point for the interface meeting on the last day. The interface meeting was intended as a mock discussion but felt like the real deal. "Some information is out of reach to the public, so these kind of meetings are very important," U Hlo Myint from Ward 7 stated.

And U Kyaw Soe, Deputy Director of Patheingyi municipality, said, "I am quite happy with the meeting and would like to talk more if there would have been time!"

The focus group discussion with citizens from ward 12

